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Be Seen not Heard: Lessons from the Little Mermaid

When watching young girls in a swimming pool, one witnesses an odd phenomenon. A little girl with a toothy grin will dog paddle over to the side of the pool to an adult and say “Look at me! Look at me! I’m a mermaid!” She will then proceed to stick her knees together as tightly as she can, ankles touching, making her legs look like a fin. She will then dives under the water and move her legs simultaneously. Coming out of the water, she jumps to the top of the pool and pulls herself over in an attempt to make a wave. She has watched *The Little Mermaid*. Not only does Ariel teach young girls how to swim like a mermaid, but she teaches other, darker lessons too. *The Little Mermaid* has many messages for both young and adult people interwoven in its plot. The meta-messages in *The Little Mermaid* teach young girls to see themselves as silent, beautiful, and important only in their relation to men.

The first few minutes of *The Little Mermaid* offers a view into the personality and authority of King Triton, the ruler of the merpeople. He is extremely muscular, a physical sign of the power he yields. He also has an obvious temper. His eyes turn red and his face terrifying as he yells his daughter’s name. His place in society and domination is obvious. He has no queen and no sons. There does not seem to be anyone with leadership qualities in his family to inherit his kingdom. Repeatedly he tries to control Ariel through violence (ostensibly as a protective and loving father): he yells at her when he found out she had

been to the surface, he destroys her room, and he tries to use physical violence to stop Ursula from taking her. His relationship with Ariel seems to be summarized in his response to her “misbehavior”: “As long as you live under my ocean, you obey my rules” (Disney, 1989). In his effort to protect Ariel, he isolates her. Ariel’s protests are interrupted and ignored; he’ll not listen to anything positive she may have to say. Triton is already beginning to process of teaching Ariel her “place”. She is to remain silent and not to protest against her father’s, a male’s, wishes. In this way, her voice is lost even before she gives it to Ursula willingly. According to Triton and Sebastian (the crab) she needs “constant supervision.” As Sebastian says, “If she were my daughter, I’d show her who was boss... I’d keep her under tight control” and it is with this quote that Sebastian is charged as Ariel’s chaperone. When Triton finds out through Sebastian about Ariel’s love of Prince Eric, he’s outraged. “So, help me Ariel, I’m going to get through to you and if this is the only way so be it.” Once again, his power is in violence and is portrayed as love for her. Ariel can do nothing. Unlike her father, she is small and has very little physical strength. It is only with the power of another person, an aggressive, powerful, and ostracized sea witch that she can resist her father and express her desires to a willing listener.

Ursula’s power can also be expressed in her size, but it is much different in relation to King Triton. She’s obese, manipulative, and sensual. According to Henke,

Ursula is both seductive and repulsive. She skillfully wields power over the Merpeople who want to become more physically attractive to the opposite sex, and turns hapless Merpeople into groaning, clutching, mournful, seaweed who line the walls of her cave. (245)

She repeatedly is shown in a sexual manner. She sways her hips and jiggles her breasts while she dances to “Poor Miserable Souls”. Her sexuality is easily ignored by many, however, due to her un-stereotypical feminine body-type. Ursula, unlike Ariel, does not fit an “innocent” or “purity” stereotype (perhaps in relation to the Madonna-Whore complex<sup>1</sup>). Ursula’s age, and hence experience, is depicted as villainous. Ariel, a young mermaid of sixteen years old, knows nothing of experience or of the world. She is naïve and innocent in that she does not even know the function of a fork, never mind the functions of her own genitalia. Also in contrast to Ariel, Ursula has ambitions. Where Ariel simply wants to marry a man, Ursula wants the same amount of power as a man. According to Henke, “... when Ursula’s ambitions lead to her banishment from the sea kingdom of Triton, she vows revenge by using Ariel, his favorite, beautiful, and youngest daughter” (244). Near the end of the movie, when Ursula does get the power she has desired, her transformation is hideous and unfeminine. She enlarges, the sky grows dark and menacing, her voice deepens to a less feminine quality, and she is frightening. However, her power is not meant to last. Eric rams the prow of the ship into Ursula, impaling her. This image seems to be shockingly phallic, as if the ship or Eric were ravishing her and thus draining her power. This, Disney teaches, is what happens to ambitious and powerful women. It is not Ariel who took a powerful role but Eric, and therefore, power is restored into the hands of men and patriarchy survives.

With silence being forced on her by her father, Ariel seeks Ursula’s help. Ursula asks Ariel for payment: “Just your voice”, makes it clear that she cares little for Ariel’s

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<sup>1</sup> The Madonna-Whore complex teaches men that it is sinful to have intercourse with a “pure and angelic” woman, but that having sex with a whore is fine because she’s already a “fallen woman”. This complex also makes men less likely to want to have sex with women who remind them of their mothers.

voice either as constantly interrupts her during their meeting. The lesser value of a woman's voice in the world is depicted again as Ursula sings:

Come on, they're not all that impressed with  
conversation True gentlemen avoid it when they  
can. But they dote and swoon and fawn  
On a lady who's withdrawn It's she who holds  
her tongue who gets her man. (Disney, 1989)

Ariel does not question Ursula about the value of her voice and simply disregards it for the chance of being with Eric, a teenage boy she's never even held a conversation with. When she meets him they are not even acquaintances, but Ariel wants to marry him. Hence, Ariel has to try to get him to kiss and love her not by her intelligence but rather by how she looks. Even when they do almost kiss, Eric does not know her name. Sebastian tries to create a little romance, but his lyrics are also anti-voice:

Yes, you want her  
Look at her, you know you do  
Possible she wants you too  
There is one way to ask her  
It don't take a word  
Not a single word  
Go on and kiss the girl

Instead of, perhaps, singing about who she is, Sebastian instead draws on her beauty and physical attraction. Girls watching the movie at this point undoubtedly believe that this notion of physical attraction is "love". This in turn may create a negative self-image or

loss of self-confidence in who one really is. Also, by this point in the movie, Ariel's personality has changed significantly. She is no longer the adventurous, rebellious, or song-filled mermaid of the film. At the beginning of film, Ariel's main desire seems to be "... to know what the people know/ Ask 'em my questions/ And get some answers" (Disney, 1989). Finding a husband is not even thought about until Ariel sees Eric. Her prime focus seems to be on education, and while it can be certain that she learns about the human world as a human, she loses focus. Instead, all of her energy is not in learning but rather in attracting Eric's attention. Even "...adventurous and interesting role models like Ariel... inevitably succumbed to dominant heterosexual, patriarchal notion that... satisfaction is defined not by self-knowledge, being or accomplishments, but by a role prescribed through marriage" (Henke 247). It would seem that "Ultimately, Ariel's voice is silenced and she sacrificed her curiosity to gain the love of a man" (Henke 237). This silence is counterproductive in real-world mechanics because if communication is impossible then a relationship is impossible. Self-disclosure is key to deepening relationships but "... by withholding their voices, girls also risk losing relationships that are genuine and authentic" (Henke 231). However in the Disney verse true love is simply displayed in a kiss and love needs to words or communication.

Love and romance are key events in all of the Disney Princess movies. It would seem to any girl watching, in fact, that marriage should be the only goal for women. Love is often felt as first sight or as Eric said "... When I find her I'll know. With out a doubt. It'll just BAM hit me like lightening" (Disney 1989). It would also seem to young viewers that only skinny, beautiful women get "the Prince". A girl's beauty (and/or the beauty of her voice) is key to any Disney Princess's character. It would seem that "Girls

win the prize if they are the fairest of them all; boys win if they are bold, active, and lucky” (Lieberman 385). This teaches girls to care deeply about their appearance and their weight. Interesting enough in *The Little Mermaid* every young female character is depicted looking in a mirror: Ariel, her sisters (whose room appears to be nothing but a room full of mirrors), Ursula, and Vanessa. Ursula is even depicted as putting on lipstick, Ariel in fixing her hair to see Eric, her sisters in primping, and Vanessa in revealing that she is Ursula. The fact that Vanessa’s mirror shows who she “is inside” should not escape notice. It seems that not only are mirrors popular in *The Little Mermaid*, but they can also show you that if you are an “ugly” person in your heart that it will show on the outside. “Interestingly, television’s greatest impact on body image seems to be in providing female adolescents with images with which to compare themselves” (Herbozo 22). The perfect place for a girl to compare herself with someone else is in a mirror. Thinness is a very obvious trait of Ariel’s right from the start. She and Flounder, when exploring a sunken ship, need to pass through a window, and while Ariel slips through with room to spare, Flounder is too big to fit. Ariel’s thinness is also depicted with great attention when she first breaks from the water:



### **Figure 1. Ariel's body<sup>2</sup>**

This sexual image of Ariel's body, now that she is a human gives insight on the meta-messages about beauty in *The Little Mermaid*. As Ariel transforms, "... the speedy and beautiful transit of the tail gives way, in a startlingly painful, even erotically 'charged' splitting [and]... the price of split legs can be restored only after the kiss of romance" (Wilt 96). Ariel's split legs, as the scenes following her transformation would suggest, have sexual meaning. They symbolize intercourse while at the same time serving their purpose for walking on land. With sexuality being an undertone, Ariel's thin body cannot be ignored. In a study by Sylvia Herbozo "the girls preferred body figures that were significantly thinner than their current body figure and the one considered most attractive to boys" (23). Adolescent girls have internalized images of the female body portrayed by Disney, which is unattainable by many (if not all) women. It's important to note that "Disney makes a connection between entertainment and education so as to fuse together the public and the private spheres of subjective being and memory according to an image of innocence" (Trifonas, 28). The transformed image of Ursula as the skinny woman, Vanessa, is not "by chance", it is an attempt to educate children. Even she, a powerful (albeit evil), assertive, and independent woman gives into being a beauty as she disguises herself to be Vanessa. Vanessa is now a threat to Ariel in competition for Eric's love. A meta-message in this action tells young girls that men find skinny girls more appealing. This can cause a negative view of body image in that "... no young girl can feel it is too early to worry about the stains of female ugliness- age or fat- invisible within her from birth, waiting to be revealed" (Wolf 95-96). It would seem to many girls that only girls of Ariel's size or Vanessa's measurements (evil or not) win boys like Eric. After all, it

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<sup>2</sup> Image found at <http://www.meeko.org/disney/mermaid/gallery/image/95>

would have been just as easy for Ursula to have just donned a pair of legs as Ariel had (without any upper-body alterations) and snagged Eric due to his spell-bound state. However this is not the case because “In many of the classic videos... a character’s love for another depends on his or her physical appearance” (Herbozo 27). It would have been against societal norms of beauty to have an obese octopus walk down the isle with a handsome prince.

This obsession with being thin has obvious negative connections: eating disorders. According to Herbozo “Studies have shown that children overwhelmingly associate positive traits with thin and average-sized figures and negative traits with obese figures” (22). Adolescent girls are being taught to try to be thin and to be dissatisfied with their body-types. Dissatisfaction with the female body has to be taught, and Ariel is a teacher in this education. She’s naïve, innocent, dependent of male approval, and extremely beautiful. However, she is not smart, wise, or logical. “Culture stereotypes women to fit the myth by flattening the feminine into beauty-without-intelligence or intelligence-without-beauty; women are allowed a mind or a body but not both” (Wolf, 59). This is a tragic flaw in Disney. Women are denied their brains and education simply due to a rushed marriage, and are objectified as beauties rather than for their intelligence. However, this negative effect does not deter many young women, who grow up into adult women, from feeling dissatisfied with their self-image or self-confidence. Perhaps if they knew the real images behind the pretty faces they would stop and think that to be unique is to be truly beautiful.

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<sup>3</sup> Info for citations found at:

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