

Siren's Song: Getting out of the Bird Suit

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Abstract

Siren's Song has been forever calling since the old times. Their call is unbound, ambiguous, disruptive, seductive and dangerous. Not only did their voices have the power of seduction, but also that of creation. As the song anticipated their presence it could change body's signification and manipulate the listener's perception. Therefore siren's song was silenced as it can be seen in literature and myth from the *Little Mermaid* (1837) to *Odyssey* and more modern texts. In this study I analyse the construction of the siren's stereotype in the light of Edward Said's Otherness, as well as the monological approach towards their song, following Bakhtin's concept of dialogic language I will try to uncover its hidden polyphony.

1. Introduction: What is a Mermaid?

The Sirens will always challenge our concept of the world as our own notion of them varies from folklore to folklore and through the centuries. Their appearance may change - from the winged bird-like sirens of ancient Greek myths to more conventionally beautiful fish-tailed mermaids in the form of Selkies, Melousinas or Loreleis - but they share the same song. Woman is understood as a gender construction¹ and so are sirens. The label "female" confines women to domesticity and sets taboos in the same fashion that the label "siren" confines them to the figure of the temptress and turns their discourse into one with a single meaning: seduction. Nonetheless, as stated by Robert Hodge² a song is a multisemiotic form of discourse because

The words of a song are organized by at least two kinds of syntagmatic structure, verbal syntax, and intonational syntax (tune). Even when there is only one tune, there is the possibility of polytaxis (i.e. multiple structures coexisting in one surface form) Possibilities of syntagmatic ambiguity (and therefore multiple meanings) increase with the number of tunes or other syntagmatic principles organizing the song-discourse (1985, 130)

They make one of their earliest and most famous appearances in *The Odyssey*, where they were represented as bird-woman hybrids. Later they developed into fish women hybrids, causing confusion when trying to separate the mermaid from the siren. However Meri Lao³ points at the Greek word “pterugyon” as the origin of the duality siren/mermaid. She suggests that it referred to both terms “wing” and “fin”, what would have prompted scribal misinterpretation. The concepts of siren and mermaid seem to have been interchangeable from the Renaissance onwards, appearing in Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors* (1595) to describe Luciana.

O, train me not, sweet mermaid, with thy note
 To drown me in thy sister’s flood of tears
 Sing, siren, for thyself, and I will dole
 Spread o’er the silver waves thy golden hairs,
 And as a bed I’ll take thee, and there lie,
 And in that glorious supposition think
 The gains by death that hath such means to die (III, ii, 45-51)

But it is Richard de Fournival in his *Bestiaire d’Amore*⁴ who puts an end to the feud of the distinction between sirens and mermaids when he claims “There are three forms of sirens, two of which are half woman and half fish and the other half woman and half - bird.” Therefore I would refer to them both as two members of the same species.

As Antiphilus of Syracuse exemplifies in *The Comedy of Errors* (1585), sirens have always been related to semi-divine beings and attributed the power to enchant and transform others with their song. To create love as well as to annihilate the lover. An irresistible and immobilizing force. In this work I will try to entangle the creation of this trope.

The images of the mermaid and siren have undergone a gradual process of change, from literal mythical figures to metaphoric images and stereotypes. From the winged bird-like sirens of ancient Greek myths to more conventionally beautiful fish-tailed mermaids. Their image might have been altered — as in different folklores they take different forms appearing as Selkies, Melusinas or Loreleis — but they share the same song. Their song was power⁵ as it constituted a feasible means for persuasion. It could seem obvious that a vehicle like sirens’ song should have been a source of agency for those female characters. But, on the contrary, it ended up triggering their silence and stereotyping. That comes given by the fact that both sirens’ discourse and their identity reaches us after being judged and defined according to exclusively masculine parameters.

Along history, starting with *The Odyssey* it has been stated that the only aim of the sirens was to seduce men and doom them. This idea is based on a monologic view of the world that places men as the centre and as sirens’ object of desire. This concept is the result of the Imperialist gaze but under 21st century light and after having analysed sirens’ songs in recent pieces of work we conclude that it is not always so. I will also pay attention to the evolution of the siren through the times as well as its different meanings and connections (especially its connection to the indomitable woman). I will analyse representations of sirens in the 21st century works of art. These lack the items that are characteristic like the mirror and the comb. However, their song is their mirror, the representation of their deceptive and narcissistic self, a dangerous weapon sailors will be forced to battle.

The objects of my analysis will be *Margaret Atwood's Sirens' Song* (1966), as well as the different songs sirens perform in *Pirates from the Caribbean: on Stranger Tides* (2014), Neil Jordan's *Ondine* (2009), and Tom More's *Song of the Sea* (2014). By means of their analysis we will discover how sirens' song are not a means of destruction and/or seduction, but also a tool for constructing and even a defence method. The analyses of these songs will also oppose to the stereotypical image of sirens, the bird suit Margaret Atwood talks about.

2. Methodology

The explanation of the construction of the sirens' stereotype will be based on the conception of the listeners of the songs — sailors, fishermen, Odysseys and other Greek heroes and men in general — as colonizers. I will appropriate Edward Said's *Orientalism* theory on how the west constructed Orient and applicate it to how the sailors construct new definitions of the siren.

Said argues that the "Orient" is constructed and represented in the binary opposition against the Occident, as the Other. I will discuss that sirens are constructed as a binary opposition "sailors" vs "the enemy". If the self – male, white, colonizer - is conceived as positive, the other is constructed as negative.

By the process of Othering the colonizers treat the colonized as "not fully human" and consider themselves the embodiment of the "proper self." The sirens undergo that very same process. They are considered both devilish and exotic at the same time. For Said, the controversy about the postcolonial discourse begins with the term of re-presentation, which entitles the Westerners to be "(11).

In this process knowledge is control, control is power and vice-versa, as it determinates the reality of the sailor and the siren, the colonizer and the colonized. Foucault in *The Archaeology of knowledge and the Discourse of Language* (1969) proposes that knowledge is not to be measured any other way than in terms of what is said and its internal divisions and reads texts or utterances in terms of their context or subtext. Discourse is both which constrains or enables, writing, speaking and thinking. What he terms "discursive practices" work both in inhibiting and productive ways, implying a play of prescriptions that designate both exclusions and choices (2008, 54). The Sirens are both subject and object of those discursive practices. Not in vain, the sirens in the *Odyssey* offered Odysseus comprehensive and absolute knowledge. Homer presents us with a powerful image of Odysseus, tied to the mast of his ship and listening to the Sirens' song surrounded by his men, whose ears have been blocked with wax. This scene portrays the tension between the desire for the other and for knowledge, to experience the unknown and the will to retain one's sense of individuality, to keep allegiance to one's old roots, to stick to the past, to the old traditions. Odysseus prevents their men from evolving, from knowing and understanding new horizons and as the only hearer changes and manipulates what he has heard. Creating new knowledge about the sirens, his own truth about the sirens and their discourse. "The truth" Foucault claims to be like "a system of exclusion, a historical, modifiable, and institutionally constraining system (1982, 54), a truth which sounded of Greek poets, a truth "which inspired respect and terror, that which was pronounced by men who spoke

as of right and according to the required ritual” (1982, 54). A monologic vision of the world with the only will to exercise control on society and wipe out other perspectives. The discourse of the sailors embodies the one Said describes

The will to exercise... control in society and history has also discovered a way to clothe, disguise, rarefy and wrap itself systematically in the language of truth, discipline, rationality, utilitarian value, and knowledge. And this language in its naturalness authority, professionalism, assertiveness and antitheoretical directness is ... discourse (Said 2006, 216)

In that new truth the sirens’ lose their original definition as knowledge bearers and are turned into plain seducers whose songs lacks any other meaning but the desire, which is also the only motor that moves them. The sirens are storytellers seducing each sailor with a different tale. The subordinated position in which sailors were trapped after listening the sirens’ call would provide them with a repertory of rights and duties turning them into the product of sirens’ discursive practices shaping and reshaping their identity, going from active figures to passive objects. The concepts of agency and passivity historically attributed to man and woman would swap their recipients. Despite the fact the sailors perceive monologism and a single message: attack — whatever the real message of the sirens, sailors would always feel attacked by them, we are aware of the multiplicity of their voices. That monologic perception makes them fight both siren and song and they do so by means of silencing. Music works as an aspect of what Foucault calls the technology of sign systems, which refers to the implication of relationships of power in the assignment of meaning to abstract sounds and symbols. Sirens’ songs are exactly that, a compendium of sounds and words which convey a message, a message that is usually misheard, silenced or rewritten. They could be treated as political motivated stories, as a means of empowerment and a source of agency legitimating or dominating. But fear seems to construct sirens as creatures aimed to be dominating as they seduce each sailor with a different tale. Their compositions might have several primary or basic messages as a polyphonic piece of music overlapping different musical strings and cords each one expressing a different feeling. The polyphonic character of a work will have as a pillar not only the compositional part, that is to say: the idea of melodic independence that the composer has devised, but also the possibility of auditory discrimination on the part of the listener. That is to say, listeners might not be able to recognize certain parts of the composition and despite sailors are listening to a polyphonic melody, they fail to perceive the independent melodies or meanings. The polyphonic concept has also been appropriated by Bakhtin in literary theory and speech acts to refer to the simultaneity of points of view and voices within a narrative. Bakhtin chooses Dostoievski to explain his views on dialogism in the novel. Dialogism consists in the disappearance of the authoritative voice of the creator/narrator and the appearance of a bigger freedom and knowledge in the voices of the characters, a multiplicity of points of view in the novel. If Bakhtin stated that Dostoievsky did not provide a “single vision” of events, we must point out that neither does the sirens’ song, which we can also analyse as a text the tale sirens are narrating to the sailors. The polyphony of the sirens’ song comes not given by the multiplicity of voices that is mentioned In *The*

Dialogic Imagination (1981) when elaborating the theory of polyphony, but by a multiplicity of songs hidden in one. There is not a variety of speaking subjects, but a variety of conflicting ideological positions in the sirens. Dialogism, according to Bakhtin, is a process by which meaning evolves from the interactions among the author — sirens in this case — and the reader/listener — the sailor/ men.

The first part of this article shows how the sirens ability to produce autonomous meaning is denied to project on them what the representatives of patriarchal discourse expect to hear from them and how they give their own definition of the siren even altering their very song, while the second part aims at discovering the multiplicity of sirens' song and their breakage from the stereotypes.

2.1. Creating the Bird Suit

The Bird Suit is the patriarchal construct sirens — as well as the rest of the women that deviate from the norm — have been made to wear through history. The subject, sirens in this case, are constituted by the discourses of sailors as technologies of power and domination. Discourse is what determines the positions of individuals in their relations to each other and power is conducted through them serving as a vehicle to produce subjects. Men are the bearers of discourse, therefore women are constructed as inferior to men because as they cannot internalize the law of the father they cannot produce language and meaning. That excludes them from language which is based on binary oppositions privileging men over women by focusing on the male-female dichotomy: masculine/feminine, rational/emotional, strong/weak, dominant/submissive, superior/inferior.

The entrance of Sirens puts the status quo into question as female identities in possession of a different discourse. A female discourse that would oppose and contradict the official one. In order to stop sirens' discourse from getting relevance not only do male representatives categorize it as negative, but they place themselves in the middle of that discourse, as the sirens' target. The usual listener of these songs: the dominant male — embodied by Odysseus and the sailors to whom the sirens' song is addressed— denies freedom of expression to the female —represented by the siren—. He condemns them to be “the other⁶”, to silence and invisibility beyond the images patriarchal discourse is able to create for them. At the same time that he monopolizes language reshaping sirens' message as a seductive song, he propagates an ideology of male dominance and female subordination. Although sirens might be representative of female oral tradition and therefore transmitters of culture, the addressees of these songs are unable to recognize it.

The *Odyssey* is the most popular appearance of the sirens and one of the first cases in which their voices are here. Although the truth is we cannot be sure they are their real voices as their song has been previously categorized by Circe when she advises Odysseus not to approach them. The reason why her discourse overcomes that of the sirens is because it is authorized as she plays the role of the hero's ally because only the dominant group is able to impose otherness values and diminish other's particularity and speech. She categorizes the song as a mighty spell which threw the sailors into disarray, paralyzing their will.

First you will raise the island of the sirens
 Those creatures who spellbind any men alive
 Whoever comes their way whoever draws too close,
 Off guard, and catches the Sirens' voices in the air
 No sailing home for him, no wife rising to meet him
 No happy children beaming up at their father's face
 The high, thrilling song of the sirens will transfix him
 Lolling there in their meadow, round them heaps of corpses
 Rotting away, rags of shrivelling skin on their bones (lines 12. 44-60)

She is the first to warn about the negativity of the sirens, and her categorization differs from their actual discourse. Never do the sirens mention meadows full of corpses, showing off because of the many losses at their back. There is no magic, no paralyzing power in their words. In fact there is no performance of that discourse, it is only a promise of what it could have been. However we do not remember the discourse of the sirens, what we do bear in mind is Circe's warning and Odysseus theatrical performance. Odysseus binding himself to the post and waxing his men's ears to prevent them from listening to the song in the same fashion as Orpheus who oversings sirens with the lute, create a blank space to write over sirens' original discourse. And thus just because they are different, because they are considered to be rivals, or because they are misheard and misunderstood they become the foe, "the other". Otherness is the result of a discursive process by means of which a dominant group: "us"/the sailors/the conquerors construct the dominated group "them"/the sirens through the stigmatization of a difference that might be real or figured. They are built as the Temptress, the femme fatales that look for romantic interests only to destroy them. As it is shown in W.B Yeats *A Man Young and Old: The Mermaid* (1931).

A mermaid found a swimming lad
 Picked him for her own
 Pressed her body to his body
 Laughed: and plunging down
 Forgot in cruel happiness
 That even lovers drown (72,1999)

The mermaid here is turned into a creature unaware or careless of the danger she is causing to her lover. Just playing around with him as prey, as a toy, non-repentant of the chaos caused. Everything would be attributed to the nature of the mermaid. Cruelty and lack of common sense were usually attributed to women in order to justify the oppression patriarchal discourse had on them through history. This kind of discourse creates a space for sirens, a subjection. The control patriarchal discourse representatives aim at works through the production of popular knowledge about these creatures. It stereotypes both positions: Sailors/conquerors are entitled to exercise control on the sirens and the latter are perceived as degenerated creatures. They are the bad girls who will love you to death, whose actions initially driven just by desire will unchain all the fury of heaven and hell. That sexualisation is extended to all women because according to Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1941).

Woman is the siren who lures upon the rocks, she is Circe, who changes her lovers into beasts, the Undine who draws fishermen into the depth of pools. The man captivated by her charms no longer has will-power, enterprise, future; he is no longer a citizen, but mere flesh enslaved to its desires, cut off from the community, bound to the moment, tossed passively back and forth between torture and pleasure. The perverse sorcerer arrays passion against duty, the present moment against all time to come; she detains the traveller far from home, she pours him the drink of forgetfulness. (2011, 196)

2.2. Breaking from the Bird Suit

Something that cannot be denied is the fact that Siren's songs have the quality to draw people towards them. That quality is inherent in them, it cannot be helped. Their songs, besides their alluring quality might hide different meanings to which listeners were oblivious, there are different meanings beneath the call to sailors. As Irigaray (1985) states about women's relationship with language,

One must listen to her differently in order to hear an "other meaning" which is constantly in the process of weaving itself, at the same time ceaselessly embracing words and yet casting them off to avoid becoming fixed, immobilised. (2006, 33)

In the following poems and songs we will witness that particularity of women's discourse and will have an insight of that other meaning that sailors forget about.

The siren of Atwood's makes use of the instability of language to submit a structure that is founded on her very exclusion. She is at the same time trapped and freeing herself by means of discourse, a discourse that mirrors that of the *Odyssey* but which breaks with the stereotypes built there.

The very opening of the song Atwood comes into conflict with the heroic codes of the Homeric texts and with the patriarchal nature of Greek mythology. She decides to re-enact the siren's call giving the siren a voice and keeping up with our contemporaneity. In *The Odyssey*, Homer, as a heterodiegetic narrator, sings the feats of heroes, even when giving them voice, therefore the Siren's song had arrived to us by means of an intermediary. Here the siren is the autodiegetic narrator, her discourse has no filters and we cannot doubt her authenticity. Atwood needs to rewrite the siren's myth, in order to redeem her from the sins they are accused of, or at least to give us a more authentic version of her speech and her motivations. While in the *Odyssey* the poem starts with a direct Call to Odysseus, Atwood's siren starts claiming the song as her own, as well as her own defining voice. She does not need anybody else to categorize it, and she is no deceiver. There is no concealing it, the purpose of the song is to make sailors jump.

This is the one song everyone
would like to learn: the song
that is irresistible:
the song that forces men
to leap overboard in squadrons
even though they see the beached skulls

Contrary to what happens in the *Odyssey* Atwood's siren makes reference to the death of the mariners that she attracts and leaves no chance for anybody to be aware of its

contents for nobody but her, the producer of the discourse is entitled to know or reveal the secret as they do not survive.

Atwood constructs the reader as an Odysseus, led to one seemingly innocent signification, and then realizing that it conceals another. She make us fall in the siren trap, allured by her calling. The siren plays at convincing the listener that she is in an abyss of desperation and agony, she does not use imperatives but requests and looks for the complicity of the listener. Appealing to his camaraderie and understanding. The secret she is about to reveal is not the secret of the most important questions to life, but her secret to her heart. She makes use of the seduction techniques appropriating the archetype of the damsel in distress throwing herself in the arms of the saviour her discourse is making of the listener.

Shall I tell you the secret
and if I do, will you get me
out of this bird suit?

While at the same time by mentioning “the bird suit” she makes the connection between her body and the formulation of her own identity presenting herself as to herself a victim of her own body’s betrayal, questioning the stability of her own identity as she appears to dislike some sort of uncontrolled behaviour what she is forced to carry out because of her nature in an open reference to show the inherent construction of gender identity and gender performativity, gender being performed constantly to keep up an illusion of stability. She asks for help because she does not seem to have power, to get away from the idealized (though in this case negative) feminine image that society/ the audience of their song have of her and that she refers to as a mask she puts on and off out of a compulsion to act appropriately or as it is expected from her. She is aiming at a possible rupturing force by using Butler’s concept of subversion through re-signification⁷.

I don’t enjoy it here
squatting on this island
looking picturesque and mythical
with these two feathery maniacs,
I don’t enjoy singing
this trio, fatal and valuable.

She claims to be a slave to her own voice, to her nature – the one that has been created for her, but that is not her choice- and unable to perpetuate that behaviour she claims to be repulsed by her sisters’ attitude and asks for help to her lover.

I will tell the secret to you,
to you, only to you.
Come closer. This song
is a cry for help: Help me!
Only you, only you can,
you are unique
at last. Alas
it is a boring song
but it works every time. (1976,165)

The listener is just another victim. However, the siren claims at the end that “it is a boring song” and that “it works every time”. Thus, she complains about the gender roles, both modern and old, forced on her by patriarchal society. The sirens’ song is not only a song of attraction, it is a song of complaint, of rebellion. It is also a teaching song, as the siren is narrating her skills, explaining how she lures sailors to death and it is also a weapon, but most importantly it is a cry for freedom. The mermaids or the sirens long for a departure from themselves, for one or another reason they long to escape the boundaries of gender and definition and they just have one means to do so.

Sirens’ song is deemed as deceptive. However, in Neil Jordan’s *Ondine* (2009), the main role is a woman who is caught in a fishnet in a scene evocative of traditional storytelling. As the small town inhabitants believe her to be a magical creature: She is also trapped in a “bird suit” which has also been created for her by a sailor. In this case, being an ordinary woman, a selkie identity has been constructed for her. She gets a new life, the bird suit gives her a possibility to break with a criminal past, as long as she plays along the beliefs of the people in the town and does not step out of the selkie myth. While identity constructions – or bird suits – are a means to entrap, this new identity has the function of protecting and providing her with an escape from her past life. It gives her a new opportunity and to some extent freedom. But it is not enough for her, as she wants to be true to the man she loves — the sailor who rescued her—. She wants to share with him, her past and her true identity. Consequently, her song is both a love song and a confession, far again from the seductive and deceptive role sirens have been attributed. Joanna/Ondine wishes she were able to show her true self, her authentic identity.

She constantly keeps singing the same song. A song which — as it is found out later on — is really a pop song by the group Sigur Ros. The selkie appropriates a popular song that serves to lure a modern day fisherman. Besides, the structure of the song parallels that of the sirens’ Joanna/Ondine does not address the sailor directly, but on third person. Therefore, the “sailor” is not the addressee, there is no use of charm or enchantment. She is not using her song as a weapon or trying to manipulate anybody. It is not even meant to be heard, it is stream of consciousness. When she implies he is the only person to make everything alright, to help her get through, it is not a construction to entrap the listener or a new appeal to the “knight in shiny armour” — as Margaret Atwood did — but a recognition to herself. The song is a promise of togetherness “Let’s sing into the years, like one” of lasting love “you stay to be alright.” But if there is something different in this song is how far it is from deception. There is nothing hidden here, no double sense. It just expresses how she wishes the truth about her will unravel.

I want him to know
 What I have done
 I want him to know
 It’s bad
 I want him to know
 What I have done
 I want him to know
 Right now

Pirates from Caribbean in Stranger Tides (2011) offers a different view of the sirens. They are given wild animal features. This perception of female as predatory arises from a sense of powerlessness before the unknown, the untamed. They acquire vampire features⁸ suggesting that their goal is to play around with men/sailors until they drained them out and can obtain no more satisfaction out of them. They are carnivorous and ravenous, sailors being their favourite dish. This is also a step forwards vilifying female agency with a simplistic notion of sexual empowerment as aggressive conduct. However, they do not act as it is expected from them. They do not have the attitude we would be expecting according to the folktales, to the myth. They are not the ones who chase the sailors, they want nothing to do with them until they are summoned by the songs which represent a bait for them. They are not attackers. They defend themselves as the sailors are the real aggressors who try to hunt them in order to obtain the source of eternal life. They do sing when they discover that the mariners are up to something. Far from making use of their own song — that remains unheard, once more — they appropriate and subvert what is being used to trap them. We first hear the lines or stanzas from one of the sailors while attempting to capture a mermaid. The song goes as follows:

My name is Maria, a merchant's daughter fair
And I have let my parents and three thousand pounds a year
My heart is pierced by cupid, I disdain all glittering gold
There is nothing can console me but my jolly sailor bold

Half attracted by the song, half by the oars splashing the water, a beautiful mermaid appears, swims to the boat and holds onto its side. She pretends to be innocent asking “are you the one who sings” yet seductive at the same time “are you my jolly sailor bold? As she goes on to sing the third and fourth lines of the song. But the meanings of the words change when Tamara the siren utters them. “The jolly sailor bold” is no longer a love interest, but a prey. They both continue singing together,

Come all you pretty fair maids, whoever may be
Who love a jolly sailor bold who ploughs the rough sea

But the locution (the actual words used by the sirens) differs from the illocution (their intention behind the utterance). This is a call to Tamara's sisters “pretty fair maids” who suddenly appear surrounding the boat in an equally menacing and seductive scene. They appropriate the song with which they were being attracted by the sailors, recovering the power they seemed to have lost, going back again to their “hunter position”.

Their song subverts the image of “the pretty fair maids” they seem to relate to. They are indeed beautiful, but have no plans to be fair to those who are going to attack them and disturb them. They do not consider the pirates to be “jolly sailors bold”, but rather enemies who try to conquer the sea and themselves. They make use of their own words to give a different meaning which is misunderstood as a luring song, but if we read between the lines, it is clearly a threat.

While up aloof, in storm, from me his absence mourn
And firmly pray, arrive the day, he home will safe return
My heat is pierced by cupid, I disdain all glittering Gold,
There is nothing that console me but my jolly sailor bold

Their intention is not to let the sailors come back home but to attack them. They do not hope for the safety of the sailors but just the opposite. Their only aim is to get the sailors for them and they are able to do and say whatever is needed. The sirens are subverting a love song and turning it into a deadly one. However, they cannot be considered the attackers. They are somehow defending themselves. The sailors are the ones to appear there to hint them. Sailors are the attackers and sirens are the prey, but as it happens in power relations, the tables are turned. Their appropriation of the “pretty fair maid” is somehow a revenge of those real “pretty fair maids” who spent their lives waiting for their loved-sailors to come home not knowing what life had reserved for them. If their love was true or not. It is a conquest of agency in retribution. Their status as predatory allows them to take the lead now, and maybe to take revenge. The sweetness of the words of the maids turns into heartless cruelty on the outcome of what is bound to happen.

Selkies have the duality to be human or not at will as they can shed their sealskins, step from the water, and walk as humans on shore. In the same fashion as Andersen’s and Disney’s Little Mermaid, they renounce to their own world and their original bodies in order to be allowed to interact with this one, in a representation of legitimated women’s subjugation. A human man would often woo a selkie in human form, marry her, and then hide her sealskin and hold her captive as his spouse going against her free will. Eventually the selkie would find her sealskin, or have it brought to her by one of her children, and return to the sea. They would be seen just as a vehicle to have offspring and keep the house with no regards for their feelings or happiness as any hint of difference would have to be uprooted as well as the uncontrolled sexuality should be contained and there should be a prescription of what “these new women” should engage in, creating a trend of new “womanliness”.

In Tomm More’s *Song of the Sea* (2014), we witness how Saorsie and Ben have grown up without their mother Bronagh, a selkie who had to come back to the sea after giving birth to the little Saorsie. Ben blames his younger sister for his loss and despite having four years she is not able to talk. The two songs Bronagh sings are two lullabies. The drawing quality they have is far from evil or deceiving. They are the calling of blood and past. The explanation of the true nature of the mother and the real identity of Saorsie. Too hurt after losing his wife, Conor hides Saorsie’s sealskin fur coat from her, thinking he is protecting her. The truth is he is depriving her of her true identity, her freedom and her possibility to grow up. Her mother’s songs connect her back to her origins and make her achieve her own voice.

Between the here, between the how
 Between the North, between the South
 Between the West, between the East
 Between the time, between the place
 From the shell
 A song from the sea
 Neither quiet nor calm
 Searching for love again

It is Saorsie to whom Bronagh sings. Despite or exactly because of her mother's absence, only by acknowledging her true self will both of them survive. Her voice, her song is past, identity. In the song Saorsie finds two types of identity, namely the personal and the collective. Being the only female in the lighthouse she is growing up, the song is her means to get identification. It is a part of herself that comes from knowledge of her membership in a social group – that of selkies-, together with emotional significance attached to it – the recovery of her mother. The loss of their mother shatters the family, and prompts over protection, trying to keep Saorsie away from her origins is what prevents her from speaking. Only when she learns the song is she able to express what she feels and who she is. It is when she earns her voice when she gets power and the possibility to desire if she stays with her family in land or goes with her mother. As women-sirens do no longer conceive themselves as docile bodies in the grip of disciplinary power but on the contrary, they are self-determining agents, even little Saorsie, capable of challenging and resisting the structures of domination.

Conclusion

The sailors-sirens relation, we have analysed is a relation of power which has two counterparts who have totally different targets. While the sailors aim at obtaining the sirens' bodies, the sirens aim at different things. Each self has a sense of personal order, a characteristic mode of address to the world and a structure of bounds and desires and there are certain control mechanisms that shape and manipulate the formation of identity or expression. Women have always been trying to look for at least a limited freedom, and many times that has been achieved through language, through song. Sirens are conscious of power discourse, and self-shaping so they play the part. Their mask is language and that mask makes them get control and power. Through it they create their own identity and perform the roles they consider more suitable in order to obtain their aim. The validity of the voices of sirens have been denied through the centuries together with the validity of their experiences but it is time for them to reclaim their empowerment and to be taken out of their entrapment once and for good.

The treatment of the sirens' song is an example of what happens with female characters confined to the constraints of gender roles. Odysseus and the sailors in all the examples we have analysed are representative of "the male gaze" as the sirens are representative of "the female other". The male gaze should learn to appreciate the difference of the other as beauty and with respect.

Notes

¹ The central concept of the theory Judith Butler states in *Gender Trouble* based on the idea that gender is constructed through repetitive performance and related to the idea that discourse creates subject positions to occupy

² Hodge, Robert. Song. In Pedersen *Mermaids and the Production of Knowledge in Early Modern England* (2015)

³ Qtd in Pedersen *Mermaids and the Production of Knowledge in Early Modern England* (2015)

⁴ Qtd in Pedersen's *Mermaids and the Production of Knowledge in Early Modern England* (2015) p.11

⁵ I refer to power as Foucault defines it in *The Subject and Power* (1982). There he compiles his ideas on the human subject and how it is determined by power structures. This power is not exercised through oppression but through the creation of individuals.

⁶ This construction of the other relates to both Edward Said's concept in *Orientalism* (1978) and to the reduction females see themselves reduced to in the discourse categorization through binary oppositions.

⁷ Concept appearing in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (2011)

⁸ The hypnotic gaze of the vampires is substituted by the paralyzing song of the siren seeking their prey among the sailors, taking all their energy to keep at bay the monster lurking within.

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