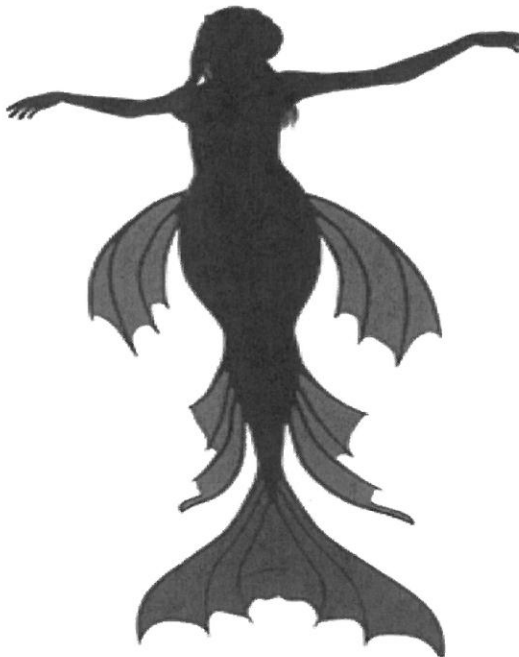


The Mermaids of the Atlantic in Four Traditions

By Sarah Davis MacMillan

The mermaid is an example of a folkloric figure that looks very similar when compared from one folkloric tradition to another. However, when examined in context, “mermaid” stories from different traditions have both similarities and very distinct differences. The following are examples of mermaid types from four different traditions that



have influenced the concept of the mermaid as we know her in Atlantic Canadian folklore.

French

The most famous mermaid in traditional French fairy tales was Melusine, a medieval noblewoman said to have connections to the faerie world, and to the Arthurian Isle of Avalon (Tichelaar, 2011). Cursed to assume the form of a mermaid every Saturday night, she tried to conceal her “imperfection” from her husband. When his curiosity got the better of him, he broke his nuptial promise to allow her privacy on Saturdays, and she fled in anger and shame, returning only much later to visit her children in secret (Darwin, 2015, p.129-130).

The well-known YA gothic novel *Melusine*, by Lynn Reid Banks, is directly inspired by this legend, but draws upon the version where Melusine’s enchanted form is that of a large snake. This younger Melusine’s serpentine transformation is associated with her experiences as an abused child.

Melusine is sometimes represented as a fish-tailed mermaid, but is more often shown with a lower

body like a sea serpent or dragon, with reptilian legs or multiple tails. Melusine is associated with both fresh and salt water, and is depicted more often in forest pools, fountains and lakes than in the ocean.

If Melusine seems very familiar to you, you probably have seen her recently- on a cup of coffee. Since 1971, Starbucks' Coffee has used variations on a classic illustration of her in its branding, though the graphic designer who originally chose her image because he wanted a traditional nautical siren design, and not because of any association with this particular character (Murray, 2011).

African-Canadian

In many Afro-Atlantic traditions, female nature spirits are strongly associated with the ocean and other bodies of water. Like European mermaids and water spirits, they are most frequently depicted as women with the lower bodies of fish, or with other fish-like characteristics like scaled bodies (Brown, 2010, p.126).

Unlike most feminine water spirits in European traditions, which tend to be presented as dangerous "sirens", the best-known Afro-Atlantic

water women are maternal beings (Brown, 2010, p.139), who sometimes appear in works of art as symbols of protection and good fortune (Governor General of Canada Archives, 2009).

Afro-Atlantic mer-women are frequently referred to as Simbi (nature spirits in the Congolese and Haitian tradition), or Mami Watas ("Water Mothers" associated with the West African deity Yemaya). Although these sea-women are considered protective and benevolent, often appearing in stories to rescue or comfort suffering children, they are able to influence the weather at sea, and will call great waves and windstorms to their defense if angered (Brown, p. 125).

A pair of Haitian Simbi can be seen on the Coat of Arms of Michaëlle Jean, former Governor General of Canada (Governor General of Canada Archives, 2009).

Mi'kmaq

The Sabawaelnu (Halfway People), or People of the Water, are fish-tailed merfolk who are often depicted as smaller than humans. (A description of a Sabawaelnu child reported in 1870 describes its head as no more than three inches in width (Wallis & Wallis, p. 350-

351)). They are benevolent toward fishermen and travelers, and, if treated well, will protect them from dangerous weather. However, if they are treated disrespectfully, they use their powers over the weather to raise great storms, which they control through incantations, to punish their aggressors. Both male and female Sabawaelnu are said to appear to humans, and both genders participate in the singing rituals they use to influence weather patterns (Wallis & Wallis, p.349-353).

Celtic

Two common types of merfolk appear in the Celtic tradition. One is the Merrow, a fish- or sea serpent-tailed mermaid with the upper body of a woman who resembles the classical siren in both appearance and behavior. The merrow's male counterpart, who appears as a more monstrous creature with human and sea creature traits, is also said to inhabit the harbours and coves of Ireland (O'Hanlon, p. 56-58). In Scotland, these creatures are referred to as finmen, and are associated with malevolent magic. In this tradition, adult mermaids mature into finwives, or sea hags, who are often powerful witches (Towrie).

The other Celtic mermaid is the Selkie, or Roan, a seal (sometimes represented as a seal/human hybrid), that is able to transform itself into an attractive human by shedding its pelt, allowing it to live, sometimes secretly, among humans on land. Sadly, if a Selkie's sealskin is stolen while he or she is on land, the Selkie is trapped in human form until it is found again. There are many stories of humans who exploit this weakness to abduct Selkies, who are then unable to return to the sea for many years. When they eventually escape, they often leave families and children behind on land (Darwin, p.124-125). There are both male and female land-going Selkies. In appearance, both genders' human forms are considered exceptionally attractive, yet strange in an undefinable way, by humans (Towrie).

Selkies are, unsurprisingly, popular figures in fantasy adventure and paranormal romance. A few noted selections featuring Selkie characters include Mercedes Lackey's *Home from the Sea*, Catherynne M. Valente's *The Tale of the Skin* and Franny Billingsley's *The Folk Keeper*, and the films *The Secret of Roan Inish* and *The Song of the Sea*.

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