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A mermaid in Disneyland

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Hans Christian Andersen's «Little Mermaid» (1837) is one of his most popular stories. It has been translated into numerous languages, and in major languages like English there are hundreds of versions in existence. Many of these translations are really adaptations, which to some degree change the author's meaning. This is also the case with the Walt Disney Film version (1989), which takes many liberties with the text, but on the other hand offers some interesting new perspectives on the story.

It may be a good idea to begin with a summary of the story and the film respectively.

Hans Christian Andersen's story, then, describes how a teenage mermaid, who ever since childhood has been longing for the world of men and for the immortality granted to them, is allowed to ascend to the surface of the sea on her 15th birthday. On a ship she sees a handsome prince, falls in love with him and subsequently rescues him when his ship is lost in a storm.

She consults a sea witch who gives her a potion that will turn her fishtail into human legs so she can go to her beloved. But in return the witch demands the mermaids voice, so she cannot plead her cause or use her power of singing when she comes to the prince's court, and she is told that if she does not succeed in making the prince marry her, she will die when he marries somebody else.

The princess accepts the challenge and manages to impress the prince by her beauty, her dancing and her devotion; but when he meets a princess whom he believes to be the girl who rescued him, he marries her instead. The mermaid's sisters urge her to kill the prince, as the witch has promised that this will avert her doom. But although she is very jealous she refuses, throws herself into the ocean and is dissolved into foam, to be resurrected as a spirit, a daughter of the air, with the promise of being able eventually to work out her own salvation.

In secular terms, then, the story is a tragedy; but because of its religious dimension it could be regarded as an illustration of one of the ways to salvation

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–through isolation and suffering. Altogether, the religious motif is almost as important as the love-motif. It is introduced quite early in the tale when the mermaid asks her grandmother why she cannot live forever, and the perspective is kept to the very end of the story.

The Disney story is very different from this. There is nothing left of the religious dimension, which is probably not considered PC; besides, the suffering of the mermaid is minimised, and the story is given a happy ending. Also a number of added animal figures –a crab, a fish, a sea-gull, and the faithful dog of the prince– help to keep up our spirits, as do the song-and-dance numbers that bear witness to influence from the musical tradition; and if the film fails to render the speeches of Andersen's characters, it has a few additions of its own, all of them humorous, as when the sea-king asks his assistants to «leave no shell unturned» in the search for his daughter, and when she accuses her fish assistant of «getting cold fins» when a daring enterprise is being contemplated.

There is no alternative princess, either, so nothing stands in the way of the mermaid except the witch, who impersonates the mermaid rather like the black princess in Swan Lake; but her bluff is called in the end.

What makes this part of the movie interesting, though, is the play with identities that goes on. The witch transforms herself into the mermaid turned princess. But on one occasion the witch sees both herself and the mermaid, when she looks in her mirror. Thus it seems to be rather cleverly suggested that women cannot be neatly divided up into princesses and witches, but that aspects of both can be found in the same person.

The idea of basing a film on a prose narrative without feeling bound by every detail of the original is of course as old as the film genre itself. McFarlane (1996) makes the point that it is futile to look for «faithfulness» in movies, but that one should rather look upon a film and the novel it is based on as linked by means of intertextuality.

Klein and Parker (in McFarlane: 11) distinguish three different ways of following a novel:

1. «fidelity to the main trust of the narrative»;
2. an approach which «retains the core of the structure of the narrative while significantly reinterpreting or, in some cases, deconstructing the source text»; and finally,
3. «regarding the source text merely as raw material, as simply the occasion for an original work».

Obviously, this movie primarily belongs in the third category, even if quite a few narrative elements are carried over from the original, such as the mermaid's loss of her voice and her rescuing the prince from the shipwreck.

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It is not difficult to accept the view that a film-maker must be free to tell his own story. However, if you give your film the title of a book without specifying that it is simply «based on» or «after...» the said work, we have a right to expect that the basic message of the two versions should be the same. This is not the case here; but then the film does not mention the name of Andersen –you have to look carefully at the Disney home page to discover that Disney Studios are in fact aware of their source; and the film is typical of the Hollywood approach in changing a story with a tragic ending into one with a happy one.

Obvious changes are:

1. Change of plot –already mentioned.
2. Disappearance of characters (such as the mermaid's grandmother) and addition of others (e.g. Sebastian, the pompous, artistic crab). Even more interesting, there may be a reinterpretation of characters: the Mer-King is rather colourless in Andersen's story, but has a much more prominent role in Disney's version.
3. Something which is more difficult to prove, but to my mind is clearly suggested by the descriptions in the story and the pictures of the film: a relocation of scene. Andersen's story is definitely European –sometimes the landscape described resembles southern Germany, sometimes Italy, and the sea is most often the Mediterranean. The film, on the other hand, often seems to be located in the Caribbean –and not only because of the music.

Other changes may be explained with reference to the ideas of descriptive translation studies. The descriptive school of translation studies, notably Hermans (1985) and Toury (1995) have argued that translated texts have to be adjusted to the norms and conditions of the receptor culture. This appears in many little details in the film, the total effect of which is to turn the European 19th century aristocrats of the original into modern American teenagers. Thus the mermaid, who is quiet and passive in the original –the typical dream-like romantic heroine– is much more aggressive and result-oriented in the movie. She really works hard to get her prince, and the witch has to interfere actively to prevent her speedy success. Both mermaid and prince seem less mature than in Andersen's story, but to make up for it, they certainly do not suffer from inhibitions, and in the end they literally fight for their love, defeating the witch in a spectacular sea battle.

Two brief quotations may help to illustrate what has happened to Andersen's mermaid during her transformation to the Ariel of Disneyland. Andersen describes his heroine as follows,

> Nobody was so full of yearning as the youngest [of the mermaid sisters], the very one who was so quiet and wistful. (my translation)

On the other hand, the cover of the Disney video quite accurately talks of «Ariel, the fun-loving and mischievous mermaid,...»

An important twist to the narrative, which helps it to conform to a typical 20th century American pattern, is emphasis on the mermaid's rebellion against parental authority, and the reconciliation at her wedding, which implies on the one hand a recognition and acceptance of the love between father and child, on the other of the necessity of parting when the child is ready to start a family of her own.

This is of course also a well-established folk tale motif, and hinted at, though for obvious reasons not developed, in Andersen's story. But in spite of some blustering, the American Poseidon (called King Triton) is rather more tolerant than fairy tale parents normally are; and in the absence of other supernatural powers, he in fact must restore to his daughter the human form she lost when she failed to win her prince in time, thus enabling her to leave the parental submarine castle for good.

It is worth noting that many of the changes found in the film resemble changes found in prose adaptations of the story, some of which are described in Hjørnager Pedersen (1990). These changes are of two kinds:

A. Changes that move the story closer to a perceived norm than the original. This is one way of explaining the happy ending: as «The Little Mermaid» is supposedly a fairy tale, it is felt to need a happy ending, and is consequently provided with one. This corresponds to the instinct of film-makers; but it also found in several book adaptations of the story. The introduction of animal helpers could be seen in the same light, in spite of the fact that they are also typical Disney characters.

B. Changes that seem like comments on or interpretations of the original story. Thus the relationship between the Mermaid and the sea witch is rather different from what is found in the original; but it might be argued that elements in the original tale tend to support the interpretation chosen in the film. For instance, it is not clear in the tale why the witch wants the mermaid's voice; the film provides an explanation, i.e. that she wants to play the mermaid role herself.

It is tempting to use this study as an occasion for speculating what is happening in the Disneyland of contemporary popular art. The difference between the way Disney Studios today approach the folklore that is the basis of many of their stories as compared to the way in which they used to treat their sources becomes apparent if we compare their *Little Mermaid* with their *Snow White* (1937) and *Cinderella* (1950).

In those stories, the film still preserved the main story-line of the underlying folktale –and they were, of course, real folktales with happy endings– even

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if there were many additions in the form of personified animal helpers. In the Mermaid, the story almost drowns in the numerous additions, many of which are drawn from a supply of stock situations, e.g. that of a big, strong fellow chasing a small and weak creature with axes and knives, as the cook does the crab in this film –without success, however.

Altogether, whereas Andersen's Mermaid is tragic, and traditional folk tales serious, this modern Disney story is almost pure comedy, with elements added from the musical tradition. It is fascinating to try to see this development in the light of George Steiner's idea of «The Death of Tragedy». Steiner in his fascinating study argues that traditional tragedy died out with Racine in the 17th century, and that all later writers of serious drama, including the great romantics and more modern writers like Ibsen and Strindberg, have been unable to uphold the bleakness of the tragic vision.

Schiller and Goethe wrote «romantic tragedies» –according to Steiner, a contradiction in the adjective– because some ray of hope must always be held out to an audience that refuses to accept the utter nihilism of a Sophocles or Shakespeare. This, according to Steiner, is very relevant for films, too:

> In large measure, we are romantics still. The evasion of tragedy is a constant practice in our own contemporary theatre and films. In defiance of fact and logic, endings must be happy. Villains reform, and crime does not pay. The great dawn into which Hollywood lovers and heroes walk, hand in hand, at the close of the story, first came up on the horizon of romanticism. (Steiner: 135f)

Certainly there seems to be great reluctance in modern fiction to provide seriousness –cf. the modern American tradition of «Detective Comedy» where instead of murders and atrocities being treated seriously, you see policemen and detectives clowning their way through the mayhem of the modern world. But such callousness apart, it is interesting that the refusal to accept tragedy should be so ubiquitous in the performance arts– more so than in the novel or in poetry; and it is also interesting that in spite of what has just been said, the avoidance of tragedy can in a way be traced right back to Andersen's story.

«The Little Mermaid» was one of the stories that Andersen felt most deeply about. It is in a way another and grimmer version of «The Ugly Duckling», and it is written at a time when Andersen had been reluctantly accepted –on probation– by the Copenhagen bourgeoisie that he hankered after, but had been twice turned down by young ladies. Marriage seemed to him one way of achieving happiness and security –a way that for deeply personal rather than social reasons was to remain closed to him, as he was dimly beginning to realise. But he simply could not leave it at that; if marriage did not work, there had to be another way– hence the daughters of the air, and their rather bleak scheme for achieving eternal bliss through good works.

In the film, then, the problem of failure in the quest for love is simply left out, and thus a personal and deeply felt (semi)-tragedy is turned into a romantic comedy with musical elements. But although Disney's version has little to do with Andersen's, it is quite well made, and like Andersen's story seems written for a mixed audience of children and adults. It is definitely not for the very young, but altogether it is a rather successful attempt at adapting a romantic story for a modern film audience.

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