

11-2018

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### Recommended Citation

Jones, Melissa (2018) "A Mermaid's Tale: The Evolution of the Representation of Mermaids in Popular Culture," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2018.080202

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A Mermaid's Tale:

The Evolution of the Representation of Mermaids in Popular Culture

Melissa Jones

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(Newport News, VA)

The belief in merpeople, or water spirits, has been in existence since the beginning of recorded history, and possibly even before that. Water spirits and merpeople were seen as powerful, and their representations in later folktales were often as deadly beings. Mermaids, and creatures similar to them, were seen as dangerous to humans. Slowly, during the Enlightenment period and the nineteenth century, people started to think of mermaids as more peaceful and good-natured as they accepted the scientific rejection of mermaids as real beings. The creation of modern forms of entertainment and the wide-spread rejection of the existence of mermaids have led to twentieth century representations of mermaids as beautiful and kind creatures. Today, mermaids are still usually represented as beautiful, courageous, and kind, however, there are also some representations of mermaids as dark creatures that recall old folktale beliefs. The freedom of being able to use imagination when portraying or thinking about mermaids has led to an increase in fascination with them, which is not likely to end anytime soon.

Merpeople as Gods, Deities, and Spirits in Ancient Times

The first record of belief in merpeople is from the ancient civilization of Babylon. Babylonians around 5000-4000 BCE had drawings and stories about a Lord of the Waters, Oannes, and his wife, who both were drawn as having fish tails.<sup>1</sup> Other cultures in ancient times believed in similar merpeople as deities. The Philistines believed in Dagon, the Indians in Vishnu, the Chinese in river gods, and the Greeks in Nereus.<sup>2</sup> Northern European cultures also believed in sea gods and goddesses, as did North Americans, Canadians, Africans, South Americans, Japanese, Syrians, and even people from cultures in the Pacific.<sup>3</sup> Sea gods and goddesses represented both fertility and life, as well as deadliness and danger.<sup>4</sup> Many of these cultures also believed in nymphs, sea fairies, or nereids, which were children of sea gods or merpeople with various characteristics and supernatural abilities.<sup>5</sup>

The belief in semi-gods, or mer creatures, was manifested in stories of sightings, not just in the religious beliefs of gods and goddesses. Some of these creatures were portrayed as being harmless, but some were portrayed as being dangerous.<sup>6</sup> A captain serving under Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE recorded stories of sightings of nereids, or mermaids, at islands; some of which were reported to turn men into fish.<sup>7</sup> A governor of Gaul wrote to Augustus during the first century CE about sightings of nereids that were often seen on shores. They looked human-like but had scales, and could often be heard singing.<sup>8</sup> There are many other

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<sup>1</sup> Gwen Benwell and Arthur Waugh, *Sea Enchantress: The Tale of the Mermaid and Her Kin* (New York: Hutchinson, 1961), 23 and Oliver Narelle, *Mermaids Most Amazing* (Indianapolis: G.P. Putnam's Sons Books for Young Readers, 2005), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Benwell, 25-39 and Narelle, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Marc Potts, *The Mythology of the Mermaid and Her Kin* (New York: Capall Bann Publishing, 2000), 54-73.

<sup>4</sup> Potts, 53.

<sup>5</sup> Benwell, 25-39.

<sup>6</sup> Potts, 34-49.

<sup>7</sup> Jack Dann, *Mermaids!* (Massachusetts: Ace, 1986), 3.

<sup>8</sup> William Hanse, ed, *The Book of Greek & Roman Fokltakes, Legends, & Myths* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 169-170.

recordings of mermaid sightings and captures during the first century CE as well. These mermaids were usually thought to have beautiful voices, but with the potential to be dangerous to humans when they wanted to be.<sup>9</sup>

People living in India during this time period believed in water nymphs, which were similar to nereids. Some of these were friendly, but some were dangerous. Chinese people of this time also believed in a type of river gods and water nymphs, but they were usually honored and respected. People of Scotland, Ireland, and Britain had similar beliefs involving water spirits, river deities, and mermaids during this time. Many of these creatures were represented as dangerous or evil in stories. Arabs believed in mermaids too, usually with similarly negative characteristics. As new religions developed from ancient religions, these beliefs turned into stories that were passed down through generations.<sup>10</sup>

### Mermaids in Medieval Folktales (1000s-1500s)

“The conception of the mermaid as a beautiful sea-maiden, possessed of uncanny powers, developed through the ages from the moment when...the first fish-tailed god and goddess were born of the needs and imagination of man.”<sup>11</sup> Mermaid folktales of the eleventh to sixteenth centuries are derived from ancient conceptions and form the foundation of modern popular thought about mermaids. The image of “a beautiful fish-tailed woman sitting on rocks, combing her long hair with a golden comb...is the classical image of the mermaids; the picture conjured in the minds of most people by the term. It is a description of the mermaid of folklore, the

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<sup>9</sup> Benwell, 36-39.

<sup>10</sup> Benwell, 32-33, 60-67, 140.

<sup>11</sup> Benwell, 22.

romantic creature perpetuated by artists and poets down through the ages.”<sup>12</sup> Folklore myths often featured stories that portrayed mermaids as relaxing on rocks or bobbing on waves, carrying a mirror and a comb, and being a beautiful woman from her torso up with a fish tail in place of legs.<sup>13</sup> Even though she appeared beautiful, these folktales featured mostly seductive mermaids who brought harm and death to humans.

Many of these folktales were spread by sailors, or among coastal towns by people who associated mermaids with storms and curses.<sup>14</sup> However, mermaid folktales were also popular all over the world. The mermaids were usually described in the same manner, but were called many different names such as seal-folk, water nymphs, morgen, ceasg, ben-varrey, merrow, haumand, and many others.<sup>15</sup> One king in France even incorporated maids dressed up as mermaids to greet guests at one of his galas.<sup>16</sup> This wide distribution of mermaid folktales speaks to the fascination people have with the idea of mermaids, which has been attributed to their power of seduction and ability to lure men to do their will.<sup>17</sup> Although these folktales vary in their details, the same main ideas are present in mermaid folktales all over the world.

The Scottish folktale envisions mermaids as owning seal skins which allow them to live in the water, similar to the cap which mermaids of Irish folktales wear. Many Irish and Scottish folktales are of mermaids who marry humans, but later return to the ocean. Sometimes mermaids of these folklore are the ones being kidnapped themselves.<sup>18</sup> Some Irish, Scottish, and British families even claim to be descendants of mermaids who intermarried with humans. Welsh

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<sup>12</sup> Potts, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Dann, 2 and Potts, 8-11.

<sup>14</sup> Dann, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Potts, 23-34 and Narelle, 6.

<sup>16</sup> Phyllis Méras, *The Mermaids of Chenonceaux, and 828 Other Stories: An Anecdotal Guide to Europe* (New York: Congdon & Weed, Inc., 1983), 76-77.

<sup>17</sup> Benwell, 13.

<sup>18</sup> Benwell, 15-18, 154-165 and Potts, 12.

folklore often portrays mermaids as being loving and helpful to humans. Folktales in Greece portray mermaids as using their irresistible voices to lure sailors to death.<sup>19</sup> In France, there was a legend of a mermaid named Melusina who seduced a man into marrying her, and when he found out about her evil tricks, she haunted that area forever. French folktales were often about beautiful but seductive and destructive mermaids.<sup>20</sup> Similar stories were told in Italy, Portugal, Spain, Russia, Esthonia, Africa, China, and Japan. Scandinavian mermaids in folktales vary between evil and benevolent characters. Germans believed that mermaids were dangerous to humans. North American natives believed the mermaids were kind to humans and helped them find places to settle. They also believed in intermarriage of mermaids and humans.<sup>21</sup> European folklore often portrays mermaids as luring sailors to their death, sometimes capable of controlling storms, and able to curse people and grant wishes.<sup>22</sup> During this time period in folktales across the world, the mermaid generally “appears as a dangerous siren against whom no ship or sailor can be considered safe upon the high seas; and also as a sea-maiden longing for the soul which she can attain only by marriage with a mortal.”<sup>23</sup>

Besides tales, there were also an enormous amount of people who claimed to have spotted mermaids in this time period.<sup>24</sup> Mermaids were recorded as being spotted in Iceland, and sailors claimed to have caught one in Britain in the twelfth century.<sup>25</sup> There were numerous accounts of people from Ireland, Holland, Greenland, Denmark, Scotland, and all around Northern Europe spotting mermaids, as well as some people spotting mermaids off the coast of

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<sup>19</sup> Benwell, 150-152, 41 and Potts, 18, 140.

<sup>20</sup> Benwell, 78-79, 189 and Potts, 8.

<sup>21</sup> Benwell 194-199, 180-189, 200-204.

<sup>22</sup> Potts, 12-17 and Benwell, 141-144.

<sup>23</sup> Benwell, 140.

<sup>24</sup> Narelle, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Benwell, 74.

Africa and in the West Indies.<sup>26</sup> Respected and famous captains like Christopher Columbus, Sir Walter Raleigh, Henry Hudson, and John Smith wrote about seeing mermaids during their travels.<sup>27</sup> Even religious people and doctors from around the world confirmed seeing or capturing mermaids.<sup>28</sup>

Mermaids also appear in many respected books and encyclopedias during this time period. “Mermaid figures appear in the earlier bestiaries and natural histories; she appears also in the *Historia Monstorum* of Ulysses Aldrovandi.”<sup>29</sup> Pliny the Elder included mermaids in his book about the history of the natural world in the first century. An encyclopedia of science, geography, animal and plant folklore, and myth written by Batholomew Anglicus in the thirteenth century describes mermaids as luring men to the death, sometimes after making them have sex with them. John Hesse also mentioned mermaids in his book, *The Eastern Travels*, published in the fourteenth century. A book written by an Italian jurist in the sixteenth century about popular thought included stories about mermaids. Other books that mentioned mermaids are *Histoire de la Compagnie de Jesus*, *The New Found Worlde*, and *Purchase His Pilgrimes*. Not everyone could own copies of these books since they were expensive in Medieval times, however the stories were passed down either orally or by elites who had money to buy books.<sup>30</sup>

Authors of poems and plays also mentioned mermaids as characters, for example Shakespeare mentioned mermaids in many of his plays.<sup>31</sup> Even newspapers and magazines printed reports from sailors that told of their experiences seeing or capturing mermaids.<sup>32</sup> Belief

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<sup>26</sup> Dann, 9-16 and Narelle, 15.

<sup>27</sup> Benwell, 82, 86, 95-97 and Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola, ed, *Early American Literature and Culture: Essays Honoring Harrison T. Meserole* (Newark: University of Delaware press, 1992), 38-56.

<sup>28</sup> Benwell, 87 and Narelle, 14.

<sup>29</sup> Benwell, 90.

<sup>30</sup> Benwell, 51, 71, 78, 82-88.

<sup>31</sup> Benwell, 88 and Potts, 90.

<sup>32</sup> Benwell, 106-110.

in mermaids was taken so seriously that a king in Benin during the fourteenth century was becoming paralyzed and claimed that he was changing into a sea god so that no one would expect him to walk anymore on legs. This propaganda worked, and his subjects believed that they could not look at his 'sacred tail,' which saved him much embarrassment about his paralysis.<sup>33</sup>

As Christianity rose in popularity, it had profound effects on the perception of the mermaid myth worldwide. Sirens, bird-people who wreaked havoc on humans, and mermaids became conjoined in popular thought, creating a very negative connotation for mermaids.<sup>34</sup> Christians viewed mermaids as representing sin, as opposed to some folktales that represent mermaids as "gay and lovely beings."<sup>35</sup> Christians further populated the belief that mermaids were dangerous to men instead of being kind and gentle.<sup>36</sup> "From fish-tailed goddess she has become the hopelessly doomed and wretched pagan creature that longed for salvation in a Christian heaven."<sup>37</sup> Although they were not thought highly of, mermaids were still so popular in common thought that they were used in carvings, architecture, and craftsmanship often, and even for churches.<sup>38</sup> In these depictions, she was naturally often seen holding a mirror and comb.<sup>39</sup> Her basic appearance did not change during this period, but her nature began to.<sup>40</sup> Instead of trying to fight the popular idea of mermaids, since the common man believed in their existence, Christians tried to use this mythical creature to teach people about sin.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Narelle, 16.

<sup>34</sup> Benwell, 48.

<sup>35</sup> Benwell, 81 and Potts, 83.

<sup>36</sup> Derounian-Stodola, 54.

<sup>37</sup> Potts, 2.

<sup>38</sup> Benwell, 57, 69 and Potts, 77 and Vaughn Scribner, "'Such Monsters Do Exist in Nature': Mermaids, Tritons, and the Science of Wonder in Eighteenth-Century Europe" (*Itinerario*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2017, 507-538), 509.

<sup>39</sup> Benwell, 72.

<sup>40</sup> Potts, 2.

<sup>41</sup> Benwell, 127-129 and Potts, 80-81.



## Mermaids in the Enlightenment Era

The Enlightenment era, also known as the “Age of Reason,” lasted from the seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century and promoted observation and study of the natural world so that phenomenon could be explained with reason and humans could better understand the world around them. Philosophers and scientists attempted to explain and rationalize myths. Some believed the mermaids that people saw were really manatees, sea cows, or dugongs.<sup>42</sup> Others reasoned that foreign people washed ashore from shipwrecks that could not speak local dialects were automatically assumed to be some sort of sea creature.<sup>43</sup> There were a few instances of people that were deformed with their legs conjoined or fingers webbed being mistaken for mermaids or descendants of mermaids.<sup>44</sup> Some other popular theories were that when humans evolved to be land-dwelling, some creatures did not fully evolve to live on land, or that for every land animal, there was a sea animal that was identical or similar.<sup>45</sup>

During this period, “belief in the mermaid’s existence begins to fade, although sustained well into the nineteenth century by the evidence of sailors, fishermen and others. Skeptics or doubters arise among the sophisticated, such as John Donne, Francis Bacon, and Sir Thomas Browne.”<sup>46</sup> Problems with these Enlightenment theories about mermaids are that many descriptions of mermaid encounters provide detailed accounts of what the mermaids looked like,

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<sup>42</sup> Dann, 2 and Benwell, 14, 86.

<sup>43</sup> Dann, 24.

<sup>44</sup> Narelle, 17.

<sup>45</sup> Narelle, 9, 11 and Scribner, 509, 529.

<sup>46</sup> Benwell, 86.

which are not very similar to humans or sea animals. This led common folk to doubt the theories of Enlightenment thinkers. Additionally, many of these accounts came from reliable and trusted sources such as captains, explorers, and even priests.<sup>47</sup>

At first, the lack of evidence against the mermaid myth led people to continue to believe in mermaids, especially amidst the continuous overwhelming number of stories and writings of encounters with them.<sup>48</sup> Even while Enlightenment thinkers were trying to disprove the existence of mermaids, sailors and townspeople were still reporting sightings and captures of mermaids.<sup>49</sup> Intellectuals doubted that mermaids existed, but the common man was more likely to believe in stories from people that he trusted than in beliefs of scientists or philosophers. Interest in mermaids remained strong throughout the Enlightenment Era, and they were considered a controversial figure until the nineteenth century.<sup>50</sup>

As scientists began to gather evidence about what people were mistaking as mermaids, drawings and pictures surfaced of ugly depictions of what had been thought of as “mermaids.” Intellectuals of the Enlightenment argued that sailors who came across any sea creature that they were unfamiliar with described them as mermaids due to their belief in folktales. As scientists and naturalists began to gather drawings of mermaids that had been sighted, they saw a pattern of ugly, scary looking creatures instead of the beautiful women depicted in folktales.<sup>51</sup> This study of and fascination with mermaids only served to further their popularity going in to the nineteenth century, and encouraged people to include them in art, novels, and even museums.

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<sup>47</sup> Benwell, 14 and Scribner, 510.

<sup>48</sup> Benwell, 86 and Scribner, 509-510.

<sup>49</sup> Narelle, 10 and Scribner, 510.

<sup>50</sup> Benwell, 86-87, 110.

<sup>51</sup> Grace Costantino, “Five ‘Real’ Sea Monsters Brought to Life by Early Naturalists” (*Smithsonian.com*, October 2014), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/five-real-sea-monsters-brought-life-early-naturalists-180953155/> and Scribner, 510-514.

## Mermaids in the Nineteenth Century

Even though tales of mermaid sightings and captures continued through the nineteenth century, more and more people believed that mermaids were in man's imagination. Publications, depositions, and letters could no longer convince the common man of the existence of mermaids. "The dawn of the nineteenth century found the fabulous elements of Pliny, the bestiaries and the natural historians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries finally discredited; the marvels in which the Middle Ages delighted had come to have a 'curiosity' value only."<sup>52</sup> This curiosity value would lead people to try to produce fake mermaids in an attempt to fool or fascinate the public.

Although fake mermaids had been made since at least the sixteenth century, the nineteenth century is known for being the height of clever, and even crude, attempts to fool the public. Some people dressed up and pretended to be mermaids sunbathing on rocks, and even attracted crowds to watch them. Popular gentlemen's magazines published stories about the fakes being created, which sometimes drew heated debate from those who still believed in mermaids. The Japanese became renowned for making fake mermaids, and many mermaids put on display originated from Japanese con-artists. Some buyers knew the mermaids were fake, but others were just as fooled as the intended audience.<sup>53</sup> Most of these fake mermaids had faces that resembled monkeys or dogs, and usually they did not have fins or gills but somewhat resembled fish by having scales.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Benwell, 111.

<sup>53</sup> Benwell, 121-123 and Narelle, 17-18.

<sup>54</sup> Potts, 5 and Narelle, 13, 18.

Motivated by fame and money, many people made or purchased fake mermaids to fool the public with. One example is a mermaid exhibit that was created in London in the early 1800s. Another popular example was the mermaid exhibit created by P.T. Barnum in his museum of curiosities, which drew huge crowds and created a lot of profit for the showman. Although these mermaids were advertised as the beautiful creatures of folktale, the real specimens were often shriveled up, ugly creatures. It was very common to see these shriveled up mermaid specimens in exhibits, in coffeehouses, taverns, and in museums in big cities like London and New York.<sup>55</sup> The public continued to be drawn to these exhibits, likely in hopes of one day seeing a mermaid specimen that matched their imagination. This, of course, was never done in a mermaid exhibit, and later in the twentieth century the British Museum created an exhibit about fakes which included all of the fake mermaid specimens that had been produced in the past century.<sup>56</sup>

Despite the public's disappointment with mermaid specimens, artists still used the classic idea of the beautiful sea creatures in their paintings. This could be because people desired to see mermaids as they had always pictured them, so artists worked to fulfill these wants since museums were not doing so.<sup>57</sup> In fact, mermaids as artistic inspiration reached its peak in the nineteenth century during the era of Romantic art. One example is the notable painting *A Mermaid*, by John William Waterhouse depicting a beautiful, young mermaid. Other notable artists that used mermaids as inspiration were Howard Pyle, Edward Burne-Jones, Frederick Leighton, Edvard Munch, Arnold Brocklin, and Arthur Rackham. Poets and playwrights continued to use this idealized mermaid in their work as well.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Narelle, 18.

<sup>56</sup> Benwell, 126.

<sup>57</sup> Gary Kulik, "Mermaids, Mummies, and Mastodons: The Evolution of the American Museum; The Other Museum: Power and Spirit" (*The Journal of American History*, vol. 78, no. 1, 1991), 255-259.

<sup>58</sup> Potts, 6, 90-97.

One of the most famous examples of a mermaid in literature is from *The Little Sea-Maid* written by Hans Christian Andersen in 1836. Andersen became fascinated with nature as a boy, which is likely what inspired him to write about a mermaid.<sup>59</sup> The portrayal of Andersen's mermaid is very telling of the time period in which he lived. Andersen's little sea-maid was exquisitely beautiful and had the prettiest voice in the world. Although the merpeople who lived underwater did not like men and thought they were dangerous, they did not deliberately hurt or kill humans. The little sea-maid was different though, and was fascinated by the world of men. She even saved a prince from drowning, which led her to fall in love with him.<sup>60</sup>

In order to have a chance at being mortal and marrying the prince, the sea-maid decided to give a sea witch her tongue in return for legs and a chance to be human. The prince eventually married someone else though, which meant that the sea-maid would die and turn into sea foam. The sea-maid's sisters made a deal with the sea witch which would allow the sea-maid to live if she killed the prince and let his blood cover her feet, but she loved him too much to kill him and accepted her fate of death.<sup>61</sup> This representation is indicative of the evolution of public thought on mermaids.

As mermaids became accepted as part of man's imagination, people felt free to make them into romantic and kind beings, instead of the dangerous creatures of folktales. In many ways the little sea-maid who saved a human she loved is a stark reversal of old folklore about mermaids who seduced men with the intention of murdering them. Andersen's novel became so famous that a statue of his mermaid was created and placed in Copenhagen, Denmark on the

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<sup>59</sup> Méras, 54.

<sup>60</sup> Hans Christian Andersen, "The Little Sea-Maid." *Folklore and Fable: Aesop, Grimm, Andersen* (New York: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 255-262.

<sup>61</sup> Andersen, 268-275.

harbor front. It is still considered to be a cherished landmark that brings good luck to sailors.<sup>62</sup> His classic novel was also used as inspiration for many future representations of mermaids in popular culture and had a profound influence on these depictions in the twentieth century.

### Mermaids in the Twentieth Century

The introduction of new technology in the twentieth century allowed a new portrayal of mermaids to explode in popular culture. Although idealistic visions of mermaids continued to be used for inspiration in art and literature, the introduction of forms of popular culture like films, logos, and comic books allowed this representation to flourish.<sup>63</sup> The first silent film to feature a mermaid was *La Sirène* (The Mermaid) by French film director Georges Méliès. This film was released in 1904 as silent films became popular, and is about a magician who pulls things out of his hat. Near the end of the film he produces a young, beautiful mermaid who appears to be laying in an underwater habitat. The audience cannot be sure if the mermaid is real or a trick of the magician, but she appears to be an innocent and lovely creature. Interestingly, the film ends with her transforming into a sea goddess, and him into a sea god.<sup>64</sup>

One actress to feature in several silent films about mermaids was Annette Kellerman. She appeared in *Siren of the Sea* in 1911, *Neptune's Daughter* in 1914, *Queen of the Sea* in 1918, and *Venus of the South Seas* in 1924. She plays a beautiful, young mermaid in all of these films.<sup>65</sup> Another popular silent film created in 1924 was *Peter Pan*, the first movie to be based on J.M. Barrie's novel. In this film many beautiful mermaids with long hair are seen bathing on rocks by

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<sup>62</sup> Méras, 47.

<sup>63</sup> Potts, 95.

<sup>64</sup> Georges Méliès, dir, *La sirène* (Star-Film, 1904, silent film), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1rFZvrg60Dw>.

<sup>65</sup> "Annette Kellerman (1887-1975)," *Imdb.com*. <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0445807/>.

the shore. In addition to their lovely appearance, they are benevolent and agree to help Peter save his friends.<sup>66</sup>

Two similar films were produced in 1948, *Mr. Peabody & the Mermaid* and *Miranda*, both featuring mermaids as central figures in their plots. *Mr. Peabody & the Mermaid*, based on the novel *Peabody's Mermaid*, is about a man who falls in love with a mermaid. While on vacation in the Caribbean, he meets a young mermaid. She was portrayed as mute, which was common for the era. She does have a beautiful singing voice, and he likes her so much that he takes her home and keeps her in his bathtub. The film makes it unclear as to what happens to the mermaid, but he keeps her with him when he returns home.<sup>67</sup> The plot of *Miranda* is very similar, with the plot consisting of a man falling in love with the beautiful mermaid, bringing her home, and attempting to hide her.<sup>68</sup>

More dramatic films to feature mermaids are *Million Dollar Mermaid* and *Hans Christian Andersen*, both released in 1952. *Million Dollar Mermaid* is a theatrical representation of the life of Annette Kellerman, who was known as a famous swimmer and actress who often starred as a mermaid.<sup>69</sup> Part of the *Hans Christian Andersen* film features the story of *The Little Sea-Maid* presented as a ballet.<sup>70</sup> The 1953 version of *Peter Pan* by Disney also included more dramatic elements in scenes of beautiful mermaids who were nice, but feisty. They helped Peter but were mean to Wendy, which was presented as being out of jealousy.<sup>71</sup> Another interesting film that involves more dangerous and fantastical elements is *Creature from the Black Lagoon*,

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<sup>66</sup> Herbert Brenon, dir, *Peter Pan* (Paramount Pictures, 1924, silent film), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4bNLJG\\_Kkug&t=4311s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4bNLJG_Kkug&t=4311s).

<sup>67</sup> Irving Pichel, dir, *Mr. Peabody and the Mermaid*. Nunnally Johnson Productions (1948, silent film), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLh6tBBwP60>.

<sup>68</sup> Ken Annakin, dir, *Miranda* (Gainsborough Pictures, 1948, movie), [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0040597/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0040597/?ref_=nv_sr_1).

<sup>69</sup> Mervyn LeRoy, dir, *Million Dollar Mermaid* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1952, movie).

<sup>70</sup> Charles Vidor, dir, *Hans Christian Andersen* (Samuel Goldwyn Productions, 1952, movie).

<sup>71</sup> Clyde Geronimi, dir, *Peter Pan* (Walt Disney Productions, 1953, movie).

which was released in 1954. This film is about a scary water creature that explorers encounter on a scientific expedition. The creature kills many of the explorers on the expedition, and eventually retreats back to the water once the explorers successfully wound him.<sup>72</sup>

Mermaids were also featured in various forms of literature in the twentieth century. The 1930s and 40s saw the rise of fantasy stories. One such short story was about a swim team that used a mermaid to win a swimming competition. She was a beautiful and an amazing singer but avoided contact with humans usually. In this story, mermaids used to associate with humans, but after men created advanced weapons and technology mermaids started avoiding them to remain safe from being hunted or captured.<sup>73</sup>

Mermaids were also introduced into comics. The first popular comic book mermaid was Lori Lemaris who made an appearance in “The Girl in Superman’s Past” in *Superman* volume 129 from 1959.<sup>74</sup> She is described as a “girl of rare beauty and courage with eyes as blue and mysterious as the sea.”<sup>75</sup> Lori lives in Atlantis and has the power to read minds and use telepathy over far distances. She can use these powers to contact humans or to make sea creatures listen to her commands. The mermaid is able to briefly survive out of water, but must stay in water for at least ten hours every day to stay healthy. Although Superman wanted to marry her, she believed that a man and a mermaid could not live happily together, and so they parted.<sup>76</sup>

Mermaids continued to be used in literature both as real characters, or as powerful symbolism. In the novel *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing*, written in 1965, Mrs. Stevens is a famous and talented poet. The author writes that Mrs. Stevens hears the mermaids

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<sup>72</sup> Jack Arnold, dir, *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Universal Pictures, 1954, movie).

<sup>73</sup> Dann, 29-55.

<sup>74</sup> “Lori Lemaris” (*DCguide.com*, March 2018), [http://dcuguide.com/w/Lori\\_Lemaris\\_\(PreCrisis\)#PERSONAL\\_DATA](http://dcuguide.com/w/Lori_Lemaris_(PreCrisis)#PERSONAL_DATA).

<sup>75</sup> “Lori Lemaris” (*Supermanica*, January 2012), [http://supermanica.superman.nu/index.php/Lori\\_Lemaris](http://supermanica.superman.nu/index.php/Lori_Lemaris).

<sup>76</sup> “Lori Lemaris,” *Supermanica*.



singing, creating a metaphor that being able to hear mermaids sing indicates that an individual is particularly creative and imaginative.<sup>77</sup> The novel is full of references to the sea, the use of women as muses, and mentions of nymphs helping people get stirred up creatively.<sup>78</sup> It is believed that the title of the book comes from T.S. Eliot's poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, which uses the lines "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each/I do not think that they will sing to me" in order to tell his readers that the narrator does not think that he has inspiration or creativity.<sup>79</sup>

Other novels employed the mermaid more literally, such as in the well-known book *The Mermaid Summer* by Mollie Hunter, published in 1988. In this story, the popular folktales told about mermaids by fisherman in this town turned out to be true. The plot references back to old folktales of mermaids and depicts a mermaid who can lure men to their death if she wants to.<sup>80</sup> Her weakness is that she is obsessed with being beautiful, and when she gets mad that she cannot have a special comb, she makes sure that the fishermen do not catch any fish. Eventually, she is tricked by villagers to leave them alone by them threatening to cut her hair off, which is what gives her magic, unless she gives them three wishes.<sup>81</sup>

Representations of mermaids in the 1980s vary somewhat. Many stories depict mermaids that are so beautiful that they entrance men. They can often be seen laying on rocks by the shore and many times have powers of prophecy and singing. These mermaids sometimes rescue humans or become lovers to human men, but also have the power to track them down if they try to leave. In all of these stories men are entranced by mermaids who can manipulate them in any

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<sup>77</sup> Mary Sarton, *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing* (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, Inc., 1965), 30-31.

<sup>78</sup> Sarton, 11-18, 180, 202-203.

<sup>79</sup> "Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing" (*Enotes.com*, 2018), <https://www.enotes.com/topics/mrs-stevens-hears-mermaids-singing>.

<sup>80</sup> Mollie Hunter, *The Mermaid Summer* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1988), 2-8.

<sup>81</sup> Hunter, 65-104.

way that they want. Most mermaids are kind to humans and take them as lovers, but a few trick them and even kill them.<sup>82</sup>

Mermaids became so common in popular culture in the twentieth century that they were used as logos by businesses. In 1971, the original logo for Starbucks was created as a twin-tailed mermaid. The design was changed in 1987 and 1992, but retained the image of the mermaid.<sup>83</sup> Another popular company that used the mermaid was the Mermaid Theatre in London, which was open during the 1900s. It was a site where many famous plays were performed, including *The Cowardly Custard* in 1972.<sup>84</sup> A popular band of the 1900s called the Weavers produced a song called “The Eddystone Light” in 1993 about a mermaid and lighthouse watchman who had kids together, two of which were fish and one which was human.<sup>85</sup>

The end of the twentieth century was filled with a rush of mermaid movies. *Splash*, starring Tom Hanks and Daryl Hannah, was released in 1984 and is still well-known today. The mermaid in the movie is very smart, beautiful, and men easily fall in love with her. She can be out of water for a short amount of time, since she has legs when she is out of water, but has to return to the water for the full moon or she can never go back again. The mermaid falls in love with a man and at the end of the movie he runs away to the ocean with her, since he can live underwater as long as he is with her.<sup>86</sup>

Disney released their animated *The Little Mermaid* movie in 1989, which was immediately popular with audiences. It is similar to Andersen’s mermaid story of the previous century, but with a happier ending. The mermaid, Ariel, is young and beautiful and falls in love

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<sup>82</sup> Dann, 64-71, 85-130, 144-195.

<sup>83</sup> Saumya Raghav, “Starbucks Logo-An Overview of Design, History and Evolution” (*Designhill.com*, 23 March, 2016), <https://www.designhill.com/design-blog/starbucks-logo-overview-of-design-history-and-evolution/>.

<sup>84</sup> Garald Frow, et al, *The Mermaid's Cowardly Custard* (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1977), 6.

<sup>85</sup> The Weavers, “The Eddystone Light” (*Traveling On With the Weavers*, 1993, song).

<sup>86</sup> Ron Howard, dir, *Splash* (Touchstone Pictures, 1984, technicolor film).

with a human prince. She trades her voice to a sea witch to have legs and get the prince to fall in love with her in three days. The prince is tricked by the sea witch and almost marries her in disguise, but Ariel's real identity is revealed, and he kills the witch so they can live happily ever after. This movie is a more family-friendly version of Andersen's story. It still features merpeople that are not out to kill humans, although most are not as fascinated with them as Ariel is, but does not involve such violent scenes as the original story.<sup>87</sup>

A lesser known Irish movie, *The Secret of Roan Inish*, was based on the Irish version of mermaids, called selkies, and released in 1994. It is about a girl who goes to live in an Irish fishing village and hears stories about peoples' ancestors who married selkies. Selkies are seals that can become human by taking off their seal skins. They are beautiful, and if men steal their skins they can force the selkies to stay and live with them. The movie is about the girl trying to find a boy who was lost when his mother, a selkie, found her seal skin and went back to live in the water. This movie recalls Irish folktales of selkies, but represents selkies positively as beautiful, kind to humans, and even good wives.<sup>88</sup>

The last major mermaid movie to be released in the twentieth century was *The Thirteenth Year*, a story about a young merman which was released in 1999. In the movie, the young teenage boy finds out that his mother is a mermaid, and after turning thirteen he turns into a merman when he gets into the water. Some humans in this movie are made out to be the bad guys, as some sailors try to hunt and capture the boy's mermaid mother. He ends up joining his mother underwater to try to learn how to live with being a merperson, but promises to come back

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<sup>87</sup> Ron Clements and John Musker, dir, *The Little Mermaid* (Walt Disney Pictures, 1989, movie).

<sup>88</sup> John Sayles, dir, *The Secret of Roan Inish* (Jones Entertainment Group, 1994, movie).

to land to visit his adopted family.<sup>89</sup> Variations on these mermaid stories have continued to be part of popular culture and appear almost everywhere you look.

### Mermaids in Today's Popular Culture

Mermaids still appear as symbols on coats of armor, signs, maps, coins, and in art and literature all over the world in the twenty-first century.<sup>90</sup> One local example is the mascot of Norfolk, the mermaid. This idea began as a way to spark interest in the city of Norfolk. Businesses organized a mermaid parade and created over 130 casts of mermaids to be decorated, auctioned off, and placed around the city.<sup>91</sup> The mermaid was embraced by residents and visitors, and is now a well-known symbol of Norfolk's ties to the water.<sup>92</sup>

The novel *Aquamarine* was published in 2001 and quickly followed by a film adaptation released in 2006. Both plots are similar, revolving around a pair of best friends who meet a mermaid. The mermaid, Aquamarine, is young and beautiful. In the book she can only stay on land for a few days. In both versions she and her new friends try to make a young man fall in love with her. While mermaids are seen as odd to regular people in the storyline, the two young girls readily accept the mermaid as a friend and try their best to help her win over her man.<sup>93</sup> This type of mermaid who is fun, adventurous, and beautiful becomes a pattern in literature and films produced for teenage girls in the twenty-first century.

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<sup>89</sup> Duwayne Dunham, dir, *The Thirteenth Year* (Dream City Films, 1999, movie).

<sup>90</sup> Benwell, 215-258.

<sup>91</sup> "History of the Norfolk Mermaids" (*Norfolk.gov*), <https://www.norfolk.gov/NorfolkMermaids>.

<sup>92</sup> Cherise Newsome, "Mermaids have celebrated Norfolk life for 10 years" (*The Virginia Pilot*, 5 October, 2009), [https://pilotonline.com/news/local/article\\_03a4b49b-e6c4-5f62-98f0-2f1d12813c03.html](https://pilotonline.com/news/local/article_03a4b49b-e6c4-5f62-98f0-2f1d12813c03.html).

<sup>93</sup> Alice Hoffman, *Aquamarine* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2001) and Elizabeth Allen Rosenbaum, dir, *Aquamarine* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2006, movie).

*H2O: Just Add Water*, a show released in 2006, is about three teenage girls who become mermaids when they swim in an underwater pool on an island. They have to try to figure out how to live normal lives while coping with being mermaids. In addition to getting tails when they swim in water, each girl has a different water-related magical power. Throughout the series they meet other mermaids, and the show is relatable to young girls by being based on realistic teenage situations like dealing with mean girls or having crushes.<sup>94</sup>

A spinoff show of this series is *Mako: Island of Secrets*, released in 2013. It follows a similar plot, but instead of teenage girls, a teenage boy becomes a merman. This creates problems for the mermaids who were supposed to be guarding the island where he gained his merman powers. The show continues to follow him and other mermaids that he meets as they battle everyday scenarios as humans, as well as supernatural scenarios with things like dragons.<sup>95</sup>

One movie that includes very modern ideas is *The 3 Tails*, a movie released in 2015 about three teenage girls who become mermaids in the water. Although the movie retains supernatural qualities, it also focuses on concerns for the environment and endangered species. While the girls are trying to avoid being captured by mermaid hunters, they discover other species of animals in the water that are suffering from effects of hunting or pollution.<sup>96</sup> Shows and movies have been very successful in appealing to teenagers, however novels about mermaids have also risen in popularity among teenagers in the twenty-first century.

*Wet Magic*, written by Edith Nesbit, was published in 2008 and is about a group of young siblings who meet a mermaid. In this novel, merpeople are mistreated by humans. The siblings

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<sup>94</sup> Colin Budds, dir, *H2O: Just Add Water* (Jonathan M. Shiff Productions, 2006, show).

<sup>95</sup> Evan Clarry, dir, *Mako Mermaids: Secret of Mako Island* (Jonathan M. Shiff Productions, 2013, show).

<sup>96</sup> Andrés Garretón, *The 3 Tails Movie: A Mermaid Adventure* (Lighthouse Entertainment, 2015, movie).

help the mermaid escape a circus and get to see the underwater kingdom of the merpeople.<sup>97</sup>

Other novels written about mermaids keep to this idea of mermaids as innocent and kind.

The *Emily Windsnap* book series began being published in 2003 by Liz Kessler. The series features a young girl who discovers that she turns in to a mermaid when she enters water. Throughout the series she is characterized as being smart, courageous, and kind. This series is so popular that the author has written seven books in this series, with the last one being published in March of 2018.<sup>98</sup>

All of these popular shows, movies, and books represent mermaids as kind and brave. This could be due to the effects of the new representation of mermaids in the nineteenth century. It could also be due to these mermaid stories being targeted towards teenagers. It is likely that the representation of mermaids in the twenty-first century is influenced by a mixture of both of these.

The non-animated movie *Peter Pan* released in 2003 by Universal Pictures is one example of a movie that portrays mermaids in a negative light. The film includes scenes with mermaids, who are narrated as being “dark creatures, in touch with all things mysterious.” They know everything that happens on land and in the water and humans are usually scared of them. In the movie they hiss, have sharp teeth, webbed fingers, and let out scary screeches at other creatures.<sup>99</sup> Mermaids in this movie are very different from the original mermaids in the *Peter Pan* silent film of the 1920s.

Most of the mermaids in the popular movie *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides*, released in 2011, are also represented as scary and dangerous. They are beautiful and try to lure

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<sup>97</sup> Edith Nesbit, *Wet Magic* (New York: Dodo Press, 2008), book.

<sup>98</sup> Liz Kessler, *Emily Windsnap series* (Massachusetts: Candlewick Press, 2003-2018) book series.

<sup>99</sup> P.J. Hogan, dir, *Peter Pan* (Universal Pictures, 2003, movie).

men to a watery grave so that they can eat them. The mermaids also have fangs and smart sailors avoid them at all costs. The one exception to this characterization is a mermaid who was captured by the pirates. She is kind and is portrayed as attacking humans only out of self-defense.<sup>100</sup>

A recent movie about a mysterious water creature, *The Shape of Water*, cannot go unmentioned. Released in December 2017, the movie features a water creature that has the shape of a human but with fishy scales and fins. It does not exactly fit the typical description of a merperson, but is a modern adaptation of the idea of merpeople. The movie is set in the 1950s and the government is using the captured creature to do experiments in order to learn ways that men can survive going into space. When the officials in charge planned on killing the creature, it was rescued by a concerned scientist and cleaning lady of the facility.<sup>101</sup>

The creature is kept in the woman's apartment, where they fall in love with each other. Even though it cannot talk, it is intelligent and powerful. When the government traces the creature to the apartment the couple tries to make their escape. They are shot, but the creature does not die, and revives the woman so that she is alive and can live underwater. The narrator mentions that some think the creature is a god.<sup>102</sup>

This creature has striking characteristics that relate heavily to the representation of merpeople and mermaids in popular culture. The association with being a god references the ancient beliefs of water gods and spirits. Its power and danger recalls folktales of dangerous mermaids. The loving and gentle side of the creature adds a new dimension which is more familiar to us in the twenty-first century. An interesting line of the movie that sheds light on new

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<sup>100</sup> Rob Marshall, dir, *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides* (Walt Disney Pictures, 2011, movie).

<sup>101</sup> Guillermo del Toro, dir, *The Shape of Water* (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2017, movie).

<sup>102</sup> del Toro, *The Shape of Water*.

perceptions of merpeople is that the story was about a “tale of love and loss, and the monster who tried to destroy it all,” referring to the mean government worker who shot the loving couple instead of what the audience initially assumes refers to the water creature.<sup>103</sup>

The most recent show about mermaids that just premiered on March 29, 2018 is called *Siren*. The name of the show indicates a creature that is more dangerous than previous mermaids on television, although this image is complicated by the plot of the show. Over the course of the two-hour premiere the audience learns a lot about the mermaids who inhabit the waters around a town called Bristol Cove. The mermaids used to be friends with the humans of the town, but one villager went crazy and massacred many of the mermaids a few generations ago. Since then, the mermaids have avoided humans and thought of them as a threat.<sup>104</sup>

The show begins with a scene where a mermaid is accidentally caught by fishermen, and is then taken by the military to be studied. Her sister comes on land, where she has legs, and tries to find out where her captured sister went. She does not know English, has a uniquely shaped face, and eats anything she can find including rats. The sister does not look sinister as a human, but as a mermaid she has a pointy tail, sharp teeth, and sharp claws. She does not hurt people unnecessarily though, and only kills one man when he tries to rape her in a car. The mermaid becomes friends with some humans from the village, and the premiere ends with them trying to help her find where the military took her sister.<sup>105</sup>

Another popular form of entertainment that sometimes features mermaids is music. A few songs featuring mermaids have been produced in recent years. One song is *The Mermaid* by Great Big Sea, released in 2005. This song is sung by a sailor who is enchanted by mermaids. He

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<sup>103</sup> del Toro, *The Shape of Water*.

<sup>104</sup> Eric Wald, creator, *Siren* (Freeform, 2018, show).

<sup>105</sup> Wald, *Siren*.



falls in love with a beautiful mermaid, but eventually ends up with her sister because her sister is fish on the top and human on the bottom. This indicates that the sailor prefers the ugly mermaid since it means that he can have sex with her.<sup>106</sup>

A song with similar sentiments is *I'm On A Boat* by The Lonely Island, released in 2009. Part of the song refers to a man on a boat having sex with a mermaid. The mermaid in the music video is wearing a top that barely covers her breasts, and is presented as a sexual object. Not all mermaids in music are presented in strictly sexual terms. For example, the composer John Wayne Dixon named one of his pieces *Mermaids*. He writes that he was inspired to write this music score after seeing a beautiful woman with long hair on a beach. The tone of the piece is mostly happy and calm, and makes the listener feel peaceful.

Besides these fantastical representations of mermaids in today's popular culture, there are still small sects of the population who believe that mermaids do exist. Such enthusiasts cite facts such as humans having not explored all of the water on Earth. They argue that mermaid folklore would not be popular around the world unless they actually existed around the world. Some people even believe that our "mitochondrial Eve," whose DNA is apparently shared by all humans, was a mermaid. There are also many people who believe that they themselves are mermaids, or descendants of mermaids.<sup>107</sup>

Many people who feel as if they are mermaids or were meant to be mermaids go so far as to buy mermaid tails. Basic mermaid tails can be bought for a few hundred dollars, and custom, realistic mermaid tails can be bought for a few thousand dollars.<sup>108</sup> The most well-known group of mermaids is a secret society of mermaids in Seattle, Washington. They are a "community of

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<sup>106</sup> Great Big Sea, "The Mermaid" (*The Hard and the Easy*, 2005, song).

<sup>107</sup> Doreen Virtue, *Mermaids 101: Exploring the Magical Underwater World of the Merpeople* (New York, Hay House, 2012), xi-171.

<sup>108</sup> Virtue, 81-84.

people who identify as part-human, part-fish and call themselves merfolk.” Some of the members quit their jobs and are full-time mermaids. They run mermaid workshops and create custom mermaid tails for customers. The members of this group report feeling safer and more like themselves when acting as mermaids. Mermaid communities are growing and cropping up all around the United States.<sup>109</sup> While not all of these people believe in the existence of mermaids, they do feel that they would rather be merpeople than humans, and go so far as to dress and act accordingly.

Although one does not hear reports of sightings of mermaids anymore, the idea of the mermaid is very much alive in the hearts and minds of mankind. The fascination with mermaids has not ceased since the idea of merpeople began; if anything, it is only growing stronger. Although most people today do not believe that mermaids exist, the belief in mer gods and goddesses, as well as merpeople folktales, have impacted the development of the representation of mermaids in popular culture. These tales influenced the study of merpeople in the Enlightenment era, which led common people to finally reject the existence of mermaids. This allowed artists to use their imagination when representing mermaids, which became particularly evident as new forms of entertainment were created in the 1900s.

Mermaids began to take on more fantastical and supernatural qualities in the twentieth century, while also experiencing situations that are relatable to most people. The idea of the mermaid today is generally of a beautiful, kind woman, but old folktales have not been forgotten. The availability of different versions of the mermaid, as well as the general rejection of her existence, has allowed people the freedom to represent and think about mermaids however they

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<sup>109</sup> Timothy Duncan, “Inside America’s secret community of Mermaids where men and women identify as part-human part-fish and one gave up her job so she could concentrate on it full-time” (*DailyMail.com*, 16 January 2017), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4125624/Inside-America-s-secret-community-MERMAIDS.html>.

see fit. This freedom has only made fascination with mermaids increase, and it is likely that the idea of mermaids will continue to fascinate people for many more centuries to come.

#### About the author

Melissa Jones received her Bachelor of Arts in History and Classical Studies from Christopher Newport University. She is currently working on her Master's degree in Archival Management and History at Simmons University.

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