Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid* (1837) is a remarkable fairy tale, not least because its exemplary heroine actively plots to marry above her station. Unlike the usual run of female protagonist, whom “the fairies will reward with . . . a perfect husband” if only she “sacrifice[s] herself” (Zipes, *Myth 30*), the mermaid bargaining away her voice to gain the world, a prince, and through him an immortal soul. The narrative endorses, yet refuses any definitive realization of, these ambitious intentions. The story of the mermaid’s self-exile from the sea and acculturation into humanity recapitulates the grotesque and painful transformations suffered by the exotically foreign and racially marked subject aspiring to be on equal terms with a “superior” race. Andersen’s narrative adumbrates a collective fantasy whereby the “Other’s” tragic resolution mark it as a fable of modern culture’s feminine problematizes imperialist and class-based morality.¹ When the prince fails to recognize her extraordinary merit and an- istributed love, omniscient providential authority, which does acknowledge her worthiness and sacrifice, monitors a continued rise through the ranks to paradise. The mermaid becomes an aerial spirit serving an apprenticeship in a sentimental purgatory. Thus the heathen and untutored mermaid, despite having internalized dominant values, remains a marginal figure. Deep acceptance of the self-deprecating supplicant is promised but indefinitely deferred.²

That this achievement of the colonized consciousness, problematic in itself, is filtered through the process of feminine identity construction taxes the narrative still further and points to what Carole Pateman calls the “repressed problem” (2) of women’s social function in the capitalist state.³ This filtering is reflected, in narrative terms, by Andersen’s wedding of two disparate genres, the male bildungsroman and the female marriage plot.⁴ The heroine’s aspiration to progress and perfection is forwarded by the virtues appropriated from feudal romance by the male bourgeoisie, including imaginative sympathy, resourcefulness, courage, and self-discipline. Yet the tale is also predicated on the marriage quest, although in the end the mermaid renders invisible care to the sick and the young, not to a husband. Thus *The Little Mermaid* exposes the unresolved contradiction in political theory and practice between women’s particular, sexualized role and the normative (masculine) value of autonomy.

It is a feminist insight amounting to a truism by now that normative theories of the state, in consigning women to the private and men to the public realm, fail to “take account of the dialectic between individual and social life” (Pateman 28). Women are associated with birth and the maintenance of life, men with the rational capacity to make moral decisions. Since the inception of modern contract theory in the seventeenth century, the usual view of women’s duty as citizens has comprised a conceptual paradox: the female activity of providing life-giving, life-enhancing care is at once natural and obligatory. The female body is construed as entailing primary responsibility for the undeniably necessary work of sustaining affective social life. Yet women’s relegation to the devalued space and time of contingent social relations compromises their desire to share the privileged male status of moral autonomy. And so the mermaid must sacrifice for the welfare of the prince, who oafishly overlooks it (Solomon 145). She does so, however, to further her own self-conceived ends. *The Little Mermaid’s* ambivalently rendered plot and provisional resolution mark it as a fable of modern culture’s feminine dilemma, that of the false choice between fulfilling feminine sexual functions and realizing female desire.

Significantly, several versions of *The Little Mermaid*, variously refracting the discourse of contemporary race, class, and gender identity politics, have been published in America since the mid-1980s.⁵ The re-emergence of Andersen’s narrative occurs within an embattled context. In the wake of a twenty-year explosion of emancipatory consciousness, changing the self is not merely a matter of will: the lived experience of personal memory, group praxis, and persistent systemic discrimination complicate and seemingly confound the quest for individual and collective transformation. Two versions of *The Little Mermaid*, Rosa Guy’s novel for adolescents, *My Love, My Love; or, The Peasant Girl* (1985) and Walt Disney’s film *The Little Mermaid* (1989), are of especial interest in their relinguishing of Andersen’s bittersweet, sadly hopeful conclusion about the incorporation of women into society on equal terms. In each case, the answer is the same: women’s desire to live outside their historically constituted worlds cannot be realized, since the terms of heterosexual relations are unalterably against them.

Guy’s novel and Disney’s film retain Andersen’s narrative engagement with the operation of imperialist power and class-based authority. Guy, born in Trinidad, emigrated to America at the age of seven; she has been shaped by her experience in the civil rights movement, and, since her forties, has traveled to Africa and lived in Haiti for periods of time. Her novels are invested with her experience of race, class, and gender struggle (see Eastman; Guy, “Spirit”; Norris). The Disney studio, on the other hand, consistently mythologizes the unequal distribution of social power, as various critics have noted (see especially Project, St. John, Willis). Guy’s novel critiques the

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**The Little Mermaid: Three Political Fables**

*by Rhoda Zuk*
postcolonial state and the transnational economy. Disney’s film celebrates imperialist aggression and mystified social relations. Both texts, however, replicate Andersen in foundering on the crises of feminine desire and legitimation. The common formulation of the redemptive love of woman in Guy and Disney suggests that the pathos of feminine subjection remains the silent heart of ideology within both progressive political consciousness and the popular imagination. Mediating their most precious desires through men, the young women in these fantasies produced in the 1980s, like the mermaid in the nineteenth-century model, cannot but lose agency. While Andersen’s heroine ends a virginal dependent, Guy’s is an abject maternal figure and Disney’s an oedipal daughter. The mermaid fable dwindles, inevitably, into sexual typology. These contemporary reinscriptions of the gender politics of the early nineteenth century call for a feminist historistic analysis.

The Misfortunate Lady and the Marriage Plot

Andersen’s tale delineates the movement, effected by courage, surrender, and the operation of divine grace, from heathen intuition to Christian understanding and salvation. The mermaid longs for a departure from herself and her homeland—a fantastic but ephemeral underwater paradise. She acquires legs so as to inhabit the humanly sexual body and partake in the pleasures of human artifice in a castle decorated with tapestries, orchestras, and fountains. She strives to earn the genuine love of a genuinely beloved prince and therefore be granted the immortal soul only marriage can ensure. Ultimately, she wants to enjoy the limitless time, space, and delights of eternity. The narrative affirms the longing to escape the boundaries of racial, cultural, and sexual identity even as it exposes the relationship between that desire and the lonely agony of the alienated outsider. In making clear that the remote and placid underwater kingdom is superficial and insidiously futile, the tale communicates a repugnance for the incompatibility.

Despite the sea’s lush abundance and serene social order, the mermaid is disposed from the outset to enter the morally superior society of men. Her own high-ranked circle is exclusively female—her father and other mermaids are virtually invisible and seemingly irrelevant to her. But she is alone in her dissatisfaction with the stultifying round of feminine preoccupations. Her five sisters accede to, and her grandmother endorses, moral, aesthetic, and spiritual stasis in both day-to-day conduct and rites of passage.

The mermaid’s desires are at once precise and boundless, like the distance between the sea world and the human world, which the narrator measures facetiously according to the standard of church architecture: “Many church steeples, piled one upon another, would not reach from the ground beneath to the surface of the water above” (134). No such fanciful technology can bridge the two races, however. Sea folk live three centuries and then dissolve into sea foam; earth folk do not live as long, but their immortal lives render their dust no tragedy. True love and holy matrimony can ensoul the sea-folk, but mermaids cannot dance with men and sailors join mermaids only if they drown. The heroine regrets and finally resists this incompatibility.

During her childhood, while her five elder sisters are content to decorate their gardens with casually selected relics from wrecks, the macabre tokens of human death, the little mermaid’s plot is a carefully cultivated pagan shrine. Its centerpiece is a marble statue of a boy, a phallic idol signaling her desire to be translated into the world of human flesh, law, and spirit. Similarly, her response to the upper world, which each mermaid is free to visit after her fifteenth birthday, is crucially differentiated from that of her sisters. One, for instance, vainly attempts to bask in the intangible, transient magnificence of the evening sky. She sees “a flock of wild swans” flying “towards the setting sun, looking like a long white veil across the sea. . . . She also swam towards the sun; but it sunk into the waves, and the rosy tints faded from the clouds and from the sea” (136). She has no more hope than the birds of expanding her scope of action or reaching heavenly glory. Moreover, although they are intrigued by the novelty of sky and shore and human civilization, the sisters are dispassionate about its inhabitants. One sits on an iceberg, coolly observing sailors in terror of their lives during a storm. Together the five link arms and sing to sailors, inviting them to join them in the sea—to drown. This desultory and amoral tragedy. True love and holy matrimony can ensoul the sea-folk, but mermaids cannot dance with men and sailors join mermaids only if they drown. The heroine regrets and finally resists this incompatibility.

The little mermaid, on the other hand, demonstrates a capacity to exceed the boundaries of her socially constructed nature when she rescues a handsome prince from a shipwreck on her fifteenth (and his sixteenth) birthday. Thereafter, she will admit no impediments to joining the prince. She forsakes her home and makes a perilous journey to a sea witch to negotiate a drastic bargain for a woman’s body. The latter warns, “I will prepare a draught for you . . . your tail will then disappear, and shrink up into what mankind calls legs, and you will feel great pain, as if a sword were passing through you . . . at every step you take it will feel as if you were treading upon sharp knives, and that the blood must flow” (142).

In accepting this arrangement, the mermaid is motivated by more than sexual passion, and certainly by more than a rejection of the sisters’ passive contentment with plenitude and luxury. Andersen’s sardonic representation of the grandmother’s matter-of-fact discipline and prosaic counsel
to the mermaid, her youngest motherless charge, reveals the stunted affective life and the vacuous pursuits of the high-born lady. She imposes upon the debutante the same minor self-denials and discomforts she herself endures out of vanity and propriety: she makes the mermaid forgo her favorite color to dress in white, weighs her head with heavy ornaments, and clips eight pinching oysters onto her tail. In insisting upon the necessity of submitting to pain and restriction if she is to occupy her exalted social station, the grandmother trains the girl to make trivial sacrifices for womanly ends; but this education prepares the mermaid, once she has knowledge of other-worldly life, to sacrifice everything for larger ambitions.

The grandmother instructs the mermaid that gaining citizenship in the human world and therefore in heaven is impossible “unless a man were to love you so much that you were more to him than his father or mother; and ... all his thoughts and all his love were fixed upon you ... and he promised to be true to you here and hereafter. ... He would give a soul to you and retain his own as well” (140). She acquaints her with, but dismisses, this form of initiation: “Let us be happy ... and dart and spring about during the three hundred years that we have to live. ... This evening we are going to have a court ball” (141). The character and conduct of this conventional grande dame are ironically magnified in the sea witch’s calculation and sophistry. The witch’s advice and services, offered just as readily but more starkly, betoken a similarly false and compromised power. Limited by the terms of exacting ritual, she must brew her transformative potion that very night or wait “till the end of another year” (142). The imperative of male gallantry. Andersen’s mermaid, lucid of its views of sexuality and materiality, Guy and Disney extract from Andersen’s plot the heroine’s dissatisfaction with her native circumstances. But while Andersen’s tale defamiliarizes the marriage plot, these more recent versions, in compensating for twentieth-century secularization, tend to reinscribe them in anachronistic modes of being. Guy and Disney reverse this scheme. Their willful heroines are in need of saving—and life as their princes know it depends upon the enactment of male responsibility, render their protagonists victims, or at least potential victims. In Guy’s novel, the mermaid is a symbol of faithful strength but inevitable alienation, and in Disney’s film, a spunky but vulnerable girl next door. While Andersen’s fairy tale speaks to the precarious dream of belonging to the dominant class through acceptance of its views of sexuality and materiality, Guy and Disney stipulate that patriarchal championing of a compliant feminine otherness is required for the survival of the state.

Rosa Guy: Mother-Love and Postcolonial Catastrophe

In Guy’s My Love, My Love; or, the Peasant Girl, the heroine lives in a flamboyantly beautiful but deeply flawed setting—a contemporary fallen world and fool’s paradise—on
a tropical island known as the Jewel of the Antilles. The peasant heroine resembles the fairy tale mermaid in several ways: she is associated with the sea-god and his floods; is deprived of language inssofar as her native Creole renders her mute to the ruling class, who speak Parisian French; and, having gone barefoot all her life, finds that the colonialist's shoe does not fit. In Guy's self-conscious critique of imperialist repression and brutality, the Caribbean mermaid's cheap "plastic" "too-small shoes" transform the life of the female body into an agony: "What pain! Every step she took became a new experience in torture. Every step, as though from the turning of a screw, brought barbs of agony rushing from her crushed feet through her legs, her stomach, her heart" (77).

The novel's structure parallels the scheme of Andersen's tale. The heroine, Désirée, falls in love with a young man after saving him from an automobile wreck, then nurses him only to have him taken from her while still unconscious. She consults with local vaudou sorcerers before she leaves her aggrieved family to pursue him in the distant city; endures great pain of body and soul to gain entrance to his grand home, the Castle Beauchomme, where she rehabilitates him with peasant women's remedies; and chooses, when her beloved retains her as a mistress but remains unconscious of his indebtedness to her, not to murder him. In a striking revision of Andersen's tale, Guy figures the heroine's sexual love for the prince as that which counteracts her impulse to destroy the oppressor:

Daniel Beauchomme lay on his back, his breathing deep and peaceful. She raised the knife high to plunge it into his chest. But, as though sensing her presence, he turned on the side toward her and smiled in his sleep. His handsome face was soft in the early-morning light. Shafts of tenderness pierced through to the deepest part of her. In confusion she let the knife fall from her hand. She ran. (111)

Désirée's journey toward another way of being ends with her disenchantment and meaningless death, since her prince fails to honor her maternal care. The particular failure and large consequences of the valiant but headstrong heroine's attempt to win her lover make the story not so much a cautionary tale as an expression of disappointment and fury. My Love, My Love; or, the Peasant Girl is a pessimistic fantasy of revenge and disgust that reveals a deep acceptance of the racist, masculinist, postcolonial oppressor's terms.6

Guy takes up Andersen's colonial theme and turns it on its head: her novel elaborates on the story of otherness while disclaiming the possibility, much less the morality, of submerging, disguising, or discarding the self to belong to a privileged world. This complex poetic analysis of postcolonial consciousness is muddled, however, by an overdetermination of sexual betrayal. Daniel's marriage to a woman of his own class reproduces the course of the country's past. The island's colonial history, its racism and class oppression, dooms individual advancement, social change, and national survival itself. The heroine and her beloved are shaped by a debased and debasing material and moral economy. Generations of French plantation owners, followed by more generations of postrevolutionary, postcolonial neo-bourgeois, have maintained the peasants in virtual slavery to exploit natural resources for export. The result is the devastation of the land, which the postcolonial masters have "sold . . . for a few pieces of silver" (3), as a peasant story-teller and moralist observes. Moreover, because relations between women and men, poor and rich, and black and white are infected by the psychic deformation of colonizer and colonized alike, freedom is nominal for any postcolonial citizen. Everyone is stifled by an oppressive historical consciousness: "We peasants hate them because they reject our blackness. They hate us because we remind them of theirs . . . that is the curse of the Antilles, created by the enslavement of our fathers" (99). The wealthy and light-skinned are intrinsically and atavistically subservient to the ancient regime. Daniel's family, for instance, descended from a Frenchman and a Black peasant woman, is doomed to ignore present and apparent crises, since "Never shall the Beauchomme be free of France. Their eyes shall forever be staring across the sea" (39). In the event, Daniel fails to seize his chance to accept his racial origins when he does not marry the heroine, an incarnation of his foremother.

Latter-day rulers continue to take their inheritance and obligations in vain, being as blind to erosion and deforestation as they are to the exposed skin of the ragged and starving people. Peasants, meanwhile, in surviving the exploitation of their land and labor, are reduced to two strategies of endurance. Some take comfort in the excitement of vaudou ritual and prophecy, in which the gods figure as projections of the sexual jealousy, petty rivalries, and egocentricity of the people but especially of the arrogant rulers. So while the sea-god Agwe maliciously torments his earth-goddess wife by means of ravaging storms, the more powerful ruling god does nothing to intervene.8 The others, the religious skeptics, find cold comfort in rum and cynicism, "shouting their grievances at each other" (14). The political order is entrenched and irrevocable: foreign ambassadors fraternize with the wealthy, so that the possibility of international criticism is precluded, and a brutal partisan police force obviates the possibility of a new revolution or even popular violence.

The meaning of the heroine's presence in any part of this hellish landscape is ambiguous and contested. Her two contradictory names, the epithet Ti Moune, meaning "orphan," and her given name of Désirée Dieu-Donnée, "god-given desire," allude to but do not capture the significance of her mysterious genealogy and miraculous appearance as an "orphan of the storm" (45). After a devastating flood, an elderly couple rescues her from the tree where her doomed mother has left her. The devout wife views the foundling as a god-given omen
of good luck. The husband is reluctant, since she will be “another stomach to feed” (12), but at his wife’s insistence he plucks the girl from the tree like fruit. The heroine, therefore, is associated with natural but forbidden sexuality. Whether her realization of sexual desire will generate sustaining hope or grieveous destruction, salvation or damnation, depends upon another act of faith: Daniel must recognize and claim her as his beloved.

At sixteen, her body, like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon, bursts out of her worn dress as she luxuriates, illicitly, in the plantation owner’s brook. At the same time, Daniel crashes his sports car into a tree. She finds him and pulls him out; he is her very own orphan babe in the tree. Going so far as to bare her breasts to nestle and keep him warm, she nurses him until his father returns the motherless youth to his home in the city, still unconscious.

Désirée’s stepmother, desperate on discovering the girl’s intention to leave her people to find her beloved in his “castle” in the city, drags her to a vaudau ceremony. The ambiguity of the heroine’s motives for abandoning her people—is she selfish or selfless—is reflected in the gods’ opposing interpretations of her mother’s desertion. She hears her mother’s voice speaking through possessed villagers and reflects that she both cherishes and hates it. The Virgin Mary asserts that the act was another act of faith: Daniel must recognize and claim her as his beloved.

If the prince fails to love the orphan peasant, Agwe “shall destroy them” (52).

Désirée inhabits a dream state of ambiguous memories and infinite, implacable desires that converge in the person of her prince. She longs for the male body, for the things of the earth, for the prosperity of her people and the reconstruction of their land. Her lover, she believes, will marry her and restore the citizenry and its island. After she has gained entrance to his palace and taken up residence as his nurse and mistress, he asks, in a moment of tenderness and noblesse oblige, “In this entire world, what can I give you?” (93). She replies: “I want those mountains green again. I want hardwood trees reaching for the sun again. I want Agwe to be kind and never to punish the good Asaka [his wife] again. I want them to work together to change through self-conscious action and about the likelihood of men acknowledging women’s nurturing and potentially transformative work.9

Disney: Saved by the Phallus

By contrast, Disney’s The Little Mermaid’s legitimation of marriage as the primary object of social relations is at once
more inanely and more programmatically conceived, constructing a struggle between carnivalesque forces of change and the authority of a nostalgically conceived past. Drawing on the genres and ideologies of American popular culture from the 1950s, the film uses the characterizations and conventions of Hollywood musical romance and the televised family to tell the mermaid’s story: she is saved to melt into the happy marital pot. Moreover, Disney recasts what Zipes identifies as its own representational type, “the moral innocence of the white Anglo-Saxon male, made in America,” whose formation is necessary to create “an orderly society that could only sustain itself if irrational and passionate forces are held in check” (Brothers 25). The Disney hero, the mermaid’s prince, wins a definitive victory over degenerate pretenders to power. This fantasy reinstates, unsurprisingly, the authority of the patriarchal white American.

The Disney mermaid’s exotic birthplace, like that of Andersen’s heroine, is characterized by ease and abundance, although its people are caricatured as feckless and incurious as well as colorful, joyful, and pleasingly suited to the authoritarian rule of Triton, the mermaid’s father. Male characters predominate, in the underwater as well as the human kingdom. Ariel’s six musical sisters, scantily clad and indistinguishable in their pretty inanity, like so many chorus girls in an Esther Williams film, are irrelevant. Sea creatures and birds, all male, attend and advise the heroine. The only involuntary, and most beleaguered, of these servants, Sebastian the Crab, Triton’s minion and court choreographer, comprises a racist caricature of a hapless lackey. He is thick-lipped, vain of his singing and dancing, and craven: he wails his fear of becoming “de laughin’ stock of de entire kingdom.” The prince’s servants, including a peremptory French chef and unindividuated gossipy English laundresses, exemplify the hackneyed comedy of national type. The prince, colloquial, corny, freckled, accompanied by a shaggy dog—an Opie of Mayberry in a naval uniform—is an idealized, all-American hero, not least because his attractive ordinariness appeals to the spurious erasure of class difference. Moreover, it falls to him to rescue the charming but insufficiently virile dependents of both worlds when the mermaid’s revolt against her father sets in motion catalyptic evil.

The mermaid’s name, Ariel, recalls the magical island and reconciliatory themes of The Tempest and points to the tenor of Disney’s political discourse in the film. For several decades, The Tempest has been politicized to an extraordinary degree by postcolonial writers and stage directors (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 189–92). Since 1960, postcolonial literary and stage productions of The Tempest have identified “the colonial with Caliban” (192), giving prominence to the character as unjustly dispossessed native. In English-speaking Canada, which has “internalized” the role of “dutiful daughter” to the English “motherland” (192), stage productions give prominence to Miranda. Ariel, in Shakespeare’s text released from the bondage of the witch Sycorax by Prospero and associated with poetic imagination, becomes in Disney’s The Little Mermaid the usurped king’s passionate daughter. On the one hand, this resonant confusion of name and role typifies what Susan Willis identifies as Disney’s practice of emptying the classic text “to trade in its signs” for the purposes of creating the illusion of a “declased” culture (86, 85). On the other hand, the naming encapsulates The Little Mermaid’s neo-imperialist ideology: in releasing Ariel’s father and his kingdom from the sea witch’s bondage, the young prince is legitimated both as a new, improved father of an older, weaker, less progressive nation and as a more tolerant overseer of women.

The Little Mermaid’s action is premised on troubled father-daughter relations. That Ariel is motherless heightens the emotional consequences of the father’s directives and discipline, since no female presence mediates or consoles. This absence of traditional feminine authority brings into relief the crisis of female resistance to patriarchal subjection. But the narrative context condones paternal abuse by displacing paternal blame onto the king’s resistance to human might. When the mermaid’s father enters her bedroom and discovers her collection of human artifacts, he invokes a tempest that destroys her contraband possessions, leaving her frightened and weeping in the wreckage. This deeply disturbing outbreak of violence arises from benign if misconceived motives: he wants to protect her from the uncertain consequences of contact with the foreign humans. Clearly, Ariel needs protection, even within her own world—she narrowly escapes a shark attack, for instance—and she is indeed entirely ignorant of human ways. Triton is at fault, however, in misrecognizing the beneficial quality of the foreign race’s explorations in his territory. Moreover, Ariel’s refusal to obey her father’s interdiction that she not frequent human shores paves the way for Ursula the sea witch to seize control of his kingdom. The film resolves the conflict between the father’s right and obligation to rule and the daughter’s maligirl-like desire to collect possessions and pursue attractive if unlikely boys through her marriage to a ruler more powerful than her father. Ariel’s prince, in rescuing her, also saves her homeland from an evil usurper and her father from emasculation.

The name “Ariel” recalls the transformation of the Andersen’s heroine from mermaid to aerial spirit, but the acquisitive and flirtatious Disney heroine is not required to sacrifice anything. While Andersen’s tale centers on the little mermaid’s pure and principled nature, and Guy’s on her self-defeating actions within a defeated politic, Disney’s heroine is relieved of the necessity for conscious struggle on finding herself magically and painlessly transformed into a new person in the human world, a marvelous land of adventure and opportunity, where she progresses by employing her childlike charm. Prompted and aided by a committee of faithful animals, and bemusing and entrancing the prince with her
ineptitude and affection, she finds that all things conspire to forward her purely romantic desires. The good-hearted, valiant hero must assume the burden of responsibility for protecting the weaker sex as well as her father, the foreign, misguided ruler overthrown by the universal underworld enemy, Ursula.

Outrageous, compelling, insinuating, and castrating, Ursula might be a Mae West with tentacles—although as reviewer Drew Fetherston comments, the girth, facial features, and voice (the actor is male) of this polymorphously endowed monster appear to be modeled on “Divine, the late transvestite diva.” The sea witch’s character and overly phallic body, therefore, incorporate the frisson of camp. The witch represents a thrilling but nightmarish vision of sexual perversity bumping and grinding its way into the normative territory of heteronormative innocence. When, having granted Ariel legs in exchange for her lovely voice, Ursula is visited by Trident, now compromised by his daughter’s abandonment, she seizes his phallic trident and shrivels him to a sea snake.

Thereafter, to lure the prince and become ruler of the human world as well, Ursula transforms herself into Ariel’s beautiful rival. This equally treacherous incarnation comprises a misogynous representation of the sexually aware and ambitious woman. With the aid of the mermaid’s pure voice, which she has cheated away from her, Ursula enchants the prince in order to become his bride. But this false female is punished and humiliated for her attempt to usurp male power. Any modest realization of the mermaid’s ambitions is compensated for by the demonization of the real female desire for power and flaunting of sexuality. Thinking herself alone in her dressing room, Ursula demonstrates a vicious, graceless, and immodest character; she hitches her petticoat above her knees and steps up onto a dressing table, carelessly crunching a glass—symbol of female virginity—underfoot. The animals, however, avenge Ariel, the true woman, by degrading the unbecoming bride in human world as well, Ursula transforms herself into Ariel’s phallic trident and shrivels him to a sea snake.

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Guy and Disney fundamentally alter the terms of Andersen’s marriage plot. Whereas marriage in the original story is but the means to the soul’s end, the shortest route to salvation for the heathen female, in both contemporary stories the heroine’s marital destiny determines the fate of nations. In Guy’s novel the heroine’s failure to marry brings on an apocalypse, and in the film it threatens an end to world freedom. Andersen’s individualism is displaced therefore by a momentous and obligatory sexual contract, the wedding of tenacious female devotion to salvific male agency. A residual sanctimony drives the narrative logic; marriage comprises a new covenant according to which the imperative of the powerful and beloved man to recognize, protect, and act upon the innate genius of the faithful woman means the difference between universal salvation and universal damnation. While all three stories cover over any anxiety surrounding the exclusion of worthy applicants to polity, prosperity, and domestic contentment, the move from Andersen’s wry resignation to Guy’s profound dread and Disney’s facile triumph reflects a pervasive and overwrought anxiety about the meaning of intimacy in American life.

In the 1980s, reevaluations and new explorations of women’s affective desires and responsibilities were (and remain) central, much contested, and charged with urgency. Both Guy and Disney articulate impatient, resentful, over/simple answers to women’s historically constituted, untenable social position, a position that subjugates them within the affective realm. In Andersen’s story, a woman’s marital desire is a form of piety. That the foreign heroine shares the ethical disposition of the dominant (human) culture and invests her devotion in its ruler sanctifies her—and her alone. In Guy and Disney, marriage remains an expression of faith in sexual teleology, but evokes the insidious hope that erotic choice, the will to be happy, must override and confound prohibitions to freedom and felicity. The pursuit of hetero-sexual love, which galvanizes the heroine in each of the three narratives, ultimately diminishes her. This textual irony provokes interrogation of marriage as an institutionalized ideal around which all women must situate themselves.

Andersen’s, Guy’s, and Disney’s narratives may be read as illuminating the preoccupations of, respectively, a colonial, a postcolonial, and a neo-imperialist ideology. Although contextually diverse, the texts have in common an enormous investment in formalized heterosexual union. Intriguingly,
though, Andersen’s nineteenth-century tale, in circumvent-
ing the heroine’s marriage, at least owns the possibility that other feminine destinies might be invented and pursued. Neither of the contemporary narratives captures the promise embedded in the original narrative. Rather, each constructs the imperative of a conclusive social shift to enable women’s radical departure from their designated social place, while at the same time denying that the unequal distribution of power between the sexes can be changed. In My Love, My Love, history is destiny. Guy, in ascribing the heroine’s death to her hubris and the will of her native gods, elevates the drama of the young woman’s erotic desires and moral choices to the realm of mythic tragedy. Mythification also inflects the Disney plot’s political trajectory, inasmuch as the text subscribes to the exasperating model of the wholly domesticated female. That the latter two versions of The Little Mermaid envision difference as even more insuperable and categorical than it was in Andersen’s time arises, at least in part, from the social and rhetorical struggle ensuing upon collective bids for freedom and independence. If My Love, My Love reflects psychological exhaustion, Disney’s The Little Mermaid bespeaks a deplorable mean-spiritedness. Together they point once again to the need for newly imagined modes of being and desire.

NOTES
1 Similarly, while much popular culture is characterized by false syntheses of antagonisms between the dominant and the dominated, Jerry Phillips argues that The Secret Garden (1911) is an “embryonic commentary” on the Empire’s need to evolve new discourses of power at a time when “imperial certainty” is increasingly displaced by “ideological uncertainty” (169). Burnett’s novel, says Phillips, illustrates the process of emergent ideology: it incorporates but fails to synthesize “discrete ideological values” (170) deriving from the discourse of the Empire, of domestic class relations, and of childhood. Andersen’s The Little Mermaid is also characterized by unresolved contradictions between discourses of power; the author “placed power in divine providence, which invariably acted in the name of bourgeois essentialist ideology” (Zipes, Subversion 80).

2 Andersen, not conventionally pious, nonetheless ascribed his own hubris and the will of his native gods, elevates the drama of the young woman’s erotic desires and moral choices to the realm of mythic tragedy. Mythification also inflects the Disney plot’s political trajectory, inasmuch as the text subscribes to the exasperating model of the wholly domesticated female. That the latter two versions of The Little Mermaid envision difference as even more insuperable and categorical than it was in Andersen’s time arises, at least in part, from the social and rhetorical struggle ensuing upon collective bids for freedom and independence. If My Love, My Love reflects psychological exhaustion, Disney’s The Little Mermaid bespeaks a deplorable mean-spiritedness. Together they point once again to the need for newly imagined modes of being and desire.

3 See also Dorothy Dinnerstein’s groundbreaking feminist psychoanalytic treatment. P. Lilaherup includes a range of theoretical treatments of The Little Mermaid that conclude that it is a troubled narrative, and Robert Solomon examines the tale in relation to transplanted and subjugated wives in praise fiction.

4 Susan Fraiman views the genre of female bildungsroman as existing, like “femininity” itself, tentatively and complicatedly; she discusses “a competition of narratives, referring less to the apprenticeship of a central figure than to a drama of dissonant ideas about just what formation is or should be” (140). The Little Mermaid illustrates this “competition.”

5 Two versions not taken up here include Jane Yolen’s “Undine” (in Dragonfield and Other Stories, 1985) and Robin Morgan’s The Mer-Child (1991). Yolen focuses on woman-centered restoration of the physically and psychically wounded child, and Morgan on a similar “healing” achieved through androgynous interaction. This deployment of Andersen’s narrative typifies the strategy of one strand of feminism, which seeks to remedy social injustice through self-actualization.

6 On one level, Guy’s novel reflects a narrative pattern in French Caribbean women’s writing as identified by Elizabeth Wilson: the female protagonist’s “life is depicted as tragically limited and her needs for newly imagined modes of being and desire.

7 Patrick Taylor explains the postcolonial pattern in the Caribbean in similar terms: for instance, after “the Haitian Revolution [that] occurred at the end of the eighteenth century. . . . The people were left to be exploited by foreign capitalism and its agents, the intermediary bourgeoisie” (68-69).

8 According to Taylor, “Vaudou is the classic example of the mythical encoding of experience in the Caribbean. . . . As in the tradition of the African high god, Bon Dieu is a remote being who has left his affairs in the hands of the other spiritual beings” (98).

9 The Broadway musical Once on This Island (1990), based on Guy’s novel—and produced the year after the Disney film, also a musical, was released—coarsens My Love, My Love’s lyrical treatment of alienation in appending a fatuous coda that celebrates harmonious race relations: an interracial marriage takes place under the tree into which the heroine has been transformed. Like Andersen’s disappointed mermaid, who, having failed to marry, evaporates into a transparent, fragrant spirit, Once on This Island’s heroine ends, reassuringly, as a beneficent spirit. In other words, the genre of musical fantasy displaces Guy’s fatalism about the burden of race, class, and national history to project redemptive sexual coupling into a dehistoricized, uncontextualized future.

10 Ariel Dorfman notes that “rivalries, envy, and tension . . . dominate family relations in Disney” (84); A. Walker Hastings also points out, as an instance of Disney’s “conscious effort to rechannel children’s movies with no alarming moral ambiguities,” that revisions of fairy tales typically include “the imposition of generational conflict, absent from the original” (84). In The Little Mermaid, as in other Disney fairy tales, he says, “the conflict between parent and child proves illusory” (88). Roberta Trites observes moreover that in omitting Andersen’s female community to forward the father-daughter conflict, Ariel’s tale is reduced to an easily resolved psychosexual drama: “The value system that controls the plot has been established: Ariel must choose between her father and the human prince” (146). Another of Trites’s observations, that “the collapse of Ariel’s obsession with
human artifacts into the pursuit of one perfect man indicates . . . that no goal matters as much as hunting for a mate" (146), deserves more emphasis; the prince mediates the heroine's consumerist desire, since through him she has access to the plenitude of human products.

WORKS CITED


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