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# From Bird-Woman to Mermaid: The Shifting Image of the Medieval Siren

Claire Cannell

*Portland State University*

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Claire Cannell

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### Abstract

During the Middle Ages, the siren transforms from its classical status as grotesque bird-woman into an alluring mermaid. The shifting medieval siren is contextualized among contemporary secular images of female sexuality and the writings of religious authorities such as Leander of Seville, who wrote that all women were either nuns or sirens. I plan to analyze the implications of the nun-siren binary created by Leander of Seville through analysis of the changing image of the siren.

My argument contextualizes the siren more largely within the world of the medieval monsters and their role in Christianity. I compare images of the medieval siren from bestiaries, religious sculptures, and illuminated literary manuscript to acknowledge her varied forms. The division between the bird-woman siren and the mermaid siren blurs at times. This suggests that the transformation of the siren was a gradual, rather than a sudden shift. Thus, what was considered monstrous in women gradually changed; beauty and sexuality become vilified in the body of the beautiful siren.

### From Bird-Woman to Mermaid: The Shifting Image of the Medieval Siren

Beautiful, alluring, and deadly—the siren is a medieval art motif with classical roots. The image commonly associated with sirens today is that of a beautiful mermaid; this is the depiction of the Renaissance, which has received a great deal of scholarly attention. Less attention has been received by the medieval siren who, especially in the earlier medieval era, was sometimes depicted as a less attractive bird-woman hybrid. While less commonly associated with sirens today, the bird-woman hybrid is true to the classical roots of sirens. It is during the middle ages that the image of the siren began its shift from bird-woman to mermaid (Leach 187). With the transformation of the siren's image, the attributes associated with female monsters shifted. This suggests a change in the traits that were considered monstrous in women. The siren's movement from a frightening bird-woman to a beautiful mermaid represents female beauty becoming monstrous. Throughout the middle ages sirens increasingly represented a male fear of female seduction, suggesting a growing fear of female sexuality.

For medieval Christians, sirens were heavily associated with female sin. In the Vulgate translation, the Bible itself refers to sirens inhabiting the same realm as demons (Travis 33). During late antiquity, Saint Jerome equates sirens to demons (Travis 39). Leander of Seville argued that all women were either nuns and sirens in the fifth century. This statement sets up sirens in direct opposition with the most spiritual Christian women. Here, sirens are not only associated with sin, but with a lack of religious conviction. As nuns were expected to be celibate and sirens were symbols of seduction, sexuality is an important factor here. In the early middle ages, sirens become heavily associated with female sin, which is inextricably tied up with female

sexuality. This fear continues to permeate the image of the siren, as she slowly transforms through the middle ages from a hideous bird-woman into a beautiful mermaid.

The first depiction of the siren as a mermaid appears during the seventh or eighth century within *Liber monstrorum*. The work defines the siren as such: “the upper part is that of a virgin, but she has a scaly fish tail that is always hidden in the sea.” (Hassig 212). The choice to refer to the upper body of the siren as like that of a virgin can be read as implying her possession of youth, beauty, or an innocent appearance. Regardless of which trait the author intended to evoke one thing is sure: the siren is less obviously monstrous than her previous bird-woman form. She is hiding her tale, thus she appears to be a normal woman. The depiction of the siren as normal in appearance may have reflected a sense of distrust around normal women and the female body. This would be fitting given the characterization of sirens in earlier times by Christians such as Leander of Seville who associated sirens with female sinners.

After the publication of *Liber monstrorum*, the mermaid-type siren began to dominate medieval imagery. Still, images of the bird-woman siren lingered. Albert the Great described sirens as bird-like creatures who use their “offspring to help snare victims” and have “a horrible face and long hair.” (Hassig 211). This description departs from other medieval examples of sirens in that it does not show the siren as beautiful. If the beautiful medieval siren represents a medieval fear of beautiful women, this depiction represents a fear of female ugliness. If both the beauty of the virgin-like siren and the hideousness of the bird siren are to be feared then both attractiveness and unattractiveness are monstrous in women (Hassig 210-212). In this case, it must be the fear of the female body, and the sexuality it contains that is represented by the monstrous figure of the siren.

Other writers adapted the newer depiction of sirens as mermaid-like creatures.

Bartholomew the Englishman argued that sirens “lured sailors to a dry place and attempted to have sex with them. When the sailors refused, the sirens tore them to bits and ate them.” (Hassig 212). This example evokes a specific fear associated with the monsters of medieval sirens: the fear of female sexuality. Sirens are often seen as seductive figures—their songs are so alluring that men cannot control themselves. This example uses no pleasant metaphor of music to describe the siren’s seduction. Even the seduction of this siren is unpleasant. In this example, the men always refuse and never truly seem seduced by the sirens. The sirens do not passively watch the sailors drown but instead viciously tear them to bits and consume them. In this example the blame is placed solely on the female monster, and her capacity for violence is emphasized. The man in this example has no defense against the siren’s violent sexuality (Hassig 212).

Other writers attempted to combine both definitions of sirens—the mermaid and the bird-woman hybrid. Guillaume le Clerc argued that “some were half-bird while others were half-fish.” The inconsistencies in the features of sirens are reflected in many bestiaries. Often, within the same work, the image of a siren will be of a woman-fish hybrid, while the writing describes a half bird. This contradiction may point to the fact that the authors and artists of the bestiaries were not in direct contact. Though this explanation seems likely it is also possible that other writers and artists agreed with Guillaume le Clerc in his argument that sirens could come in the form of a woman-bird hybrid or a woman-fish hybrid (Hassig 212-213). I believe it is also possible that the siren was illustrated as a mermaid because it is more visually appealing and described as a bird-woman because it is more frightening.

Another example of a siren in medieval art is within a beautifully detailed manuscript of Pierre Gringore's *Les abus du monde* which was created around 1510. This siren is half woman half bird. The human part of her does not have the monstrous face described by Albert the great, but instead seems rather pretty. The siren has two sets of wings, which differ in size. The larger wings bring to mind those of an angel, especially against the trumpet she has in hand. This brings to mind the religious significance of the medieval siren. Medieval Christians may have read in the Bible that sirens are grouped with demons (Lindquist and Mittman 104-105). The influence of Christianity gives special meaning to the sinful, seductive figure of the siren, which often seems to demonize female sexuality. The siren's angelic appearance gives it a deceitful nature; perhaps the siren's innocent appearance was inspired by the definition within *Liber Monstrorum* which compares the siren to a virgin.

This siren from *Les Abus du Monde* represents the importance of music in the image of sirens. She holds a harp and a trumpet and floats above the sea. Music can be seen as representing the seduction of the siren, because it is classically the weapon of the siren which brings men to their deaths. This depiction stays true to this idea as many men drown in the water beneath the siren. The siren here is an evil temptation, bringing many men to their deaths. In this way, she stays true to classical definitions of the siren. However, there is one way in which she differs. Though at first glance, this siren is the more classical image of the bird-woman hybrid, she shares a feature that looks as if it could belong to the fish-woman hybrid version of the siren: her tail. It is darker in color than the other, feathered parts of her body, contains markings that look like they could be scaled, and widens at its end like the tail of a fish. Though this siren has mostly the features of a bird, this tale shows the influence of the fish-woman version of the siren,

which by the time of this manuscript's creation had been in existence for hundreds of years. The siren's conventional beauty also speaks to the changing image of the siren. She is not blatantly violent but rather seduces men to their death, representing the deadliness of female powers of seduction (Lindquist and Mittman 104-105).

Another religiously evocative depiction of the siren rests on the west façade of the Romanesque church, Montceaux-l'Étoile in Southern Burgundy. On the south console, there is a monster, partially dressed with scales covering its legs, wings above, and claws for hands. The figure has been referred to as "an angel, a demon, or siren." Considering, its religious location, it is logical that some individuals assumed it to be an angel or a demon. However, I believe it is very likely the creature is a siren. It contains features of both the fish-woman hybrid and the bird-woman hybrid, in a way that reminds me of the siren from *Les abus du monde*. Although sirens are today associated with classical Roman and Greek polytheistic religious beliefs, medieval Europeans did not have the same reason to believe they were simply "pagan" mythical creatures. The Vulgate Bible itself references sirens. The creature is also referenced in many bestiaries throughout the middle ages. For these reasons, it seems likely enough that a siren would end up on the façade of a church, perhaps to represent demons or sin (Sekules 450). As suggested by St. Jerome, sirens appear to represent the female demon.

The medieval siren is difficult, if not impossible to define. At once beautiful and hideous, she represents growing medieval fears of the female body and sexuality. The image of the medieval siren is deeply entangled with Christianity. Her image can be found at churches. She is depicted as performing the guise of an angel and a virgin. Throughout the middle ages, the image of the siren was shaped by Christian beliefs that vilified female sexuality. Thus she is shown

seducing men to their death, both by violent force and beautiful songs. She shifts from a hideous bird-woman to beautiful mermaid in this time, and in many depictions she appears to be caught between the two such as the beautiful bird-woman of *Les abus du monde*, and Bartholomew's terrifying mermaid sirens. These varying depictions show that it is not how the siren presents her body or seduces men that makes her monstrous—it's the fact that she does at all. These images of sirens, both hideous, beautiful, violent, and innocent, showcase the complicated and growing religious fears surrounding female sexuality in medieval Europe.

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