

WOMEN OF THE SEA MUSES OF THE AGES

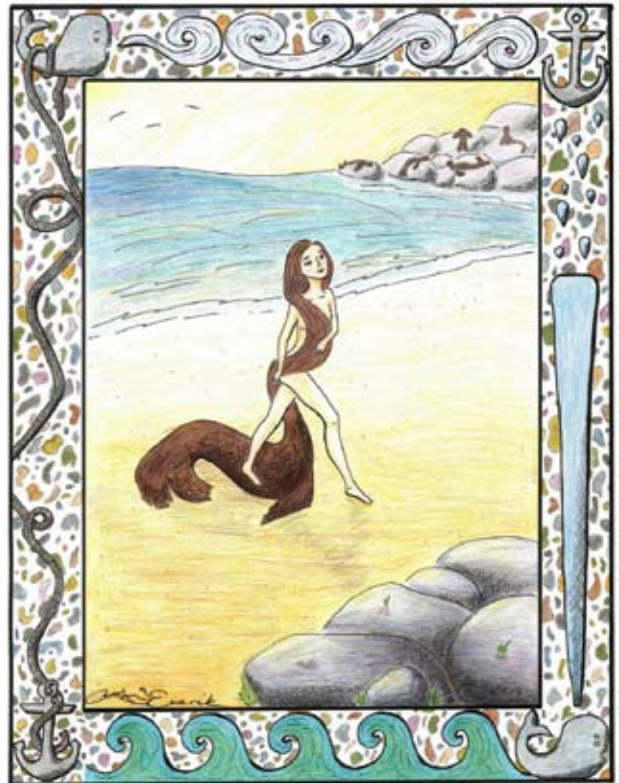
by Carolyn Emerick
Buffalo, NY, USA

Mermaids, sirens, selkies, water nymphs – female mythological figures of the sea were a source of both inspiration and fear for seagoing men over hundreds of years. Perhaps they represented the allure of the open sea, the way it beckoned to those young men who left life at home behind.

The sea is a giver of life, and taking to the sea could be a road to prosperity during periods when times were tough. Yet the sea is a dangerous place and every sea voyage could end in peril. Likewise, there are stories of beautiful sirens singing an irresistible song, or mermaids promising romantic bliss to a naïve sailor. In many of these stories if the sailor succumbed to her call, he was dragged to the bottom of the sea and drowned!



Mermaid of Zennor, by John Weguelin, c. 1900



Selkie, by Carolyn Emerick, 2013

Sometimes the story was reversed and the watery woman was the victim. Hans Christian Andersen reimagined the mermaid legend. His mermaid wanted nothing but to live on dry land with her handsome prince. But when he married another she was doomed to dissolve into sea foam. Selkie legends also involve a woman from the sea transforming to live on dry land. Scottish and Norse folklore are rife with stories of seal-women who shed their seal skin to reveal a beautiful human body. If a man is able to find her seal skin and hide it, the selkie will be trapped on land and forced to be his wife. Only if she can find her hidden seal coat will she be able to return to the sea.

These mythological women of the sea have inspired folk tales, ballads, art, poetry, short stories, novels, and modern films. They appear in ancient works such as Homer's *Odyssey* and continue to be featured in various forms of artistic representation through the ages right up to today. Here is just a sampling of some of the poems and ballads written about these watery spirits.

O, train me not, sweet mermaid, with thy note,
 To drown me in thy sister's flood of tears.
 Sing, siren, for thyself, and I will dote;
 Spread o'er the silver waves thy golden hairs,
 And as a bed I'll take them and there lie,
 And in that glorious supposition think
 He gains by death that hath such means to die;
 Let Love, being light, be drowned if she sink!
 - *William Shakespeare, Comedy of Errors*

Full fathom five thy father lies;
 Of his bones are coral made;
 Those are pearls that were his eyes:
 Nothing of him that doth fade
 But doth suffer a sea-change
 Into something rich and strange.
 Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell
 Burthen Ding-dong
 Hark! now I hear them,—Ding-dong, bell.
 - *William Shakespeare, The Tempest*

I have heard the mermaids singing,
 each to each.
 I do not think that they will sing to me.
 I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
 Combing the white hair
 of the waves blown back
 When the wind blows the water and back.
 We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
 By sea-girls wreathed
 with seaweed red and brown
 Till human voices wake us, and we drown.
 - *T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"*



The Siren, by John William Waterhouse

A mermaid found a swimming lad,
 Picked him for her own,
 Pressed her body to his body,
 Laughed; and plunging down
 Forgot in cruel happiness
 That even lovers drown.
 - *W.B. Yeats*



Little Mermaid Saves Prince, by Edmund Dulac for Hans Christian Anderson



Arthur Rackham Clerk Colvill and the Mermaid for British Ballads

THE LORD OF DUNKERRGON – A Scottish Ballad

The lord of Dunkerron – O’Sullivan More,
Why seeks he at midnight the sea-beaten shore ?
His bark lies in haven, his hounds are asleep;
No foes are abroad on the land or the deep.

Yet nightly the lord of Dunkerron is known
On the wild shore to watch and to wander alone;
For a beautiful spirit of ocean, ‘tis said,
The lord of Dunkerron would win to his bed.

When, by moonlight, the waters
were hush’d to repose,
That beautiful spirit of ocean arose;
Her hair, full of lustre, just floated and fell
O’er her bosom, that heav’d
with a billowy swell.

Long, long had he lov’d her-long vainly essay’d
To lure from her dwelling the coy ocean maid;
And long had he wander’d and watch’d by the tide,
To claim the fair spirit O’Sullivan’s bride.

The maiden she gazed on the creature of earth,
Whose voice in her breast to a feeling gave birth
Then smiled; and, abashed as a maiden might be,
Looking down, gently sank to her home in the sea.

Though gentle that smile, as the moonlight above,
OSullivan felt ‘twas the dawning of
And hope came on hope, spreading over his mind,
Like the eddy of circles her wake left behind.

The lord of Dunkerron he plunged in the waves,
And sought through the fierce
rush of waters, their caves;
The gloom of whose depth studded over with spars,
Had the glitter of midnight when lit up by stars.

Who can tell or can fancy the treasures that sleep
Intombed in the wonderful womb of the deep?
The pearls and the gems, as if valueless thrown
To lie ‘mid the sea-wrack concealed and unknown.

Down, down went the maid -
still the chieftain pursued;
Who flies must be followed
ere, she can be wooed.

Untempted by treasures, unawed by alarms,
The maiden at length he has clasped in his arms!

They rose from the deep
by a smooth-spreading strand,
Whence beauty and verdure stretched over the land.
‘Twas’ an isle of enchantment!
and lightly the breeze,
With a musical murmur,
just crept through the trees.’

The haze-woven shroud of that newly born aisle
Softly faded away, from a magical pile,
A palace of crystal, whose bright-beamin sheen
Had the tints of the rainbow-red, yellow, and green.

And grottoes, fantastic in hue and in form,
 Were there, as flung up –
 the wild sport of the storm
 Yet all was so cloudless, so lovely, and calm,
 It seemed but a region of sunshine and balm.

‘Here, here shall we dwell in a dream of delight,
 Where the glories of earth and of ocean unite!
 Yet, loved son of earth! I must from thee away;
 There are laws which e’en spirits
 are bound to obey!

Once more must I visit the chief of my race,
 His sanction to gain ere I meet thy embrace.
 In a moment I dive to the chambers beneath:
 One cause can detain me - one only - ‘tis death!’

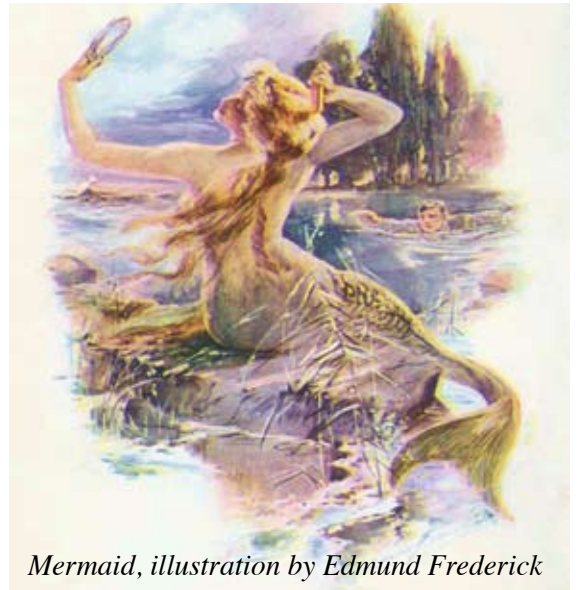
They parted in sorrow, with vows true and fond;
 The language of promise had nothing beyond.
 His soul all on fire, with anxiety burns:
 The moment is gone - but no maiden returns.

What sounds from the deep meet his terrified ear -
 What accents of rage and of grief does he hear?
 What sees he? what change
 has come over the flood –
 What tinges its green with a jetty of blood ?

Can he doubt what he gush
 of warm blood would explain?
 That she sought the consent
 of her monarch in vain!
 For see all around him, in white foam and froth,
 The waves of the ocean boil up in their wrath!

The palace of crystal has melted in air,
 And the dies of the rainbow no longer are there;
 The grottoes with vapour and clouds are o’ercast,
 The sunshine is darkness-the vision has past!

Loud, loud was the call of his serfs for their chief;
 They sought him with accents of wailing and grief:
 He heard, and lie struggled –
 a wave to the shore,
 Exhausted and faint bears O’Sullivan More!”



Mermaid, illustration by Edmund Frederick

TO UNDINE

by Friedrich de la Motte Fouque

Undine! thou fair and lovely sprite,
 Since first from out an ancient lay
 I saw gleam forth thy fitful light,
 How hast thou sung my cares away!

How hast thou nestled next my heart,
 And gently offered to impart
 Thy sorrows to my listening ear,
 Like a half-shy, half-trusting child,
 The while my lute, in wood-notes wild,
 Thine accents echoed far and near!

Then many a youth I won to muse
 With love on thy mysterious ways,
 With many a fair one to peruse
 The legend of thy wondrous days.

And now both dame and youth would fain
 List to my tale yet once again;
 Nay, sweet Undine, be not afraid!
 Enter their halls with footsteps light,
 Greet courteously each noble knight,
 But fondly every German maid.

And should they ask concerning me,
 Oh, say, “He is a cavalier,
 Who truly serves and valiantly,
 In tourney and festivity,
 With lute and sword, each lady fair!”