

*Jesslyn Rollins's essay on The Little Mermaid offers an excellent example of how a literature-based essay can effectively put critical sources into conversation with one another to arrive at an original argument. Rather than make unsubstantiated assertions about other authors and approaches to this Disney film, the essay patiently presents to readers the author's argument as it emerges from her reading and study of the Disney film and its critics.*

ENGL 1102

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### Swimming Away from Patriarchy

The harpoons have been sharpened, and the nets are lowered. Feminist critics are waiting on the shoreline to capture the finned heroine. Disney introduced the world to Princess Ariel of *The Little Mermaid* in 1989. Once the film was released, the mermaid princess was demolished by feminist scholars and repeatedly accused of representing the epitome of Western culture's blatant sexism. They claim that the heroine's motives thrust the long patriarchal pole way below the shoreline because she represents three things that force a woman to conform to a man's demands: a woman must sacrifice herself to the feminine's ideal traits of subservience and passivity; she must remain silent to be desired; and she must always put a man above her own independent goals. However, my analysis plans to shed light on this film and erect Ariel as a strong, powerful modern heroine. I will detail many of the points that critics have overlooked and argue

that the feminist readings are misinterpretations that disregard vital points of Ariel's commanding character. This modern heroine, Ariel, propels a dominant, independent image of women across the seas because her personality traits and her decisions sink the patriarchal demands of how a woman should behave.

Feminist idealists deplore Ariel's decision to swap her voice for a pair of human legs. Critics believe this choice directly correlates to the West's patriarchal stance that a girl should sacrifice and rebuild who she is to become the woman a man wants her be (Sells 180). When Ariel travels to Ursula's lair, the malicious sorceress explains to her that if she desires to become human, she must surrender her voice into Ursula's tentacles. Although Ariel quickly questions how Prince Eric could love her if she never spoke to him, Ursula reassures her, "You have your looks, your pretty face! And don't underestimate the importance of body language!" (*The Little Mermaid*). According to Ursula, on land there is no need for a woman to have any qualities other than physical beauty to make a man fall in love with her. Thus, Ursula's reassurance encourages Ariel to make the transformation because Ariel does not know typical human-like customs. Ali Wachutka, the writer of "Becoming a Princess: The Transition from Individual to Sex Object," immediately slices into Ariel's decision. She strongly retaliates, "Ariel's trade itself represents blatant sexism in that

she trades her means of communicating and expressing her intellect and personality for the physically sexual symbol of human legs, making her into a 'woman as man wants her to be'" (25). In Wachutka's opinion, Ariel's swap symbolizes that she is a slave to patriarchal society and the man she longs for. In this view, the heroine has not escaped the feminine personality traps, subservience and submissiveness, because she agrees to sacrifice her ability to communicate so that she can finally transform into the meek, entirely physical woman a man wants her to become. However, there is one mammoth point that Wachutka is missing from the scene: Ursula's intentions are *evil*.

Ursula has been spying on Ariel, plotting for weeks. This fact proves that the trade-off is an obvious con meant to hurt her. Ursula even sneers to her two slithery sidekicks, "Flotsam, Jetsam, now I've got her, boys!" (*The Little Mermaid*) when Ariel signs over her voice to her. Thus, Ariel's decision directly indicates that choosing a physical transformation which hinders her communicative ability is incredibly foolish because the change will certainly not heighten a man's desire for her. It is clear that Ariel should have analyzed the gaping holes in Ursula's logic further and listened to her gut when she first questioned whether a man did not require communication to fall in love. Furthermore, my argument is put into action later in the film because the voiceless Ariel never ties down Eric's affection with true love's kiss. Her silence, instead, enslaves her to Ursula, sending Ariel into

an evil spiral of events in which she has to fight for her own life. Wachutka puts forth that Ariel's trade-off is meant to glorify the Western ideal that a woman should adapt and alter herself to fit the patriarchy's demands. However, seeing that the heroine's swap began as an evil ploy which almost sent her to her death, I argue that Ariel's decision was actually meant to show the harm in altering one's self for a man.

I realize that there is still an argument surrounding this topic: Ariel's loss of communication is ultimately rewarded because she marries Prince Eric. Russell Banks, an author quoted in "The Ideology of the Mermaid: Children's Literature in the Intro to Theory Course," dives into this argument, lining up his ideology with Wachutka's assertions. Banks asserts, "*The Little Mermaid* was essentially a dramatized tract designed to promote the virtues and rewards of female . . . silence" (Greenberg and Matthew 221). This author is of the opinion that the heroine of the film reaches her goal of getting Eric to fall in love with her by keeping her silence. In a larger sense, Ariel's character explains to women that they must be quiet and maintain their passive nature in Western society if they wish to marry the man of their choosing. However, Bank's overall point needs to be ironed out. The fact that Ariel lost her voice only made her human, which led her to Prince Eric; her loss of communication did not make Eric fall in love with her. On the contrary, before Ariel's newly formed human body is tugged to the surface by Sebastian and Flounder, Eric is found drifting down the shoreline

questioning where the girl with the “beautiful voice,” whom he saw lying beside him after the shipwreck, could be hiding. Furthermore, when he first meets Ariel, the exact girl he has been searching for, silently sitting half naked on a rock, a look of disappointed gloom falls upon his face when she mimes to him that she is mute. He glances downward and responds, “Oh you must not be who I thought you were” (*The Little Mermaid*). The fact that Eric does not recognize Ariel or take interest in her barely clothed body indicates that a woman’s voice or her means of communication is the ultimate influence on a man’s heart. This detail emphasizes the idea that feminine silence is not rewarded throughout this film. It is only when Ursula’s necklace breaks that Ariel’s voice is freed and Eric realizes that Ariel is the girl he has been searching for all this time. This modern-day heroine does not glorify silence. She instead represents the power of a woman’s voice.

The final net thrown out by feminist thinkers is the argument that once Ariel sees Prince Eric, she becomes so overwhelmed with her attraction to him that she loses her bright-eyed curiosity and aggressive thirst for knowledge. Laura Sells, author of the chapter “Where do the Mermaids Stand?: Voice and Body in *The Little Mermaid*” in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, expounds on this topic, arguing that “First, Ariel’s fascination with the human world transformed into a love for Prince Eric . . . Once she meets the prince, her curiosity is

minimized and her drive becomes externally motivated rather than self-directed" (180). At the moment when Ariel sees Eric as she peeks over the ship during his birthday party, Sells observes that the heroine loses all interest in her individual passion to know more about the human world. In other words, her intellectual goals sink below the surface while attaining Prince Eric's affection becomes Ariel's major focus. Sells's conclusion can easily be proven false.

When Ursula asks Ariel to trade her fins for feet, she explains that if Ariel is successful in getting Eric to kiss her with a true love's kiss, she will not only get to be with Eric, she can also remain human permanently. The sea witch's two promises show that Ariel desires to both win Eric's love and become a human: the two goals are of equal importance. Furthermore, both aims are made obvious when Prince Eric takes Ariel into his kingdom to show her the town. In the following scenes, Ariel drags Eric onto the dance floor, interrupts a puppet show by grabbing a puppet off the performer's hand, and even catapults their carriage over a cliff to the other side when Eric hands her the reins. Sheer thrill and excitement light up her face because she is finally able to live out her fantasies of the human world on land. Although I concur that Ariel strongly desires to make Prince Eric fall in love with her, it is vital to remember that this goal never overrides her longing to be human.

The feminist interpretation of Princess Ariel blankets the great

strides that this modern heroine has made against the patriarchal system. Throughout the film, her character reveals the stupidity of incorporating another man's demands into a woman's set of beliefs, while also proving the power of one's own independence and voice. These misreadings befuddle me entirely because they prove that once a man is thrown into the equation, the feminist interpretations transform into either air or water, where no one can breathe in between. My research shows that many feminist readings do not give a woman room to fall in love because every move she makes can be analyzed as solely dependent on the man's decisions or her need to please him. Such a reading raises questions, such as: are independent women supposed to remain loveless, and why does the act of making another love you seem to be viewed as a betrayal to oneself? These questions prove that when it comes to asserting oneself as a powerful, influential woman, adding a love interest is most often viewed by feminist eyes as a sacrifice of the self. However, I argue that Ariel proves a woman can keep hold of her independence and still hook her man. The feminist critics should pack up their harpoons and raise their nets out of the ocean.

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