IDEALIZING THE BODIES OF MEDIEVAL MERMAIDS:

Analyzing the Shifted Sexuality of Medieval Mermaids in the Presence of Medieval Mermen

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In Medieval manuscript images from 1200 to 1400, mermaids appear as supernatural female archetypes performing a variety of acts like standing idle, playing musical instruments, embodying sirens to lure sailors, and using weaponry. These early images show mermaids with short or partially concealed hair and sagging breasts. Medieval manuscript images begin depicting mermen in the 1400s, with the mermen performing acts like wielding weaponry, playing musical instruments, and raising phallic objects over their heads. These mermen appear primarily clothed in cloth garments or metal armor with head coverings and weaponry. As images of mermen appear, mermaids embrace a more decorative role with depictions of them primarily combing their hair and looking into mirrors while neglecting most of their previous actions. Medieval mermen act as heroic entities of the Medieval merfolk species, consequently forcing Medieval mermaids to forfeit their agency and serve as sexual entities of the Medieval merfolk species.

Introduction

Mermaids reign as one of the most iconic mythological creatures of all time and fundamentally serve as a female archetype that resembles supernatural beauty and grace. The belief in mermaids spans across centuries, particularly originating from explorers' reported sightings of these oceanic creatures. While sailing off the coast of Hispaniola in 1493, Christopher Columbus reports his Admirable seeing three mermaids or sirens. His logbook reads, ". . . as the Admirable was proceeding toward the Rio del Oro, he said that he had quite distinctly seen three Sirens emerging from the sea, but that they were not as beautiful as they are said to be, for their faces had some masculine traits."[1] Although the Admirable and other supposed eyewitnesses likely sighted manatees rather than mermaids, the logbook entry emphasizes a key component of the mermaids: beauty. Admittedly, one cannot expect a mermaid to appear beautiful if she is actually a manatee, but the Admirable's notion that the sirens' faces appear far less beautiful than imagined emphasizes the cultural association with merfolk as sexually alluring creatures. Unfortunately, folklore literature lacks an understanding behind the sexualization of Medieval mermaids in manuscripts, particularly in regard to the interactions between mermaids and mermen as mermen begin appearing alongside mermaids in Medieval manuscripts.

By analyzing images of mermaids and mermen from Medieval manuscripts, viewers can analyze the evolution of merfolk throughout Medieval manuscripts and understand how their sexuality and purpose shift overtime. Although mermaids originally exist as mythological creatures with un-emphasized hair and un-emphasized breasts, the presence of Medieval mermen causes Medieval mermaids to undergo a visual transformation that enhances their sexuality. Artists begin depicting mermaids with more voluminous hair and rounder, perkier breasts to accentuate their sexual biology and distinguish them from mermen. By further understanding this relationship between mermaids and mermen, viewers can use this relationship to consider the social relations between actual men and women during Medieval history. Thus, this study of Medieval merfolk provides readers with a fascinating perspective into the gender roles and social relationships between men and women during the time these images originate. These studies also reveal how iconic religious imagery such as the depictions of Adam and Eve with the serpent influence not only artistic imagery but universal social expectations and social norms. Ultimately, this paper explores the idealization of Medieval mermaids in the presence of Medieval mermen, particularly as Medieval mermaids develop sexualized appearances and embrace sinful roles as malevolent, cunning succubi with occult powers similar to lunar deities.

Terminology

In this paper, I use the term "mermaids" to describe merfolk who portray traditionally feminine characteristics such as long hair and visible breasts. I use the term "mermen" to describe merfolk who portray traditionally masculine characteristics such as short hair, pectoral muscles, broad shoulders, or beards. I use the term "siren" to refer to two different types of merfolk: female merfolk attacking men or luring sailors and female merfolk that display both fish-like characteristics and fish-like characteristics such as a fish tale with feathers, wings, or bird feet. I acknowledge that most Medieval sirens take the form of half bird-half human creatures with little to no merfolk or "fish" characteristics. However, this paper only focuses on "sirens" that display merfolk characteristics as well as bird characteristics. As a general term, I use "merfolk" to refer to mermaids, mermen, androgynous merfolk (merfolk with ambiguous sexual characteristics), and sirens.

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1   Sánchez, Jean-Pierre. 1994. Myths and Legends in the Old World and European Expansionism on the American Continent. The Classical Tradition and the Americas: European images of the Americas and the classical tradition, edited by Walter de Gruyter. p. 203. ISBN 3-110-11572-7.

Method of Analyzing Manuscript Images

In order to construct a narrative around the sexuality of Medieval merfolk and sirens, I consulted the Index of Medieval Art from Princeton University[2]. Specifically, I searched the keyword "mermaid" between the dates 500 and 1500, and I specified the work of art type to "manuscripts," which allowed me to analyze 61 images of merfolk from Medieval manuscripts. I also searched the keyword "merman" between the dates 500 and 1500, and I specified the work of art type to "manuscripts," which allowed me to analyze 44 images of merfolk from Medieval manuscripts. I then searched the keyword "siren" between the dates 500 and 1500, and I specified the work of art type to "manuscripts," which allowed me to analyze 123 images of sirens from Medieval manuscripts, with some overlap occurring as images from the "mermaid" and "merman" searches appeared in the "siren" search. Manuscript images of merfolk and sirens did not appear until the 900s, with the majority of images appearing between 1200 and 1500. Thus, I chose to focus my research on images of merfolk and sirens that appear in Medieval manuscripts dated between 1200 and 1500.

The Breasts of Medieval Mermaids

The sexuality of mermaids remains most apparent in the visibility of their breasts. Medieval mermaids lack the seashell bras that modern mermaids enjoy; instead, during the early depictions of Medieval merfolk and sirens, the bare breasts appear saggy and deflated (see fig. 1). However, the breasts of merfolk and sirens receive less emphasis between 1250 and 1350 (see fig. 2). While the silhouette of the breast shape remains apparent, the contour of the breasts and detailing of the nipples remain faint. Later, from 1350 to 1500, Medieval artists depict merfolk and sirens with more idealized breasts. These breasts typically appear larger, rounder, perkier, and with greater nipple detailing (see fig 3). In other words, early depictions of Medieval mermaid breasts remain basic biological features of mythical female humanoids, while later depictions of Medieval mermaid breasts serve to enhance their sexuality.

Figure 1. Early depictions of mermaids showcase drooping breasts. On the left, a mermaid from ca. 1230-1240 holding a fish in her right hand.[3] On the right, a mermaid from ca. 1210 holds a comb in her right hand and a fish in her left hand.[4]

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2   "Welcome to the Index of Medieval Art." Index of Medieval Art. Princeton University, 2020, theindex-princeton edu. libproxy.berkeley.edu/home.

3   London, British Library. MS Harley 4751, fol. 47v. In addition to the drooping breasts, this image showcases the reproductive organs inside of the mermaid, including two fallopian tubes and the vaginal cavity.

4   Oxford, Bodleian Library. MS Ashmole 1511, fol. 65v.

Figure 2. Between 1250 and 1350, the breasts of mermaids appear less visible. In this image, a siren from ca. 1310-1320 holds a mirror and showcases a bare, un-emphasized chest.[5]

Figure 3. Mermaids from 1350 to 1500 appear with idealized breasts. A mermaid from ca. 1425-1430 with round, perky breasts holds a comb in her right hand and a mirror in her left hand.[6]

The Chests of Medieval Mermen

While Medieval mermaids endure quite the transformation in the depictions of their chests, Medieval mermen fail to undergo the same level of transformation. Instead, Medieval mermen appear with flat pectoral muscles but no visible breasts (see fig 4). Unlike mermaids, many images of mermen also depict visible ribs underneath the chests of the mermen.

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5   London, British Library. Royal MS 2 B VII, fol. 96v. Note that this image includes two types of sirens: a half-woman, half-bird siren and a half-woman, half-fish siren. For the purpose of this paper, I specifically focus on the half-woman, half-fish siren holding the spherical object. The Index of Medieval Art from Princeton University describes the spherical object as a "mirror," and I agree with this description since other mirrors appear spherical, such as the mirror in fig. 3.

6   New York, Morgan Library. MS M. 453, fol. 162r.

Figure 4. Compared to mermaids, mermen showcase flat pectoral muscles instead of breasts. On the left, a mermaid raises her right hand to expose her breasts in full view. On the right, a merman raises his left arm to conceal his breast-less chest.[7]

Depictions of Medieval Mermaid Motherhood

Medieval manuscripts depict mermaids and motherhood through two mediums: breastfeeding and birthing. In these depictions, motherhood appears as a solitary activity with no mermen present to provide parental support. Admittedly, depictions of Medieval mermaids engaging in maternal activities remain scarce. Mermen did not begin appearing regularly in Medieval manuscripts until 1400, so early artists lack exposure to the idea of merfolk as feminine and masculine; typically, one associates merfolk with mermaids as opposed to mermen. In other words, people generally consider mermaids to resemble a specific mythological female archetype as opposed to merfolk resembling an entire species with both feminine and masculine counterparts that can mate and produce offspring. So, early artists more commonly consider merfolk fantastical creatures as opposed to humanoids with children.

Figure 5. Two double-tailed mermaids from ca 1270-1280 wear blue shirts and pull their tails apart as though emphasizing their births.[8]

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7   Herdringen, Gräflich Fürstenbergische Bibliothek. MS 8, fol. 3r.
8   Princeton, Princeton University Library. MS Garrett 97, fol. 127v

Even though fig. 5 showcases two double-tailed mermaids giving birth, two blue cloth garments conceal the breasts of the mermaids. This remains particularly fascinating since breasts exist for the biological purpose of providing newborn children with nutrients. So, this Medieval manuscript image seems like one of the primary instances where artists would expose the breasts due to the biological nature of the scene. Given that this image appears from 1270 to 1280, however, the mermaid fits appropriately into a period where Medieval manuscript artists had not begun emphasizing and idealizing breasts yet. Thus, the artist does not oversexualize the breasts, instead opting to emphasize their biological utility without putting them on display for decorative pleasure.

Figure 6. A mermaid from ca. 1250-1300 nurses a child while a demon dances on her tail.[9] She covers her non-nursing breast with her arm while she squeezes her nursing breast. The child's body covers the nursing breast with its body, and the child appears to have a single breast of its own.

Figure 7. A mermaid from ca. 1401-1450 nurses her child, but her both her nursing and non-nursing breast remain exposed.[10]

These images of Medieval mermaid motherhood also emphasize the variation in breast exposure that further accentuates the sexual transformation of breasts that Medieval mermaids endure. In fig. 6, the Medieval mermaid nurses her child with round, perky breasts. While the mermaid in fig. 6 covers her non-nursing breast with her arm, the mermaid in fig. 7 does not cover her non-nursing breast. Evidently, mermaids become more

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9   London, British Library. MS 24686, fol. 13r. The demon dancing on the tail of the mermaid perhaps emphasizes the sinful nature of women discussed in "The Postures and Actions of Medieval Mermaids" section.

10   New York, Morgan Library, MS M. 1004, fol. 142r.

feminized and sexualized by having idealized breasts. Consequently, the breasts shift from solely providing biological utility to also invoking feminine sexuality.

The Hair of Medieval Mermaids

Medieval mermaids primarily appear with long hair. Early depictions of Medieval mermaids show long hair that is clearly visible but not accentuated (see fig. 8).

From 1300 to 1418, the hair appears short, hidden by a helmet or head covering of some sort, or obscured because the angles of the mermaids' postures cause the hair to disappear down the backs of the mermaids (see fig. 9). From 1418 to 1500, some artists begin depicting mermaids with deliberately longer hair again. Specifically, artists draw long, flowing hair and somewhat emphasize the visibility of the hair regardless of the angle of the merfolk; even forward-facing merfolk show accentuated hair that peers out from behind the mermaids' backs (see fig. 10).

Figure 8. Mermaids from 1200 to 1300 have long but unaccentuated hair. A siren from ca. 1200 and 1210 stands with long hair falling down her back as she holds a fish in her right hand and her fish tail in her right hand.[11]

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11   Cambridge, University of Cambridge Library. MS Ii.4.26, fol. 39r. Note that this siren has a humanoid chest, a pair of bird feet, and a fish tail. Due to the presence of her fish tail, I am including her in the analyses of sirens.

Figure 9. Mermaids from 1300 to 1418 have shorter, less visible hair. On the left, a mermaid from ca. 1350–1374 with short hair holds a mirror in her right hand and a comb in her left hand.[12] On the right, a mermaid from ca. 1420 with short hair holds a mirror in her right hand and a comb in her left hand.[13]
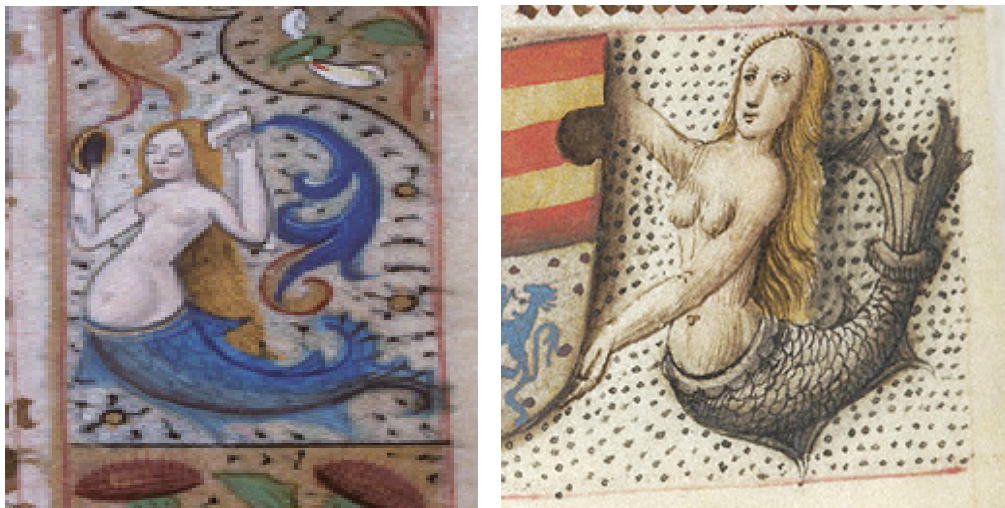

Figure 10. Mermaids from 1418 to 1500 have long, voluminous hair. On the right, a mermaid from ca. 1490 with long hair holds the edge of a shield.[14] On the left, a similar mermaid from ca. 1490–1500 with long hair holds a mirror in her right hand and a comb in her left hand.[15]

Although mermaids experience a significant transformation regarding the presentation of their hair, the varying lengths of hair accentuate the mermaids' cunning intellect. On the subject of mermaids' hair, Krista Lauren Gilbert, a researcher from the Pacifica Graduate Institute and author of *The Mermaid Archetype*, writes:

> If wielding hair can be equated to wielding a powerful weapon, then her weapon is double-edged and paradoxical. As both shield and blade, her hair simultaneously protects, incites, and ferociously attacks. As shield her hair acts as clothing in the realm of consciousness. Like Botticelli's Venus emerging from the sea, her long tresses hold the numinous power selectively and protectively to conceal and reveal the

12   New York, Morgan Library. MS M. 814 fol. 61v. Note that this mermaid actively combs her hair despite the short length of her hair. Even though the hair remains the central focus in the actions of the mermaid, the artist does not accentuate the length or visibility of the hair.

13   New York, Morgan Library. MS M. 76 fol. 134r.

14   New York, Morgan Library. MS M. 463 fol. 202v.

15   New York, Morgan Library. MS MA 46 fol. 146r.

beauty that lies beneath.[16]

In this sense, mermaids utilize their hair as weapons and tools for seducing onlookers. Mermaids may utilize their long hair to conceal their bodies, imitating coy façades as sailors gaze at their barely covered bodies in admiration and hunger for a glance at the flesh beneath the hair. Once mermaids earn the attention of sailors, the mermaids then brush their long hair back, fully revealing their exposed skin and breasts to completely entice the sailors. Consequently, the hair of the mermaids serves not only as an accentuation of feminine beauty but also as a tool for enticing and seducing onlookers. This idea endows mermaids, especially sirens, with cunning intelligence as they use their hair to manipulate onlookers.[17]

The Clothing of Medieval Mermaids

Medieval artists depict mermaids as primarily naked and exposing their breasts. Unlike their male counterparts, mermaids rarely wear cloth garments like shirts or hats (see fig. 11 and see fig. 12). Even when standing next to an armored merman, mermaids lack clothing of their own. Evidently, the bodies of mermaids exist to emphasize and display their sexuality and femininity.

Figures 11. A winged siren from ca. 1418 wears a headdress and a shirt.[18]

Figures 12. Androgynous merfolk with clothing.[19]

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16   Gilbert, Krista Lauren. "The Mermaid Archetype." Order No. 3264656, Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2006. search-proquest-com.libproxy.berkeley.edu/docview/304907834?accountid=14496.
17   Note that the action of deliberately using hair to lure onlookers corresponds more closely with sirens than mermaids in general since sirens function as malevolent mermaids.
18   New York, Morgan Library. MS M. 919 fol. 42r.
19   New York, Morgan Library. MS M. 183, fol. 252v. I refer to this merperson as androgynous due to the shoulder-length hair and the possibility of breasts underneath the shirt.

The Clothing of Medieval Mermen

Mermen primarily appear in Medieval manuscript images from 1400 to 1500. These images portray mermen as wearing much more clothing than mermaids (see fig. 13), typically in the form of cloth garments or armor.[20] Specifically, mermen also wear hats more frequently than mermaids. Since artists begin depicting mermaids with longer hair to further accentuate their sexuality, the notion that mermen wear hats more frequently than mermaids further supports the idea that hair serves as a symbol of feminine sexuality. Consequently, mermen have short hair or wear headpieces to emphasize their masculinity. From 1450 to 1500, Medieval artists begin depicting mermen as wearing fewer clothes and exposing more skin. Interestingly, manuscript images primarily depict mermen naked when alone or in the presence of other mermen, but mermen rarely expose their bodies in the presence of mermaids. While a merman's body exists to provide him with muscles and strength to wield weapons and fend off enemies, the mermaid's body exists to attract viewers and emphasize the beauty within her that she so commonly embraces by looking into mirrors and combing her hair.

Figure 13. Medieval mermen wear clothing much more than Medieval mermaids. On the left, a merman from ca. 1350 wears a helmet and a shirt.[21] In the middle, a merman from ca. 1320-1330 wears a helmet and a shirt.[22] On the right, a merman poses shirtless in his solitude, but he wears a bandana around his head.[23]

The Postures and Actions of Medieval Mermaids

In Medieval manuscripts from 1200 to 1400, artists depict mermaids completing a variety of different activities. Mermaids play musical instruments like horns and violas or engage in idle activity as they stand or "float" in space (see fig. 14). In very rare cases, mermaids wield weaponry (see fig. 15). However, female merfolk typically engage in action or violence when they appear as sirens. In these images, artists depict sirens as female merfolk biting off the heads of men or trying to lure sailors out to sea. Most importantly, mermaids look into mirrors and comb their hair (see fig. 16). The mermaids holding the mirrors reflect the iconic imagery of Eve and the vanity she feels as she admires her own beauty (see fig. 17). Additionally, the spherical shape of these mirrors alludes to moon disks worn by lunar deities, such as the Egyptian god of the moon, Khonsu (see

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20   Note that the aforementioned mermaid jousting the centaur in fig. 14 did not wear armor. So, even when female merfolk engage in masculine activities, female merfolk maintain key components of their sexuality by allowing bodily areas such as their breasts to remain visible due to their lack of armor.

21   London, Victoria and Albert Museum. MS MSL/1891-1346, fol. 42r.

22   New York, Morgan Library. MS M. 754, fol. 31v.

23   New York, Morgan Library. MS M. 1004 fol. 81v. Even though the man lacks a shirt, he wears a bandana as though covering his hair to emphasize his masculinity.

fig. 18). Therefore, these mirrors represent not only vanity but also the occult powers of sirens.

In this sense, mermaids act as a somewhat evil feminine archetype. However, from 1400 to 1500, mermaids begin emitting more sexuality. Artists begin depicting Medieval mermaids as primarily looking in mirrors and combing their hair (see fig. 16) while disregarding previous actions, such as playing instruments[24] or standing idle without emphasis. Later depictions of Medieval mermaids show not only mermaids combing their hair and looking in mirrors, but also mermaids raising their arms and exposing their breasts as though specifically posing to show off their bodies. Thus, later artists ensure that mermaids primarily exude sexuality given their sexually suggestive appearances.

Figure 14. Early depictions of Medieval mermaids showcase mermaids playing music or standing idle, while later depictions of Medieval mermaids showcase mermaids looking in mirrors and combing their hair or standing in revealing poses. On the left, a mermaid from ca. 1350 plays the jawbone with a pair of tongs.[25] On the right, a mermaid from ca. 1380-99 poses idle.[26]

Figure 15. A mermaid raises a shield in her left arm as she lunges a lance towards a centaur with her right hand.[27]

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24   The act of mermaids playing musical instruments connects to the idea of sirens as merfolk with magical singing voices that possess the ability to brainwash sailors and lure them to their deaths.

25   New York, Morgan Library. MS G. 24 fol. 16r.

26   New York, Morgan Library. MS M. 268 fol. 22r.

27   London, British Library. Royal MS 2 B VII, fol. 96v. This image depicts the unlikely scenario of a mermaid wielding a weapon and actively engaging in combat. Some may argue that this image contains a merman rather than a mermaid, but I argue that this mermaid has visible breasts similar to the breasts of the siren in fig. 3.

Figure 16. Later depictions of mermaids primarily showcase mermaids combing their hair and looking into mirrors. On the left, a mermaid from ca. 1420-1425 combs her hair with her left hand as she supports a mirror with her fish tail.[28] On the right, a mermaid from ca. 1440-1450 with long hair holds a comb in her right hand and a mirror in her left hand.[29]

Figure 17. Constructed in the 13th century, this sculpture at the entrance to the Notre Dame Cathedral depicts Adam and Eve with the Serpent, and the Serpent's face appears as a reflection of Eve's face.[30]

In fig. 17, the serpent appears as a reflection of Eve's face to emphasize Eve's vanity. Since Eve vainly admired her own beauty and plucked the forbidden fruit, she bears responsibility for the fall of humanity and

28   New York, Morgan Library. MS M. 1004 fol. 166r.
29   New York, Morgan Library. MS M. 358 fol. 207r.
30   Kennison, Rebecca. 1991. Adam, Eve, and the (female) serpent at the entrance to Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. Photograph. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/4a/France_Paris_Notre-Dame-Adam_and_Eve.jpg/416px-France_Paris_Notre-Dame-Adam_and_Eve.jpg.

the association between women and vanity. In this sense, the mirror reflects the sins of the individual looking into the mirror. Consequently, Medieval artists depict mermaids as female archetypes looking into mirrors to reflect the sinful vanity of women and their responsibility for mankind's sinful nature.

Figure 18. Khonsu, the Egyptian god of the moon, appears in the Temple of Khonsu with a moon disk above his head.[31]

The Postures and Actions of Medieval Mermen

In the Medieval manuscripts, mermen typically complete three actions: playing musical instruments,[32] standing idle with miscellaneous objects, and holding or utilizing weaponry in combat. Fundamentally, mermen engage in more masculine activities than their female counterparts.

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31   Kairoinfo4r. 2013. Relief from the sanctuary of the Temple of Khonsu. Photograph. https://www.flickr.com/photos/manna4u/10668479813. The brown sphere with the gold trim represents the lunar deity's moon disk, which bears resemblance to the spherical mirrors that Medieval mermaids hold.

32   Note that mermaids playing musical instruments connects to the idea of sirens singing and using their magical melodies to lure sailors to their deaths, but mermen also play musical instruments despite their separation from sirens.

Figure 19. On the right, a merman from ca. 1420-25 plays the drums with drumsticks.[33] On the left, a merman from ca. 1425-30 holds a pitcher in his right hand and a cup in his left hand.[34]

Figure 20. Two mermen from ca. 1310-20 joust each other.[35]

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33   New York, Morgan Library. MS M. 1004, fol. 161v.

34   New York, Morgan Library. MS M. 453, fol. 124r.

35   London, British Library. Royal MS 2 B VII, fol. 143v. Note that these mermen take the form of a creature with a humanoid torso and a full fish body. The fish body appears to omit flippers in leu of the humanoid arms. Yet, the fish body also contains a fish head with eyes and a mouth. Thus, the creature perhaps sees with both humanoid eyes and fish eyes.

While mermen assert their masculinity by wearing armor, posing with weaponry, and engaging in combat, mermen also emphasize their masculinity by raising sticks over their heads. In various Medieval manuscripts, artists depict mermen as raising rod-like objects above their heads (see fig. 21). These mermen hold these objects both alone and in the presence of mermaids, but mermaids do not hold these sticks above their heads. While some viewers may interpret these images as mermen holding miscellaneous objects without any significance, the presence of the rod enables the mermen to have a sexual presence due to the phallic shape of the stick.

Figure 21. Mermen raise sticks above their heads. On the left, a merman from ca. 1475 raises a stick above his head using his right arm.[36] In the middle, a clothed merman from ca. 1480 holds a pitcher in his right hand and raises a stick above his head with his left arm.[37] On the right, a merman looks behind him as he raises a stick above his head with his right arm as though preparing to strike.[38]

The Postures and Actions of Medieval Mermaids and Mermen when Depicted Together

When depicted together in Medieval manuscripts, the gender roles of mermen and mermaids become most apparent. While mermaids initially start as more neutral figures with un-idealized breasts and un-emphasized or short hair, mermaids become much more sexualized and feminine when mermen start to appear more frequently in the 1400s. In the presence of mermen, mermaids almost solely comb their hair or look into mirrors while exposing their naked bodies due to a lack of clothing. On the other hand, mermen typically wear armor or hold weaponry in the presence of mermaids even when the image does not depict any sort of entity that the merman would fight. In other words, while some images of mermen will show the mermen fighting or holding weaponry, usually these mermen actively fight some sort of creature. However, when shown with mermaids, a lot of mermen still wear armor or hold weapons even with a lack of danger in the immediate area.[39] So, in the presence of mermaids, mermen assert their masculinity by wearing clothing or armor and holding weapons. On the other hand, mermaids retain their femininity by combing their long hair or looking into mirrors and admiring their beauty while standing in a way that positions their bodies and their arms to expose their breasts (see fig. 22 and fig. 23).

36   New York, Morgan Library. MS M. 253, fol. 41r.
37   New York, Morgan Library. MS M. 1004, fol. 142r.
38   New York, Morgan Library. MS M. 867, fol. 25r. Note that this merman has a visible penis where his human torso connects to his fish tail. The presence of the phallic stick raised above the head of the merman accentuates the phallic shape of the penis.
39   I emphasize this point due to a specific image of a solitary merman raising a sword and shield as he charges toward a duck in the water of a pond or lake. One could not possibly imagine a duck to pose a legitimate threat to the merman, yet the merman raises his shield defensively as though preparing for a mighty battle against the duck. So, the fact that mermen would act so aggressively against a mere duck further emphasizes the need for mermen to appear masculine. Source: New York, Morgan Library. MS M. 390, fol. 185v.

Figure 22. A merman and mermaid from ca. 1445 appear together on the page of a manuscript.[40] On the left, a merman holds a shield in his left hand and a sword in his right hand. On the right, a mermaid holds a mirror in her right hand while she combs her hair with her left hand.

Figure 23. A merman and mermaid from ca. 1500 appear together on the page of a manuscript.[41] On the left, a merman draws a bow and arrow. On the right, a mermaid holds a mirror in her right while she combs her hair with her fingers or a semi-visible comb.

These images have critical social implications for Medieval women during these periods. While Medieval scribes write these psalters, artists paint images unrelated to the text on the page. Thus, as Medieval readers read religious psalters, they witness these unrelated images of a naked mermaid or an armored jousting merman on the page. Consequently, readers must ask themselves to consider the purpose of these images and whether they provide any meaning to the texts themselves or instead images act like graffiti on the pages of these manuscripts. The idea that a man or woman could be sitting and reading a Medieval manuscript containing religious psalters but then glance to the side of the page and witness an image of a Medieval mermaid exposing her breasts and accentuating her sexuality feels particularly damning to the female population. Since the mermaids provide no significance to the text, the image of the mermaid makes women feel like decorative objects. While mermen randomly appear in heroic situations like wielding weaponry or engaging in combat, mermaids exist solely for viewing pleasure. Medieval women reading these psalters could not get inspired by the bravery and heroism of mermaids like Medieval men reading psalters could look at images of mermen and relate to them or feel encouraged or impassioned by the heroism that these mermen depict. In other words, the presence of these images in these Medieval manuscripts greatly influences the people who consume these

40   New York, Morgan Library. MS M. 304, fol. 20r.
41   New York, Morgan Library. MS M. 390, fol. 166r.

images as entertainment or viewing pleasure and further contribute to the social idea that women exist solely for sexual pleasure while men exist for glory and accomplishment.

The Medieval Siren's Song

Although mermaids experience an objectifying transformation throughout Medieval manuscripts, the presence of sirens returns feminine power to the merfolk species. Sirens represent the malevolent mermaids who attack sailors and sailors to their imminent death, and the key element of sirens' magic originates from the siren's magical voices, which sirens use to lure sailors to their deaths. As previously mentioned, the majority of sirens appear in the form of half-bird, half-woman creatures. On the subject of the half-bird nature of sirens, Elizabeth Eva Leach, a musicologist who specializes in music of the Middle Ages, asserts:

> "Medieval sirens normally appear in bestiaries among the bird entries, and are for the most part the same hybrid—woman to the navel, with the lower half a bird. Imagining the siren as half-woman half-bird makes her singing ability even more prominent and expected; it also promotes the siren's pairing with the nightingale as her female songster counterpart."[42]

In this quote, Leach compares sirens to nightingales, birds known for their powerful singing voices and beautiful tunes, due to sirens' original appearance as half-bird, half-human creatures. The connection between singing birds and sirens remains a common theme throughout Medieval literature. In the novel *The Romance of the Rose,* one of the most classic stories of Medieval courtly love, the narrator enters a beautiful garden and falls in love with a rose, thus sending him on a mighty journey to earn the trust and consent of the rose so that he may finally make love to the rose. The allure of enchanting birdsong catalyzes the narrator's entrance into the garden, which he compares to the sound of singing sirens:

> These birds that I am describing to you did most excellent service. They sang as though they were heavenly angels, and you may be sure that when I heard the sound I rejoiced greatly, for never was so sweet a melody heard by mortal man. So sweet and lovely was that song that it seemed not to be birdsong, but rather comparable with the song of the sea-sirens, who are called sirens because of their pure, sweet voices.[43]

The narrator concludes his thought with the assertion that sirens earn their name due to their "pure, sweet voices." The notion that the voice of the siren is "pure" feels particularly off-putting since sirens possess a reputation for luring sailors to their death. Unless one is actively enchanted by sirens, one would think that the sirens' voices would seem neither "pure" nor "sweet" because they originate from evil creatures with evil intentions. Additionally, the narrator compares sirens to birds that seem like "heavenly angels" because "never was so sweet a melody heard by mortal man," yet the actions of sirens separate them quite drastically from "heavenly angels." The mention of "mortal man" accentuates the occult powers of sirens because they exist as supernatural creatures above the natural plane of human existence. Ultimately, this bizarre notion of sirens as benevolent creatures emphasizes their seductive capabilities; despite the horrifying myths surrounding sirens, Medieval individuals still find themselves fascinated with the allure of these creatures and opt to consider sirens with admiration as opposed to fear. In a sense, this notion actually emphasizes how successfully sirens manipulate their prey.

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42   Leach, Elizabeth Eva. 2006. "'The Little Pipe Sings Sweetly While the Fowler Deceives the Bird': Sirens in the Later Middle   Ages." Music & Letters 87 (2): 187–211. doi:10.1093/ml/gci250.

43   Horgan, Frances, translator. The Romance of the Rose, by Guillaume De Lorris and Jean De Meun, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 12.

Conclusion

Medieval mermaids serve as supernatural female archetypes. However, as mermen appear within Medieval manuscripts, mermaids become more sexualized in the presence of mermen. While mermen wear cloth garments or armor to conceal their chests, mermaids lack clothing and instead expose breasts that become increasingly idealized throughout Medieval manuscripts. Moreover, the presence of mermen subdues mermaids into static, decorative roles. Initially, mermaids conduct a variety of activities in Medieval manuscripts, such as standing idle without suggestive postures, playing musical instruments, and using weaponry in rare circumstances. However, as mermen begin appearing in manuscripts during the 1400s, mermaids almost solely comb their hair and look into mirrors. These mirrors represent the mermaids' vanity as they admire their own beauty, therefore connecting mermaids to Eve and further emphasizing mermaids as a sinful female archetype. By the same token, the spherical shape of the mirrors represents the moon disks commonly depicted with lunar gods, therefore accentuating the occult powers typically associated with sirens. Sirens utilize magic to sing melodies and lure sailors to their deaths and therefore obtain their powers directly from their ability to seduce men. Thus, even when sirens appear as powerful creatures capable of tricking and killing sailors, they appear powerful solely because of their sexuality. On the other hand, mermen appear powerful due to their armor and skills with weaponry, and images of mermen raising phallic sticks over their heads emphasize their masculine sexuality. Ultimately, mermaids forfeit their agency to act as sexual entities for the merfolk species, therefore allowing mermen to act as heroic entities for the merfolk species.

Contributor's Note

While completing a research seminar on Medieval sexuality, the contributor chose this area of study for the primary research project in the course in pursuit of an English major with an expected graduation year of 2022. Specifically, the contributor recognized a change in Medieval mermaid images, prompting an investigation into the historical portrayal of merfolk in Medieval manuscripts to explore the impact of the Medieval mermen's presence on Medieval mermaids. This exploration of Medieval sexuality articulates the dominating presence of masculinity and the role of masculinity in suppressing the agency of women and limiting them to sexual entities.

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