Mermaid-Like: The Tragedy of Ophelia  
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Her clothes spread wide,  
And mermaid-like a while they bore her up;  
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,  
As one incapable of her own distress,  
Or like a creature native and ended  
Unto that element. (4.7.174-9)  

The mermaid presents an equivocal figure, suggesting both innocence and  
sexual potential. Above the waist, she is traditionally portrayed as a young  
maiden, beautiful and desirable, but below, her body tapers off into a  
long fishtail which fuses loins and legs together and conceals her sexual  
organs. Like Pope’s vision of Man, “Created half to rise, and half to fall,” she  
seems uncertain whether to crawl onto land or sink back into the cold safety  
of the water. She is, in essence, a symbol of female sexuality at the threshold  
of sexual experience.  

In traditional folktales, mermaids and their freshwater cousins—the  
undines, lorelais and rusalki of Central European legend—fall into two basic  
categories: those who lure men to a watery death with their enchanting  
songs, and those who are themselves lured out of the water by newly-  
awakened love for a mortal man. Mermaids who leave the water are invariably  
unhappy: either their love is misunderstood, and therefore not reciprocated,  
or it is betrayed. The mermaid almost always returns to her native element  
and reverts to her original form, in which condition she is sometimes  
compelled, by her own nature, to lure her penitent lover to his doom. In  
Hans Christian Andersen’s “Little Mermaid” (a nineteenth-century fairy  
tale based on a much older folktale that survives in a number of variants), the  
heroine sacrifices her life by refusing to kill the man she loves and is rewarded  
by being transformed into an air spirit with the possibility of earning an  
immortal soul after three hundred years of good deeds.  

The very act of leaving the water requires a terrible sacrifice. Andersen’s  
mermaid is told by the sea witch that the division of her tail into two legs  
(rendering her, by implication, accessible to sexual penetration) will feel as if  
“a sword were going through your body;” and “every time your foot touches  
the ground it will feel as though you were walking on knives so sharp that  
your blood must flow.” (68). Her only hope of completing her transformation  
into a mortal woman is to win the heart of the man she loves; if he rejects her  
and marries another, she will die the following morning and return to the  
sea as foam. But in payment for her legs, the mermaid must give the witch  
her tongue, thereby sacrificing both her beautiful voice and the faculty of  
articulating her feelings.  

Ophelia, of course, is no fairy tale archetype, but a young woman of  
strong and complex emotions. Although she has learned to guard her feelings,  
she is capable of passion—unlike Andersen’s heroine, whose mysterious  
languishing never quite waken into conscious sexual awareness. But when  
Gertrude describes the drowning Ophelia as “mermaid-like,” she brings into  
focus the precise nature of her tragedy, that of a young woman turned away  
at the threshold of sexual fulfillment, whose maiden love is shattered, rejected  
and thwarted. There has always been some uncertainty as to whether Ophelia  
is Hamlet’s lover in the physical sense, and interpretations on the stage and  
screen have run the gamut from virgin Ophelias to pregnant ones. But whether  
or not she has slept with the prince (I’m inclined to think she hasn’t though  
she is obviously drawn to him), the point is that she is not allowed to  
complete her destiny: she is denied her rightful place as Hamlet’s acknowledged  
lover and wife. As Gertrude laments while scattering flowers over Ophelia’s  
corpse: “I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid/Not to have  
strewed thy grave” (5.1.229-30).  

What destroys Ophelia’s hopes is Hamlet’s suspicion—a suspicion  
directed not so much at Ophelia specifically, as at female sexuality generally.  
“If thou dost marry,” he tells her, “I give thee this plague for thy dowry: be  
thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny”  
(3.1.134-6). In Hamlet’s mind a woman accused is by definition guilty. His  
rejection of Ophelia began earlier in the play, when he suddenly walked into  
her bedroom, wide-eyed and disheveled, at the beginning of Act 2—not (as  
Polonius later surmised) because Ophelia had refused his letters, but because  
she had just seen a ghost, and the ghost told him that her mother had slept  
with his uncle while his father was still alive. From that point on, all women’s  
love was irrevocably tainted. What later provokes Hamlet’s wild invectives  
in the famous “Nunnery” scene is his absolutely clear perception that Ophelia  
still loves him. That is what he cannot tolerate—that is what drives him  
crazy—because a woman who loves is a woman who can be seduced and  
corrupted.  

Slandered, rejected and thwarted—reduced to the incoherent mutterings  
of insanity as her only means of expressing her outrage—Ophelia has  
nowhere left to go but to the water. By accident or intention she will fall into  
the brook, where, for a little while, she will float on the surface singing her  
mermaid songs, before finally slipping below, “like a creature native and  
ended unto that element.”  

Works Cited  

Call For Papers  
The Idea of the City: Early Modern, Modern, and Post-Modern  
Locations and Communities  
A two-day international conference at the  
University of Northampton, UK, 8-9 June 2007  
This conference will explore the nature of the modern city in literature  
from its origins in the early-modern period to post-modern dislocations.  
Speakers are encouraged to submit papers which explore the representation  
of real and imagined, national and international, capital and regional  
cities, in poetry, prose, and drama. Prospective papers might dwell upon  
the city as a context within which literature is created, structured, or  
inspired, and as spaces, places, and localities in which distinct voices and  
genes emerge, for example plague-ridden Ch16th London, post- 
revolutionary Paris, Bradford after the 2001 riot, sectarian Belfast, the  
interface between the tradition and technology in Tokyo, or globalisation  
in Mumbai.  

While the focus of the conference is literary, papers are welcome by  
authors from cognate disciplines, including history, art, and film, especially  
if their paper considers the interface between their discipline and the  
literary. Potential areas of interest might include: the impact of regional  
thrust upon its cities; the role of city authorities in the dissemination of  
ideas; the city and its aliens; ethnic minority voices in the inner cities;  
the tension between the country and the city; the interface between global  
cities; and marginal urban identities and activities (vice, prostitution, and  
poverty).  

Plenary speakers to be announced  
Prospective speakers are invited to submit proposals for 20-minute  
papers by 1 March 2007 to the conference organizers,  
Dr Joan Fitzpatrick and Dr Lawrence Phillips by e-mail to  
mail@JoanFitzpatrick.org or to  
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