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## **THE LITTLE (DISNEY) MERMAIDS: EMBRACING HUMAN IDENTITY THEN AND NOW**

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### ***Abstract***

*In my paper, I investigate how the image of the little mermaid has been constructed by the Walt Disney studios over the last half century, from the initial cartoon version of the character in the 1989 American animated musical fantasy to its contemporary counterpart in the 2023 American musical film. I will contrast the two different character constructs and their impact upon a young audience, alongside a discussion of white race dominance and the cultural homogeneity of identity versus the concept of multiculturalism and the idea of embracing cultural diversity. Separately, I will focus on the little mermaid figure as opening up a philosophical perspective on the human condition and will attempt to explain the identity construct in the original version of the tale by Hans Christian Andersen and its implications for the idea of embracing the human identity, both male and female.*

**Keywords:** audience; animation; musical; identity; cultural diversity.

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### ***Introduction***

From the 1989 animated version of the story to the 2023 musical, the Disney Company has adapted Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale to suit the taste of a changing audience. Initially, Disney had shelved a project on the topic in the late 1930s but, in 1985, Ron Clements became interested in a film adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* while he was serving as a director on *The Great Mouse Detective* (1986). Believing the story provided an "ideal basis" for an animated feature film and keen on creating a film that took place underwater, Clements wrote and presented a two-page treatment of *Mermaid* to Disney's CEO Jeffrey Katzenberg, who approved of the idea for possible development the very next day. While in production in the 1980s, the staff, by chance, found the original story and visual development work done by Kay Nielsen for Disney's proposed 1930s Andersen feature and noted that many of the changes made by the staff in the 1930s to Hans Christian Andersen's original story were coincidentally the same as the changes made by Disney writers in the 1980s, according to Wikipedia. The 2023 live action movie follows closely (up to a point) all the changes made for the initial Disney production.

One of the first issues that comes to mind when watching the 2023 film version is a comparison with the 1989 cartoon, the central character of which was a cultural emblem of the nineties. The cartoon character Ariel, modeled on Andersen's mermaid and on the figure of an

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American female astronaut from the fifties<sup>2</sup>, is obviously white-skinned and red-haired, while the character interpreted by Haley Bailey is a mulatto with reddish-brown dreadlocks, otherwise quite as spirited as her cartoon counterpart. The initial debate ongoing amid contemporary Disney fans was strictly connected to this mixed-race casting of the movie, with no qualms about the acting of the singer-cum-actress, which – as the reviews prove – was impeccable. Together with Felix Nicolau, in his article on the transfer of signs between heterogenous systems, I would argue that from Andresen’s fairy tale to the cartoon version and then from the cartoon to the movie version, there were applied two “transmutation paradigms”. The term was coined by Venuti in 2004, following the observation of Roman Jakobson, who was the first to recognize the possibility of translating non-verbal messages: “Intersemiotic translation or transmutation is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal systems” (Venuti in Nicolau, 2016, 74). In his study, “The Translator’s Invisibility”, Venuti provided examples of transmutation paradigms from verbal art to dance, cinema, music or painting, this overlapping equated to transmutation being the mark of incongruity and heterogeneity. According to Nicolau,

If the ideal transposition and rephrasing were impossible even in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the less likely will they be in the multimedia communication epoch. Inside environments that make use of sensory words, vision, audition, and touch, all texts become ‘polysemiotic multi-signs’ (Gambier and Gottlieb, 2001). Multimedia translation is about drafts and screen translation, which include transitory, non-finite content. Additionally, the interconnection of the media relies on flexibility and teamwork. (2016, 74)

Indeed, the makeover that Disney undertakes in the case of *The Little Mermaid* (2023) is prone to the accusation of eclecticism. In a review from the *New York Times* of May 2023, Wesley Morris argues<sup>3</sup> against the production’s claim of being a black adaptation of the Disney classic: “It’s not a Black adaptation, an interpretation that imbues white material with Black culture until it’s something completely new”, especially since “the brown skin and placeable accents don’t make the movie more fun, just utopic and therefore less arguable.” The reviewer also notes how the construct of a Black Ariel burdens the audience with a need to re-interpret the elements of the plot: “When Ursula pulls a fast one and reinvents herself as Vanessa, a sexy rival who appears to be white and woos Eric with a siren song in Ariel’s voice, there’s a whole American history of theft and music to overthink, too.” In my opinion, this newly induced “trickiness” is just in the mind of a race conscious audience member, such as the affirmative–action advocates. A regular movie-goer, and a child especially, wouldn’t mind (or make a big thing out of) the mixed-race casting. Also, the reviewer seems to contradict himself when he talks of “an allergy to creative risk that produces hazards”, since immediately afterwards he commends the cooperation between two minority-background artists, while commenting upon “The Scuttlebutt” song with lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda and played in the voice of the rapper Awkwafina:

Here’s an Asian American performer whose shtick is a kind of Black impersonation, pretending to be a computer-generated bird, rhythm-rapping with a Black American man pretending to be a Caribbean crab. It’s the sort of mind-melting mess that feels honest and utterly free in its messiness, even as the mess douses a conveniently speechless Black woman.<sup>4</sup>

Intriguingly, I would argue that the issue at the center of Disney’s new production of *The Little Mermaid* is not racial but gender-based, therefore having more to do with negotiating gender dynamics than the color dichotomy. And, if the producers of this movie fantasy were

<sup>2</sup><https://www.looper.com/1313270/four-real-life-women-inspired-ariel-design-the-little-mermaid/>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/24/movies/little-mermaid-review-halle-bailey.html>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/24/movies/little-mermaid-review-halle-bailey.html>

aiming for anything, they were trying to give Ariel more influence over the course of the action by making the other characters surrounding her increasingly humane and vulnerable – such as prince Eric, for instance. And, in order to comprehend the underlying drive motivating the producers, one must go back to the original story that Andersen wrote and fathom its author’s complex motivation and creative vision.

*The Little Mermaid* was written by Hans Christian Andersen back in 1836 and first published in Copenhagen on 7 April 1837 in a collection of nine fairy tales<sup>5</sup>. In my opinion, what Andersen meant to stress out when writing the fairytale back in 1837, was that there is a hierarchy among the beings on Earth and that this hierarchy is not absolute, as in exceptional cases categories can migrate and morph into one another to accommodate a more elevated degree of consciousness: those inhabiting the sea (mermaids), humans (earthlings) and those inhabiting the air (daughters of the air) are the three ranks of beings endowed with an awareness of their own destiny. Above all that, there are the Heavens where only those with an immortal soul can go. According to his tale, humans have an immortal soul, but mermaids only live for a very long time (300 years), as do the daughters of the air. The only difference between the latter category and the former is that mermaids will dissolve into foam when they are dead, whereas the daughters can gain an immortal soul by doing good deeds and helping human beings for the length of their life-span. The Little Mermaid is unaware of this hierarchy in the beginning, but when she saves and falls in love with the prince, she starts yearning for achieving the human condition. Her aim is to find love but she also desires to gain an immortal soul and finally go to heaven. She, however, does not know about the daughters of the air and about the fact that she could become one of them. In fact, the ending suggests that Heavens make an exception for her due to her incredible kindness and power of sacrifice. Andersen’s tale is a tragic one with a happy ending: the Little Mermaid becomes human, experiences great pains and tries to win the prince’s heart but, without her voice, she is unable to accomplish the task. In order to save her life, the mermaid’s sisters offer her a charm given by the sea witch – a dagger to kill the prince with and return to her former mermaid self. It is only by refusing to do so that she is able to ascend to a superior category of beings: she becomes a daughter of the air for another 300 years and hopes to gain an immortal soul. The Disney versions eliminated from their storyline the part about the dreadful pain in the legs (a pain that accompanies her every step in Andersen’s story) and have opened up the possibility of romance with the prince, who is definitely falling in love with her in the movie as well as the cartoon version. However, the sea-witch is made to intervene in order to stop this from happening: she impersonates the prince’s savior, talks in Ariel’s stolen voice and tries to marry Eric. From this point onwards, the Disney productions diverge significantly from Andersen’s fairy-tale since there is no discussion of gaining an immortal soul in the end but only of Ariel marrying the prince as the expected outcome for all Disney princesses. Indeed, in this respect, the new version of the classic tale leaves a lot to be desired being totally devoid of originality, its script a slavish copy of the action of the cartoon, with only a little twist at the end.

However, a look at Andersen’s hierarchy of beings proves that the mermaid category is an unfortunate hybrid between human and fish and so Ariel’s race appears to be inferior to the prince’s – which could further be construed as presenting women as inferior to men. In the new Disney production, the issue is complicated by the fact that the little mermaid is dark-

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<sup>5</sup>Andersen became an international celebrity especially after the publication of *Fairy Tales Told for Children* (1835–1837), his first collection of fairy tales. The collection consisted of nine tales that included “The Tinderbox”, “The Princess and the Pea”, “Thumbelina”, “The Little Mermaid”, and “The Emperor’s New Clothes”. (cf. Wikipedia)

skinned whereas the human prince is white. And so, I would argue that Andersen wrote from an unconscious macho standpoint, which is that of traditional culture: humanity/ (white) masculinity is being placed on a superior level that deserves to be accessed but for which love (and social status) is the only prize – human, not divine love.

But what else should there be considered valuable in the quest of the little mermaid for spiritual evolution? In this respect, the more recent version of the Disney classic proves quite explicit: besides love, it seems, there is the knowledge of human affairs, scientific discoveries that distinguish humans from beasts – the simplest example is the use of the fork that Ariel puzzles over and believes to be a comb. In a way, the 2023 live action movie takes the debate on negotiating human identity one step further than the 1989 Disney cartoon, in the sense that it shows Ariel as more self-reliant in her quest for the human form and also as an equal to Prince Eric in terms of taking action and saving the day (*spoiler alert*: she is the one to impale the sea witch at the end). However, it has to be noted that Eric is also a collector of curiosities just like Ariel, and many of the items he is hoarding in his office make no sense to him – just as many of the human artifacts stored underwater make Ariel puzzle over them indefinitely in her mermaid den. And so, by eventually coming together, these two characters might be said to expand the knowledge of a common realm, thereby uniting the powers of land and sea.

As a mermaid, Ariel's life was supposed to be one of self-indulgence and passivity, all she would have to do was enjoy being a spoiled subject of her father, the Sea King. But as a human princess, her existence opens up to the realm of possibility. Beyond the classical Disney ending (princess marries prince and they live happily ever after), one can imagine her exploring the world alongside Eric, studying science or getting involved in some kind of humanitarian action. Perhaps, even going to heaven for the good deeds in her life - whereas, the cartoon character Ariel doesn't seem to have any interest beyond married life and the passive enjoyment of the wonders in her newly-gained earthly kingdom. Extrapolating on the idea of historical development, which includes the reversal of gender roles in society and advocating minority rights, the negotiation of human identity from the mermaid level upwards involves much harder work in 2023 than it did in 1989 – partially because it is a mulatto character who now plays the part and also because of the female emancipation movement which is in continual progression. Yet, there is no telling what another ten or twenty years will bring in terms of a Disney remake of Andersen's particular fairytale. But we can always speculate on that: a holographic version of the story with full sized 3-D characters, the leading character then being a young merman of ambiguous sexuality, who may or may not fall in love with a human being but who would definitely be fascinated by our race's advanced technology or a creature that fashions for itself a human avatar and embarks upon exploring our world - and this extrapolation leads me to a final observation on Andersen's ultimate motivation for writing his story.

It seems – again, according to Wikipedia - that the unhappy ending of the original storyline was prompted by its author's feeling of frustration in connection to a thwarted homoerotic love affair – that Andersen pictured himself as a creature inferior and therefore unworthy of gaining the favors of the “young prince” he had been courting discreetly, until the latter had decided to get engaged. In the volume *My Dear Boy: Gay Love Letters through the Centuries* (1998), Rictor Norton theorizes that *The Little Mermaid* was written as a love letter by Hans Christian Andersen to a man named Edvard Collin. For this hypothesis, the critic relies on a letter Andersen wrote to Collin, upon hearing of the latter's engagement to a young woman, around the same time that the story was written. According to Norton, Andersen confessed in

writing to his male acquaintance: "I languish for you as for a pretty Calabrian wench... my sentiments for you are those of a woman. The femininity of my nature and our friendship must remain a mystery."<sup>6</sup> It seems that Andersen also sent the original story to Collin as a wedding gift, Norton therefore interpreting the letter as a declaration of Andersen's homosexual love for Collin and so describing *The Little Mermaid* as a sublimation of Andersen's frustrated desire.

In supporting the above hypothesis, it has to be said that Andersen himself regarded *The Little Mermaid* as one his favorites. While he admitted having been inspired by the story of Undine written by another 19<sup>th</sup> century author<sup>7</sup>, he believed that the gaining of the main character's soul should rely solely on the effort and merit of the heroine herself and bear no connection to the male counterpart's role. In 1837, shortly after completing his manuscript, Andersen wrote to another friend, "I have not, like de la Motte Fouqué in *Undine*, allowed the mermaid's acquiring of an immortal soul to depend upon an alien creature, upon the love of a human being. I'm sure that's wrong! It would depend rather much on chance, wouldn't it? I won't accept that sort of thing in this world. I have permitted my mermaid to follow a more natural, more divine path" (qtd. in Frank 2005, 104). Andersen definitely hoped that the story would grip an adult audience, but in the foreword to *Fairy Tales Told for Children* (1837), he wrote: "I dare presume, however, that the child will also enjoy it and that the denouement itself, plainly considered, will grip the child." (qtd. in Johansen 1996, 239)

Other reviewers of Andersen's story have emphasized the author's "constant engagement with mutability and changes in identity" (Tatar, 2002, 308). Maria Tatar's interpretation in *The Annotated Classic Fairy Tales*, for instance, emphasizes the mermaid's curiosity and adventurous spirit that bespeak her evolutionary potential –the critic even mentions a version of the tale in which the prince dresses her up as his page. Wearing a boy's clothes in order to be able to ride a horse by his side, the little mermaid transcends both race and gender simultaneously – 200 years earlier than the latest Disney version of the story! However, most critics would argue that while what the little mermaid achieves is definitely a transgression of many boundaries, her ultimate goal and desire is that of accessing the traditionally masculine symbolical order of speech and power and that for her, remaining a mermaid and being content with her status is simply not acceptable. In a way, she can be said to represent the evolution of the female gender's adaptability to circumstances, but she could equally be the imaginative product of a thwarted homoerotic desire. I hope that, by mentioning this cocktail of critical considerations, I have not confused the readers of my paper altogether but it is my contention that each and every one of these interpretations is worthy of some notice and makes sense in its own way.

### **Conclusions**

Besides the implications of race and gender role discussed above, a word of praise must go to the interpretation of the main actress, Hale Bailey, as well as a brief mention about the impact of her appearance in the movie for a whole new generation of children, which I think is required in order to conclude this paper. Reading through the readers' comments from the *New York Times* reviews of the movie, I have selected a few relevant commentaries from the

6 apud. Hans Christian Andersen's correspondence, ed. Frederick Crawford, London. 1891

7*Undine* is a novella by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué in which Undine, a water spirit, marries a knight named Huldbrand in order to gain a soul. Published in 1811, it is an early German romance, which has been translated into English and other languages. – cf. Wikipedia



24<sup>th</sup> of May 2023 - immediately after the release of the feature in movie theaters in the United States - which I will comment upon below:

- (1) Make no mistake, Disney knew exactly what they were doing by casting this young woman. The racism was expected, and courted, and has been used to market yet another soulless CGI cash-grab from a company whose creativity seems to have dried up. – Emily, USA
- (2) @Emily: This is one of those wonderful and too-rare instances where a child of color can see a movie hero who looks like they look. That changes lives. – Bowman, USA
- (3) I take vast pleasure in the bitterness we see from the Right over this "young woman" being cast as Ariel. They're treating this as another humiliation. If Disney "courted" that, and chose instead to lift a kid's heart, kudos to Disney. Bowman, USA
- (4) I had a lot of similarities with her. That's why I connected with her," Bailey said. "But of course, visually, she looked different than me." It's interesting to me that Bailey was enthralled with everything Ariel was, *in spite of* the skin color. This just shows that *it is the 'qualities' of the character that attract children, not just the visual representation.* (emphasis mine) Yet we are now in an era where "characters who look like me" are all the rage so that children won't feel excluded or fail to see themselves. I didn't admire Wonder Woman because she was a skinny white chick with a cool outfit. I was a pudgy, non-athletic klutzy kid who admired the can-do attitude, the belief that you stand up for what's right even if it's unpopular and that bullies should never be tolerated but that you should never become the bully when you stand up for yourself. Those ideas served me well since I grew up to be, not a super hero, but a biologist who had to deal with clueless, rude guys in the lab. Wonder Woman was with me all the way. –B. Dawson - Commonsense USA
- (5) Race is NOT the issue, I don't think, in the way some people are taking it. *It's the generational knowledge of the character that we are suddenly changing drastically.* (emphasis mine) Also, had Disney decided to do a live action depiction of *Princess and the Frog* and cast a blonde hair blue eyed Tiana, I as a white person, would have been ticked. I as well as every person in the world knows Tiana as a black character. Don't mess with that. So yes, a black Ariel is not some people's Ariel, just as a white Tiana, or a Muslim Pocahontas, etc. isn't *THE character they have been trained by Disney to know.* (emphasis mine)- TazzManiac83 – USA

The most commonsensical comment is obviously the last. It introduces the notion of audience training, which focuses on reception. As I have previously stated, race is merely the bait and has generated a rather healthy controversy, I would argue. But the real issue at stake is femininity (not feminism, though). The little mermaid is just as much an agent in her own evolution as is the prince himself (if it weren't for him, there would have been no plot). Interestingly enough, the 2023 production is in keeping with Anderson's own idea of the mermaid's character, who evolves based on her own merits. Besides this fact, the color of Bailey's skin makes her casting in the movie significant for children of color, although – as the actress herself confesses – she had no problem identifying with the white-skinned Ariel in the cartoon when she was a child herself: "I had a lot of similarities with her. That's why I connected with her," Bailey said. "But of course, visually, she looked different than me." (qtd. in Richardson) It seems that the similarities alluded to were more than personality traits, as the review mentions she hadn't been afraid to dive into something big — in this case her first major film role — and had possessed a go-getter spirit since early adolescence, despite an overprotective father. Moreover, for her acting career, this was a very effective start: after impersonating Ariel, Bailey went on to star as young Nettie in the musical adaptation of "The Color Purple" in December 2023. And since from the producers and fellow actors appearing in the movie there were only words of praise for Bailey, all in all – she is to be appreciated for her achievement:

Like a sponge, Marshall (N.B. one of the producers) said, Bailey absorbed the talent and skill of her co-stars, including Melissa McCarthy as the sea-witch villain, Ursula, and Jonah Hauer-King as Prince Eric. Despite her guileless persona, DeLuca (N.B. the other producer) said, he was moved by her ability to access difficult emotions with ease. (cf. Richardson)

The color conscious casting definitely brings a plus, both to the minority audience as well as for the industry – see comments (1) through (3) above. Bailey herself supported this conclusion, as she rejoiced in having a Barbie doll made in her appearance: “It’s almost healing for the inner child within me to have this doll that looks like me,” Bailey said. “It does a lot for your self-worth and confidence.” (qtd. in Richardson) Last but not least, Yara Shahidi<sup>8</sup> told *The Hollywood Reporter* that some people view inclusion as detrimental to the quality of the story, “instead of seeing how beautifully they can be interwoven together.” She herself had faced a backlash when interpreting Tinkerbell in a live-action adaptation of *Peter Pan and Wendy* in 2023 and felt the need to defend her former castmate, when she was being attacked by audience members who lashed out at her with the hashtag “NotMyAriel” because of her skin color.

But the most meaningful element to my mind is the fact that the producers conceded to Bailey’s preserving her natural looks as regards her hair, which is braided in the African style. The actress further explains how this would have been a deal-breaker for her or at least a serious infringement upon her truthful image. According to Richardson’s review<sup>9</sup>,

Her Ariel has natural locs, which were wrapped with strands of red hair. To Bailey, who has had locks since age 5, keeping her natural hairstyle was nonnegotiable. “As Black women our crowns are so special to us,” Bailey said. “Our hair is important to us in every single way, so I was really grateful that I was allowed to keep that essence of me.”

In an interview for *The Face*, Bailey explains how her perception of the character evolved, from childhood to adulthood, which is a reflection on the changing dynamics of gender roles incorporated in the 2023 production:

When we saw it, when we were younger, she gave up everything for the guy. But I don’t think [that] reflects modern women today. So [now] it’s more about Ariel finding freedom for herself because of this world that she’s obsessed with.” Prince Eric, the handsome shipwrecked human for whom she gives it all up, “is a cherry on top. But it’s not all about him.” (qtd.in Pometsey)<sup>10</sup>

As comment number (4) above explains, it is the personality traits that attract an audience to a movie (or fairy-tale) character. Nowadays, children can fully identify with Ariel’s curiosity and ingenuity, regardless if her skin is white or black. However, the acting is important too, and in this respect Haley Bailey did an irreproachable job. The fact that the production brought to the Disney company another “cash-grab” is just a matter of showbiz.

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<sup>8</sup>a fellow actress with whom Bailey starred in an all-black cast series entitled “Grownish”.

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/24/movies/halle-bailey-little-mermaid.html?action=click&pgtype=Article&state=default&module=stylIn-little-mermaid&variant=show&region=MAIN\\_CONTENT\\_1&block=storyline\\_top\\_links\\_recirc](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/24/movies/halle-bailey-little-mermaid.html?action=click&pgtype=Article&state=default&module=stylIn-little-mermaid&variant=show&region=MAIN_CONTENT_1&block=storyline_top_links_recirc)

<sup>10</sup> <https://theface.com/culture/halle-bailey-interview-the-little-mermaid-ariel-disney-beyonce-music-film>

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