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Monster or Missing Link? The Mermaid and the Victorian Imagination

Monstre ou chaînon manquant ? La Sirène dans l'imaginaire victorien

Béatrice Laurent

- 1 In the early decades of the nineteenth century, while paleontologists were bringing to light indisputable proofs that species had existed and become extinct, many natural scientists were led to think that the fantastic animals which peopled classical mythologies were possibly not the fantasies of creative minds but lost species. In this context, the existence of mermaids hardly seemed more improbable than that of dinosaurs. First, mermaids had been household names for ages, and still appealed to the Victorian imagination. Moreover, they seemed to have existed in very distant places of the globe: travellers and explorers carried back home tales of them having been spotted in Asia and the West Indies. These two arguments, the longevity of the 'mermaid tale' and its quasi-universalism, were reiterated for most of the nineteenth century and led Simon Wilkin (1790–1862), a fellow of the Linnean Society,¹ to hold on to the belief in the existence of mermaids because 'I cannot admit the probability of a belief in them having existed from such remote antiquity, and spread so widely, without *some foundation in truth*' (Wilkin 59, n.2). As late as 1871, at the meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, a Scottish anthropologist, Lieutenant-Colonel Jonathan Forbes-Leslie (1798–1877), stated that he 'had heard gentlemen quote the belief of intelligent persons, incapable of deception, who asserted that they had distinctly seen and watched mermaids' (*New York Times* August 27, 1871, 6). In the nineteenth century, the question was not whether mermaids existed, but rather what they were really: 'What is a mermaid?' asked Wilkin, 'Aye, there is the very gist of the question' (Wilkin 59, n.2).
- 2 Was she² an animal species in her own right? Or was she a hybrid creature? In that case what were the nature and the cause of her hybridism? Was she an intermediate creature between the human and the animal? Or was she a common ancestor to both aquatic and terrestrial forms of life? These questions were addressed by natural scientists who took

them very seriously because the mermaid species did not seem wholly extinct: some were reported to have been sighted off the coast of Scotland as recently as in 1809 and 1812.

- 3 Nineteenth-century audiences were used to oddities displayed at fairs, which included exotic animals as well as human 'freaks'. The newly discovered platypus, discussed with wit and science by Harriet Ritvo (1997) was a more puzzling creature than the mermaid after all, but it clearly was an animal. Human 'monsters' such as Siamese twins or Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man, analyzed with much insight in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (1996), were known and toured in fairs, but their humanity was not disputed. A contemporary form of human-animal hybridism, however, raised serious dilemmas about the ontological definition of human nature. These are reflected in the tone of the exchanges about the 'mermaid question' that heated up from zoological debate to intellectual war.
- 4 This paper purposes to explore these issues and to suggest that the definition of mermaids oscillated through the nineteenth century from mythological creatures to animal species, and to intermediate beings in the chain of evolution. These definitional hesitations showcase larger ideological changes concerning the way scientists and laymen perceived themselves in relation to other living beings. Three major theories accounted for the existence of mermaids. On the one hand, the fixist understanding of the order of the Creation which dominated early nineteenth-century Western thought was governed by taxonomies, and taught men that animals and plants were what they had always been, and could be grouped in families on the grounds of shared internal or external characteristics. The evolutionist theory, on the other hand, proposed that, as missing links, mermaids illustrated the adaptation of animal life from an aquatic to a terrestrial environment. This second point of view was still a horizontal vision, but it was dynamic, with each stage of development generating the next one. Phylogeny located the mermaid in the great chain of beings as an embryonic form of human life. A third theory explained that mermaids were the common ancestors of various species, which, perceived in a vertical perspective, branched out and adapted to their adopted milieu so as to become apparently very different from one another.
- 5 These gradual changes in perspective were slow and implied a period of coexistence of several theories which may be observed in many different scientific ventures undertaken in the nineteenth century. As far as the mermaid is concerned, the scientific wrangling to make sense of her nature and to include her in one theory or another shows the resistance of ancient beliefs, concomitant in the nineteenth century with new ways of understanding the world. Heather Brink-Roby (2008) suggests that, in the mytho-evolutionary debate, the mermaid was employed by Darwin's adversaries to undermine evolutionism on a theoretical ground. If the mermaid was exposed as a myth, they thought, then, evolutionism, which postulated the existence of transitional forms of life, would be debunked. Yet, this conclusion was not reached. In fact, in the nineteenth century, the scientific explanation of myths testifies to a yearning to elucidate ancient beliefs, not to eradicate them. Reciprocally, the willingness to believe in and defend what the scientific mind had construed fuelled a passionate interest in mythology and folklore. These two impulses, the scientific explication of myths, and the exploration of myth to justify science, energized the collection of 'facts' and instances related to ancient mythologies, as a focus on the celebrated Feejee Mermaid will make clear.

A Questionable Piece of Evidence: the Feejee Mermaid

6 In his *Eccentricities of the Animal Creation* (1869), the antiquary John Timbs (1801–1875) recalled that ‘less than half a century ago, a pretended Mermaid was one of the sights of a London season; to see which credulous persons rushed to pay half-crowns and shillings with a readiness which seemed to rebuke the record’ (Timbs 33). Timbs was referring to the much-acclaimed Feejee Mermaid.

7 The successful reception of this stuffed mermaid specimen in London had been prepared by one Reverend Dr Philip, who presented himself as the representative of the London Missionary Society at Cape Town, Cape of Good Hope. He probably was John Philip D. D. (1775–1851), a Scots Congregationalist minister who was sent to South Africa on behalf of the London Missionary Society, and was appointed their superintendent there in 1822. Philip claimed to have examined Captain Eades’s mermaid³ and dispatched his description to a number of periodicals. To the *Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, he sent a letter dated April 20, 1822, in which he claimed:

I have to-day seen a mermaid, now exhibiting [sic] in this town. I have always treated the existence of this creature as fabulous; but my skepticism is now removed. The head is almost the size of that of a *baboon*.⁴ It is thinly covered with black hair, hanging down The cheek bones are prominent. *The forehead is low*, but, except in this particular, the features are much better proportioned, and bear a more decided resemblance to the *human countenance* than those of any of the baboon tribes. The ears, nose, lips, chin, breasts, fingers and nails, resemble that of the human figure. From the position of the arms, and the manner in which they are placed, I have no doubt that it has clavicles; an appendage belonging to the human subject From the point where the human figure ceases, which is about twelve inches below the vertex of the head, it resembles a large *fish* of the salmon species The figure of the tail is exactly that which is given in the usual representation of the Mermaid. (Philip 1822a, 364)

8 Another letter from Philip reached the *London Medical and Physical Journal* before the stuffed creature arrived in London, as, he explained, ‘the ship which conveys this extraordinary creature to America is to visit the Thames on her way’ (Philip 1822b, 277). Through the high reputation of the journals that published it, Philip’s letter was endowed with the double authority of science and religion. It provided credential to the sensational announcement, and made the public ready to believe in the existence of the hybrid creature which it meticulously described:

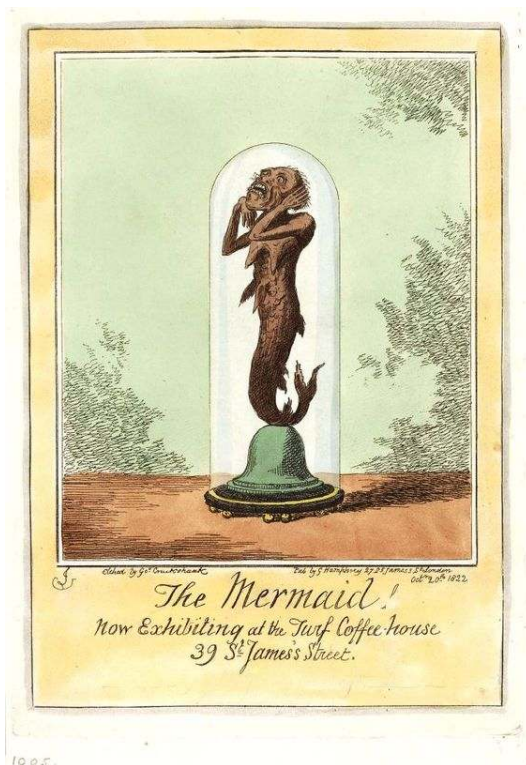
The countenance has an expression of terror which gives it an appearance of a *caricature of a human face*; but I am disposed to think that both these circumstances are accidental, and have arisen from the manner in which the creature met its death The length of *the animal* is three feet; but not having been well preserved, it has shrunk considerably The canine teeth resemble those of a full grown *dog*; all the others resemble those of a *human subject*. (Philip 1822b, 277)

9 Dr Philip’s titillating announcement of the mermaid’s visit to London was also made in *The New Monthly Magazine* (Philip 1822c, 403), in which he stated that he had just seen the mermaid on April 26, and in *The Gentleman’s Magazine and Historical Chronicle* (Philip 1822d, 82), in which the date of the visit to the exhibit was this time said to have happened two days later, on April 28. In these last two communications, the tone is less formal and the mermaid is presented as a piece of entertainment rather than a biological specimen: ‘As it is probable no description of this extraordinary creature has yet reached England,’ wrote

the clergyman, 'the following particulars respecting it may gratify your curiosity and amuse you' (Philip 1822d, 82).

- 10 Why Reverend Dr John Philip, whose name is better remembered as the founder of the temperance and anti-slavery movements in South Africa than as a natural scientist, should have been fascinated by the mummified creature to the point of copying the same letter so many times and sending it to at least four periodicals—and possibly many more, who chose not to publish it—is unclear. Why he should, moreover, have yielded to the temptation of a petty lie regarding the date of his visit to the mermaid, is surprising. Philip was clearly intent on arousing Londoners' interest in the exhibit, and his writing reads like a piece of advertising. Whatever Philip's motivation may have been, the strategy worked and triggered much curiosity in the mermaid when it reached England in September, even before it was exhibited in October. The advertising campaign initiated by Philip was pursued by Eades who spared neither effort nor funds to have the exhibit announced in major newspapers, with an illustration by no lesser an artist than George Cruikshank (1792–1878) [Fig. 1]. This picture presents a pleasant contrast between the delicate pale green in the background and in the supporting bell, and the more vivid sandstone brown used in the lower part, suggestive of the natural environment of the mermaid in the depths of the sea. Cruikshank reinforced this illusion by hatching the background in the top right corner and on both sides of the central figure with loose suggestions of seaweeds. These pictorial efforts, however, fail to make the mermaid a pretty sight. The parched specimen, partially turned away, presents sagging dry breasts and seems to be holding her head, tilted backwards, with her skeletal upper limbs. The facial expression, bulging eyes and gaping mouth, is one of terror, as if some horrible apparition in the upper left, outside the picture plane and beyond the yellow frame which represents the warmer earthly world, had struck her dead.

Figure 1. George Cruikshank, *The Mermaid!* 1822, British Museum.



- 11 Ugly as it was, the mermaid quickly became a celebrity. ‘Throughout the autumn of 1822’, writes Jan Bondeson,
- the mermaid was London’s greatest scientific sensation: people thronged to see it, and most newspapers had articles about ‘the remarkable Stuffed Mermaid.’ . . . It was jealously guarded by Captain Eades and his assistant and protected by a heavy glass dome, inside which the creature stood erect, supported by its tail. (Bondeson 41)
- 12 As soon as it was exhibited, though, the Feejee mermaid raised a zoological debate. Some scientists such as Sir Everard Home (1756–1832) seriously suspected a hoax; others, including Dr Rees Price (1780–1860) believed in the authenticity of what was submitted to their examination and were ready to accept it in the grand table of living beings in the space that Linnaeus, the father of taxonomy, had left especially blank because he thought that mermaids might exist. Between and beside these two positions, a number of opinions could and were accommodated and defended. These can be observed by paying close attention to the verbal and visual descriptions of the specimen. Most insisted on the combination of simian, canine, piscine and human features which future visitors were invited to verify. The mermaid was thus material for the empirical gaze of naturalists, and could gratify positivist logic. She was a tangible support for various hypotheses that had been looming in the scientific imagination for more than two decades, and which the manufacturers of the poor artefact had aptly grasped. Robert Chambers (1802–1871), the successful editor of reference books and evolutionist thinker, remembered in his *Book of Days* that
- [t]his imposture was a hideous combination of a dried monkey’s head and body, and the tail of a fish, believed to have been manufactured on the coast of China, and exhibited as the product of the seas there. George Cruikshank has preserved its features, and we are tempted to reproduce his spirited etching. (Chambers 266)
- 13 Follows an etching which shows the mermaid under her glass bell, in a similar posture to the one depicted by Cruikshank, but with substantially more flesh on her bones, so as to present more lively arms, fuller pendulous breasts, and a pleasant curve where a human bottom would be. Chambers added a footnote to specify that:
- This was in the summer of 1822, . . . a contemporary described it as ‘now the great source of attraction in the British metropolis; and three to four hundred people every day pay their shilling each, to see a disgusting sort of compound animal.’ . . . Though naturalists and journalists fully exposed the imposture, we are at the same time assured that, ‘this circumstance does not appear to affect the exhibition, which continues as crowded as ever.’ (Chambers 266)
- 14 Indeed, the Feejee mermaid was exposed to be a fake in December 1822, by Sir Everard Home and his assistant William Clift, the Conservator of the Hunterian Museum.⁵ At first sight, it seems the ‘fixist’ scientific orthodoxy won. The show, which had been held at the respectable, red-carpeted Turf Coffeehouse in St James’s Street, closed down in January 1823. However, the stuffed mermaid continued to attract public attention: she was subsequently exhibited at popular venues such as Bartholomew Fair and the Horse Fair, and then taken to tour the provinces until 1825. At Bartholomew Fair’s show XVI, catchy posters tricked the public to believe that their eyes were going to behold a ‘Real Wonder!’ as it was boldly announced. Chambers commented that ‘*outside* the booth at the fair there was a picture of the orthodox mermaid, with beautiful features and hair, comb in one hand, mirror in the other, and so forth’ (Chambers 614). In the 1840s, the artefact which ‘drew crowds by its ugliness, and shewed what wretched things will suffice to gull the public’ (Chambers 614) was sold by Captain Eades’s son to two American amusement

entrepreneurs, Moses Kimball, the owner of the Boston Museum, and his friend, Phineas Taylor Barnum, the manager of the famous circus, and embarked on a new career on the other side of the Atlantic.

- 15 The continuing success of the mermaid exhibit was sustained by the assertion that, even if this one specimen was a fake, this did not invalidate the existence of the whole species. Some scientists and a very large part of the common people were still convinced that hybrids did exist, either as contemporary composite animals or as remote 'missing links'. The persistence of the belief in the existence of monsters and fantastical creatures and the number of publications concerned with them were made possible because, to take up Harriet Ritvo's word about mermaids, they 'embodied alternative modes of understanding the natural world' (Ritvo 186). These creatures accounted for the animal, even the monstrous aspects of human personality that criminologists of the positivist biological school such as Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909) were discovering and explaining as atavistic behaviours. The Feejee mermaid filled in a gap in what Hans Robert Jauss⁶ would term 'the horizons of expectation' of the early nineteenth century. It materialized what natural scientists had been waiting to witness: a specimen that could either validate their theory or undermine alternative ones.
- 16 The Feejee mermaid, far as it was from the expected beautiful appearance of the maid of the ocean, looked scientifically plausible, and seemed to answer Simon Wilkin's question by exposing that she was part animal, part human. But this definition was unsatisfactory as gradation had to be taken into consideration to answer the subsequent questions: was the animal part or the human part prevalent? Was it a monster? If so, as Gillian Beer points out, more questions followed: 'The question "what is a monster?" and the apparently related question "where is the boundary between mankind and the animal?"' (Beer 1992, 14). Questions bearing on the ontological definition of mankind 'haunt [nineteenth-century] literature and theory' (Beer 1992, 14) and generated various responses to the mermaid question. These, in turn, voiced anxious reactions to the imperilled distinction between human and animal species, and raised the nightmarish possibility of a human-animal hybrid existing as the fruit of an unnatural union, or through the manipulation of a mad scientist such as the fictional Dr Frankenstein and Dr Moreau⁷ who created composite monsters. These possibilities testify to what I have described in the introduction as a 'horizontal vision,' and result from the mental image of the (taxonomic) table in which a line of separation between two blocks would have been broken.
- 17 Alternatively, deciding that the mermaid was an animal species in its own right and reinforcing the line of separation between the animal and the human was a morally more comfortable option.

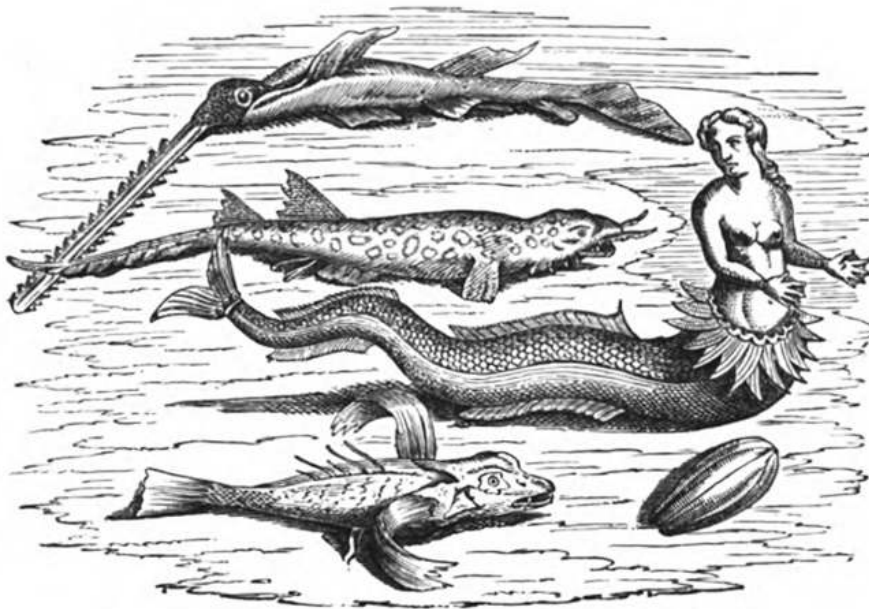
The Valentyn Mermaid: a New Species Identified?

- 18 After inspecting the Feejee Mermaid, Dr Rees Price was ready to accept it as the representative of a new species. In *The Gentleman's Magazine* of October 1822, Price enthused that 'the introduction of this animal into this country will form an important area in natural history' (Price 366). Since ocean travels had expanded in the eighteenth century for the purpose of trade and exploration, mermaid sightings should have been reported throughout the globe. Evidence, however, had to be exhumed from distant sources: in the testimonies of a Portuguese, Demas Bosquez, who dissected a mermaid in

1560 and found it to be 'in all respects conformable to the human' (Lee 130), of Sir Thomas Browne (1605–1682), and of the Dutch minister and naturalist François Valentijn (or Valentyn) (1666–1727). More recent sightings near home, off the coast of the Netherlands, of Scotland, of Ireland and even of England, were communicated orally and had not led to the capture, dissection or even drawing from life of a specimen.

- 19 The Valentyn Mermaid which had been known to specialists since the publication of *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën vervattende een naaukeurige en uitvoerige verhandelinge van Nederlands mogentheyd in die gewesten* (1724–1726) reached a larger public after the engraving representing her was reproduced in Sir James Emerson Tennent's *Sketches of the Natural History of Ceylon* (73) and Henry Lee's *Sea Monsters Unmasked* (Fig. 13). [Figure 2] In this plate, the mermaid is placed among four odd-looking fishes: a sawfish, a leopard catfish, a long fin carp and what looks like a melon butterflyfish. Not quite faithful to the respective sizes of these animals, this stylized illustration locates the mermaid in a 'naturalised' context. Her fish lower half undulates between the leopard catfish and the long fin carp, visually enforcing the analogy between the three creatures. Her human upper half, however, meets the canon of feminine beauty in eighteenth-century Western art: small round breasts pushed together, as if clad in 'invisible clothing'⁸ so as to create a deeper inter-mammary cleft, hair done in curly waves on either side of a centre part. Except for the webbing between the fingers of her two open hands, the upper half of her body exemplifies the paragon of female beauty.

Figure 2. Henry Lee's *Sea Monsters Unmasked* (Fig. 13).



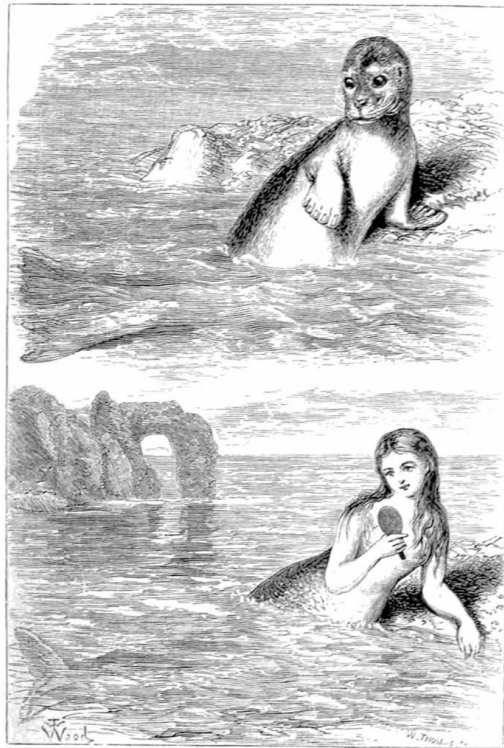
- 20 Contrary to Valentyn who perceived the mermaid as one of the fishes that share some attributes with other species, such as the catfish or butterflyfish, the Irish traveller Tennent agreed with Simon Wilkin that the mermaid's next of kin in the animal world was the seal or dugong. Simon Wilkin proposed that it was 'a most supposable, and probably often seen, though undescribed, species of the herbivorous cetacean (the seals and lamantins), more approaching, in several respects, the human configuration, than any species we know' (Wilkin 59, n.2). According to Tennent, the female of this

phytophagous cetacean possesses characteristics that could have led to a misinterpretation:

The rude approach to the human outline, observed in the shape of the head of this creature, and the attitude of the mother when suckling her young, clasping it to her breast with one flipper, while swimming with the other, holding the heads of both above water... probably gave rise to the fable of the 'mermaid'. (Tennent 69)

- 21 The dugong, whose name is derived from the Malay *duyong*, meaning 'lady of the sea', was described and illustrated in Tennent's volume so as to visually enforce what science suggested: that fables were imaginative readings of natural facts. To sustain Wilkin's and Tennent's propositions, John Timbs chose to include in his *Eccentricities of the Animal Creation* (40) an illustrative plate by T.W. Wood entitled 'Seal and mermaid' [Fig. 3] depicting on the same page, in a similar posture, the two species, so as to underline their resemblance. Understandably, Wood played down the motherly attributes of both, creating a smooth bosom, with a faint suggestion of swelling in the place where breasts should be.

Figure 3. T.W. Wood's engraving 'Seal and mermaid'



The Puzzling Problem of Mermaid Reproduction

- 22 The female dugong breastfeeding her young was illustrated in Tennent (69) [Figure 4]—not one, but two mother-and-suckling-babe groups, one in front view in the foreground, one in profile in the background—creating the impression that the ocean was a nursery, the specific locus of mother and child affectionate bond. The pre-established association of dugongs and mermaids permitted artistic representations of motherly mermaids by Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898). Indeed, Burne-Jones's series of mermaid watercolours⁹ executed between 1880 and 1890 represent mother-and-child mermaid groups, excluding

most of the time the presence or even the hypothesis of a father, a fact which could be explained by the recently discovered genetic phenomenon of parthenogenesis. With its typical satirical humour, *Punch* parodied the language of science when it described the mermaid as 'a pneumono-branchiate animal [which], as there are no males, constitutes an instance of true parthenogenesis' (*Punch* 79). Mermen were reported to exist but they were less successful as visual artefacts and less attractive to the collective imagination, whereas the motherly mermaid was the embodiment of ideal motherhood, untainted from sex, a sort of lay and aquatic equivalent to the Virgin Mary whose immaculate conception had been defined as a doctrine in 1854 by Pope Pius IX. Parthenogenesis was in fact a convenient explanation to solve the puzzling question of mermaid reproduction. A rival theory held that, as a hermaphrodite, the mermaid was capable of self-fertilization. When, on 10 January 1860, Charles Darwin wrote to his friend Charles Lyell that 'Our ancestor was an animal which breathed water, had a swim-bladder, a great swimming tail, an imperfect skull and undoubtedly was an (sic) hermaphrodite!' (*Darwin Correspondence* 2647), he may not have been thinking of mermaids. Yet, Darwin's writings about aquatic mammals which were the ancestors of mankind enable the reader to visualize these hermaphrodite creatures as sirens.

Figure 4. A female dugong by J. Emerson Tennent in *Sketches of the Natural History of Ceylon*.

CHAP. I.]

THE DUGONG.

69



THE DUGONG

- 23 In the nineteenth century, sexuality and reproduction were at the core of scientific enquiry. Contemporary research was particularly concerned with the conception and reproduction of hybrids and mongrels. When Thomas Henry Huxley undertook a lecturing tour of the United States in 1863 with the purpose of bringing the new theory of evolutionism on the other side of the Atlantic, he addressed these burning issues. His view was that hybrids and mongrels were sometimes confounded, which led to misunderstandings, while in fact an essential difference in degree had to be taken into

consideration: 'there is a great difference between "mongrels", which are crosses between distinct races, and "hybrids", which are crosses between distinct species. The mongrels are, so far as we know, fertile with one another' (Huxley 111). A mermaid, if proved to be the product of two distinct species would have to enter the category of hybrids—an aquatic version of the mule—and could not be fertile. Mermaid babies born of a mermaid mother were therefore purely fictional. The reason for hybrid sterility was still unknown, but Huxley rejected 'the common teleological explanation . . . that it is to prevent the impurity of the blood resulting from the crossing of one species with another' (Huxley 111). The common opinion that Huxley was denouncing was held by William Darwin Fox (1805–1880), among others. In their correspondence, Fox and his illustrious cousin Charles reverted many times to the question of hybridism. Charles Darwin even jotted down in his 'Notes on Hybridity' the following thought: 'Nature acts as a man would. If two of his best breeds united he would castrate the mongrel' (*The Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, 10: 707). This personification of nature explained why cross fertility could produce a mule while hybrid sterility would make the mule infertile.

- 24 If, therefore, the mermaid resulted from a human-animal crossing, her sterility was understandable, and seemed to be verified in literature. The heroine of Andersen's 'Little Mermaid' (1837, first translated into English in 1846), embodies the Victorian feminine virtues of love, devotion, selflessness, beauty and silence: she is so self-sacrificing that she bargains her tongue for a pair of legs so as to look more human and conquer the heart of the Prince she loves. Yet, the conclusion of the tale matches contemporary scientific views: by way of natural selection, the male is attracted to a female of his kind, and the two will contribute to the preservation of the species. While a romantic reading of the tale is that the mermaid's unrequited love breaks her heart and causes her self-destruction, a scientific one is that she, as a hybrid, is sterile, and therefore less qualified as a mating companion for a human partner. Although tales of mermaids marrying men existed and were reported by the Very Reverend John O'Hanlon (1821–1905), the Irish folklorist, who stated that 'the merrow [the Irish name for mermaid] was capable of attachment to human beings, and is reported to have intermarried and lived with them for years in succession' (O'Hanlon 57), there were some doubts about the veracity of these stories. O'Hanlon himself conceded that 'some allegory is probably concealed under the fiction' (O'Hanlon 57).
- 25 Rather than the product of an unnatural union, the mermaid could more likely be considered a monster, that is, something that many scientists interpreted as an accidental variation of nature. In chapter 1 of *The Origin*, Darwin remarked that 'monstrosities cannot be separated by any clear line of distinction from mere variations' (Darwin 1859, 8). The blurred line of distinction was conveniently used to construe the mermaid as both a seductive female of the humankind, and therefore man's natural companion, and a monster with terrible teeth like those of a dog that turned her into man's enemy. The dichotomy voiced contemporary anxieties concerning the nature of women, especially when it was embedded in the scientific view of the Great Chain of Being. The monster was the original woman, a product of Nature 'red in tooth and claw',¹⁰ and the charming harmless sea-maiden, a product of civilization. Thus 'two diverse ideas—connection and encroachment—are both sheltered within the phrase "the missing link"' (Beer 1992, 15) in the evolutionist view seen from a horizontal perspective.

A 'missing link' Found, or a Common Ancestor?

- 26 The idea of the Great Chain of Being surfaced a long time ago very far back: it can be spotted in Plotinus's Neoplatonic philosophy, and can be followed through Renaissance speculations about the place of man in the order of the Creation. The concept gained new strength when it was integrated into 'the quest of missing links' in eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinking, and it took a different turn in the nineteenth century, when it was approached in the perspective of evolutionism. The humoristic journal *Punch* was quick to claim that the mermaid (to which it gave the taxonomic name *Siren Canora*) was 'one of the connecting links of which many are missing, between Man and the Ascidian'¹¹ (*Punch* 79).
- 27 Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the evolutionist hypothesis had been suggested by Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's *Histoire naturelle des animaux sans vertèbres*¹² (1815–22) and Robert Chambers in his *Vestiges of the Natural History of the Creation* (1844). To these natural scientists and their followers, including geologists and fossil collectors such as William Buckland (1784–1856), Henry de la Beche (1796–1855), and Mary Anning (1799–1847), the fossils of extinct species anchored the concept of missing links in the context of evolution. They also established the sea as the locus of the creation of all living species. Since water had preceded land in the order of the geological creation, fish must have come out of the water at some stage to become mammals, and mermaids were a visual rendering of the process. Their evolution from water to land was also one from nature to culture. The mermaid fitted neatly as a connecting link between the two elements and the two concepts.
- 28 Perhaps, then, mermaids had once existed and were a missing link that could explain the evolution from fishes to humans. This was suggested by the description of the water-breathing, swimming-tailed, hermaphrodite ancestor that Darwin humorously considered as 'a pleasant genealogy for mankind' (*Darwin Correspondence* 2647). This comment was issued just after the publication of the second edition of the *Origin of Species*, when the naturalist was involved in answering a huge number of letters, some of them hostile to the concept of evolution. In the previously quoted letter to Lyell, Darwin mimics the assertive tone he would use to silence sceptical voices, but also to humble male scientists who thought too highly of themselves. Indeed they provocatively stated that water, not earth, was their original locus, and that gender differences were introduced at later stages of evolution, since the common ancestor to all human beings was neither male nor female, but a hermaphrodite. This speculation was based on a common practice of paleontological and evolutionary theories: 'the matching of ontogeny (the life-cycle development of the single organism) and phylogeny (species development),' which, according to Gillian Beer, 'has been one of the most powerful new metaphors of the past 150 years' (Beer 1996, 123).
- 29 The pairing of individual and species development excited mid-nineteenth century people. This methodology was also used, for instance, at the meeting of the Ethnological Society of 3 February 1863 by Robert Dunn (1799–1877) for a paper on the 'Psychological Differences which Exist amongst the Typical Races of Man'. Dunn, a phrenologist with ethnological interests argued that differences between various 'races of the human family' were not of a physiological nature. Instead, he considered that racial differences were psychological and resulted from various stages of intellectual and moral

development attained, which he measured by using the Caucasian as a standard: 'the Negro exhibiting the imperfect brow, projecting lower jaw, and slender bent limbs of the Caucasian child some considerable time before its birth, the Aboriginal Americans representing the same child nearer birth, and the Mongolian the same new born' (Dunn 177). The same methodology could have inspired Darwin's comment about the genealogy of mankind. From the observation of human embryos, which develop in a liquid environment, grow what look like fins before they become limbs and possess both sexual characteristics that will later make them boys or girls, the image of hermaphrodite aquatic forebears could be construed. The same methodology transpires from Dr Rees Price's description of the Feejee mermaid: 'its head is nearly round, about the size of that of a child two or three year old; its forehead somewhat depressed, and chin projecting, similar to the Negro' (Price 366). The similarity between the specimen, the Caucasian infant and the African locates the mermaid in the chain of evolution. Indeed, the speculation that distant proto-human beings must resemble contemporary human beings in their embryonic forms was rather widely shared and provided the foundation on which the existence of an aquatic ancestor—the mermaid—could be postulated. Price's, Dunn's and Darwin's speculations were variously supported or contradicted through the debate over the origin and nature of a mummified creature that possessed many of the characteristics of a human being belonging to 'the Negro type' at an intercepted stage of development: the Feejee mermaid, as she was displayed in London.

- 30 In the autumn of 1822, Darwin was an impressionable 13-year-old boy who could barely miss the scientific attraction of the season. He does not seem to have been taken to see the Feejee mermaid, but he certainly read and heard reports that made her appear more attractive than the exhibit actually was. Possibly the embellished artistic representation of the aquatic creature outside the booth at the Bartholomew Fair was still on Darwin's mind when he visited Lima, in Peru in the summer of 1835. In his notebook, he remarked the beauty of local women and the variety of human types he observed: 'ladies, like mermaids, could not keep eyes away from them:—remarkably mongrel population'.¹³ The visual presence of beautiful women conjured up the idea of the mermaid which, in turn, was immediately associated with the remark about their 'mongrelisation'. The mermaid, as a type, brought together conceptions related to femininity and to interbreeding. As such, she offered puzzling alternatives to the straight and horizontal lineage theory that Darwin sought to undermine. In the 'tree of life' hypothesis, evolution meant that beings had existed with features that later were more fully developed in descendants according to their milieus. A mermaid could be seen as the common ancestor to the cetacean and the human. As the metaphoric images associated with the two evolutionary theories suggest, there were hesitations between a horizontal vision, the chain, and a vertical one, the tree. Instead of a continuous link of dependence and modification, the tree as a metaphor could accommodate puzzling dead-ends. There had been some dry branches: some intermediary creatures had not survived.

Conclusion

- 31 Whether it was approached with the paradigm of the horizontal Great Chain of Being or the vertical Tree of Life, evolutionism generated many new speculations. Since species were not the result of a definite divine *fiat* but constantly evolved, adapted and changed, within a lifespan as well as through generations, and even more so through hybridization,

the mermaid could be seen as one nature's riddle, and like other monsters and missing links, 'it figured nineteenth-century anxieties, not only about our relationships to other life-forms, but about a variety of social relations within and beyond European culture' (Beer 1992, 14). Though they did not all share the same vision of evolution, in trying to tackle the mermaid question, nineteenth-century scientists unanimously shared the positivist view that the accumulation of facts would eliminate the subjective, literary, and mythical elements from science. To voice their opinions, however, they resorted to images and metaphors that were loaded with the very elements they wished to discard. Because scientific discourse is made of words, it cannot do without connotations that unwittingly betray and induce interpretation. Indeed, 'Knowledge and interpretation are inseparable' writes the post-structuralist philosopher Todd May, therefore, 'the distinction between wanting to know and wanting to impose an interpretation cannot be made' (May 76). Furthermore, when illustrations or objects are introduced to support scientific discourse, their visual or material appeal often supersedes the theoretical explanation, and they take, as it were, a life of their own. This is probably the reason why, even when she was eventually discarded by Home and Clift, the mermaid was not vanquished: in the latter half of the century the maid of the ocean was revived, far more seductive in the literary and artistic imagination than the poor wrinkled stuffed artefact of 1822 had ever been. She could not be eradicated because she had taken on a new function, as a heroine of the nineteenth-century tale of evolution.

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NOTES

1. Founded in 1788, the Linnean Society of London takes its name from the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus and is committed to the study of all aspects of the biological sciences.
 2. Even though mermen were occasionally heard of, the majority of fish-human hybrids were female and often referred to by the pronoun 'she', rather than 'it'.
 3. Samuel Barrett Eades was said to have bought the mermaid from a sailor.
 4. Italics mine.
 5. This museum of anatomy opened in 1813 at the Royal College of Surgeons of England.
 6. *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, Trans. T. Bahti, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.
 7. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*, 1818; H. G. Wells, *The Island of Dr Moreau*, 1896.
 8. About 'invisible clothing' shaping the form and taste in female nude representations, see Hollander (1978, 85–89) and Wiber (1997, 53–4).
 9. For instance *The Mermaid Family*, 1878, coloured chalk, watercolour and bodycolour on card, private collection; *Mermaid with her Offspring*, c.1880, private collection; *The Sea Nymph*, 1881, private collection; *Mermaids in the Deep*, 1882, private collection; *The Mermaid*, 1882, gouache and watercolour on paper, Tate.
 10. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 'In Memoriam A. H. H.', 1849.
 11. A class of primitive marine invertebrates.
 12. Translated by John George Children and published in six parts in issues 27–32 of the *Quarterly Journal* from 1822 to 1824.
 13. Chancellor, Gordon & John van Wyhe (eds), *Charles Darwin's Notebooks from the Voyage of the Beagle*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 432.
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ABSTRACTS

While the evolutionist hypothesis was gaining ground in the early decades of the nineteenth century and paleontology showed that species had existed and become extinct, many natural scientists were led to think that the fantastic animals which peopled classical mythologies maybe were not the fantasies of creative minds but lost species. In this context, mermaids that had been household names for ages were perceived as hybrid creatures, possibly even missing links between the aquatic and terrestrial forms of life. Moreover, the mermaid species did not seem wholly extinct: some were reported to have been sighted off the coast of Scotland as recently as in 1809 and 1812, and when the Feejee mermaid was exhibited in London in 1822, it raised a zoological debate. While some scientists such as Sir Everard Home seriously suspected a hoax, others, including Dr Rees Price, were convinced that the mermaid was the 'found link' in the chain of evolution, and were ready to accept it in the grand table of living beings in the space that Linnaeus, the father of taxonomy, had left especially blank because he thought that mermaids might exist. Nineteenth-century audiences were used to oddities. The newly discovered platypus was a more puzzling creature than the mermaid after all, but it clearly was an animal. Human 'monsters' such as Siamese twins or Joseph Merrick, the 'Elephant Man', were

known and toured in fairs, but their humanity was not disputed. A contemporary form of human-animal hybridism, however, raised serious questions about the ontological definition of human nature. What started as a zoological debate heated up in an intellectual war because the 'mermaid question' was imbedded in larger issues related to hybridism. This paper purposes to explore these issues and to follow their development throughout the Victorian period.

Au cours des premières décennies du dix-neuvième siècle, tandis que l'hypothèse évolutionniste gagnait du terrain et que les paléontologues démontraient que des espèces avaient existé et s'étaient éteintes, nombre de scientifiques furent conduits à penser que les animaux fantastiques peuplant les mythologies classiques n'étaient peut-être pas des fantaisies d'esprits particulièrement imaginatifs, mais des espèces disparues. Dans ce contexte, les sirènes, qui faisaient partie de l'imaginaire collectif depuis l'Antiquité, en vinrent à être perçues comme des créatures hybrides, que l'on soupçonnait même d'être le chaînon manquant entre les formes de vie aquatique et terrestre. En tant qu'espèce, la sirène ne semblait pas totalement éteinte: on rapportait en avoir vu au large des côtes écossaises en 1809 et 1812, et lorsque la sirène des Fiji fut exposée à Londres en 1822, elle déclencha un débat zoologique. Certains scientifiques comme Everard Home soupçonnaient un canular; d'autres, parmi lesquels le Dr Rees Price, étaient convaincus que la sirène était une espèce animale qu'il convenait de rajouter dans la grande table des taxonomies à l'emplacement que Linné avait laissé vacant parce qu'il pensait que les sirènes pouvaient exister; d'autres encore étaient persuadés d'avoir trouvé en elle un chaînon manquant. Au dix-neuvième siècle, le public était habitué aux bizarreries de la nature. L'ornithorynque nouvellement découvert était une créature plus déconcertante que la sirène après tout, mais c'était clairement un animal. Des « monstres » humains tels que les siamois ou John Merrick, l'homme éléphant, étaient exhibés dans les foires, mais nul ne mettait en doute leur appartenance à l'espèce humaine. La sirène, en revanche, se présentait comme un hybride de l'humain et de l'animal, ce qui soulevait des questions sur la définition ontologique de la nature humaine. 'La question de la sirène' qui n'était au départ qu'un sujet de débat zoologique devint prétexte à une véritable guerre intellectuelle dans laquelle s'affrontèrent les partisans du créationnisme et ceux de l'évolutionnisme, avec un acharnement d'autant plus féroce qu'elle touchait directement aux grandes questions liées à l'hybridation. Cet article propose d'explorer ces questions et d'en suivre le développement au cours de la période victorienne.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Sirène, Darwin (Charles), évolutionnisme, mythologie, chaînon manquant, hybride

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