THE EVOLUTION OF THE SIREN'S SYMBOLISM ACROSS WESTERN CULTURES: FROM SEDUCTIVE BEAST TO VIRTUOUS PRINCESS

Anna Darragh

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Dr. Anna Devi Russakoff

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Introduction

The Siren was invented hundreds of years ago, yet remains relevant in contemporary culture. The creature has gone in and out of popularity, but it has never fully disappeared. Whether conscious or unintentional, art reflects the attitudes of the artist, the time and the society that it comes from. The Siren has been portrayed in many different ways across different periods of time and culture. Each era of the Siren tells us something different about the dominant culture it comes from. The early adaptations have clear reflections of misogyny and patriarchy, however more modern examples are not totally harmless. The aim of this paper is to provide historical context of the siren in Medieval art history, Modern Art, and recent Pop Culture. Additionally, I will discuss the Siren's symbolism through a feminist lens, applying previous literature that combines social psychology with Siren literature and media. Lastly, I will compare art works from Medieval and Modern periods of fine art and how they relate to Pop Culture and my overall discussion. I will also discuss the qualities that have caused the Siren to remain relevant over hundreds of years. Historically, the Siren has represented the two opposing stereotypes men project onto women; sinful seductress and innocent virgin. In both cases, the female character is extremely sexualized. Today, the symbol is reclaimed by women as a representation of power and independence. While this paper will focus on Western societies, future research should investigate the Siren across Eastern countries. Further research is also needed in discovering different ways female artists use the Siren's symbol in empowering ways, particularly in Fine Arts and mainstream media.

Ancient & Medieval Times

Sirens were introduced to the western world through Homer's *The Odyssey* in 700 BCE.[1] This story does not give physical descriptions of the sirens, only establishes the fact that they seduce sailors with their songs and ultimately kill them. A few hundred years later, Plato uses the symbol in his writing. He defines 3 classes of sirens (celestial, earth, and chthonic).[2] Although the earth and heavenly class of Sirens seem like a more positive depiction of women, all these classes "belong" to different male gods. The seductive Sirens from mythology are adopted by Christianity and used to teach moral lessons of sexual sin.

The Medieval Bestiaries are collections of stories about real and fantastical beasts that serve as metaphors for Christian morals.[3] The Medieval writers were often celibate Christian men making stories for a similar audience, so it is unsurprising that immorality was attributed to feminine characters.[4] Elizabeth Eva Leach wisely points out that these authors could not express their dominance and masculinity through sex, according to their religion's rules, so they felt the need to express these traits intellectually. Not only did the Bestiaries associate Sirens with sexual sin, but also with vanity and pridefulness.[5] Debra Higgs Strickland writes that these qualities were almost always associated with women. Sometimes the Bestiary's would attribute pride to the (male) peacock, however this bird is usually depicted with his tail down, indicating his

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[1] Axel Müller, Christopher Halls, and Ben Willliamson, *Mermaids: Art, Symbolism and Mythology* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2022).
[2] H. David Brumble, *Classical Myths and Legends in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: A Dictionary of Allegorical Meanings* (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998).
[3] Juliana Santos Dinoá Medeiros, "The Iconographical Diversity of Thesirens' Physical Forms in Medieval Bestiaries," *Anastasis. Research in Medieval Culture and Art* 8, no. 1 (May 29, 2021): 51–64, https://doi.org/10.35218/armca.2021.1.03.
[4] Elizabeth Eva Leach, "'The Little Pipe Sings Sweetly While the Fowler Deceives the Bird': Sirens in the Later Middle Ages," *Music and Letters* 87, no. 2 (May 1, 2006): 187–211, https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/gci250.
[5] Debra Higgs Strickland, "Sex in the Bestiaries," *The Mark of the Beast the Medieval Bestiary in Art, Life, and Literature* (Garland Pub, 1999.), 59–91, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aup/reader.action?docID=1486811#.

restraint and humbleness. Funnily enough, the peacock only raises his tail and spreads his feathers when hearing praise. My interpretation of this is that Siren's feel confident with or without outside approval, while Medieval men need validation, at least in this specific scenario.

We could even apply the peacock and Siren associations with pride to a contemporary context. Like Strickland mentions, today there is a figure of speech when someone is confident, they are "proud as a peacock." This is not necessarily a negative connotation with this phrase. Yet if someone is called *vain*, like the Sirens are associated with, this is considered an undesirable trait. This conversation can be applied to the way men in today's workplace are viewed as "demanding respect" or "confident," but when women have similar attitudes they are labeled as "bossy."

The authors of these books would write their stories with large spaces for artists to fill in later. This left the illustrators room for creative interpretations of how the creatures should look. While often described as half-bird half-woman, some drawings include a fish tail instead of, or along with, the bird body.[6] While some writers have claimed that the different depictions are different creatures, Juliana Santos Dinoá Medeiros refutes this in her analysis of Medieval Sirens. Rather, the different forms are a result of the Bestiary illustrators' freedom to use their imagination and creativity when translating the text to visual art. She mentions that some readers assume that the illustrators were confused, but concludes that they were fully aware of the different depictions. Sirens in the Bestiaries often held objects associated with the moral temptations they were representative of. For example, the mirror and the comb represent vanity. Sometimes they are seen dangling fish, symbolizing temptation (Figure 1). Similarly, in some

[6] Juliana Santos Dinoá Medeiros, "The Iconographical Diversity of Thesirens' Physical Forms in Medieval Bestiaries," *Anastasis. Research in Medieval Culture and Art* 8, no. 1 (May 29, 2021): 51–64, https://doi.org/10.35218/armca.2021.1.03.

depictions the Siren is holding a fish directly in front of the sailors (Figure 2). In this second example of Siren imagery, she appears more monstrous due to her size compared to the tiny sailors. This depiction presents the Siren as a beast that can physically overpower the men and their ship, quite easily in fact. She has the boat in her hand, indicating her strength and power over the situation.

As I mentioned earlier, *The Odyssey* never gives specific descriptions of the Sirens. Homer only provides their character traits (seducing sailors to their death) and a vague physical trait (ugliness). The Bestiary writers and illustrators must have come up with the Siren's human-bird-fish combinations on their own.[7] This highlights the importance and relevance of the Medieval Bestiary in Art History as well as Pop Culture. Without these illustrations, *The Little Mermaid* wouldn't even exist.

[7] Juliana Santos Dinoá Medeiros, "The Iconographical Diversity of Thesirens' Physical Forms in Medieval Bestiaries," *Anastasis. Research in Medieval Culture and Art* 8, no. 1 (May 29, 2021): 51–64, https://doi.org/10.35218/armca.2021.1.03.

Figure 1. Muratova, X., Medieval Bestiary (1984) , pp. 92-93; color pl. fol. 18r544.

Figure 2. Medieval Bestiary, Harley MS. 4751, British Library

Modern Art

Representations of the Siren in fine arts declined in the 19th and 20th century, along with myths and legends in general.[8] Symbolism and realism is replaced by art deco and surrealism, along with a focus on the basics, such as light, shape, color, etc. This is due to the World Wars and improved education systems. The siren finds popularity in commercialism, especially in tourism and coastal products. Sirens and mermaids increasingly appear on cigarette boxes, hotel advertisements, and fishing equipment.

[8] Axel Müller, Christopher Halls, and Ben Willliamson, *Mermaids: Art, Symbolism and Mythology* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2022).

Despite this decline, we have a beautiful siren creation by expressionist painter Edvard Munch in 1896, "Haufren," or "Mermaid," amid the Art Nouveau emergence (Figure 3).[9] This depiction of the siren occurs in the middle of her transition from mermaid to human. Her fins are still present, but you can see her legs forming. This suggests to the viewer that the siren is beginning her journey of finding romantic love with a human, sacrificing her legs and home in the sea. The moon's reflection on the water is interpreted as a phallic symbol, making this work a combination of sexually suggestiveness, yet implied desire for monogamy and love. This combines my 2 categories of over-sexualization *and* glorified innocence men projected onto the siren.

Figure 3. Munch, Edvard. "Haufren" (Mermaid), 1896. Philadelphia Museum of Art. https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/224544.

20th Century

The only surrealist painting featuring a siren I have come across is Réne Maguritte's "L'Invention Collective," of 1934 (Figure 4).[10] This disturbing image features a siren in the reverse form of the typical bird/fish tail and human torso. Maguritte paints a fish head on human legs, lying on the beach. This depiction takes away the siren's voice and song, and ejects her

[9] Axel Müller, Christopher Halls, and Ben Willliamson, *Mermaids: Art, Symbolism and Mythology* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2022).
[10] 1. Axel Müller, Christopher Halls, and Ben Willliamson, *Mermaids: Art, Symbolism and Mythology* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2022).

from her home, the water. We see this stealing of power years later, in Disney's 1987 adaptation of "The Little Mermaid," in which Ariel gives up voice in pursuit of romantic love.[11] Magruitte's work manages to depict the siren as an ugly beast, taking away her beauty and seduction, while still making her a sexualized object for the male gaze. The fish head is entirely unappealing, yet the human legs and private parts of the siren are on display.

Figure 4. Magritte, René. "L'Invention Collective" (Collective Invention), 1934. Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen. https://arthive.com/renemagritte/works/333319~Collective_invention.

A rare example of the siren in contemporary fine arts is in Erich Kissing's "Leipziger am Meer," or "Leipzig Citizens by the Sea," (Figure 5).[12] This mixed media piece features a beautiful siren surrounded by Kissing himself and his classmates. They all break the fourth wall,

[11] Phillip Hayward, "Becoming Ariel, Becoming Ursula," *Making a Splash*, 2017, 21–50, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt200605w.6.
[12] Axel Müller, Christopher Halls, and Ben Willliamson, *Mermaids: Art, Symbolism and Mythology* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2022).

looking directly at the viewer. It's based on Velázquez's "El Triunfo de Baco" or "Los Borrachos," which translates to "The Triumph of Bacchus," or "The Drunks." In its creation in 1979 critics attributed meanings to the work, but Kissing claims he simply wanted to work with a naked female model.

Figure 5. Kissing, Erich. "Leipziger Am Meer" (Leipzig Citizens by the Sea), 1975. Galerie Schwind. https://www.galerie-schwind.de/erich-kissing-leipziger-am-meer-1975-1979/.

Popular Culture

Regardless of the momentary dip in public interest in Sirens, the iconography has stood the test of time. This symbol from Antiquity is still relevant in Pop Culture today. Hannah Adamy in her article, "The Inescapable Siren, the Cry from the Stage," proposes a theory as to

why the Siren's image has survived so long.[13] The Siren combines two ideas related to escapism; water and music. Water provides a physical form of transportation and music allows us to be metaphorically "transported" to another world. Additionally, the female body grabs the audience's attention. To build on this theory, I would argue that women often serve as an "escape" for men. This can occur in a motherly sense, for example, providing comfort and security from a stressful work life. Women are also viewed as an escape for men that are bored or insecure, and see women as an exciting as exotic distraction. Whatever the case, the women in these scenarios are not viewed as human beings, but rather a character in the man's life, just like the Siren. I would also add that fairy tales themselves are forms of escape, just like any other form of fictional literature. Specifically literature with fantastical elements, because they transport us to a world so drastically different from the one we inhabit.

Possibly the most well known siren today is Disney's Ariel, from the 1989 cartoon *The Little Mermaid*. This movie is based on the original short story by Hans Christian Anderson.[14] An analysis by Phillip Hayward provides a comparison between the original Anderson story and the Disney adaptation which helps explain why the Disney film had such a pivotal role in changing the siren's symbolism from sinful to innocent. Anderson's character becomes Ariel, named after an angel from Abrahamic mysticism, indicative of her purity. Similar to Munch's *Mermaid* (Figure 3), Ariel is a beautiful young girl longing for romantic love with a human man. So much so, that she gives up everything. Her home in her natural habitat, her relationship with her father and her sisters, her tail and even her voice are sacrificed for Prince Eric. The cartoon

[13] Hannah Adamy, "THE INESCAPABLE SIREN, THE CRY FROM THE STAGE," *TCNJ JOURNAL OF STUDENT SCHOLARSHIP* XV (2013): 1–10, https://joss.tcnj.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/176/2013/04/2013-Adamy.pdf.
[14] Phillip Hayward, "Becoming Ariel, Becoming Ursula," *Making a Splash*, 2017, 21–50, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt200605w.6.

allows Ariel and Prince Eric a happy ending, in which all her physical and emotional sacrifices are rewarded with romantic love. In Anderson's original version, human-legged Ariel is too late, and the Prince has already married someone else. While telling similar stories, the film reached more widespread popularity, sanitized the plot for a kid-friendly audience, and gave the fairytale a happier, more digestible ending. Hayward concludes that the little mermaid exists in a patriarchal context in both stories. In every adaptation, she is defined by what she lacks (phallus and therefore power, feminine parts and therefore male desire, and finally, her voice, the most powerful asset of all.

Laura Sells methodology compares the worlds in *The Little Mermaid* to the real world, as described by Ann Wilson Schaef in *Women's Reality* (1981) as the "white male system." Sells chooses 2 relevant myths defined by Schaef that are believed by this system, despite their contradictions. First of all, nothing outside of this system exists, and secondly, this system knows all and understands all. However, groups outside of this system are fully aware of both their world and the white male world, and all the differences between them. These ideas can be applied to the land and sea as well, especially in the case of Ariel. The mermaid knows all about the human world. She's grown up watching sailors and tourists at the beach, collecting human's litter (like the iconic fork), and inspecting sunken ships with her underwater friends. Despite this, the mermaids are forbidden from interacting with humans, due to her father's rule and assumed danger. Therefore, the human world is unaware of Ariel's world, just like the first myth. The second myth, that the dominant group knows everything, also applies. The human world doesn't know about Ariel, but they think they know that she wouldn't exist.

When discussing the Siren as a villainous beast, it's relevant to look at the way (real) women have been looked at as "the other" across history. From antiquity to modern day, women

have been seen as "closer to nature," than men.[15] In part due to the feminine cycle's link to moon and tides, also the Christian belief that Eve was created after Adam, from his own rib. Regardless, this idea is dehumanizing and reduces women to being closer to animals than to men. A similar idea was presented in a reading discussed earlier by Leach. She stated that Medieval men believed women to be less intelligent, making the siren less unrealistic in their minds.[16] Linda Phyllis Austern explains this cliché belief that had been perpetuated by men for centuries. She follows by providing a similar historical philosophy, but this version has a feminist lens. It is called the aquatic theory of evolution, popular among 1970's feminist authors. This idea focuses on the "fat deposits of the feminine form" and how women are in tune with the sea (as opposed to earth). She calls water the "blood of the earth," which reminds me of the idea of "mother nature." This is a beautiful and empowering twist on the original demeaning ideology. Perhaps the femininity of the ocean has to do with humanity's century-long fascination with sirens.

Reclamation is defined as "taking back control by targets of words used to attack them."[17] Artworks are not only a reflection of the creator's conscious ideas and beliefs, but a record of the attitudes of the culture it comes from. For example, Homer's literature provides evidence of the misogynistic culture of his time. For centuries after *The Odyssey*'s publication, the siren was a symbol of men's demonization of sex, femininity and sex-workers. It then

[15] Linda Phyllis Austern, "'Teach Me to Heare Mermaides Singing' Embodiments of Acoustic Pleasure and Danger in the Modern West," essay, in *Music of the Sirens* (Indiana University Press, 2006), 21–61.
[16] Elizabeth Eva Leach, "'The Little Pipe Sings Sweetly While the Fowler Deceives the Bird': Sirens in the Later Middle Ages," *Music and Letters* 87, no. 2 (May 1, 2006): 187–211, https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/gci250.
[17] Mihaela Popa-Wyatt, "Reclamation," *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 97, no. 1 (March 4, 2020): 159–76, https://doi.org/10.1163/18756735-09701009.

became a way to glorify, yet infantilize, women and female virginity. Today, women reclaim the siren as a symbol of female empowerment, sexual liberation and independence.

An example of this is the shift from the Siren in naval tattoos for men to a popular design seen on women.[18] The siren tattoo originally gained popularity among sailors in the classic naval style, now known as "American Traditional." The history of sailors getting tattoos to commemorate memories and accomplishments has a long history, but was revived in the 20th century by Sailor Jerry. For sailors and men in general, the siren tattoo represented danger, mystery, desire and sex, very reminiscent of the original siren meaning. This has changed overtime into a strong female figure, increasingly popular among women.[19] Today, the Siren tattoo takes on a meaning of independence, power of the female mind, imagination and escapism.

While Siren imagery has been popular among women as a symbol of empowerment, not much evidence is currently recorded in empirical research. The main evidence of this phenomenon is from tattoo art. Future studies should look for this symbol in a feminist context in other forms of pop culture, such as music, film, fine art and performance art.

Comparisons

In this section of my essay, I will combine analyses and comparisons of these Siren images from previous researchers. I also include my own comparisons and interpretations of the images and the research I have found. While the Bestiary images from the beginning of the paper and the paintings at the end deal with the same iconography, there are many different formal and

[18] Axel Müller, Christopher Halls, and Ben Willliamson, *Mermaids: Art, Symbolism and Mythology* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2022).
[19] Axel Müller, Christopher Halls, and Ben Willliamson, *Mermaids: Art, Symbolism and Mythology* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2022).

symbolic elements to discuss. This a result of the passage of time and change in popular beliefs, as well as new media changing the images interpretations by the later artists. For example, the Munch paintings of the Siren are very clearly impacted by Anderson's *The Little Mermaid* story. Some things remain consistent, like the aquatic setting, the fishtail, and the intrigue from male characters. Other aspects are completely forgotten, such as the fish-bait and the bird features.

The Sirens of the Medieval Bestiaries are visually very different from the Siren we see in later representations of the image. The intention of the Medieval Sirens was to scare the reader into avoiding lust and sexual deviance, according to the Christian beliefs. The Sirens we see in Modern Art and Pop Culture are used very differently. The Sirens after the mid-19th century encourage the audience to lust and fantasize about them. The Siren is no longer a feared monster, like in *The Odyssey*, but a sweet, virginal princess that only longs for love. We see this second adaptation very clearly in multiple works by Edvard Munch.

Munch's depiction of the Siren in his painting, *Mermaid* (Figure 3), creates a very similar story to Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale, *The Little Mermaid*.[20] As the author John Zarobell points out, both stories involve a mermaid in the process of transforming her tail into legs in exchange for a chance at love with a human. While a fairytale can tell us the entire timeline of events, from the mermaids' life in the sea, to her encounter with the villain who takes her voice, to finally, in some adaptations at least, a happily ever after ending with her lover. A painting, however, can only choose one scene to show us. Munch's choice to paint the mermaid mid-transformation, with human hips and faint fins on her ankles, making her appear an attractive human woman with a hint of fantasy.

[20] John Zarobell, *Edvard Munch's Mermaid* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with the Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).

Zarobell compares this to another one of Munch works, *Encounter on the Beach: Mermaid* (Figure 5), made the same year. There are formal differences, this is a watercolor on wove paper and is much smaller in size. The viewpoint has changed, we see a shoreline this time. This angle creates less of a fantasy and takes focus off of the figure. What contrasts this work the most, compared to *Mermaid* (Figure 3), is the presence of a second figure. In this watercolor, we see the man that the mermaid is changing herself in order to be with. The shoreline divides the figures, creating a visual and symbolic boundary between them. We can infer how much these characters long for each other, even without prior knowledge of Anderson's story. Zarobell concludes this comparison by pointing out what makes both *Mermaid* and *Encounter on the Beach: Mermaid* so captivating. Each takes a pivotal scene from *The Little Mermaid*, and purposefully portrays them in a mysterious way. The viewer will never know what kind of ending the mermaid will face. I believe ambiguity is amplified when viewed in the 21st century, due to the amount of adaptations of this story.

Figure 6. Munch, Edvard. “Encounter on the Beach: Mermaid” 1896. Watercolor with crayon underdrawing.

Both of these works by Munch are drastically different depictions from the creature we see in the Medieval Bestiary (Figure 1). First of all, the Medieval Sirens are typically holding harps, horns or flutes, as a reminder of the music used to tempt men. Perhaps because the song of the Siren is so well known by the time of Munch’s depictions, he does not include these reminders. Medieval Sirens would also be drawn holding fish, another symbol of temptation. Munch’s Siren is not a villain, but a protagonist. His Siren is still supposed to be sexually attractive, but in the context of a love story protagonist rather than a beast to be weary of. These differences all come back to the purpose behind the Siren’s image. The Bestiary’s intention is to teach and warn readers to obey Christian morals, while the fairytales are made to entertain.

Another drastic difference between the Medieval Bestiary (Figure 1) and *Mermaid* (Figure 3) is the lack of bird features in the latter. As we previously discussed, the Bestiary depictions varied from bird-woman, fish-woman, and bird-fish-woman.[21] I interpret the lack of bird features to be the Modern Artists’ attempt to make the Siren more aesthetically desirable. The bird features are more animalistic. The bird claws are a reminder of the Siren’s original purpose, to attack and consume men. The mermaid, however, is not a vicious or violent monster, but the protagonist in a fairytale. She has been created to please, to be a sweet girl looking for love, and the claws would kill that fantasy. In *The Odyssey*, despite the lack of specific physical descriptions of the Sirens, Homer gives us enough information to conclude that the Sirens are not

[21] Juliana Santos Dinoá Medeiros, “The Iconographical Diversity of Thesirens’ Physical Forms in Medieval Bestiaries,” *Anastasis. Research in Medieval Culture and Art* 8, no. 1 (May 29, 2021): 51–64, https://doi.org/10.35218/armca.2021.1.03.

pleasant to look at. This idea, along with the bird features, is ditched when the Siren becomes associated with the Greek myth, Muses.[22]

I find René Magritte's "L'Invention Collective" (The Collective Invention) (Figure 3), of 1934 to be the most similar to the original Siren from Greek Mythology and the Medieval Bestiary, despite its backwards form. As mentioned previously, *The Collective Invention* features a Siren with a fish head and female, human legs, making her grotesque but sexualized at the same time. This is very similar to the Siren's description in *The Odyssey* and physical adaptation from the Bestiary. The original Siren was a sexual temptress, yet was hideous to look at.[23] These two qualities sound contradictory, but we understand them existing simultaneously in each of these examples. When looking at this dichotomy with a Feminist perspective, it makes me think of men that degrade women that they are attracted to out of intimidation, embarrassment, shame, or simply wanting to look cool in front of male peers.

Erich Kissing's "Leipziger Am Meer" (Leipzig Citizens by the Sea) (Figure 5), from 1975 is visually, quite similar to the *Mermaid* by Munch (Figure 3). Both depictions feature a conventionally attractive woman with a fish tail, no bird features, and is addressing her viewer with direct eye-contact. Both Sirens are topless, but Kissing's is in much greater detail, along with the entirety of the painting. Additionally, they use the same framing. We are viewing the Siren from the land, with only the sea in the background. Both have a bit of rock in the foreground, confirming that we are viewing her from the shore. The girls are much more beautiful and human-like than the Sirens from the Medieval Bestiary. The Bestiary images

[22] Hannah Adamy, "THE INESCAPABLE SIREN, THE CRY FROM THE STAGE," *TCNJ JOURNAL OF STUDENT SCHOLARSHIP* XV (2013): 1–10, https://joss.tcnj.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/176/2013/04/2013-Adamy.pdf.
[23] Hannah Adamy, "THE INESCAPABLE SIREN, THE CRY FROM THE STAGE," *TCNJ JOURNAL OF STUDENT SCHOLARSHIP* XV (2013): 1–10, https://joss.tcnj.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/176/2013/04/2013-Adamy.pdf.

(Figure 1 & 2) give the Sirens wrinkly gray skin, scars on their bellies and strange ribs that look inhuman.

The second Munch work we discussed, *Encounter on the Beach: Mermaid* (Figure 6), is less similar to Kissing's painting in its formal qualities, however the subject matter is more alike. This Munch piece, unlike the first one, features a male subject. Kissing himself is featured in his painting, along with six other men who were friends with the artist.[24] Munch does not include himself, nor does he feature multiple men. The only similarity here is that they both based their men off of friends.[25] The tone of the works are drastically different. Kissing uses pastel colors, giving his work an overexposed, daylight effect, while Much uses dark colors, portraying a nighttime scene with a note of sadness. Kissings's painting is lighthearted and the Siren does not seem romantically interested in any of the men surrounding her, or even the audience. These men are really only present for a slightly unsettling, comedic effect and establishes the unseriousness of the painter. Munch, however, is portraying the emotional turmoil of the Siren from *The Little Mermaid* story, who is doing whatever it takes for a shot of love. The dark colors of the scene might even imply a sad ending for the character.

One of the Bestiary images (Figure 2) also includes men in the image. These men however, are sailors, similar to the original mythology that created the Sirens. The sailors in the image are so small compared to the Siren, it makes her look huge and intimidating. In Kissing's painting, the men are equally proportional to the Siren. She is a harmless fantastic creature rather than a dangerous monster. She isn't holding any symbol of sin, such as the fish, mirror or

[24] Axel Müller, Christopher Halls, and Ben Willliamson, *Mermaids: Art, Symbolism and Mythology* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2022).
[25] John Zarobell, *Edvard Munch's Mermaid* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with the Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).

instrument, either. This comparison is a great representation of how drastically the Siren's image has changed over time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Siren has stood the test of time and experienced transformations along the way. Like all art, these transformations reflect different things about the time and culture in which they were produced. Paintings from Fine Arts and even mainstream media have kept a record of various ideologies associated with the Siren overtime. The Medieval Bestiary's purpose was to warn readers of the temptations and sins of the world. The Siren from this time reflects the Christian men's view of women, as they blame their lust and sexual sins on women. Years later, largely in part to Hans Christian Anderson's short story, the Siren becomes a symbol of innocence, youth, virginity and a longing for heterosexual love. Neither of these depictions of Sirens represent a multidimensional female character. They both represent restrictive female stereotypes that don't allow the woman many options in life. Misogyny has gone through many different manifestations, and studying the Siren provides interesting insight into these various manifestations. The Siren has been used for men to project various stereotypes and personal moral crises onto women. Rather than taking accountability for their lust or accepting their sexual desires, they point the finger at a female figure. We see the symbol reclaimed by many contemporary women through tattoo art. Possibly in the future, research will reveal other ways in which women use the symbol in fine arts or in literature.

Bibliography

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In this article, Adamy discusses the Siren in the context of music and humans’ desire for escapism. Fantastical creatures and art, such as music, allow people to experience another world. The Siren is so captivating because she encapsulates both of these ideas at once. Perhaps this is why the Siren has been so successful for so many years now.

Austern, Linda Phyllis. “‘Teach Me to Heare Mermaides Singing’ Embodiments of Acoustic Pleasure and Danger in the Modern West.” Essay. In *Music of the Sirens*, 21–61. Indiana University Press, 2006.

The author of this chapter analyzes the siren as a piece of history that reflects the broader culture’s view of women. She approaches the subject by looking at historical examples of female authors' use of sirens in comparison to famous male examples. They make an interesting point about the way Sirens were symbols of sex and sin while Muses were seen as honorable and serious, even though they are very similar characters. The Muses sound like pop-culture mermaids (innocent, sweet, virgins). This could be applied to the way women are pinned against each other in real life (the “not-like-other-girls" trope, anti-feminist discourse in politics, etc.).

Brumble, H. David. *Classical myths and legends in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: A dictionary of allegorical meanings.* London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publ., (1998): 312-315.

This encyclopedia provides a definition of sirens and focuses on the mythological sirens and the way they seduce the male characters. He discusses authors from antiquity, aside from Homer, that use the siren in their stories. This author applies what we already know about sirens to a new context. He compares the siren to other characters with similar narratives, such as Venus from Sharkespere’s literature.

Hayward, Philip. “Becoming Ariel, Becoming Ursula.” In *Making a Splash: Mermaids (and Mermen) in 20th and 21st Century Audiovisual Media.* Indiana University Press, (2017) 21–50. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt200605w.6.

The first chapter of this book points out some of the misogynistic themes in the original “The Little Mermaid,” from 1837. While it’s not surprising that sexist themes would appear in a fairytale from this time, the author does make some interesting notes that I never considered. For example, Ariel craves independence from her father, the King, only to desire a man to love and marry. To receive this love, she drastically modifies her body by giving up her tail. She also sacrifices her voice and song, one of her greatest sources of power.

Leach, Elizabeth Eva. “‘The Little Pipe Sings Sweetly While the Fowler Deceives the Bird’: Sirens in the Later Middle Ages.” *Music and Letters* 87, no. 2 (May 1, 2006): 202. https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/gci250.

Leach provides insight into the siren’s symbolism, specifically in the Medieval period. She makes an interesting point that most writers at the time were celibate, religious males, which explains why the sirens were so demonized in the bestiary and other texts. The creation of the siren in literature, as well as its allegorical purpose in church sermons, is a way for men to blame their lust and sin on women. This is an example of how the mermaid reflects the different ways society has negatively viewed women across centuries.

Müller, Axel, Christopher Halls, and Ben Williamson. *Mermaids: Art, Symbolism and Mythology.* S.l.: University of Exeter Press, (2022).

This book provides an in-depth overview of the history of the siren and mermaid’s changes in symbolism, as well as reasons for those changes. My thesis developed after reading this text. It describes the ancient and medieval stories of mermaids, the resurgence during the Renaissance period, alleged “sightings” and “proof” across time, as well as the art periods and how each interacted with mermaids. Possibly most importantly, it gives a detailed history of “The Little Mermaid” fairytale, and its Disney adaptations over 150 years later. The authors claim that the Disney adaptation marks the mermaid’s change in

symbolism from sin and temptation to innocence and love. The section on mermaid tattoos mentions its prevalence among women as a symbol of independence and escapism.

Santos Dinoá Medeiros, Juliana. "The Iconographical Diversity of The Sirens' Physical Forms in Medieval Bestiaries." *Anastasis. Research in Medieval Culture and Art* 8, no. 1 (May 29, 2021): 51–64. https://doi.org/10.35218/armca.2021.1.03.

In this paper, Santos focuses on the siren's various representations in the Medieval Bestiary. She first gives a detailed background on these Bestiaries, and why there are three representations; bird-woman, fish-woman, and bird-fish-woman. The bulk of the paper is an analysis of two opposing opinions by authors Florence McCulloch and Michel Pastoureau. McCulloch argued that the illustrations varied due to the subjectivity in giving a mythical creature a physical depiction, while Pastoureau claimed the bird-siren and fish-siren were entirely separate beats. She concluded with her own opinion separate from these two. They each focus on the text *or* the images, while Santos examines the complicated relationship between the two.

Scribner, Vaughn. Merpeople : A Human History. London, United Kingdom, S.1.: Reaktion Books, Limited, (2020): 29-60, 174-213.

Scribner discusses the history of the siren and theorizes how and why it is still relevant to us today. He provides the reader an understanding of the siren's switch from beast (scaring people away) to commercial (luring in tourists and consumers). His chronology includes popular beliefs about the siren, as well as reported sightings from people that swear by the mermaid's existence. The siren functions as a lens to look at human's relationship to nature and fantasy over time.

Sells, Laura. 'Where Do the Mermaids Stand?': Voice and Body in The Little Mermaid." In From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture, edited by Laura Sells, Elizabeth Bell, and Lynda Haas, 175–92. Indiana University Press, 1995. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt16gz53v.15.

This book begins with a Barbara Bush speech, in which Bush was attempting to defend (or idealize, rather) the tradwife lifestyle to a crowd of feminists. She ends her speech by mentioning mermaids as a metaphor for the possibilities of women's social roles. Sells compares Bush's mermaid to Disney's mermaid, concluding that they are both rather narrow ideals of femininity. The bulk of this text is a history of mermaids from Hans Christian Anderson's fairy tale to Disney's, and various artistic adaptations in between.

Strickland, Debra Higgs. "Sex in the Bestiaries." *The Mark of the Beast the Medieval Bestiary in Art, Life, and Literature*, 59–91. Garland Pub, 1999. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aup/reader.action?docID=1486811#.

This the book, Strickland discussed the sins from the Bestiary and what they tell us about Medieval culture. In my essay, I used the chapter titled "Sex in the Bestiaries," in which Strickland details the sins associated with the Siren and real-life women from this time period. Not only sexual sin, but vanity and pridefulness were considered feminine qualities only. This teaches us about misogyny from the time.

Zarobell, John. "A Year in Paris: Edvard Munch's 'Mermaid.'" Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin 93, no. 393/394 (2005): 7–23. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3795497.

Zarobell writes about Edvard Munch's *Mermaid* painting, while providing some context on the location and art movements surrounding the paintings' creation. He analyzes the painting and speculates what it says about the psychology of the artist. We also learn some background information about the commissioner of the work and the context of where it was made to be hung. The author compares *Mermaid* to other works by Munch to give us a better understanding of the artist and his painting, and points out similarities between the work and Christian's *The Little Mermaid*.

Additional References

Popa-Wyatt, M. (2020). Reclamation. Grazer Philosophische Studien, 97(1), 159–176. https://doi.org/10.1163/18756735-09701009