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Mock vs. the Mermaid: A Cultural Analysis of Physical Femininity and Identity

A young girl has decided she hates her life. She is a precious child: vibrant, vivacious, admiring, she longs to be perfect. She is misunderstood. Her family and friends don't understand why she can't just be happy with what she's been given. Why does she have to want so much more? She doesn't care what they think. She knows what she wants and she's tired of being treated differently for being born into a set of circumstances she can't control. She finds a way, she works hard, she sacrifices. She wins. Finally, a simple change of state and she's where she's dreamed of being for years. She is the vision she's imagined all throughout her youth- the perfect woman. Vibrant, physical, self-assured.

In one case, the little girl that goes through these magical changes is the beloved Disney Princess, Ariel, also known as the namesake of her whirlwind fairy tale, "The Little Mermaid." In this 1989 children's film, young Ariel grows up dreaming about the human world and all of its miracles. She then happens to fall in love with, naturally, a human, who acts as her final motivation towards becoming human. She trades her magical, beautiful voice (and potentially her soul) for a pair of legs, frolics about on land, and eventually, after a brief battle in which the sea witch tries to claim Ariel's promised soul, marries the human Prince to the applause of her friends and family, as well as, in true Disney fashion, a rainbow.

In another, realistic case, Redefining Realness by Janet Mock chronicles the author's fight to become the woman she has longed to be all her life. Born with a male body, Janet Mock struggled with molestation, poverty, and bullying. While a full-time student, Mock worked as a prostitute to fund her sex change surgery, and eventually became a highly successful author and journalist.

While both women grew up in less than desirable circumstances, they each rose above their hardships and worked hard to achieve the life they longed for. The general responses to these two stories, however, reveal modern culture's highly specific taste, as it draws a vague line between the two. Cultural reactions to these tales of womanly hard work for their desired beauty have differed dramatically. While Ariel is honored as a Disney Princess and sacrificial, loving, passionate teen, Mock is examined for her questionable life choices and psychological state. Ariel has served Disney with highly successful merchandise and a theme park, as she is marketed toward young females as a dreamy, adventurous redhead. In fact, Ariel was deemed so worthy of little girls' attention and emulation, that Disney invested in her as one of their first film promoted "with an integrated internal marketing strategy for transmedia franchising"(Reid-Walsh, et. Al). Mock, on the other hand, is not a household name, and is constantly fighting to defend the LGBTQ's identity as separate from their gender and sexual identification. Let us not forget that while Mock did participate in illicit activities to achieve funding for a long-desired surgery, Ariel met a man who was the final push towards humanity and, as a result, visited a highly dangerous villain, who went so far as to steal her soul and voice so that the naive little mermaid would have a mere chance at human-hood. This character is heralded as a highly desirable princess, despite her questionable ethics, while Mock, along with millions of other people who identify as

transgender, “face shockingly high levels of discrimination...and transgender representations in the last 10 years of television found that more than half were negative”(HuffPost).

But what effect do these dramatic stories and differences between these stories reveal about society’s ability to accept those who differ from the norm? Furthermore, prior to that reactive acceptance or denial of these narratives, what do they teach about what people, specifically young women and transgenders, should do when faced with identity difficulties?

Firstly, the very existence of “The Little Mermaid” merchandising and marketing being clearly geared toward young girls proves its permeation into feminine culture. According to one subject in a personal interview, “I felt that it really portrayed women to look a certain way... They have to have perfect hips. It was just full of unrealistic expectations about women’s physical beauty.” While people of all ages can notice the design of Ariel to be physically appealing, its effect is no doubt more concerning when imposed on young, vulnerable girls vying for social acceptance and their womanly identity. It uses a childlike, aesthetic pleasure to bait viewers into admiring the mermaid’s struggles. This subtle, inherent justification of sacrifice and work for beauty insinuates that as long as a woman is beautiful, she can make her own choices. This directly contrasts with Mock, who by Disney’s concept of beauty (as depicted by Ariel), was absolutely not beautiful in her youth, specifically because of her physical maleness. However, some argue that mermaids as a collective group of fantasy creatures hold a specific kind of allure with trans children as well, even those who are unrealized. “A transgender girl who does find mermaids interesting may do so because mermaids are identified as female by the appearance of the top half of their body not the lower half. Not having the genitalia to match their gender identity is one source of dysphoria for transgender children”(Beck). Clearly, the topic of magical body modification and actual sex changes has not gone unnoticed in the social

science community, as the topic raises questions about the innocence and true meaning behind such dramatic physical changes.

Furthermore, as both women make dramatic sacrifices to achieve their true identity, they are applauded and lauded both in narrative and life. While some might argue that Ariel's encounter with a human man is the only reason she decided to make the full transition from mermaid to human, Eric was really only the catalyst that actualized her lifelong desire. However, culture mostly ignores the fact that she had desires to be a part of the human world since she was young, and instead chooses to focus on Eric, a man, acting as the major, influential, climatic cause of the main character's change. Regardless of the true motivation behind Ariel seeking to become human, young people's perceive this act to be because of Eric, insinuating that this major, life-changing (and in Ariel's case, species-changing) decision must happen as a result of a man and love for a person other than oneself. Mock challenges this archaic, misogynistic rule in that her desire for physical change occurs because of her life-long, personal desire to become a woman. There is no catalyst to her seeking out the actual change, other than a final, long-awaited right-time-right-place and a personal decision to carry out the sex change. Mock's transition to her true physical identity takes place because of her own desires, teaching readers that loving yourself and wanting your true identity is reason enough to change. "With trans, they know they're different from the beginning, but Ariel, it was more like an obsession than identity issue. ...The legs for Ariel were identity, but it was changing her body to enter this world, and to find a part of her that she so wanted to know. In sex change, there's this pure identity that they want to find, only for themselves"(Personal Interviews).

One of the most confusing effects of "The Little Mermaid" and Redefining Realness is attempting to understand why one is heralded as an inspiring, optimistic children's story and the

other a troubling and controversial account of a so called “born-male” woman. There exists a blurred but important cultural line between women and perfect physical identity, self-actualization and femininity, a blasphemous dream and magical fantasy. Modern culture deems petite, imaginary redheads grasping for love and identity cute, while young people breaking established gender norms for love and identity horrendous. While “The Little Mermaid” and *Redefining Realness* may seem like two young women’s quests for true identity and purpose, their underlying messages and viewers’/readers’ responses to those messages represent culture’s confusing and picky acceptance of body modification. To further an environment that encourages adolescent desires for achieving their true self, fighting for goals, and an internalized sense of beauty rather than one outwardly represented, artistic works, both fairy tale and biography, must be analyzed for their true cultural connotation.

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