Mermaids: A Hybrid Creature in folklore

One of the illustrations in the *Book of Kells* depicts a mermaid (more precisely a mer-hermaphrodite) swimming up the centre of a genealogy. This lovely figure may refer to Iona and to Columba himself by means of a complex linguistic pun. The word, *Iona*, includes the Greek word for dove; *Columba* is Latin for dove and the mer-creature makes the island link. Although strange it is a relatively secure reference, since St Columba's biographer makes the same pun and the Kells manuscript was probably made to celebrate an anniversary of Columba's death. If nothing else the illustration is testament to the popularity of the mermaid image.

Sea dwelling creatures, half human and half fish, are common in European and Near Eastern folktales. As these people have immigrated throughout the world, traditions about these mysterious beings have travelled with them. Mer-folk are rather like fairies in that they are supernatural, but not completely divine or immortal unlike, say angels. As such they live in an 'in between' world. Their lives and actions under the sea, an environment alien to humans, parallel the human world, and they often interact with their human counterparts. Mermaids are more popular in European folklore than mermen (the males are very popular in Eastern tales however). Marriages between a mer-creature and a human are the most common form of interaction in folktales. In Irish stories a fisherman will steal the mermaid's salmon skin cap and the 'merrow' i.e. mermaid, will then marry the human. They have children and are happy together, but one day she finds her salmon skin cap and returns to her own world. Usually the children of these marriages have a special characteristic inherited from their non-human mother. Sometimes they are good fisherman, but other times they have red hair which marks them off as temperamental or fey. This may be where the Disney animators got Ariel's red hair or it may be coincidence. Sometimes the offspring of these human mermaid marriages are haunted by the sound of the sea and cannot sleep at night or are unable to speak.

The most famous mermaid tale is that of Mélusine, a French Mer-creature and the ancestress of the Counts de Lusignon. Mélusine appears to the young Count as a beautiful woman (with legs). Mer-creatures usually are able to walk on land and only have fins while in the sea. (Rather a convenient trait in these marriage tales). Mélusine promises to marry the count, as long as he attempts to see her bathing on a Saturday. Of course eventually he does just this, and realises that she is human from the waist upwards but a sea serpent from the waist down. She then disappears through the window with a screech and is never seen again. But she is heard crying on the battlements before a death in the family. The merman story is much the same. A human woman marries a merman and lives with him in his beautiful underwater world. After a while she wants to return home to visit her family. She is warned not to overstay her visit and not to attend church services. Naturally she forgets and cannot go back to the sea. Coleridge's poem*, The Forsaken Merman* is based on this story.

Sometimes however mermaids, like fish, cannot live out of the water. There is a mermaid tale associated with the river Neath in south Wales. Many years ago a mermaid

was trapped in a fisherman's net and put on display in the town, but the captured creature soon died out of water. There is a medieval tale of a famous merman in Italy, known as Colá Pesce, who met the same fate. The king wanted to see the creature, and they kept pouring sea water over him to keep him alive, but alas he died anyway. In some of these tales, the fisherman takes pity of the mermaid and lets her go. She then rewards him by seeing that his nets are always full or warning him before a tempest arrives. This is a common story in Scandinavia. The fishing boats put out to sea one day and the hero-fisherman hears the mermaid calling to him or sees her sitting on a rock. He turns back just in time to avoid a tempest which comes on suddenly, and all the other fishermen are drowned and their boats destroyed.

We usually think of mermaids as beautiful women with long hair who seduce men, sometimes to their death. The comb and the mirror appear in medieval Church carvings (not any earlier) These attributes symbolise feminine pride and vanity and are common symbols in classical carving, sometimes as attributes of Venus. From sculpture they move into folklore. There is a well-known, although not ancient, British ballad called 'The Mermaid'. One of the ship's crew sees a mermaid sitting on a rock with a comb and mirror. This is a sign of bad luck and the ship is lost at sea. Mermaids were associated with the destructive powers of nature. The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford contains a Renaissance painting of a ship in the midst of a storm, the sails are ripped and the life boat adrift. In the lower left corner is a mermaid with long hair and a fish tale. In the upper right hand corner is St Nicholas patron of sailors (yes Santa Claus was originally the patron of sailors). The metaphor is clear. The divine power of the saint overcomes the destructive power of the supernatural mermaid. Another famous medieval mermaid adorns a mosaic in the Cathedral of Otranto in Italy. This mosaic is a metaphor for human frailty and the power of salvation. The mermaid, a classical Siren with a double tale (two fins) is placed so as to indicate nature in its unredeemed state.

In 1430 in the Netherlands, the dikes near Edam broke during a storm. A group of young girls found a mermaid floundering in shallow water and took her home. They dressed her in women's clothing and she became adept at spinning and weaving, but never learned to speak. In Ceylon about 1560 some mermaids were caught in a net and taken ashore where they were dissected by a famous doctor who declared that they were just like humans inside and out. A less gruesome fate for mer-people caught in nets is found in tales associated with the Orkneys and Outer Hebridean islands. A mer-person (male or female) is caught in a net and goes to live with the islanders. The visitor from the sea attends a christening, but cries when everyone else is happy because they have foreknowledge of the fate of the child. Alternatively, they laugh at a funeral because they know they dead person is in heaven. This behaviour unsettles the humans and eventually the uncanny visitor returns to their underwater world which is an exact copy of the human one.

What is the truth in the mermaid story? Well the idea of beings who are similar to humans but live in an environment where human beings cannot is wide-spread and doesn't need more explanation than our own desire to populate the universe with creatures similar to us. Consider the early Star Trek episodes, everywhere they went they

met humanoid creatures. However this doesn't stop us rationalising our imaginative creations. Visual images have played a part in keeping the mermaid traditions popular. Pictures of strange fish were drawn and printed on single sheets or paper or small cheap books and sold widely at fairs and such from the fifteenth century onwards. They were the sensational tabloids of the day. As these pictures were copied and re-copied the strange fish with human characteristics look ever more human. There are examples of man-fish, female fish monk-fish (westill use this one for an edible form of shark), bishop fish. Every possible type of human seemed to have a 'fish' counterpart. It has been suggested that sea mammals such as manatees and dugongs who nurse their young have been mistaken for mermaids by sailors. Since mermaids are not invariably beautiful, indeed the ones who call up tempests are often hideous, this might make sense, but basically it is an attempt to rationalise something which already in the imagination.

P. T. Barnum, the great American circus impresario, had a 'mermaid' in one of his freak shows. They were a fairly popular fairground attraction in American during the nineteenth century. The Japanese produced little mermaids for export at this time. These consisted of the skeleton of a monkey grafted onto the a fish tale. A fair number of these survive in museums. They are about two feet long sometimes less and quite compulsively grotesque.

How does this relate to Hans Christian Anderson's 'The Little Mermaid' and the Disney animation?

Well the Hans Christian Anderson tale is really a short story rather than a folktale. This type of romantic, emotional and didactic story based on traditional tales were popular in the nineteenth century. There are a number of features that Disney changed to make the story acceptable to a modern international audience. Anderson's mermaid sings beautifully (as mermaids often did), but in his story she is mute while on earth, and as she walks on her human legs she experiences pain as if walking on knives. Anderson himself had a difficult life and his 'fairytales' have a touch of sado-masochism which Disney not unsurprisingly avoided. Also Anderson's mermaid does not get her prince. The prince does not realise her devotion and marries a human. The mermaid 'dies' but is transformed into a slyph which is a made up creature from Renaissance philosophy, not a folklore being. She must wander the earth looking after the dreams of little children and eventually she will get a human soul and be saved. There are a number of folktales in which supernatural beings, like fairies and mermaids, go looking for a human soul. Anderson's mermaid was more interested in salvation than human love, but Disney avoided this as well.

So Disney's Ariel speaks and the story ends happily. Actually Disney's version is more like a folktale with its simple and direct narrative and uncomplicated characters than Hans Christian Anderson's story. The Ursula figure in the cartoon is very like the nasty type of mermaid who calls up storms and likes to drown sailors and keep their souls locked up in a cage under the sea, while Ariel conforms to the beautiful and more sympathetic type who falls in love with a human and protects the object of her affection.

The origin of mermaids is, like so many imaginative concepts, a mixture of elements. Certainly there are gods and goddesses who were thought to be half fish and half human. These figures could be benevolent or violent. Triton in the Greek and Roman tradition was associated with storms, ships and even shipbuilding. One the whole he was benevolent to those who treated the sea with respect. The sirens, on the other hand, sang beautifully but lured sailors to their death on the rocks, a good metaphor for the fascination/danger dichotomy with which man has viewed the sea. There are of course a number of sea gods and goddesses who are not half fish, for example Neptune and the Inuit mother figure, Sedna, who marries a supernatural bird and whose father throws her out of the canoe. As she clings to the side he chops off her fingers and all manner of sea creatures, fish, whales sea birds etc. flow from her bleeding hands. Sedna certainly embodies the bounty and peril of the sea, but is always described as a woman. What seems to characterise mermaids is that they are always associated with ambiguity in relation to water. Their half human/ half fish shape makes this clear. The symbol of the port of Cracov in Poland is a Siren who protects the port and its fishermen. However a Breton tradition is closer to 'The Little Mermaid.' In Brittany, the *Mari Morgan* lives in a beautiful underworld land lying beneath a mysterious island (or the land is a sunken island). She desires to marry a mortal but her touch is fatal. Sailors who listen to her either drown, or must live forever in her underwater domain. Mermaids on the Isle of Man are called *ben varre,* which means 'woman of the sea' in Manx Gaelic, and are associated with storms and disaster.

Occasionally a mermaid is associated with a particular family and appears, or is heard, before births and deaths. A Danish figure called a Havfrau (half woman) is a kind of mermaid. One of them foretold the birth of King Christian IV. Sometimes they are seen driving their white cattle across the water, but this is a sign of stormy weather. On land they appear to be real women with feet. Sometimes they visit fishermen camps in the guise of a beautiful woman who is wet and shivering with cold. However anyone unwary enough to allow one of these creatures close to the fire will be seized and dragged into the water and drowned. The next day the onlything left will be the victim's liver and lungs floating in the surf.

There are mermaids in lakes as well. Sometimes the mermaid is associated with a sunken bell and appears to ring the bell on a particular day of the year or before a disaster, depending on the local variant. There are a hand full of tales from Cheshire and Shropshire in which a church bell is hurled into the lake usually by some disapproving figure like the Puritans or Oliver Cromwell. A mermaid holds the bell under the water and will not release it. The villagers are told that they must raise the bell in absolute silence and they do so with the mermaid sleeping inside. Someone however speaks (actually he swears), naturally the mermaids wake up and drags the bell back into the depths. One of the 'inland' mermaids was sighted in a pool at child Ercoll in Shropshire at the end of the eighteenth century. Two men saw her early one morning. She told them about a treasure at the bottom of the pool and offered to lead them to it. However when they beheld the huge lumps of gold, one of the men swore and the mermaid seized the treasure and disappeared. These inland mermaids are very fussy about manners!

Perhaps the most consistent point in all these tales is that the mermaid is wild nature (not pagan, not something that can or needs to be tamed, but just there). This might explain why they are so often found as church ornaments. They represent the world outside the safety of Christendom. However, being gendered, they of course become the subject for romantic speculation. There is nothing essentially pagan about them or evil, they are just other, the natural danger of the natural world.