

Transgender Bodies in “The Little Mermaid” and *Swim Thru Fire*

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Abstract

Swim Thru Fire, a web comic published in 2015 by Annie Mok and Sophia Foster-Dimino, takes inspiration from transgender interpretations of Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid,” prompting an analysis of both the adaptation and its predecessor. A transgender reading of Andersen’s story highlights the identity binary of humans and mermaids, as well as the discrimination faced by the little mermaid when she tries to transition from mermaid to human, elements that are similar to transgender experiences. Mok and Foster-Dimino retell the tale with a transgender mermaid as its protagonist, drawing attention to relevant transgender issues while advocating for gender diversity. Close readings of the two texts then demonstrate that *Swim Thru Fire* not only deconstructs the identity binary of “The Little Mermaid,” but also provides an alternative ending that challenges normative methods of gender assignment.

Keywords: mermaid, transgender, fairy tales, gender binary

Although mermaids have historically been defined in relation to a male gaze (Kingshill 39), recently the mermaid figure has been used to resist dominant discourses, particularly those surrounding gender. As part of society’s common perception of the mermaid (Kingshill 15), Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” is a particularly important component of these discourses. Traditional readings of the story tend to focus on its sexist elements; for example, Maria Tatar’s introduction to the tale argues that the titular character is “designed to promote subservient behaviour” (216). Transgender readings of the story take a different approach, however, by subverting the idea that the little mermaid’s transformation centers on her

love for the prince and calling attention to her desire to transform. Such an approach allows the little mermaid’s story to symbolize the transition from one gender identity to another while also highlighting the discrimination that transgender people often experience from both normative and Othered identities. The story’s ending points to the ways in which transgender people can be trapped by the expectations of society, but it also contains problematic imagery that valorizes these societal restrictions. In a retelling of Andersen’s story, effectively formatted as a web comic, Annie Mok and Sophia Foster-Dimino’s *Swim Thru Fire* takes inspiration from the transgender interpretations of “The Little Mermaid” to make a more direct statement

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about transgender issues, particularly addressing the invalidation of transgender people through medicalization and sexualization. Unlike Andersen's text, however, Mok and Foster-Dimino's work suggests a way forward for transgender identities, advocating for gender diversity through Ada's act of transformation. Through close readings of both the original tale and its reimagining, it is clear that *Swim Thru Fire* not only deconstructs the identity binary of "The Little Mermaid," but also provides an alternative ending that challenges normative methods of gender assignment.

Since there is a lack of scholarship engaging directly with *Swim Thru Fire*, and because the language involved in the examination of gender can be quite complex, it is necessary to begin by clarifying and contextualizing the research and terminology used throughout my essay. The major starting point for this discussion is an interview with Mok by the Huffington Post, in which she states that she identifies as a transgender woman, and that the protagonists of her work are usually transgender as well (qtd. in Capewell). Mok also shows an awareness of "trans readings" of "The Little Mermaid," and explains that she personally relates to "the hurt, desire, and outsider feelings" in Andersen's story (qtd. in Capewell). One of these "trans readings" is that of scholar Leland G. Spencer, who explains that a transgender reading draws attention to the "transgenderness" of a text that is "not intentionally...about transgender identity" (114). Spencer's analysis of "The Little Mermaid" then seeks to demonstrate "the usefulness of a close reading with a critical transgender lens" (125) by focusing on the "embodied identity performances" that are revealed in the story through such a lens (114). His close readings provide additional support for my own, but his work lacks in some areas; for example, he does not consider the importance of the little mermaid dancing for the prince. As Michel Foucault argues in his discussion of "many silences," silence is "an element that functions alongside the things said," and each type of silence is "an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses" (27). The little mermaid's inability to speak combined with her ability to move adds a crucial dimension to her identity performance, and therefore must be included in a transgender reading of the tale. Additionally, Spencer does not fully analyze the roles of the sea witch and the prince in marginalizing the little mermaid, roles that are vital to a transgender reading of the story. These points of my argument are instead reinforced by the work of scholars Shannon Dea and Julia Serano, the former through her discussion of the feminist groups that exclude transgender women, and the latter through her personal experiences as a transgender woman. Serano's detailed examination of gender-related issues from a transgender perspective, many parts of which allow for a connection

between the mermaid stories and certain transgender realities, are used elsewhere in this essay.

To my knowledge there are no academic analyses of *Swim Thru Fire*, but there is a hint of an academic influence in Mok and Foster-Dimino's text that indicates an opportunity for discussion. The story opens with an epigraph quoted from the article "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix" by transgender scholar Susan Stryker (Mok and Foster-Dimino Pt. 1), suggesting that Stryker's ideas are relevant to Mok and Foster-Dimino's work. Her essay is an emotional, yet critical piece that focuses on the concept of "transgender rage," a fury that "furnishes a means for disidentification with compulsorily assigned subject positions" (248). Stryker explains that "what lit the fuse to [her] rage...was the non-consensuality of [her] baby's gendering" (249), a process that highlighted, for her, "the pains of two violations, the mark of gender and the unlivability of its absence" (250). *Swim Thru Fire* not only acknowledges these ideas throughout the story, but also addresses Stryker's dilemma by suggesting that Ada's transformation, in which her soul leaves her body behind, could provide a way to negotiate with "the pains" of those "violations." Serano's analysis of gender is also relevant here, as is the work of Michael Groneberg, who resists the enforcement of a "one or the other" attitude towards gender. He contends that one can be female, male, "both or neither" (244), and that gender identity "is a quality of the human psyche that is not reducible to the physical or the social" (227). Groneberg's argument thus supports the ending of *Swim Thru Fire* through its assertion that gender identification is not dictated by the body or by society, despite the prevalence of such ideas. Mok and Foster-Dimino address this prevalence in their text through the sexualization and medicalization that Ada endures. The term "sexualization" refers to the reducing of an individual to a sexual body, while the term "medicalization" relates to the power that the medical institution holds in "producing and obscuring ideologies about sex, gender, and sexuality" (Davis, Dewey and Murphy 491). The latter concept is closely connected to the idea of gender assignment, which I use to mean the non-consensual attribution of a particular gender to another person. Additional terms significant to this discussion are "Other" and "Othered," which I use to refer to individuals who have been deemed abnormal due to their inability to fit within a heterosexual, cisgender system of norms. Taken altogether, the preceding information contextualizes the following interpretations of "The Little Mermaid" and *Swim Thru Fire*.

Andersen's mermaid can be understood as a representation of a transgender body limited by a dichotomous system of identity. The story sets up humans and mermaids as opposing identities, particularly in the grandmother's description of the two groups as having

opposing bodies and societies: "The very thing that's so beautiful here in the sea, your fish's tail, seems ugly to people on earth; they know so little about it that they have to have two clumsy supports called legs" (Andersen 224). She praises her own mermaid identity and looks down on humans, calling their bodies "clumsy" and emphasizing their inherent inability to understand the body and society that she has deemed superior. Humans, on the other hand, are stubbornly ignorant of the existence of mermaids, as shown when the mermaid sisters try to tempt sailors to join them under the sea: "the sailors couldn't make out the words of their song; they thought it was the noise of the gale" (Andersen 220). The sailors can hear the singing, but must rationalize it to prevent a disruption of their understanding of the world, reiterating the two groups' segregation. The titular little mermaid then exists in the middle of this mermaid/human binary, never hating her mermaid family but clearly identifying with human bodies, as she "look[s] sadly at her fish's tail" (Andersen 224). She states soon after that she "would give the whole three hundred years [she has] to live, to become for one day a human being" (Andersen 224), which emphasizes her inner sense of herself as human. Her desire to become a human is not merely due to her love for the prince, but also due to her identification with the human body, one that mirrors the "profound [and] deeply felt" identification with a particular gender that Serano argues is a universal human experience (*Excluded* 156). Although the little mermaid's family tries to convince her to remain a mermaid by dismissing human bodies as inferior and by making deals with the sea witch, the little mermaid cannot deny the human identity she feels within herself.

The little mermaid's transition into a human speaks to the process of transitioning from one sex to another, especially in terms of the stigma attached to such a transition. Some, such as Serano, have gone so far as to describe the procedure as "a form of self-mutilation" (*Whipping Girl* 229), a term that is also used by Tatar to describe the little mermaid's transformation (215). The most powerful force of sex reassignment stigmatization, however, is the medical community, as shown by several studies that discuss the prevalence of healthcare professionals that mistreat transgender individuals seeking to transition (Vogelsang et al 3578). When combined with the fact that the majority of these individuals feel that they "cannot choose to not be transsexual," the power dynamic surrounding sex reassignment surgery creates a particularly vulnerable environment (Vogelsang et al 3584). The little mermaid deals with a similar predicament in that she cannot choose not to become a human, but she must make a dangerous deal with a sea witch in order to undergo the transformation. The sea witch is then the medical professional of the scenario, a frightening presence that embodies a discriminatory figure in a position of authority.

As Spencer notes, the physical and emotional vulnerability of transitioning to a different body makes the little mermaid's situation "no less surgical than a transition performed with a scalpel" (117), emphasized through the pain she is forced to experience as part of her transition: "Every step she took, as the witch had foretold, was as though she were treading on sharp knives and pricking gimlets; but she gladly put up with that" (Andersen 227). Her transformation subjects her to a great deal of pain, but as Spencer points out, she is happy because her body finally "matches the internal identity she claims" (117), a reminder of the necessity of the transition. The importance of her transformation makes her emotionally vulnerable as well, a vulnerability that is depicted through her interactions with the human community.

The patronizing attitude of the prince further displays the discrimination of transgender people and reveals the institutionalized discourses of society. Although the story describes him positively in order to justify the little mermaid's love for him, he is frequently condescending towards her, calling her his "dear mute foundling" (Andersen 229) and "*allow[ing]*" her "to sleep on a velvet cushion outside his door" (Andersen 228; emphasis added). She becomes the prince's pet, appreciated for her silence and given a pillow in a hallway rather than a bed in a room of her own. She has no private space, indicating the constant scrutiny that transgender people face, particularly in terms of passing, a concern that is common for transgender individuals after transitioning (Vogelsang et al 3584). The separation between transgender performance and cisgender performance is highlighted when the prince does not define her as an autonomous person, but instead as a helpless child, a patronization that is unique to her character and thus relates to Serano's argument that transgender identities "are seen as less legitimate" than cisgender identities (*Excluded* 123). Because she is not considered to be a fully capable human being, the little mermaid is put under pressure to prove the legitimacy of her chosen identity, a pressure that Spencer finds relevant to the realities of transitioning from one gender to another: "A transgender reading of the story recognizes that to find love and hence immortality, the mermaid must successfully perform an identity that others do not recognize as natural for her" (117). Since the little mermaid cannot speak, her body becomes the main tool of her performance, indicating that she is not entirely silent; Foucault's concept of "many silences" is useful here, as the little mermaid is not placed under a "plain and simple imposition of silence," but under "a new regime of discourses" dictated by movement rather than speech (27). The proof of her humanity is thus her ability to walk and dance beautifully, a skill that she must portray admirably in order to be accepted by the audience of the prince and his social circle: "Everyone was enchanted.... Still she went on dancing, although every

time her foot touched the ground it felt as though she were treading on sharp knives" (Andersen 228). The effort that she puts into passing as a human is never-ending, indicating the significance of her body language, and supporting the fact that her inability to speak is not "the absolute limit of discourse" (Foucault 27). Despite the impressive quality of her bodily expression, however, the prince continues to treat her condescendingly, reiterating the continual questioning of her identity despite her endeavors.

The marginalization of the little mermaid by the sea witch, another Othered body, emphasizes the isolation that transgender people sometimes experience from fellow gender and sexual minorities. Although the sea witch has authority over the little mermaid, the two of them claim identities that do not conform to the mermaid/human binary, pointing to a possibility of some solidarity between them; however, the sea witch decides to maintain her position of power rather than relate to the little mermaid as a fellow Other. The deal that she proposes then accentuates the little mermaid's isolation from both normative and marginalized identities, as the sea witch will not allow her to become a human unless she submits to being silenced:

"But if you take my voice," said the little mermaid, "what shall I have left?"
 "Your lovely form," said the witch, "your graceful movements, and your speaking eyes. With those you can so easily enchant a human heart.... Well, where's your spunk? Put out your little tongue and let me cut it off in payment."
 (Andersen 226)

The sea witch defines the little mermaid's body as more important than her voice, trying to convince her that she can use her body to charm the prince and therefore does not need to be able to speak. Her assessment mirrors that of some radical feminists, who argue that transgender people, and especially transgender women, "reinforc[e] gender stereotypes" through their bodily expression of masculine or feminine identities (Dea 109). In addition, the lack of unity between the sea witch and the little mermaid reflects experiences such as Serano's, who writes of encountering "anything from apathy to antagonism" when interacting with some members of the lesbian community (*Excluded* 73). Although these experiences are not universal, they demonstrate that transgender people can confront exclusion in Othered groups as well as heteronormative groups, increasing their feelings of isolation. The sea witch's marginalization of the little mermaid isolates her in a similar way, as the witch refuses to recognize the parallels between the two of them and instead complicates the mermaid's attempts to express her true self. The little mermaid is then

forced to take on her internal identity without any guidance and must deal with its challenges alone.

The ending of Andersen's story epitomizes the limits placed on transgender bodies by removing the mermaid's ability to control her body. After refusing to give up her human identity, the little mermaid resigns herself to her fatal fate, "hurl[ing] herself ... into the sea" (Andersen 231). Despite her decision to accept her death, the air spirits claim her body for themselves, transforming it without her consent: "The little mermaid saw that she had a body like theirs" (Andersen 232). While it appears that she is being given a second chance, her new body comes with restrictions, such as the idea that "if [she] see[s] a child who is naughty or spiteful, then [she has] to weep tears of sorrow, and every tear adds one more day to [her] time of trial" (Andersen 232). Considering the discrimination that the little mermaid has faced throughout the story, such limits indicate that she will be trapped in an air spirit body for many years, waiting for society to become more inclusive before she can have her immortal soul. Spencer addresses this ending by arguing that her destiny "reflects a sad reality for many transgender people," as her human identity is "not ... well received by others" (118), whether normative or Othered. The blame is not placed on her decision to become human, however, but on the exclusionist attitudes of society, as the spirits state that "good" people can reduce her "time of trial" (Andersen 232). The story makes people like the prince responsible for the little mermaid's end, as every time they degrade someone the little mermaid will be forced to cry and lengthen her purgatory; society then has to change in order for her to be free. Although these implications can be interpreted as positive, the glorification of air spirits undermines the culpability being placed on society, as the little mermaid's air spirit identity is described as having a voice "more spiritual than any earthly music" and is implied to broaden her emotional intelligence by allowing her to experience "the feeling of tears" (Andersen 232). The connotations of superiority given to air spirits then subverts the idea that she would want society to change, resulting in an ending that seems to argue that her entrapment is rewarding. The story is supported by limits, highlighting that there are problematic elements in "The Little Mermaid" even when it is interpreted as a transgender story.

Although the mermaid has become "an icon for transgender children" (Hurley 127), her imagery is just as limited as "The Little Mermaid" story, limits that are subverted by Mok and Foster-Dimino's representation of the mermaid in their version of Andersen's tale. The mermaid figure, which is much more popular than that of the merman, is predictably more relatable for transgender girls than for transgender boys (Hurley 127), leaving a significant portion of the transgender community

unrepresented by the symbol that has been attached to them. Similarly, Andersen's story excludes non-binary identities by suggesting that mermaids and humans are the only appealing choices, and suggests that purgatory awaits those that try to transition from one to the other. *Swim Thru Fire* challenges these ideas not only by making their protagonist a transgender mermaid, as confirmed by Mok herself (qtd. in Capewell), but also by portraying the mermaid community as very diverse. "Pt. 1" depicts bodies of various shapes and designs, even including two with octopus tentacles as their bottom halves (Mok and Foster-Dimino Pt. 1). The use of an octopus body, one that instantly hints at the villainized Ursula in Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, emphasizes the community's acceptance of various bodies regardless of how positively or negatively they are defined by society. The mermaids are not perfect, however. When the humans fall off their ship into the water, many of the mermaids greet them happily, but only Ada saves them from drowning (Mok and Foster-Dimino Pt. 1). The mermaid community is thus happy for those with different ways of thinking to enter their world, but only so that they can undermine that way of thinking, symbolized by not letting the humans live. When Ada goes against this logic, and even takes a human hand to enter the world above, the mermaids are distraught, with one even grabbing at her own throat as if to visually warn Ada of the suffering she will experience (Mok and Foster-Dimino Pt. 1). They would rather destroy the restrictive human ideology, leaving them drowned in ignorance, than attempt to change the humans' way of thinking. The disappearance of the other mermaids from the rest of the story, despite the truth in their warnings, thus highlights the problems inherent in forcing the two groups to remain at opposite ends. Unlike Andersen's work, which sets up a human/mermaid binary, Mok and Foster-Dimino's retelling acknowledges the existence of binarized thinking while directly challenging how it is used to discriminate against transgender people.

Swim Thru Fire depicts the pathologization of transgender people through Caroline, who uses her authoritative position as a scientist to analyze and control Ada's body. In "Pt. 2," she gives Ada a pencil and, after getting her to hold it "properly," closely observes the way she uses the tool (Mok and Foster-Dimino). Since it would be reasonable for Caroline to assume that mermaids do not use pencils, she is not only evaluating Ada according to human standards, but also revealing her desire to contain Ada within those standards, as she specifically chooses to analyze Ada's ability to use a pencil rather than trying to learn from her. Even when Ada does speak, Caroline's face shows no emotion, and she simply gives Ada the pencil without any attempt to engage in a discussion (Mok and Foster-Dimino Pt. 2). She completely dismisses Ada's mermaid language as inferior, and so Ada's drawings of

shapes and scribbles elicit frustration from Caroline rather than interest, as she gives Ada multiple sheets of paper to try to make her recognize that a different response is expected (Mok and Foster-Dimino Pt. 2). The quick dismissal of Ada's way of thinking echoes Stryker's thoughts on having her transgender identity defined as a disorder: "Through the filter of this official pathologization, the sounds that come out of my mouth can be summarily dismissed as the confused ranting of a diseased mind" (244). As a scientist, Caroline is part of these institutionalized discourses that diagnose and catalogue differences according to an abstract concept of normality. She thus assesses Ada's use of the pencil in relation to the way a human would use it, just as medical professionals tend to assess transgender individuals in relation to "heteronormatively gendered lives" (Davis, Dewey and Murphy 509). Ada's inability to exhibit the required behaviours during the repetitive testing process causes Caroline to label her in the same way that the medical community tends to label transgender people, as a "problem[] to be solved" and not as a "healthy...variation" (Davis, Dewey and Murphy 509). Caroline's scientific background causes her not only to categorize Ada, but to do so in a way that emphasizes a specific power dynamic; the completion of the pencil test then confirms Caroline's preconceived notion of her superiority over Others and leads her to turn her attention away from Ada's mind and towards Ada's body.

Caroline's sexualization of Ada reduces her to a body that can be studied and explored regardless of consent. The shift in Caroline's thought process is clearly depicted when she stops looking at Ada's drawings and starts to touch the fin on Ada's arm, which causes Ada to retreat to the bottom corner of the water tank to avoid Caroline's touch (Mok and Foster-Dimino Pt. 2). Ada's discomfort indicates that Caroline's actions are not innocent, but invalidating, as Caroline ignores Ada's artistic creations and focuses instead on her body parts. "Pt. 3" then begins with a statement that warns of "depictions of abuse," foreshadowing the escalation of Caroline's behaviour (Mok and Foster-Dimino). She enters the room wearing a mask, which not only allows her to breathe underwater and invade Ada's space, but also disempowers Ada by removing her ability to examine the details of Caroline's face. Caroline is thus able to use her gaze on Ada without revealing anything about herself. After entering Ada's space, Caroline continues to assert her power by stroking Ada's hair and grabbing her arms, focusing on parts of her body and dismissing the whole (Mok and Foster-Dimino Pt. 3). By cataloguing Ada in pieces, Caroline not only dehumanizes her, but also prevents her from defining herself on her own terms, just as the prince's imposition of the label of "foundling" onto the little mermaid denies her autonomy, and just as projecting one's

“hierarchies, assumptions, meanings and value judgements regarding sex [and] gender” onto transgender individuals invalidates their personal experiences (Serano, *Excluded* 251). The trauma of Ada’s situation is aggravated when the scene continues, as it becomes clear that Caroline is sexually assaulting Ada, an image that is deliberately hidden by a rectangle depicting the night sky over the ocean (Mok and Foster-Dimino Pt. 3). The rape is not portrayed in detail, drawing attention to the ways that violence against transgender people is often overlooked, but by making Caroline’s intentions clear, the story critiques society’s tendency to judge victims rather than perpetrators, a situation which Stryker relates back to the exclusion of transgender people through an allusion to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*: “not only [do] the angry villagers hound their monster to the edge of town, they [reproach them] for being vulnerable to the torches” (240). Caroline’s actions contribute to such misperceptions, as she seeks to unmask Ada’s Otherness while refusing to unmask herself.

After escaping from Caroline’s boat, Ada has an intimate interaction with an anglerfish that allows her to reclaim her identity. The consensual nature of this event is contrasted with the assault scene through the multiple nods given by Ada and the anglerfish to each other, suggesting a sharing rather than a taking of knowledge (Mok and Foster-Dimino Pt. 6). She also listens when the anglerfish speaks and waits for consent before touching its body, respecting its whole rather than reducing it to its parts, unlike Caroline (Mok and Foster-Dimino Pt. 6). After fulfilling the mysterious bargain they agree upon, however, Ada is overwhelmed by her spikes, which suddenly protrude all over her body (Mok and Foster-Dimino Pt. 7). Her body takes on a monstrous appearance befitting the Othering she experienced on the boat, enveloping itself in spikes to cover up the human elements of her body and emphasize her exclusion from human society. The pain of being categorized as monstrous in this way is also implied by the choice to use spikes rather than a less hazardous feature, and by the visible pain in Ada’s face (Mok and Foster-Dimino Pt. 7). Eventually, however, Ada takes a deep breath and the spikes retract, leading to an image of her smiling contentedly (Mok and Foster-Dimino Pt. 7). She reclaims her Otherness, refusing to allow Caroline’s ideas to define her and protecting herself from the connotations of being categorized as an Other, imagery that powerfully mirrors Stryker’s ideas about self-acceptance as a transgender person: “words like ‘creature,’ ‘monster,’ and ‘unnatural’ need to be reclaimed by the transgendered. By embracing and accepting them, even piling one on top of another, we may dispel their ability to harm us” (240). Ada’s acceptance of her spikes thus allows her to be content with her true identity. Her journey, unlike that of the little mermaid, gives a positive message to transgender people, indicating a

possibility of controlling one’s own self-perception and by extension suggesting a healthy goal to strive towards.

The dismantling of Ada’s body indicates a need to disrupt the binarized construction of bodies, as her body dissipates to suggest a move towards what Groneberg calls the “gender of the soul” (227). In the last section of the story, Ada’s body disintegrates and vanishes into the ocean, a sequence that begins with a close-up of her face and hands breaking apart (Mok and Foster-Dimino Pt. 8). This imagery references Caroline’s focus on Ada’s hair and arms during the sexual assault in “Pt. 3,” but the body parts are slightly different here to emphasize that Ada is not defined by this traumatic event (Mok and Foster-Dimino). The shift from hair to face serves as a reminder of Ada’s personhood, while the shift from arms to hands signifies Ada’s newfound agency. Although Ada’s bodily disappearance could be interpreted as removing her agency and contradicting her reclamation of Otherness, it more likely suggests that her soul is transcending the gendered limits that society uses to define bodies by choosing to leave her physical vessel behind (Martin). Her transformation resists the idea that biological theories can thoroughly explain one’s identity, a resistance that is also seen in Overall’s work when she notes the differences “among women and among men” (87; original emphasis). Social theories that define gender identity as constructed by society are also challenged, as Ada deliberately rejects Caroline’s influence and accepts her innate self. These two effects are effectively summarized through Serano’s assertion that gender is “an amalgamation of bodies, identities, and life experiences, of subconscious urges, sensations, and behaviours, some of which develop organically, and others which are shaped by language and culture” (107). Ada’s ability to move beyond the definitions imposed on her by Caroline indicates that her identity is intrinsic to her, and, while influenced by that experience, is not dictated by it. As Groneberg argues, the focus on either “(somatic) sex” or “(social) gender” in the sciences ignores the complexity of gender identity (228), and by challenging these truths *Swim Thru Fire* aligns with Groneberg’s argument that gender identity is tied to “a person’s psyche,” and therefore should not be confined to scientific discourses (228). There are similarities between this ending and that of “The Little Mermaid,” as in both cases the protagonist dissolves into a new form, but whereas the little mermaid has no control over her resurrected body, Ada retains autonomy in her fate, as she chooses her soul over her body rather than being forced into a different form.

By pointing out the complexity of gender identity through Ada’s transformation, *Swim Thru Fire* advocates for the recognition of gender diversity in society. Although the destruction of Ada’s body could suggest a move towards entirely genderless bodies, such an interpretation ignores the fact that many transgender people are drawn to specific

gender identities, including masculinity and femininity. The mere removal of gender categories is then problematic because, as Serano notes, some people strongly identify with “ways of being that ... fit well within societal norms” (*Excluded* 157), despite the assumption that transgender people need to “constantly make [their] gender incongruity visible” (*Excluded* 127). By insisting that transgender people emphasize their Otherness, this ideology creates a new dichotomy of either upholding or resisting the gender binary, marking masculinity and femininity as the issue rather than the problematic normalization of binarized logic. Since Ada is a transgender mermaid, letting go of her body is not a matter of removing gender altogether, but of escaping the gendered meanings that have been imposed on her body, an interpretation that is made stronger by the poetic lines Stryker inserts into her article:

*I will become the water.
If I cannot change my situation I will
change myself.
In this act of magical transformation
I recognize myself again. (247; original
emphasis)*

Stryker’s descriptive language mirrors Ada’s transformation very effectively, lending strength to the idea that Ada does not become a new, genderless being, but instead takes on a form that allows her to “recognize [herself] again,” something she can only do by giving up her body, the medium through which outside authorities can define and classify her. The enforced significance of bodies is also seen in “The Little Mermaid” when the sea witch implies that the titular character can use her body to conform to human society. The experiences of these two characters reveal the meanings that gender their bodies, meanings that, as Overall points out, are deployed by society to “divide people, to define them in significant ways, and to treat them unjustly in some cases” (74). While the little mermaid cannot escape these meanings, Ada is able to leave them behind when she chooses her soul, the essence of her identity, as her embodiment. *Swim Thru Fire* thus expands “The Little Mermaid” by recognizing the worth of all gender identities, and argues that the recognition of the innate nature of gender identity can be used against institutionalized gender norms.

Although “The Little Mermaid” can effectively highlight transgender issues if read through a transgender lens, its problematic binary structure and contradictory ending can impart a negative message, which Mok and Foster-Dimino subvert by reinterpreting the story to acknowledge gender diversity. Andersen’s little mermaid is positioned within a human/mermaid binary, and when she decides to transition from one side to the other, she faces discrimination from both the prince and the sea witch. Her

loyalty to her internal identity causes her death, but her choice is undermined when the air spirits give her a new body. Her confinement to this body is then valorized by the suggestion that it provides her with a greater understanding than the human identity she claimed for herself. Recognizing the potential of the story despite its problematic features, Mok and Foster-Dimino retell it in a way that brings transgender issues to the forefront, and indicates a positive future for transgender identities. Their ending ensures the inclusion of all gender identities, pointing to the validity of the identity felt within the soul and critiquing the importance placed on body parts over one’s internal identity. In this way, the mermaid figure has been given the opportunity to represent gender diversity, and opens the door for new readings and retellings that continue to push the boundaries imposed by hegemonic discourses.

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