Most of the tales written by Hans Christian Andersen were not taken from oral tradition. Although he occasionally borrowed motifs from such tradition, the greater portion of his so-called fairy tales were strictly literary creations. The distinguished Danish folklorist Bengt Holbek claimed that of some 156 “fairy tales and stories” published by Andersen, “only seven of them are manifestly taken from Danish oral tradition” (Holbek, 1990, p. 165), a number confirmed by Grønbæk (1996, p. 221). On the other hand, Elias Bredsdorff in his splendid biography of Andersen suggests that “nine tales were based on folktales Andersen had heard” (1975, p. 311). Whether the number is seven or nine, there can be no question that the percentage of authentic traditional tales in Andersen’s total corpus is small.

In the parlance of folkloristics, the academic study of folklore, such literary creations are usually referred to as “Kunstmärchen” as opposed to “Volksmärchen.” There is a huge body of such literary or art tales, many of which have become a staple in the canon of children’s literature. One of Andersen’s literary tales that has received such hallowed status is his classic “The Little Mermaid” (1837). In one of his letters, Andersen acknowledged proudly that whereas his first tales were “mostly old ones” he had “heard as a child,” the later ones that were his “own creations such as ‘The Little Mermaid’ . . . were the most popular” (Bredsdorff, 1975, p. 165).
In “The Little Mermaid,” Andersen utilizes two major folklore motifs. The first is the very figure of the mermaid, a young girl whose lower parts consist of a substantial fish’s tail. The figure is listed in the six-volume Motif-Index of Folk-Literature as “Motif B81. Mermaid. Woman with tail of fish. Lives in sea.” The mermaid is not universal—no motif, for that matter, is universal in the sense of existing among all peoples past and present. It is not found in native North and South America, for example. There are many accounts of female supernatural creatures inhabiting watery domains (Moog, 1987; Röheim, 1948), but most of them do not refer to demonic beings with fish-like lower extremities. Although not universal, the mermaid or some early form thereof is well attested in classical antiquity (Deonna, 1928; Faral, 1953; Shepard, 1949) and is significantly represented in ancient, medieval (Almendral Oppermann, 1992; Broendsted, 1965; Goodman, 1983; Leclercq-Marx, 1997) and modern (Liberati, 1995) art.

There is some confusion of the mermaid figure with the siren (Marot, 1958; Rachewiltz, 1987) and apparently the evolution of the mermaid from the siren involved a shift from ornithomorphic to pisciform features. Just when the siren lost her bird-like appearance and obtained her fish-tail to become the “modern” mermaid is in dispute (Benwell and Waugh, 1961, p. 48; Burnel, 1949, p. 201). One authority claims that the earliest mention of a fish-tailed siren occurred around the turn of the 8th century (Phillpotts, 1980, p. 32), while another indicates the 6th century (Toucheefeu-Meynier, 1962, p. 450). There have been numerous alleged sightings of mermaids (Waugh, 1960) as well as repeated attempts to display fake mermaid specimens in circus freak shows (Bondeson, 1999, pp. 36–63). Though few now believe in the existence of actual mermaids—one scientific parody deplores the absence of mermaid skeletons, which might have been used as an index of mermaid population statistics (Banse, 1990, p. 151)—the popularity of the mermaid figure continues unabated in modern literature (Roebling, 1991), movies (Bouillet, 1958), as well as in jokes and cartoons (Johnson, 1987).

The second motif as identified in the standard international Motif-Index of Folk-Literature mentioned above is K1911. The false bride (substituted bride). An impostor takes the wife’s place without the husband’s knowledge. This second motif, though critical for an understanding of the plot of “The Little Mermaid” has not received much attention by students of either Andersen’s 1837 story or Disney’s 1989 feature-length cartoon adaptation. In Andersen’s narrative, the mermaid saves the prince from drowning in a shipwreck caused by a storm. But later having forfeited her voice (by having her tongue cut out) to the sea witch in exchange for having her fish tail replaced by human legs, she is unable to reveal her identity to the prince. The prince mistakenly believes the princess of a neighboring kingdom was the one who had saved him. In the Disney version, it is Ursula, the sea witch, who transforms herself into a beautiful young woman and who, armed with the mermaid Ariel’s exquisite voice, persuades Prince Eric that it was she who saved him thereby causing him to seek to marry her. (The seductive power of Ariel’s singing voice is an echo of the original siren figure.) As we shall see, the failure to take account of the false or substituted bride motif has greatly impeded the analysis of the underlying symbolic content of Disney’s “The Little Mermaid.”

The various interpretative essays devoted to the Disney film include structural (Thomsen, 1990), moralistic (Hastings, 1993), feminist (O’Brien, 1996; Trites, 1990–1991), and psychoanalytic (Soracco, 1990; Tseelon, 1995) approaches among others (Nybo, 1990). Folkloristic treatments (Bendix, 1993; Ingwersen and Ingwersen, 1990) emphasize Disney’s utilization of folktale formulas, e.g. the traditional happy ending. Not all discussions of Disney’s transformation of Andersen’s plot are equally sophisticated. Tseelon, for instance, argues that the Disney version has changed the character of the story by turning “the myth into a folktale” (1995, p. 1026). Calling Andersen’s story a “myth” reveals a serious error in genre identification. A myth, defined in concrete technical terms, is a traditional sacred narrative explaining how the earth and humankind came to be in their present form. Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” is not a traditional narrative; it is mostly a literary product of his creative imagination. It is not sacred as it does not explain how the earth and humankind came to be in their present form. Tseelon’s claim that it is a myth is based upon her mistaken notion that “a myth is a story which involves supernatural beings” (1995, p. 1018), but the vast majority of stories involving supernatural beings (such as fairies, ghosts, vampires—and mermaids) are legends. A legend is a narrative told as true and set in the post-creation world. Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” would thus be more correctly classified as a “literary legend.”
It is true that the Disney transform of Andersen's literary legend has elements of a folktale, but it would be more accurate to specify the particular kind of folktale. Folktales are fictional narratives and they include animal tales, cumulative and other formula tales, and jokes. The particular form of folktale relevant to the Disney film is the so-called magic and wonder tale (misleadingly labeled in English as "fairy tale"). In the standard canonical index of Indo-European folktales, tales of magic or fairy tales are limited to Aarne-Thompson tale types 300–749 (Aarne and Thompson, 1966, pp. 88–254). There are very few fairies found in fairy tales and most accounts of fairies are told as true and would accordingly therefore be more appropriately classified as legends, not folktales. One of the characteristics of fairy tales is that they typically end with a marriage as the Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp so brilliantly demonstrated in his pathbreaking *Morphology of the Folktale*, first published in 1928. The final function of the sequence of 31 functions or units of plot action identified by Propp in his corpus of 100 Russian fairy tales is labeled "Wedding" (1968, p. 63).

In Andersen's original story, the little mermaid does not marry the handsome prince and this sad story of unrequited or unfulfilled heterosexual love has been linked to Andersen's own personal life (Bredsdorff, 1975, pp. 280–282, 348; Golden, 1998, p. 100; Griffith, 1984; Lederer, 1986, pp. 169–172) and what appear in retrospect to be his latent homosexual tendencies. As a small boy, Andersen played with dolls even to the extent of sewing dresses for them; as a youth he studied briefly at the Royal Ballet in Copenhagen in an abortive attempt to become a ballet dancer; one of his principal life-long hobbies was making amusing paper cut-outs; never married, he appears to have had a long-standing "crush" on his patron Jonas Collin's son Edvard to whom he wrote many "love" letters; and as an old man, he invariably invited one of Jonas Collin's young grandsons to accompany him on his many travels abroad (Bredsdorff, 1975, p. 19, 22, 85, 303). The question of whether or not Andersen was a repressed homosexual remains moot, but it has been the subject of much debate (Hansen, 1901; Helweg, 1927, 1929; Lederer, 1986; Ringblom, 1997; von Rosen, 1978–1981, Bech, 1998). Certainly, Andersen seems to have identified with his mermaid creation. As one critic phrased it, Andersen "is the little mermaid, the outsider who came from the depths and was never really accepted in the new world into which he moved" and Andersen himself confessed that the story was one of only two of all his works that moved him deeply while writing it (Bredsdorff, 1975, pp. 275, 125).

In any case, Andersen is given credit or rather blame for transforming the traditional seductive, aggressive mermaid figure into a passive self-effacing heroine who sacrifices her own goals and fulfillment for the sake of the happiness of an unattainable male prince (Golden, 1998, p. 99; Stuby, 1992, p. 109). A female psychiatrist begins her book entitled *Sweet Suffering: Woman as Victim* with a report of one of her patient's first analytic sessions in which the patient recounted the story of Andersen's "The Little Mermaid." The psychiatrist comments: "This story is a nearly perfect parable of masochism, for it expresses the self-punishment, the submission to another, and the sense of suffering that lie at the heart of masochistic behavior" (Shainess, 1984, pp. 1–2). It is perfectly true that the pre-Andersen mermaid was a very different creature, a dangerously seductive combination of voluptuousness and voracity. One description may stand for many. In 1601, a Portuguese priest living in Brazil wrote the following vivid account of "Mermen, or men of the Sea":

The female are like women, they have long haire and are beautiful ... In Fort Secure are some scene, which have killed some Indians alreadie, the manner of their killing is to embrace themselves with the person, so strongly, kissing, and grasping it hard to it selfe, that they crush it in pieces remaining whole, and when they perceive it dead, they give some sighings in shew of sorrow, and letting them goe they runne away, and if they carry any they eate only the eies, the nose, the points of the fingers and toes, and privie members, and so ordinarily they are found on the sands with these things missing. (Tristaon 1601, p. 1315)

In Disney's adaptation of Andersen's story of a passive mermaid, the addition of the final wedding scene has further incurred the wrath of feminists who see it as an insidious continuation of a patriarchal conspiracy to keep women enslaved. The Little Mermaid is initially controlled by her father Triton, the king of the sea, who eventually hands her over to her husband Prince Eric. Never really free, Ariel is allowed only to transfer her allegiance and abode from one male to another. (The patronymic tradition in Western culture supports this metaphorically as a woman is expected to exchange her original father's last name for that
of her husband. Also American wedding ritual typically requires the father—not the mother—to escort his daughter-bride down the church aisle to formally give her away to the groom.) Moreover, the fact that Ariel is unable to speak means that she is quite literally “dumb.” Feminists feel, with some justification, that this further confirms the male chauvinist ideal of a woman who is beautiful but dumb, in this case not just unintelligent, but mute (Golden, 1998, p. 140; Tseelon, 1995, p. 1022).

Feminists further complain, again with good reason, that Disney has continued the tradition begun by Andersen by making the alleged “heroine” of his film a very passive creature who relies on the assistance of a number of animal allies, all of whom are male. She does not kill the evil sea witch Ursula (the only powerful female portrayed); Prince Eric does so (cf. O’Brien, 1996, p. 173; Trites, 1990–1991, pp. 150–151). She can remain human and marry Eric, not by kissing him, but by inducing him to kiss her. Even in Andersen’s story, the mermaid in search of a soul can obtain one only if the prince allows his soul to “flow” into her body—the receiving body aperture is not indicated in this sublimated image of coitus (Dahlerup, 1990, p. 420). In contrast, in true oral fairy tales, the heroine is the active agent. So in Hansel and Gretel (the very naming of this tale reflects a male bias . . . It is Gretel’s story, not Hansel’s), Gretel kills the witch, a double of her mother who was the original instigator of the plot to dispose of the children by abandoning them in the woods. (It was only after the fourth edition of the Kinder- und Hausmärchen that the Grimm brothers changed the figure of the mother to “stepmother” no doubt in an effort to avoid further besmirching the image of motherhood in traditional German culture.) When men retell women’s tales, the tales are often altered to conform to male ideology. So in the oral versions of Little Red Riding Hood, the heroine escapes from the wolf (or tigress in the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean versions) by her own cleverness and ingenuity. This is not the case in the male retellings of the tale. In the Perrault version, she is eaten up by the wolf and also in the Grimm version, where unable to rescue herself, she must await a passing male huntsman to save her (cf. Zipes, 1993, pp. 29, 79). In this context, it is not totally unexpected that the Disney version of “The Little Mermaid” continues the passive female tradition, even if this is clearly disappointing to feminist critics. On the other hand, Ariel does defy her controlling father by visiting humans and in her unrelenting single-minded quest to win the love of Prince Eric.

What is most striking about the Disney adaptation of Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” is the remarkable series of symbolic representations of a young girl’s coming of age and her successful, if conventional, resolution of the Electra Complex. Several studies of the Andersen story have concentrated on the process of individuation (Engel, 1988; Mäenpää-Reen­kola, 1989; for another Jungian study of the story, see Nyborg, 1962, pp. 68–8 and the polemic dialogue it generated: Baggesen, 1967a, b; Nyborg, 1967). It was actually Jung who first proposed the term “Electra Complex” for the female counterpart of the Oedipus Complex in a series of lectures on psychoanalysis that he presented at the Fordham University medical school in September 1912. Speaking about the Oedipus Complex, he said, “The conflict takes on a more masculine and therefore more typical form in a son, whereas a daughter develops a specific liking for the father, with a corresponding jealous attitude towards the mother. We could call this the Electra complex” (Jung, 1975, p. 72). The fact that it was Jung who coined the term may explain in part why Freud opposed its adoption, preferring instead to employ the label “Oedipus complex” for both son–mother and daughter–father constellations: “I do not see any advance or gain in the introduction of the term ‘Electra complex’, and do not advocate its use” (1920, p. 155, n. 1). On the other hand, from a feminist perspective, it seems inappropriate to use a male-centered folk tale—Oedipus is tale type 931 in the standard index of European folktales; see Aarne and Stith Thompson, 1966—to describe a female psychological configuration. However, Freud’s succinct description of the complex in his lecture on “Femininity” in his 1932 New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis would certainly seem to be applicable to Disney’s “The Little Mermaid” : “. . . in the Oedipus situation the girl’s father has become her love-object, and we expect that in the normal course of development she will find her way from this paternal object to her final choice of an object” (1932, pp. 118–119). Ariel must shift from loving her father to loving her husband-to-be Eric.

Ariel’s mermaid image itself contains a basic paradox. As a young girl, she is quite literally divided. Her lower “human” half is denied. This division is paralleled by the dichotomy between the lower world, under the sea, and the upper world where human libido is permitted to function.
Ariel's father, King Triton, assumes she will marry a merman who, like other merfolk, lacks genitals, whereby permanent virginity may be guaranteed. (It remains a mystery as to exactly how mer-people manage to reproduce.) As Dorothy Dinnerstein correctly observed in writing in 1967 about Andersen's story, the mermaid's renunciation of her tail for human limbs "means sudden human-sexual availability" (1967, p. 106). (It is interesting in this connection that inasmuch as fish are apodal, it is their caudal fin or their "tail" which replaces the normal female lower limbs in mermaid anatomy. Ariel must lose her "tail" to become human.) On the other hand, the mermaid has to pay a price for gaining human sexual parts. Through a curious form of upward displacement, she is obliged to let the sea witch cut out her tongue. In other words, she is forced to give up her upper part in order to have her lower part. In the Disney version, this is softened so that she loses only her voice. The voice, however, is also a sexual component as it is what attracts Eric in the first place. Dinnerstein interprets the tongueless mouth as the male perception of the woman as a mutilated (castrated?) male. She terms it a horrible wound, a nightmare vagina, "an empty hole created by excision" (1967), p. 108). Other critics also see the cutting out of the mermaid's tongue as a form of castration (Consoli, 1974, p. 87, 1980, p. 80; Duve, 1967, p. 141; Johansen, 1996, pp. 219–220; Soracco, 1990, p. 408; Tseelon, 1995, p. 1023). This castratory incident should, however, be viewed in the total context of the tale where it can be seen as part of the larger struggle between males and females as to who shall finally possess power as symbolized by a phallus.

The idea that a mermaid is to be destroyed or transformed is signaled early in the Disney film. Eric's ship has on the cutwater of its prow a mermaid figurehead. When he explains to his counselor Grimsby that he expects to fall in love one day as if struck by lightning, through the magic of his words and the "omnipotence of thought", lightning suddenly strikes the ship and the mermaid figurehead is roughly dislodged from its privileged position on the bow. The resulting jagged edge of the ship where she is searching for human artifacts to add to her collection of such objects which she stores in a secret place. Remembering that ships are commonly regarded as female (and referred to by means of female pronouns), it is of symbolic significance that she is investigating the interior of a ship. While rummaging about, Ariel is suddenly threatened by a hostile shark. She is saved only when the shark in an attempt to attack her (and her animal companion) gets his head caught in the upper ring portion of an anchor. (The ring with its descending shank and horizontal stock clearly suggest the standard symbol for a female, commonly referred to as Venus' hand mirror.) The phallic shark is thus rendered harmless and impotent by being tightly wedged in a female enclosure.

In the ship, Ariel does discover several objects, one of which is a fork. She does not know what it is for and when she subsequently asks a friendly but befuddled seagull about it, he informs her that it is a kind of comb. Later on land while at dinner with Prince Eric, Ariel makes a fool of herself by attempting to comb her hair at the table using a fork. The fork may be contrasted with the trident possessed by her father Triton, the king of the sea. The trident is also a kind of fork but it is much larger and endowed with magical power. Both Ariel's fork and Triton's trident are trifurcated (whereas the dinner fork of Prince Eric's advisor Grimsby has four tines). The fork is significant in terms of both its form and its size. Its form includes tines located at its bottom. Tines may perhaps suggest the bifurcation of the mermaid's tail into human legs. Ariel must learn to use a fork properly just as she must learn to walk on two legs. Her placing of the fork in her hair could allude to her grappling with the newly found sexual parts (which include pubic hair) created by the bifurcation. The seagull advising Ariel had mistakenly informed her that the fork was a "dingle-hopper," a curious seemingly nonsensical word which may or may not allude to the slang term "dingle" meaning penis (Spears, 1990, p. 51) wherein the sexual implications of learning to handle a "penis" hopper, that is, someone who hops on a penis, would be obvious.

The size of the fork (when compared to the trident) emphasizes the differential proportions of adult and child. Both Triton and the villainous sea witch Ursula are huge figures whereas Ariel is small. The adjectival prefix "Little" placed before "Mermaid" serves to infantilize Ariel. This is similar to the same device in the name of "Little" Red Riding Hood. (In French, it is Le Petit Chatperon Rouge and in German the suffix -chen signifying diminutive in Rotkäppchen accomplishes the same
result.) Of course, if we remember that fairy tales are always told from the child’s perspective, then giants are nothing more than the child’s perception of adults. Relativistically speaking, the child does not see him or herself as small but rather adults are perceived as larger versions of the observing child.

Ariel’s initial family situation is revealing. Her mother is absent (Leadbeater and Wilson, 1993, p. 472) and we are told nothing about her. King Triton lives with his six daughters of which Ariel is the youngest and obviously his favorite. In female-centered fairy tales, the mother is often absent or killed thereby leaving the father and daughter alone. This is parallel to male-centered fairy tales, where it is the father who is absent. An example would be “Jack and the Beanstalk” where Jack lives alone with his mother. Following adventures in which Jack successfully hides in the giant’s wife’s oven, he kills the giant by cutting down a huge stalk with an ax handed to him by his mother with whom he ends up living happily ever after (Röheim, 1953, pp. 358–359). As male-centered fairy tales present Oedipal plots where sons castrate or kill fathers, so female-centered fairy tales present Electral plots where daughters triumph over mothers or mother surrogates such as witches or wicked stepmothers.

In Disney’s “The Little Mermaid,” the mother substitute to be defeated is clearly Ursula, the sea witch (Leadbeater and Wilson, 1993, pp. 477, 478). When Ariel feels thwarted by her father in her quest to pursue Prince Eric, she goes behind her father’s back, turning to the mother substitute for assistance, just as children often turn to the other parent when the first one refuses to help. In the Electra Complex, the daughter competes with her mother for the attention (love) of her father. According to Freud’s Oedipal theory, a girl wants to marry her father or a substitute for him just as a boy wants to marry his mother or a substitute for her. The same-sex struggle may be transferred to the parental substitute or parent surrogate. In the case of Disney’s “The Little Mermaid,” Ursula competes with Ariel for the prized Prince Eric. It is Ursula, the mother figure, who is the false or substitute bride. She is the older mother who envies her young daughter’s beauty. She wants to be young and attractive like her daughter. Through magic, she succeeds in transforming herself into a beautiful young woman and with the aid of Ariel’s voice that she has obtained, she is able to dupe Eric into agreeing to marry her instead of Ariel.

Ursula is a gross and grotesque caricature of a femme fatale, another aspect of the original siren figure, and her seductive powers are considerable. At one point near the end of the movie, having gained possession of Triton’s trident, she stirs up the waters sufficiently so as to raise Eric’s sunken ship from the bottom of the sea to the surface, a notable symbolic resurrection. This eventually leads to Ursula’s downfall as Eric deftly uses the jagged prow of his ship to ram Ursula and this frontal attack succeeds in penetrating Ursula sufficiently to destroy her. As she meets her death, images of cemeterial crosses formed from masts of the ship are prominent in the background. The phallic nature of Eric’s improvised weapon has been recognized by several critics (Leadbeeter and Wilson, 1993, p. 475; Trites, 1990–1991, p. 150). A more overt and less symbolic testament to Ursula’s feminine charms lies in a very controversial, if brief, moment in the film. On board ship when Eric is about to marry Ursula (before the ceremony is interrupted at the last minute by Ariel’s various animal helpers), the minister performing the marriage service is depicted as having an erection barely concealed by his pants. Since he is male, his arousal is presumably caused by the sexual allure of Ursula. This incident is so brief that it is difficult to see without stopping the film. Perhaps it was meant to be an inside joke by the Disney studio personnel who worked on the film although Disney’s response was that some viewers misinterpreted a perfectly innocuous movement of the minister’s knee. Another possible inside joke consists of a seemingly overtly penile-shaped turret centrally located on the castle depicted on the illustrated case cover of the original videocassette. Disney’s apparent response was to replace this illustration on the cover of later releases of the video, totally removing all traces of a castle.

Ursula whose name derives from Urs or bear—is there a play on a sexually mature woman’s ability to “bear” children?—has the identity of an octopus. The word octopus consists of “octo” meaning “eight” and “pus” meaning foot. (The latter is, of course, the same morpheme contained in the name of Oedipus which means literally “swollen foot” or symbolically an erection.) Trites suggests that “Ursula seems to be an inverse Medusa figure. The snake-like appendages also make Ursula a perversion of femininity; her tentacles could be interpreted as eight phaluses” (1990–1991, p. 150). Her two male pet eels, Flotsam and Jetsam, who have visible sharp teeth and to whom she is very attached, also have
Triton's trident while he is holding it” stroking one of the tines with her phallic significance (cf. Otero, 1996, p. 270). But it turns out that Ursula’s “penis envy” is not satisfied by her eight feet. Instead, she “covets the powers of the male phallus” as is suggested when she “lovingly caresses Triton’s trident while he is holding it” stroking one of the tines with her fingers (Trites, 1990–1991, p. 150). It would seem that Ursula’s agenda includes more than competing with Ariel for Eric. She is also engaged in a battle of the sexes with Triton.

When Ariel fails to get Eric to kiss her within the prescribed three-day period, she must, according to the legally binding contract she signed with Ursula, revert to being a mermaid. Her father Triton, realizing the sincerity of Ariel’s love for Eric, decides to sacrifice himself for her sake and to take her place in the contract. Ursula is delighted as apparently she was more interested in unmanning Triton than in defeating Ariel. Triton reluctantly uses his trident to seal an agreement to trade places with Ariel. He then hands over the trident, the symbol of his power, whereupon he immediately shrinks into a shrunken shadow of himself to join other captive souls in Ursula’s garden. The loss of the trident would constitute symbolic castration while the dramatic shrinking would appear to be symbolic detumescence. At this juncture all seems lost. The father king is trident-less and the villainous mother-figure Ursula is in complete control.

The castration theme is also repeated in subplot detail. Sebastian, the Caribbean crab, whom Triton originally assigned to watch over Ariel but who eventually becomes sympathetic to her desire to become human, is at one point chased by Prince Eric’s French chef Louis who holds a huge cleaver, and later attacks the crab with a full arsenal of glistening sharp knives. Fortunately, he does not succeed in chopping off either of Sebastian’s claws. He is shown, however, hacking the heads off fish and the castration imagery is thus dramatically intensified by the sight of dozens of decapitated fish surrounded by countless disembodied fish heads.

Ursula quickly utilizes her new-found power by rising up to gigantic proportions whereupon she emerges from the water, with a phallic projection from a now oversized crown driving apart Ariel and Prince Eric who are huddling together (Leadbeater and Wilson, 1993, p. 475). As a result of Ursula’s expansion, Ariel gets sucked down into a vortex that with its cavernous form resembles her hidden cave under the sea. That is, Ariel is rendered helpless by being trapped in a womb-like enclosure through the toothy jaws of a gigantic mouth, and swim through womb-
like caves” (Sells, 1995, p. 184). In contrast, Ariel has a body innocent of any dental threat. The only hint is her mistaking a fork for a comb. The comb, along with the narcissistic mirror, traditionally have been the standard accoutrements of mermaids (Benwell and Waugh, 1961, pp. 137-139; Higgins, 1995, p. 40). As a comb, the fork’s tines become metaphorical teeth placed in her hair, but Eric and his dinner companions soon civilize Ariel by teaching her the true nature of a fork. The sexual innuendo of the fork as comb would have been transparent to the Romans. The Latin word for comb “pecten” also meant the female pudenda (Phillpotts, 1980, p. 10) or pubic hair (Adams, 1982, p. 76).

There is another possible interpretation supporting the notion that Ariel must be castrated in order to become Prince Eric’s bride. The mermaid’s fishtail is not only a denial of the vagina, but it could symbolize a penis (Lederer, 1986, p. 233; Röheim, 1948, pp. 22, 33). If this is so, then Ariel’s phallic attributes are somewhat analogous to those of Ursula with her serpentine octopus lower body tentacles. For Ariel to transform into a viable human female, she must lose her phallic fishtail. The castration of Ariel is further confirmed in the original Andersen story by the cutting out of her tongue. (Even though this detail was omitted from the Disney version, Ursula tosses a tongue of unknown origin into her brew designed to rob Ariel of her ability to speak, a witty literalization of the metaphor referring to the likely adverse effects caused by a “loose tongue.”) Even the loss of Ariel’s voice could be similarly construed according to Bunker’s essay “The Voice as (Female) Phallus.” Bunker does mention sirens and mermaids (1934, p. 411) but without reference to Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid.”

One could speculate that the male fear of castration by a female is transformed through inverse projection to the castration of females by males. The story in which the mermaid’s tongue is cut out was, after all, written by a male Hans Christian Andersen and the Disney script was also written by men. The male bias of the Disney studio has been well established by feminists. The history of the male domination of women includes a series of imposed restrictions designed to curb female sexuality ranging from chastity belts to keeping unmarried girls under virtual house arrest behind secure walls. Another striking illustration of the male’s fear of female sexuality is perhaps provided by the widespread practice of female genital mutilation, particularly prevalent in Africa. It is justified in part by the claim that the genital mutilation allegedly reduces women’s sexual desire which purportedly would otherwise be out of control. The excision of the clitoris is sometimes followed by infibulation, which means that the initiate cannot have sexual intercourse until the stitched vagina is cut or torn open. One critic in speaking of the mermaid in the Andersen story even goes so far as to suggest that “her loss of a tongue may be the symbolic displacement of clitorectomy” (Dahlerup, 1990, p. 427). So since the mermaid imago herself is a male ideal of sexual allure without the dangerous castratory vagina dentata, it is not surprising that such an overt castration theme permeates “The Little Mermaid” film. The thematic linkage between mermaid and castration is explicit in a striking bit of American material culture. In the late 1920s, a curious fishing lure appeared as a novelty item. As reported by the late Gershon Legman (1975, p. 433), it consisted of “a naked-breasted mermaid with a three-pronged hook emanating from her pubis.” In gleefully thinking of her prospective triumph over King Triton, Ursula speaks of looking forward to seeing “him wriggle like a worm on a hook.” The phallic nature of fish caught by fish hooks continues to be obvious as indicated by the bragging of fishermen who carefully measure and weigh their trophies, sometimes even mounting them over fireplaces in their game rooms. The repeated vandalism of the famous statue of “The Little Mermaid,” the veritable symbol of the city of Copenhagen, also confirms the association of castration with the mermaid. For the vandalism, presumably carried out by males, often involves decapitation, an act that not only connotes castration but which may also suggest defloration, that is, destroying a virginal maiden head.

Whereas a young girl can be controlled by female genital mutilation or by depicting her as mermaid, the mature female remains a threat. When Eric succeeds in penetrating Ursula with the jagged prow of his raised ship, this not only destroys the evil sea witch, but results in her dropping the trident which fortuitously falls to the bottom of the sea right near the shriveled Triton. Symbolically, Ursula has been so utterly feminized, not to say decimated, by Eric’s phallic attack, that she can no longer retain possession of the powerful trident. Triton regains his trident, swells to attain his previous imposing and muscular build, and is then empowered to set everything straight.

The role of the trident in Disney’s “The Little Mermaid” has not been
sufficiently noted by critics. The word literally means “three teeth” and both the number three and teeth have phallic significance (Freud, 1915–1916, pp. 163–165). The trident turns out to be crucial in terms of the male reworking of an Electral fantasy. Early in the film when Triton learns about Ariel’s secret grotto where she stores her human artifacts, he visits her there and destroys the chamber and its contents with his powerful trident. Symbolically speaking, a secret chamber or garden or other hiding place of a young girl is an obvious representation of her vagina. The entrance to the chamber is a tubular tunnel marked by striations that would appear to resemble the transverse ridges of a vaginal wall. Inside the chamber Ariel flirts with and sings to a lifelike statue of Prince Eric (Leadbeater and Wilson, 1993, p. 474), commissioned for Prince Eric from Grimsby, which was salvaged from the wreckage of the destroyed ship. (It is curious that the statue of “The Little Mermaid” in Copenhagen harbor was sculpted by Edvard Eriksen and that might partially account for the choice of the name Eric for the prince.) The statue of Prince Eric, intended as a nuptial gift, portrays him as about to draw his sword, presumably suggesting the impending penetration following marriage. King Triton later obliterates the statue with his trident, just as the mermaid figurehead on Eric’s ship was destroyed by a stormy sea. The discovery and wholesale destruction of her secret hideout foreshadows her eventual loss of virginity. As Triton wields this instrument symbolic of male power, it becomes illuminated, perhaps even implying heat. The illuminated trident is somewhat reminiscent of the remarkable extensible light sabers utilized in Star Wars for Oedipal father-son duels.

The “hot” trident reappears near the end of the movie when Triton relents and agrees to allow Ariel to leave his watery domain to join the world of humans on land. Still a mermaid, Ariel needs human legs and the requisite interstitial female genitals in order to become Eric’s bride. Triton accomplishes this transformation with one flick of his mighty trident. Poof! The mermaid’s tail disappears and is replaced by human legs. It is the father who gives his daughter, his favorite daughter, the necessary sexual parts which will allow her to marry Eric, and consummate the marriage properly. One may recall that when Ariel returned “in love” after her initial encounters with humans (including Prince Eric), she presented a flower to her father. This blatant prefiguration of deflowering is thus a definite daughter-father matter. Just in case the audience should miss this floral sign, it is immediately followed by Ariel’s plucking petals in a version of the well-known divinatory custom “He loves me, he loves me not” (Mieder, 1985). Completion of this literal and symbolic defloweral ritual ends with Ariel picking the last petal exclaiming triumphantly “He loves me.”

The essential Electral nature of the entire plot is confirmed by the very last words of the film. After finally being kissed by Eric at the conclusion of the marriage ceremony, Ariel embraces her father and whispers intimately, “I love you, Daddy.” While smiling tenderly at him, she slowly backs up and then blows him a kiss. The final scene shows Prince Eric and Ariel’s ship sailing off towards the arc of a rainbow, a rainbow magically produced by father Triton with one sweep of his illuminated “hot” trident. The ship’s entrance into the semi-circular image is yet one more sign of consummation of the marriage on the wedding night. Another such symbol is the French chef’s cutting the white wedding cake into two halves with his cleaver. A white wedding cake is a standard symbol of a virginal bride and the plunging of a knife (often nowadays a joint venture involving the hands of both bride and groom) into the cake symbolizes the nuptial defloweration (Charsley, 1992, p. 126). In American wedding ritual, the knife poised for the initial insertion into the usually round white cake is typically one of the principal post-wedding photographic highlights. In the Disney film, the bifurcation of the cake into two halves could also represent in microcosm the successful transformation of Ariel’s monolithic fish tail into two legs.

We can well imagine that readers hostile to psychoanalytic thought will say that they saw Disney’s “The Little Mermaid” and that they never once thought of most, if any, of the symbolic elements discussed above. Perhaps the Disney staff members who worked on the film night respond similarly. Disney films are on the surface conspicuously wholesome family entertainment with nary a hint of sexuality. Mickey and Minnie Mouse never have sex; nor do Donald and Daisy Duck (Berland, 1982, pp. 96, 103). But our analysis is concerned with the latent and not the manifest content of the “The Little Mermaid.” We would argue generally that Disney’s choice of plots for cartoon treatment is almost certainly made without awareness of unconscious symbolic elements. Why would Disney have chosen to make a movie, for example, about the masturbatory rubbing of a magic lamp that produces a wish-granting genie? (Alad-
din is Aarne-Thompson tale type 561.) For that matter, the Electral plot has proven itself in earlier successful Disney films. “Show White” (Aarne-Thompson tale type 709) tells of a wicked stepmother’s attempt to kill the heroine and there is a competition between them as to who of the two is the most beautiful. Similarly, “Cinderella” (Aarne-Thompson tale type 510A) involves a girl’s struggle with a stepmother and in some versions (AT 510B) a motif in which a father wants to marry his own daughter, a clear inverse projection of a daughter’s wish to marry her own father. In Disney films subsequent to “The Little Mermaid”, the Electral component continues: “Beauty and the Beast” (Aarne-Thompson tale type 425C) and “Mulan” both concern a father-daughter constellation in which the daughter, against the father’s wishes, insists on imperiling herself to protect her father. Indeed, as “Pocahontas” concludes, she elects to sacrifice her romantic relationship in order to stay in her village and assist her father in maintaining peace.

Disney has found a sure-fire formula for success, namely a cartoon-rendering of the Electra Complex. We suggest that the “The Little Mermaid” is just a modern version of this tried and true plot, with male-chauvinist patriarchal values superimposed upon it. A sexy young girl who wears a shell bra which reveals more than conceals (BendiX, 1993, p. 287; O’Brien, 1996, p. 173) is given female genitals by her father so that she can marry a prince who has destroyed her rival mother surrogate by a heroic act of penetration. So the girl enjoys the Electral fantasy of seeing a mother figure eliminated and wedding the man her mother surrogate was about to marry, but at the same time the power of the trident (and a ship’s prow) remains the exclusive property of males (Triton and Eric).

The fact that “The Little Mermaid” is readily available on videotape has greatly increased the dissemination of this psychologically loaded narrative way beyond its original movie-theater audience. Accordingly, this male-constructed Electral fantasy, with its powerful embedded patriarchal overlay, is likely to continue to influence the emotional development of all the young girls who see it and identify with Ariel. At the same time, it may also impact upon little boys. Although the story is certainly nominally about a female mermaid (Johansen, 1996, p. 220), the recurring themes of castration and the fear of the phallic female no doubt reflect the unconscious anxieties of the males (Andersen and Disney writers) who created the story. In that light, Disney’s “The Little Mermaid” would appear to encapsulate critical emotional issues for both girls and boys. This may serve to help explain the enormous popularity of such a unique male construction of an Electral fantasy.

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