

Shadows of the Goddess: The Mermaid

by Scarlett deMason

This article was originally located at: <http://www.newage.com.au/panthology/mermaid.html>.

The image of the Mermaid, the sea-swelling half-woman, half-fish, has been an endearing and popular one; each age had invested this enchanting creature with new shades of meaning and new elements in her myth.

Although her male counterpart, the merman, had his place also in the collective consciousness, the female of the species with her special feminine symbolism, is far more often represented; it almost seems as though the male version fundamentally exists because he logically must in order to facilitate continuation of their race. However, despite this, the first representation of the half-human, half-fish hybrid was a male; the sea-god Oannes, the 'great fish of the ocean', who was also the sun-god, rising out of the sea each day and disappearing back under the waves each night.

Oannes was worshipped by the Babylonians around 5000BCE. Early images of Oannes show him as a man wrapped in a fish cloak, but later the image evolved into the half-man, half-fish form in which he became more widely known. A civilizing force for the good, and light and life to his people, Oannes represented the positive values connected with the sea.

Oannes' goddess counterpoint was Atargatis (or, Atergatis, or in Greece, Derketo) a Semetic moon goddess who became the first official mermaid, being depicted with a fish's tail; fish were sacred to her. She and Oannes were said to be the parents of the legendary Semiramis, an historical queen of Babylon. Atargatis was an important fertility goddess, also representing the darker, night forces of love and their potentially destructive power. As Dea Syria, her cult reached as far as Britain; the migration of the ubiquitous mermaid had begun.

Later this goddess became identified with Aphrodite, who was born from the sea, and retained close connections with it, but in fully human form again; her fish attributes were transferred to her escorts the Tritons, and more rarely, the female Tritonids. Aphrodite was also a fertility goddess, and goddess of fair sailing, her companion the sacred dolphin. Many of the symbols associated with Aphrodite, subsequently the Roman Venus, have been retained in the mermaid myth. Her mirror, later a symbol of her vanity, originally represented the planet Venus in astrological tradition.

Her abundant, flowing hair, symbolizing an abundant love potential, was also an attribute of Venus in her role as fertility goddess. Her comb, necessary to keep all that hair in order, carried sexual connotations for the Greeks, as their words for comb, kteis and pecten, also signified the female vulva. Thus the mermaid is the surviving aspect of the old goddesses, particularly as the link between passion and destruction.

How did one goddess then become a multitude, a whole race of sea-people? The Greeks were a great sea faring people and obviously aware of the abundance of all life in the oceans. The incestuous union of brother and sister Oceanus and Tethys bore eloquent testimony to the legendary fertility of the sea; they produced 300 sea-nymphs called Oceanids, along with much other issue. Among these were Metis, mother of Athene by Zeus; Euromyne, who was represented as a mermaid in a statue at Phigalia; and Doris, who became the wife of another sea-god, Nereus. These two then produced 50 more sea-nymphs known as Nereids. Among these were Thetis, mother of Achilles, and Amphitrite, who became the wife of the later sea-god Poseidon, and bore the race of Tritons, already mentioned in connection with Venus.

Nereids had become synonymous with mermaids by the time of Pliny (80 CE) and the Tritons the originators of the mermen. The original sea-gods were Wise Old Men of the Sea in keeping with the tradition begun by Oannes, but the Tritons were a lustful and rapacious lot, fond of assaulting unwary sea-nymphs and human women alike, doubtless as a result of their association with Venus.

The Nereids on the other hand were protective of sailors, and reserved their beautiful singing voices to entertain their father, unlike the dangerous Sirens who ensnared sailors with their enchanting voices and lured them to watery deaths. The Sirens were originally bird-women related to the Egyptian Ra, or soul birds, demons of death sent to catch souls. But the Sirens eventually became synonymous with mermaids; thus the mermaids acquired their unpleasant reputation for drowning sailors. This evil aspect can also be traced to a certain degree as stemming from Greek sea-monster propaganda, promoting a

fearful image of the sea to discourage commercial rivals in shipping and colonization.

Whilst the Sirens tempted Odysseus with supreme knowledge, a god-like attribute, later the emphasis shifted to worldly temptation. Thus the mermaid/siren symbol was used by the Mediaeval Church as embodying the lure of fleshy pleasures to be shunned by the God-fearing. The mermaid became a victim of the repressive sexual attitudes of the Christian Church. Mermaid carvings figured prominently in church decorations in the Middle Ages, to symbolically serve as a vivid reminder of the fatal temptations of the flesh. These rapacious soul-eaters (the legacy of the bird-sirens) were of course not considered to have souls of their own. Thus the legends of the more highly-principled mermaids, anxious to acquire souls, arose.

Apparently one method for a mermaid to gain a soul was to marry a human being; the best known form of this legend is Hans Christian Anderson's 'Little Mermaid', recently popularized once again, and sanitized of the darker aspects of the legend, by the Disney Studios. But similar legends abound in the folklore of many countries. Celtic mythology included the sanctified Liban, a young woman drowned and transformed into a mermaid, who after 500 years enlisted the aid of the Irish St. Comgall to save her soul; also the Mermaid of Iona who wept many bitter tears over her inability to leave her ocean home to gain her promised soul. St. Patrick allegedly had a custom of transforming pagan women into mermaids, adding to the marine population in Ireland.

France has the legends of Melusine and Undine, both water-spirits who married noblemen. These mixed marriages in legend almost invariably fail miserably, with the unhappy mermaid ultimately unable to abandon her ocean element.

In Germany on the Rhine River they had their Lorelei or Nix, a beautiful blonde siren who sat on a cliff luring boatmen to their deaths with her songs, in traditional style.

There are the 'morgens' of Brittany, seemingly descendants of Morgan Le Fay, the sorceress of Arthurian legend. These creature lure all who come too near, down to their gold and crystal underwater palaces.

In Norway the 'havfrau' portends imminent disaster if sighted sitting on the surface of the water combing her long golden hair with a golden comb.

The Japanese have their mermaids known as Ningyo. In fact the mermaid archetype is so widespread among cultures that one may conclude it is very ancient, and fulfills a particular need in the human collective consciousness. The mermaid in our culture is the most persistent and pervasive symbol of the old Goddess energy that represents women, particularly the mysterious, life-generating element. The Christian Church, in promoting the ideas that mermaids

- a) were dangerous temptresses and
- b) had no souls of their own,

was actually stating deeply-held beliefs about all women, much as in the case of the witchcraze, when harmless old women were put to death by burning or hanging for practicing traditional herb-lore; this being the province of women it was destroyed by the Church in support of male domination.

This beautiful, helpful and compellingly attractive goddess-mermaid has been stripped of all her spiritual qualities; hence the stories involving the mermaid's soul could never end happily. They emphasized the supposed faithlessness and inconstancy of women, the danger of their attraction, and the unlikelihood of their gaining humanity.

In Elizabethan times the mermaid was used as a symbol of prostitution, and thus popularly applied to Mary Queen of Scots, as Queen Elizabeth's hated rival. Shakespeare, in the *Midsummer Night's Dream*, included these lines supposedly referring to Mary, five years after her execution:

'Thou rememberest
Since once I sat upon a promontory,
And heard a mermaid on a Dolphin's back
Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath,

That the rude sea grew civil at her song;
And certain stars shot madly from their spheres,
To hear the sea-maid's music.'

The 'mermaid', 'sea-maid' meaning Mary; a dolphins back', she married the Dauphin of France; 'the rude sea', the Scotch rebels; 'certain stars' referring to the Earls of Northumberland and Westmoreland and the Duke of Norfolk; 'shot madly from their spheres', revolted from Queen Elizabeth, enchanted by Mary's feminine qualities.

These lines may be disguised flattery; but it seems unlikely since Mary was dead, and also due to the prostitution symbolism of the mermaid at the time. More likely it was directed at Elizabeth, Shakespeare's patroness, in the sense of censuring the behaviour of her rebel nobles. The mermaid was a popular poetic and allegorical symbol in Elizabethan theatre.

In our own times the mermaid-symbol has been completely trivialized; stripped of her power to frighten or impress, all deeper meanings forgotten. Although just a cute toy for little girls, the persistence of this creature, despite her biological unlikelihood, is interesting. My personal favourite theory is based on Desmond Morris' suggestion in 'The Naked Ape', that possibly the human species spent some time living in the ocean at the time of the separation from our closest relatives, the great apes. This could explain some of the obvious differences between human beings and other apes, i.e. relative hairlessness, upright stance (both for streamlining) freeing the hands for manipulation, protruding noses, and the fact that the human, alone among the great apes, actually enjoys immersing in water and seeks it out for pleasure. Could the mermaid also be a symbol of our affinity with the sea, gained in this way?

Resources; 'Mermaids' - Beatrice Philpotts 'The Witches' Goddess' - Janet & Stewart Farrar Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable - See additional for Postscripts (unavailable now that link is broken)