

Holly McKenna

Professor Brooks

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### The Psyche of *The Little Mermaid*

The very definition of a myth is that it defines human culture. Myths represent the epitome of the human thinking, the core of our being. The reason myths survive for so long is because we as humans have not fundamentally changed in thousands of years. In the more modern centuries, myths have given way to fairy tales, which were first documented in writing, and then, in the last century, were often adapted to the relatively new invention of film. Animated films in particular lend themselves beautifully to the fairy tale. Marina Warner states in her book, *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale*, that “. . . made of light and motion, [film’s] illusions match the enchanted animism of fairy tale: animals speak, carpets fly, objects move of their own accord” (167). All is possible in animation.

In the 1950s, Walt Disney Feature Animation emerged as king of the fairy tale. With such hits as *Cinderella*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, the studio proved to be masterful at the adaptation of fairy tales both time-worn and more recently crafted. After the 1950s, however, the focus of their films shifted from classic fairy tales to movies based upon modern novels and children's books. Finally, in the late 1980s, after a string of the most unsuccessful

and unpopular films in the studio's history, it decided to turn again to what it did best, the fairy tale (Hahn, *Waking Sleeping Beauty*).

After *Sleeping Beauty's* release in 1959, the first true Disney animated fairy tale film in thirty years was 1989's *The Little Mermaid*, based on the 1837 Hans Christian Andersen story of the same name. The film adaptation made quite a few changes, including changing the entire ending of the story. Director John Musker said to the other filmmakers "we don't need to do Andersen literally, we just need to adapt [*The Little Mermaid*] and make it work for our medium" (*The Little Mermaid: The Story Behind the Story*), that medium being an animated film for a modern audience. What the filmmakers may not have consciously known is that many of the changes that were made aligned the film with a persevering Greek myth, that of Eros and Psyche. I believe that this happened because, as Johnson puts it in *She: Understanding Feminine Psychology* a myth is "an expression of basic psychological patterns" (xi). It is a fundamental representation of human psychology.

Julius E Heuscher's book, *A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales: Their Origin, Meaning, and Usefulness*, reminds us that myths persevere not as replicas, but as reimaginings; reinventions:

We find fragments of the Eros and Psyche story. . . in fairy tales from many countries . . . These images constantly modify and rearrange themselves in order best to reflect the basic psychological [sic] situations, configurations, and goals of the particular cultural

group; at the same time they achieve satisfactory compromises with the current traditional, social, religious and moral standards. (212)

Fairy tales are not exact retellings of myth, but rather, are myths reinvented for a modern audience. Many of the basic psychological principles persist, but the story and morals are more palatable for a contemporary culture. Disney's films are widely accepted as the definitive fairy tales of our modern society, and as accurate representations of our morals and culture. Henry A. Giroux states in *The Mouse that Roared* that ". . . [Disney's] films possess at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching roles, values, and ideals as more traditional sites of learning, such as the public schools, religious institutions, and the family" (84).

*The Little Mermaid* was already far into production when the filmmakers discovered, by chance, that Walt Disney himself had attempted to make an animated version of *The Little Mermaid* in 1941. While they drew inspiration from this unfinished version, the directors found that many of the 1941 adaptation's themes and ideas were already the same as theirs, though the productions were nearly 50 years apart. Director John Musker noted that "it was as if Walt was looking over our shoulders while we were developing this, because it seemed like a lot of the things that he was thinking, we were thinking too" (*The Little Mermaid: The Story Behind the Story*). The same fundamental themes occur in Andersen's 1837 *The Little Mermaid*, Walt Disney's 1941 *The Little Mermaid*, and

Clements and Musker's 1989 *The Little Mermaid*, just as the fundamental themes in myths reappear in the stories of today.

The character of Ariel, the little mermaid herself, is similar to that of Psyche in a great number of ways. Both are the youngest children of a king and queen who have only daughters, and both are revered: Psyche for her beauty and Ariel for her beautiful singing voice. They both possess a kind of purity, only natural, as Psyche is thought to be a representation of a woman's soul (Johnson 1).

It is Ariel's purity and youthful naiveté that allows her to fall in love at first sight with Prince Eric, a human. Psyche, in her myth, is pricked by the arrow of Eros, the god of love, which causes her to fall immediately in love with him. The prince in Andersen's original text of *The Little Mermaid* does not have a name, and the name Eric — which, curiously, is only a few letters away from Eros — was chosen by Disney filmmakers. Meanwhile, Ariel's human-resenting father was given the name Triton, the same name as the merman son of the god Poseidon in Greek mythology.

Both stories, at their basis, are love stories. These are perhaps the most common stories told across the centuries because love is the most commonly experienced emotion by humans both modern and ancient. The Psyche myth perseveres as a representation of the process of a woman falling in love. (Johnson 37). Her story has been repeated through thousands of years and hundreds of generations.

It is the goddess Aphrodite, Eros's mother, who sets forth Psyche's journey. Out of jealousy of the beautiful princess, she sentences Psyche to marry the horrible monster Death, sending her son, Eros, to ensure the deed is carried out and unwittingly beginning their love story. In Disney's film, a sea-witch named Ursula is the catalyst for Ariel's journey, granting her three days as a human to win the heart of her beloved human Prince Eric, at the price of her beautiful singing voice, and her freedom should she fail. A sea-witch exists in Andersen's version, but is more of a neutral minor character. Like Aphrodite, Ursula, too, acts out of jealousy, for she believes Ariel will surely be unsuccessful. Ariel will then belong to Ursula, thus angering Ariel's father, king of the sea, whom Ursula is jealous of for his power and life of luxury in the palace.

Aphrodite is described as a mother of sorts; a powerful, overbearing mother-in-law to Psyche, who, in her own way, contributes to Psyche's personal growth (Johnson 6). She is mother to Eros, and is fiercely protective of him, becoming competitive with Psyche. In her book *The Emperor's Old Groove*, Brenda Ayres describes *The Little Mermaid's* sea-witch, Ursula, with a mature femininity, alluding to her overly large hips and breasts and extravagant makeup as signs of matured sexuality. She keeps merpeople who have made failed deals with her captive in her undersea lair, and transforms them into tadpole-like creatures who are fixated to the walls and floors, unable to leave. Ariel herself is to become one of these creatures if she fails in her task. In this way, Ayres insists that “. . .she is a mother (much more vividly than in Andersen's tale) who wants

her 'children' regressed." In this way, ". . .Ariel's triumph over a competitive, sexualized maternal figure [is] the prerequisite to maturity" (138), just as Psyche's eventual triumph over Aphrodite is.

Another argument for Ursula as a mother figure is the notable absence of Ariel's own mother, who is deceased, and of many female characters in general. In the mer-world, besides Ariel and Ursula, the only female characters with spoken lines are Ariel's six sisters, and even then, their dialogue and roles in the story are extremely limited. They contribute so little that director Ron Clements admitted that one sister, Andrina, got her name from his aerobics instructor at the time (Clements, Musker, et al, 2008). On land, there is only one female character, a maid named Carlotta who is a friend to Ariel but still figures very little in the story. Perhaps most interestingly, the Disney filmmakers had originally planned for Ursula to be Ariel's aunt, her father's sister (Clements, Musker, et al, 2008). The idea was scrapped for the movie, but was revived in Disney's Broadway musical version of the film, so it potentially may be taken as canon in the movie as well, though it is unmentioned.

While fulfilling Aphrodite's jealous wishes, Eros is accidentally scratched by his own magical love-arrow and falls in love with Psyche at first sight. Prince Eric falls in love with Ariel at their first meeting after she saves him from drowning and sings to him. He does not know her identity and saw only a faint image of her, most remembering her voice from the experience. It is worth noting that, in a

role reversal of this, Psyche does not know the identity of Eros for a long while, as he keeps himself hidden from her.

After Eros falls in love with Psyche, he takes her as his wife and she is transported to a paradise garden, where she is happy. Johnson describes the paradise garden as the initial stages of a relationship, the honeymoon phase where imperfections remain unseen and partners love blindly (19). Ariel becomes human and goes to live on land with Eric, creating a sense of great joy within her, as she has been fascinated with the human world and longed to see and experience it since long before she even met him. In Andersen's tale, the mermaid longs to be a human and aspires to obtain an immortal soul, which only humans possessed.

David Whitley argues in *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation* that the mer-world is a natural paradise, and the human world represents harsh reality (139), but Ariel's compelling infatuation with the human world says otherwise. The 'human world' may appear normal to us, but we are humans; this is the only world we know. Ariel is a mermaid who has spent her whole life beneath the sea, and views dry land through the eyes of a child; as a wonderful, perfect, magical world, full of new discoveries. Although Ariel has spent her whole life in a natural paradise, the world of humans is her own 'paradise garden'.

Once on land, Prince Eric does not recognize Ariel without her voice, and thus she struggles to complete her task from Ursula. She is visibly frustrated and angered by this, but as she spends more time with Prince Eric, she falls more in

love with him than ever, and even comes to love his naiveté. She begins to fall in love with the person he is, not the person she once saw. Andersen's mermaid is in love with the prince from the moment she sees him, and her view of him does not change.

In Psyche's myth, she comes to suspect that Eros, who has continued to keep his identity hidden, may be deceiving her and is actually be a monster, and goes to his sleeping form in the night and illuminates him with a lamp. This lamp, Johnson says, is a lamp of consciousness, and the lighting of it represents a woman seeing her partner for what he truly is (28). What Psyche sees is the most beautiful creature she has ever witnessed, the god of love. She is so startled that she pricks herself on one of his magic arrows and falls in love with him on the spot.

Because of her betrayal, Eros leaves Psyche and returns to his mother, Aphrodite. Psyche is distraught and goes to Aphrodite to beg forgiveness. Aphrodite, motherly but jealous and conniving, gives Psyche four days to complete four impossible tasks before she may live again with Eros in the paradise garden. In Ariel's story, Ursula the sea-witch has given Ariel three days to complete one specific impossible task: to receive a kiss of true love from Prince Eric without the use of her voice. If Ariel succeeds at her task, she will remain human forever and may live with Prince Eric on land.

In Andersen's telling, the mermaid does not have a time limit put on her task, but the director-screenwriters of Disney's version, John Musker and Ron

Clements, felt that adding a deadline would create a sense of urgency (“*The Little Mermaid: The Story Behind the Story*”). This sense of urgency is present in Psyche’s story: as she is faced with each new impossible task, which each must be completed by nightfall the same day, she becomes so overwhelmed she contemplates suicide. In this way, the filmmakers had created yet another link to the Eros and Psyche myth.

Psyche’s first task is to sort an enormous pile of seeds. Johnson equates this to the ability of a woman to sort through the tasks she is given in life, able to discern which are more important and which must be accomplished first. She also must sort through feelings and emotions, protecting herself from the world’s cruelty (Johnson 55). In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel must make an ultimate decision at the end of the story: should she stay a mermaid and remain with her family in her home or live the rest of her life as a human with Prince Eric and leave them behind? She must sort out her priorities to make her choice, and she ultimately chooses to break away from her family to live her own life on land with her love.

The second of Psyche’s tasks is to gather golden fleece from special but extremely fierce rams in a specific meadow. Reeds by a riverside tell her to wait until nightfall and collect bits of wool from the brambles instead. Robert Johnson compares these rams to masculine power, overwhelming and dangerous when too much is used. He insists that balance between feminine and masculine power must be maintained, both in women and men, women using their

masculine power consciously and deliberately and vice versa for men and their feminine power (60).

Ariel, while fiery and brave, only uses force when her love depends upon it. The only two times in the film she lays hands on anyone are when her father is about to destroy her most prized possession, a statue of Prince Eric with his magical trident, and in a mirrored scene when Ursula is about to use her power to destroy the real Prince Eric with the same trident. Andersen's mermaid is much more subdued and pensive, only portraying a picture of femininity.

The next task Psyche must complete is to fill a crystal goblet with water from the dangerous river Styx, which falls from a high, treacherous mountain and then disappears into the earth. She is assisted by an eagle, who takes the goblet and flies to the river to fill it safely. According to Johnson, women are equipped with a "eagle vision" of sorts, giving them a broader perspective on life and granting them the ability to take a step back and look at things in a different way to figure out how to best tackle a situation (64).

In Disney's film, Prince Eric becomes engaged to another woman who, unbeknownst to he and Ariel, is Ursula in disguise, using Ariel's stolen voice and her magic to ensure Ariel's failure. Initially, Ariel is distressed and unsure of what to do next, but winds up doing nothing, for she truly loves Prince Eric and believes that the marriage is what he wants, and all she wants is for him to be happy. She is able to use her eagle vision to look at things from Prince Eric's point of view and makes what she believes to be the right decision by him,

though it will end badly for her. This is another change from Andersen's story, where the mermaid must kill the prince if she is to live, having failed at her task. Andersen's mermaid almost carries out the deed, but at the last minute finds that she cannot bring herself to kill the one she loves.

Aphrodite's final task for Psyche is the most impossible for a mortal. Psyche must journey to the underworld and ask the goddess of the underworld, Persephone for a cask of her special beauty ointment, which Psyche is to deliver to Aphrodite without opening it. Psyche successfully passes the various trials the task puts forth, but fails at the task when she disobeys Aphrodite's instructions and opens the cask. Ariel ultimately fails at the three-day task she is given by Ursula, as the the third day ends just before Prince Eric goes to kiss her. She is reverted back to a mermaid and taken by Ursula, who has shed her human disguise and now owns Ariel.

Upon opening the cask, Psyche is engulfed in a deathly sleep and collapses. Eros flies to her side and removes the sleep that has enveloped her, putting it back in the cask, and awakens the unconscious Psyche by pricking her with an arrow. Prince Eric, who has now realized that he loves Ariel, attempts to go after her into the sea and ends up assisting her in defeating Ursula once and for all. This climax is not present in Andersen's story, as the mermaid dies after not completing her task, but becomes a daughter of the air as a reward for her acts of love and selflessness.

Musker and Clements chose to end their film in a different way. Rather than being transformed into a daughter of the air, Ariel is transformed back into a human by her father, and is then wed to Prince Eric. They felt this ending would be more well-received among modern audiences. In an homage to the bittersweet ending of Andersen's tale, the filmmakers made a point of emphasizing Ariel's separation from her father, family, and the undersea world she grew up in ("*The Little Mermaid: The Story Behind the Story*").

The immortal soul plays a part in both Andersen's tale and also in Psyche's. Andersen's mermaid, upon her death, is made a daughter of the air and granted an immortal soul, with the promise that she may one day ascend to heaven. After Eros saves Psyche, Zeus, Eros's father and king of the gods, insists that the two be wed, and grants immortality to Psyche so that she may live with Eros in heaven. It can be argued that in Disney's film, the human world is Ariel's personal version of heaven, and as such, being granted a permanent human form by her father the sea-king allows her to ascend from the sea and be with Prince Eric in her own heaven. Amy Davis reflects upon this in her book, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches*:

Although her ultimate wish - to marry Prince Eric and live as a human - are on the surface very traditional, symbolically, this action can be seen as [Ariel]'s ultimate assertion of herself thanks to the fact that it actualises the goals she set for herself. (181)

Hans Christian Andersen, original author of *The Little Mermaid*, was a desperately lonely man. Many say that *The Little Mermaid* is a reflection of his own life and failures at love. He died alone, his works only moderately well known, but after his death, they ascended to a level of prominence that would make his name and life live on forever, his stories beloved by all (*The Little Mermaid: The Story Behind the Story*). Andersen's close friend Hans Christian Ørsted once told him that his novels would make him famous, but his fairy tales would make him immortal. And he was right, in a way, because Andersen's story and thus Disney's story provide a look at the inner world, the same inner world that humans have possessed for thousands of years, the immortal world of Psyche.

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