

“I’D LIKE TO BE UNDER THE SEA”

Modelling gender in Clara F Guernsey’s *The Merman and the Figure-Head*

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ABSTRACT: The focus of Clara F Guernsey’s short novel *The Merman and the Figure-head: A Christmas Story* is a merman who mistakes a ship’s figurehead for a nymph. Alongside this, in sharp and humorous parallel, runs the story of the merchant who commissioned the figurehead, which is based on a local woman whom he admires and then marries. Guernsey specifically refers to a tradition of writings about the mer-world, including Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘Den lille Havfrue’ (‘The Little Mermaid’), *The Arabian Nights*, and *Moby Dick*. Funny and light-hearted, the story uses the idea of an alternative underwater world to raise questions about human love and values, and challenges 19th Century assumptions about gender and behaviour. When one old mer-professor indignantly challenges the argument that human beings are undeveloped mermen, to staunchly argue that humans are, in fact, undeveloped walruses, Guernsey wittily employs “the world under the water” to satirise its above-water counterpart. Mer-culture enables a critique of human culture.

KEYWORDS: Mermaids, mermen, American literature, utopias, Clara F Guernsey

Introduction: Material and Imaginative Worlds

In 1969 Ringo Starr’s song ‘Octopus’s Garden’ (recorded by The Beatles)¹ created a deliberately fictive world of innocence and imagination, a world under the sea, where boys and girls can play, sing and dance, “warm below the storm.” It’s a world safe from (presumably adult) interference (“No one there to tell us what to do”). Who wouldn’t want to be there? The joyfulness of the song partly lies in its silliness. Listeners know that they cannot rest their heads “on the sea bed” and from the first two lines of the song “I’d like to be under the sea/ In an octopus’s garden in the shade” listeners know that they are in a fantasy land. Centuries earlier in 1516, in a very different context, Thomas More created a popular and highly influential imaginative world called Utopia.² This imaginary land is an island, surrounded by sea, set apart from the known world. The sea distinguishes the island from other lands, and provides a physical barrier from them, matched by the ideological differences of the islanders. Stephen Duncombe argues that this imaginative world, incredible in many ways in terms of the values of its inhabitants, nevertheless has lessons to teach readers:

¹ The lyrics of ‘Octopus’s Garden’ are available at: <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/beatles/octopussgarden.html> and the audio of The Beatles’ recording of the song at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yqZp327u39c> - both accessed 18th April 2018.

² There has been much debate about how seriously readers are supposed to take More’s work; see Duncombe (2012: xxxii-xlii).

The brilliance of More's Utopia is that it is simultaneously satirical and sincere, absurd and earnest, and it is through the combination of these seemingly opposite ways of presenting ideals that a more fruitful way of thinking about political imagination can start to take place. (2012: xxxix)

It is the combination of the "satirical and sincere, absurd and earnest" qualities of *Utopia*, Duncombe argues, that might make us think differently about our own 'real' world (ibid). The implausibility of both *Utopia* and the octopus's garden are obvious. Could people really deplore the valuation of gold as Utopians do? Do octopuses have gardens? How would we breathe under the sea? While tides and times separate these two worlds, what both share is a joyful, playful and absurd exploration of deliberately unreal worlds. Far from seeing such fictions as escapist non-sense, Duncombe suggests that we use different measures in assessing their merits. Neither *Utopia* nor the octopus's garden are promised lands, they are more like "hallucination[s] in the desert" (2012: xlv), but by being both impossible and imaginative, he argues, they act as prompts to our imaginations, to keep thinking about how things might be differently better. Rather than provide closed systems of perfect other worlds, it is their impossibility and imperfections that encourage acts of imagination and fantasy, and promote critique of 'real' world conditions.

Having invoked these two worlds, one or both of which might be familiar to readers, I now want to focus on a little-known text by Clara F Guernsey that uses some of the same strategies as More's and Starr's texts to engage with an audience. In the rest of this essay I explore how this 19th Century American writer used an underwater world populated by mermaids, mermen, whales and nymphs to call into question some of the specific values of her own time. Using humour, satire, the absurd, and many intertextual references she pokes fun at gender stereotypes to suggest that under-water creatures might have a thing or two to teach to teach humans or "forked creatures" (Guernsey, 1871: 43). Two different figures in *The Merman and the Figure-Head* suggest that, "there's more fish in the sea than ever come out of it."³ At first this might recall the advice given to rejected lovers that there are "plenty more fish in the sea." However, in the context of the novel the phrase takes on the meaning of Hamlet's rebuke to Horatio that we do not know all there is to know:

*There are more things in heaven and earth...
Than are dreamt of in our philosophy. (Shakespeare, c1600: I v 168-9)*

Used twice in the novel, the phrase "fish in the sea than ever come out of it" is a useful reminder to readers to use their imagination to create spaces for new values and ideas.

Clara F Guernsey's *The Merman and the Figure-Head: A Christmas Story*⁴ (1871)

Little seems to be known about Clara Florida Guernsey (1836-1893), who lived in Rochester, upstate New York.⁵ As an adult, she seems to have lived with her sister Lucy Ellen Guernsey, who was also a writer. Guernsey, generally, wrote short novels, often pitched at children,

³ This comment is made first by Job the wood carver who makes the figurehead, and it is repeated with a slight variation by the narrator - "There are more fish in the sea than ever came out of it" (ibid: 32).

⁴ The subtitle of the story is not explained. Perhaps it goes back to the medieval tradition of telling magical and mysterious stories in Northern Hemisphere winters.

⁵ The information that I have been able to find comes from Maineiro (ed) (1981) vi & 3 and White (2012).

published by the American Sunday School Union (ASSU), including some about the Seneca, a tribe of native Americans. It is not clear why there has been so little consideration of her writing, but one view of her work is dismissive, suggesting that it is "[c]learly didactic in purpose and rather limited in... literary achievement" (Krabbe, 1981: online). If her novels generally "are most important as reflections of the values and attitudes the American Sunday School Union and its supporters wished to inculcate in American Children in the latter years of the 19th Century" (ibid) then *The Merman and the Figure-Head* has some compelling and unconventional values to share.

The Merman and the Figure-Head was not published by the ASSU, but by J.B Lippincott, a long running publishing company with a special interest in bibles and religious materials.⁶ The story is replete with intertextual references, both to classical American literature, such as Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851),⁷ international literature such as *The Arabian Nights*, classical mythology, including nereids and nymphs, deployed in a joyful and lightly managed way. *The Merman and the Figure-Head* has a curious and unexplained role in the history of mermaids and mermen in fiction. Guernsey's narrator expresses the hope that his audience is already familiar with mer-culture: "Concerning the kingdoms of the sea and their inhabitants Hans Anderson [sic] has written a pretty story, which I hope you have all read" (Guernsey, 1871: 29). Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid' seems to have had its first known English translation in 1872, the year after Guernsey's story was published, but it is possible that she had come across it in another language, perhaps German. Similarly, she may have been aware of Andersen's poem, then play, 'Agnete og Havmanden' ('Agnes and the Merman'). Other mermaid stories preceding Guernsey's, but not mentioned by her, include Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem 'The Merman' (1830), and Matthew Arnold's 'The Forsaken Merman' (1849), so there were English literary precedents for Guernsey.⁸

In what follows I first lay out the narrative line of the story. Second, I analyse the way that the story employs detailed description to immerse the reader in the fictive world, and then employs humour to undercut the credibility of that world. Finally, I give a reading of the whole story that draws on Duncombe's analysis of More's *Utopia* and argues that mermen, mermaids and talking whales have plenty to offer to our political imaginations, particularly in relation to sexual politics. Mer-culture and a marine world provide a critique of 19th Century human values.

What happens under and in the sea in *The Merman and the Figure-Head*

The story begins with a conversation between Master Isaac Torrey and his clerk Ichabod Sterns concerning the former wishing to name his new ship 'The Sea-nymph', a name that Ichabod regards as "a heathenish kind of a name for a ship that is to sail out of our decent

⁶ See Historical Society of Pennsylvania (2007).

⁷ For a very different use of the imagination from the one I suggest here in an interpretation of *Moby Dick* and the mermaid incident in that novel, see Adams (2014: 140-152).

⁸ I am grateful to an anonymous reader for raising the issue of how Guernsey's text fits into the history of mermaid literature, and to Philip Hayward for further reflections summarised here. In terms of the possible influence of previous texts on Guernsey, Tennyson's poem 'The Merman' seems the most sympathetic in tone and colour. Guernsey does not specify which Andersen text she means, misspells his name, and there are no obvious references to 'The Little Mermaid' in her text.

Christian town of Salem" (9).⁹ The reader is immediately plunged into a humorous exchange between these two men who have clearly known each other for some time and are familiar with each other's habits. Character descriptions come four pages later, and we learn that Torrey is 34 years old, but looks ten years younger, that he is a well-dressed merchant "inclined to extravagance and luxury" (13), successful in business, but unusual in that he has "wild ways of talking," and it is reported "that he actually wrote poetry" (16). It is these artistic and unconventional habits of which Ichabod is sceptical, yet he seeks to protect his master from adverse judgements about them. These strange beliefs include a love of Latin and Greek stories, despite conventional teaching that values classical texts only for teaching grammar, by teachers stuck in the "intellectual catacombs enshrining the driest bones of grammar and parsing" (14). "Fancy, imagination, amusement, were ideas much too light and frivolous to be connected with anything so grave, solid and respectable as the intellectual drill for which alone Latin and Greek were intended," says the narrator ironically (14).

The story is strongly character-centred, and readers are predisposed to favour Torrey's engagement with the "food for the imagination" (14) that he finds in his readings. We also learn that Torrey is at "the present time... devoted to Miss Anna Jane Shuttleworth, a beautiful *still image* of a girl, who was *supposed* to have a great fund of good sense, propriety, prudence and piety, because she liked to sit still and sew from morning to night, and hardly ever opened her lips" (16, my emphasis). In these three (italicised) words, the narrator gives his own impression not only of the young woman of whom Torrey is enamoured, but of the consensus about her. She is a still image rather than a lively human being, and judgements are made of her that might not be accurate. The reader has been warned.

From these introductory characters in the first chapter we are led in the third chapter to Torrey's commission of a figurehead for 'The Sea-nymph' to be made by the master carver Job. Job is a shrewd observer, and while he notices Torrey's admiration of Anna Jane, he clearly shares the narrator's scepticism of her character:

'But I'll give the figure a look like Anna Jane, if I can,' pursued Job. 'To my mind, she's a great deal more like some such thing than she is a like a real flesh-and-blood woman.' (27)

Job watches Anna Jane, and the narrator again provides analysis of her conduct as well as the evaluation of her by others:

It was impossible to tell how she felt. Anna was always 'very reserved,' people said. They had an idea that treasures of wisdom, good sense and virtue were at once indicated and concealed by that statue-like air and silence. (53, my emphasis)

⁹ It is hard to know how much play there is in choosing Salem as the story's location, given an association of the town with the witch trials of the 16th Century. There are witches in the story, and there is a suggestion that it might have been a witch who caused the delusion of the merman. Furthermore, the name Ichabod has particular resonance in Old Testament contexts, given that Ichabod was named by his mother after her husband and father-in-law were killed and the ark of the covenant was taken from Israel by the Philistines: "she named the child I-chabod, saying, The glory is departed from Israel: because the ark of God was taken, and because of her father in law and her husband" (1 Samuel 4: 21). Ichabod here stands in stern (as his surname suggests) contrast to the free-thinking Torrey. In American Literature there is also Ichabod Crane in Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820), the suggestible and superstitious protagonist. Guernsey uses all kinds of allusive figures, leaving readers to make of them what they will.

The narrator succinctly offers the reader character analysis, but also criticism of popular conventions, particularly here of the maxim that a good woman is a silent woman. A woman who says nothing can have values attributed to her without deserving them.

Job has a reputation for great "skill in the carving of figure-heads" and his "female figures had life and character" (16 and 18), and this figurehead is no exception. It captures the contradictions of Anna Jane in being life-like but in lacking liveliness. "It looked... as if it might, if it chose, open its lips and speak, but you were quite certain it would never choose, but it was so life-like and yet so still" (54). The creation of the figurehead is an exercise in contradictions. It is based on a living woman, yet that woman is herself, "statue-like." It is so realistic that it looks as if it might speak but would choose not to. While the impersonal pronoun "it" conveys the absence of humanity, the figurehead nevertheless approximates life or is a simulacrum of life.

Between the reader meeting the two first characters, and the carving of the figurehead, we are introduced in the second chapter to "The Sea Kingdom," which begins with a disquisition on mermen and mermaids that is deliberately unsensational. It offers as real an underwater world for the readers' acceptance:

I take it for granted that all my readers have heard of mermen and mermaids. But in case any one's education should have been neglected, I will just say that they are like human beings, only that instead of legs they have tails like dolphins, a fashion much more useful in their element, and regarded by them as much more ornamental, than the style in which people are finished on land.
(28)

The matter-of-factness of the description includes the narrator providing twenty-three pages of detail of the geography, demography, political and social habits of the mer-world, or mer-country, which bears no little resemblance to the scholarly account of the world of Utopia by Thomas More. While I am not alleging that there is any direct influence, the seriousness with which the narrator treats the polity of the sea kingdom is strikingly like More's treatment of his imagined island. Both Utopia and mer-country are detailed, alternative worlds.

The sea-kingdom's literary antecedents are directly acknowledged as Hans Christian Andersen, *The Arabian Nights*, specifically E.W Lane's translation,¹⁰ and Melville's *Moby-Dick*. While the narrator provides detailed accounts of the structure of the sea-kingdom, which I shall discuss in the following section, the narrator points out that the story is "not a chronicle of the politics and history" of the area, but rather "of one particular merman's fortunes" (34). This statement at once tells the reader what the focus of the story will be, but at the same time indicates that a political and historical chronology of the mer-country could be given, asserting its reality. This young merman, the focus of the story, is the grandson of the Professor of Magic in the State University and first appears in a wonderful

¹⁰ Guernsey specifically nominates E.W Lane's translation (1840) for the reader (29). Richard F Burton's 1855 translation was more recent for Guernsey, but it is possible that Guernsey preferred Lane's bowlderised version, which effectively censored the text, for her younger readers. Nevertheless, Lane's translation is a very impressive three volume text that sought to do justice to "those peculiarities which distinguish the Arabs from every other nation, not only of the west, but also of the East" (Lane, 1840: viii).

series of scenes that poke gentle fun at established institutions of higher education, and the arcane games that can take place there. The professor has closeted himself away from his unruly and not very bright students to write a book that argues that far from being “undeveloped mermen,” humans are “simply undeveloped walruses,” (41), thus sending-up academics and human beings, more generally, at the same time:

He began his first chapter by saying that, while he had the highest respect for the Baltic merman's acquirements, intellect, penetration and general infallibility, he nevertheless felt himself obliged to declare that none but an idiot or a madman could come to the conclusion of the learned man aforesaid. (41)

Furthermore, the mer-world is susceptible to the same kind of gender standards that readers might recognise from their own. A witch, disguised as a lobster, arrives to see the professor:

The professor saw her out of the window. He knew who it was well enough, but he did not like the Witch of the Sea. He thought females had no business to study magic, and he said she practiced her art in a most irregular manner. Moreover, she could do two or three things which he couldn't, so he naturally held her in contempt. (46)

After more such funny reprises on human affairs, the main story gets underway. The young merman, on his summer holidays, decides to travel, forsaking a young female mermaid admirer. In travelling, he comes across Torrey's ship “The Sea-nymph,” and inevitably mistakes the figurehead for a real person: “‘What a lovely creature!’ thought the merman. ‘She is looking at me; she holds her vase towards me’” (61) (Figure 1). The narrator makes it clear that the mistake is the merman's alone. “He saw nothing but [it] and, in fact, he didn't see that either, for he saw it as if it were alive” (62). Even a passing gull can tell the difference between the wooden figurehead and a person, as it lands on its head and scratches its ear with a claw (64). So can a passing white whale: “‘That is nothing but wood, that figure on the ship, as sure as my name is Moby Dick’” (71).¹¹

Not only is the merman alone in seeing the figurehead as real when everyone else sees it as wooden, but this error leads to self-loathing by the merman simply for being a merman, “a creature with a fish's tail” (62). When the ship sets sail, to be followed by the besotted merman to his own fatal end, the story of the merman who thinks a wooden figurehead is a living nymph intersects with the story of the merchant Torrey who mistakes Anna Jane as a fit companion:

The next morning the ship spread her sails and went out of the harbour with a fair wind, bound for Lisbon and the Mediterranean. That same evening there was a great gathering at Colonel Shuttleworth's. Master Torrey was married to Anna Jane. (68)

¹¹ Moby Dick is, of course, the white whale in Herman Melville's novel of the same name.



Figure 1 – Illustration of the merman's first rapturous encounter with the figurehead (62)

The central focus of the story is the continued self-deception of the merman, who stubbornly and willfully refuses to listen to the good advice of all those around him, from gulls, a whale, other mermen, and figures from classical mythology such as Cymodoce.¹² No matter how many times characters tell him that the object of his love is simply a “wooden figure-head” (94), the merman resists the truth. Just once, when confronted with the naked splendour of the Nereid Arethusa who stands before him “in all her immortal beauty and shook down her golden hair till it swept her ankles” (96), the merman falters:

¹² Cymodoce, Arethusa and Panope, who appear in the novel, are Nereids from Greek mythology.

The merman felt a cold chill go to his heart. For one instant his eyes were opened; for one instant he knew he had been worshipping a stick. Then he would not see or feel the truth. (97)

Just two pages later there is a parallel moment of self-awareness on the part of the figurehead, who seems to have been affected by the Nereids' intervention:

Meanwhile, some strange influence was at work upon the wooden image. A kind of thrill ran over it. It began slowly to breathe. 'Dear me!' thought the wooden creature, for it could think a little now. 'I must be coming alive! How very disagreeable! I can see—even feel. I don't like it. It's too much trouble. What is that thing in the sea staring at me?' (99)

The figurehead, like the merman, recoils from the moment, and resolves to return to wood:

'Yes, this is much the best way,' was the wooden image's last thought, as the breath of life went away from her and left her more wooden than ever.' (99)¹³

Locked into their own worlds, the merman and the figurehead are literally on a collision course. In a major storm, the sailors take an axe to the figurehead to lessen the top-heavy ballast of the ship. As it falls, it hits the merman on the head and kills him. Figurehead and merman wash up on a beach at Salem, are briefly seen by a few Salem inhabitants, including Master Torrey and Job, before figurehead and merman are both spirited away to save the merman's body from being discovered and humiliated.

Again, there is a moment where the two stories of figurehead and merman, Torrey and Anna Jane, are directly connected, but the relations between Torrey and his wife are dealt with much more circumspectly and briefly. Torrey is a changed man when Job sees him walking on the beach:

with his head down, seeming to notice nothing but the sand at his feet. Master Torrey had quite left off his wild ways. He made no more foolish, fanciful speeches about nymphs and goddesses, and such nonsense. 'Anna Jane had made a sensible man of him,' said his father-in-law. 'He was greatly improved,' said every one, with the exception of Ichabod Stern and Job Chippit. (113)

Once again, the reader is made aware of the gap between the understanding of the general populace in the novel and that of the more observant characters. As for Torrey himself, there is pathos in the depth of his realisation of his mistake in seeing Anna Jane as more than she is. At the end of the novel, when Job conveniently intuits how the figurehead comes to be washed up on the beach near the dead body of the merman, Torrey joins the dots between the two stories and aligns himself with the bamboozled merman: "So much the better for

¹³ There is a fascinating correspondence here with Kate Chopin's 1899 novel *The Awakening*, which charts the heroine's awakening to an awareness of her own entrapment within "les convenances" (49) or expectations of her time. Guernsey's novel precedes Chopin's by twenty-eight years so the correspondence is less one of coincidence or direct influence than indicative of concerns of the times. The experiences of Chopin's heroine testify to the astuteness of the figurehead in seeing the "trouble" of dealing with female self-awareness.

him if he had given his soul to a wooden image,' said Master Torrey, bitterly'" (116). So endeth the lesson.

Strategies of engagement in *The Merman and the Figure-Head*

The effectiveness of this novel lies in its lightness of touch. Through amusing juxtapositions Guernsey parodies conventional 19th Century mores and encourages readers to engage with its essentially preposterous scenarios. How does it persuade readers to play its game? In asking this I am reporting my own experience in the pleasure of the text and in playing its game, and I am assuming that this is not an uncommon experience. If the novel does work for a reader, then while the scenarios are preposterous, like the octopus's garden, the propositions behind it are not. In the rest of this section I want to explore how the story 'works.'

As I suggested at the beginning of the previous section of this essay, readers come into the story half way through a conversation between Torrey and his clerk Ichabod Stern. We are listening into an ordinary conversation between two men, whose interchanges suggest a familiarity born of years working together. We see an awareness of each other's predilections, and a degree of honest speaking, where the clerk does not hesitate to express his own opinion about such things as Torrey's espousal of the importance of "fancy", initially in the desire to name his ship the 'Sea-nymph'.

From the outset, the story establishes the matter-of-factness of the settings and characters, thus drawing the reader into the picture. There are detailed descriptions of situations with which readers might be readily familiar. The scene is drawn to suggest the ordinariness of what we are over-hearing, but the narrative strategy of ordinariness or naturalism is jolted after just a few pages when the narrator pops his head into the scene to tell us where the story is going:

Now I am not going to tell you a long story about Master Torrey, though I might do so if I had not a tale to tell you about something else—namely, this sea-nymph and the merman who figure at the head of this story. I was once told by a schoolmaster that in writing there was 'nothing so important as a strict adherence to facts;' 'fax' he called them. I treasured up this valuable precept in the inmost recesses of my mind, and I mean to adhere to facts if I possibly can.
(12)

How is a reader to interpret this? In the space of a few pages we have shifted from a normal conversation between two people to an indication that we are about to hear a factual tale of a wooden sea-nymph and a merman. Furthermore, the narrator then launches into an extensive digression about the importance of the works of Virgil and Homer. At this point it is germane to think about the implied audience of this text, whom the narrator addresses as "my young readers," suggesting that these classical authors have produced stories as "interesting and charming as any boy or girl could desire" (13). If the real audience were young readers they might well agree with the narrator that the stories are more interesting than the rules of grammar they are often used to illustrate. Older readers, with bad memories of school days, might well wistfully agree.

So the narrator uses realistic scenes and a familiar and conspiratorial tone to engage readers, both young and old, to establish himself as a trustworthy figure to follow as the story develops. At the beginning of the second section the narrator appears again to introduce

the sea kingdom that is the focus of the main story. It is the narrator, the authoritative "I," who tells the readers of the reality of mer-country ("I take it for granted that all my readers have heard of mermen and mermaids" (28). The narrator establishes the realness of the story precisely by acknowledging its fancifulness, through making parallels between the known and obvious, and the unknown and the curious. Mermen (unknown) are like dolphins (known), and therefore mermen become knowable. Humans have legs to walk with (obviously), mermen have tails to swim with (obviously), and mermen are therefore credible. Little by little the narrator builds a picture of the mer-world that is understandable to human readers. At the same time the narrator invites the reader to acknowledge the limits of their own understanding:

Through these seaweeds wander all manner of strange creatures, such as human eyes have never seen, for there is no truer proverb than that 'There are more fish in the sea than ever came out of it.' (32)

What appeared, the first time around, as a quaint saying from the uneducated Job, becomes, the second time around, from the voice of the educated narrator, a proverb, a point of indisputable truth. You don't believe in mermen? Suspend your disbelief, you don't know everything.

Adding to the persuasive way that the narrator encourages the reader to join in with the story is the steady stream of intertextual references that build a history of the mer-world. There is, of course, the reference to the ur-text of mer-worldism, Hans Christian Anderson.¹⁴ Less familiar to the reader, and therefore given more space by the narrator, are two stories from *The Arabian Nights*, "Abdalla of the land and Abdalla of the Sea," and "Gulnare of the Sea" (29). There is not the space here to go into the details of these two stories and their depiction of the mer-world, though they would certainly bear further scrutiny, but they add to the general picture that the narrator is creating of the depth of scholarship and story about the mer-world.¹⁵ There is also Moby Dick, taken from Melville's novel with the same name. Where in Melville's story the whale is the quest of the fanatical and revengeful captain Ahab, in Guernsey's story Moby Dick is the gentle, talking whale who intercedes to try to persuade the merman of his folly, brings the mermaid to him, and generally stands as a kindly ally to the mer-people.¹⁶ The story is full of figures who, though not human, display the best of human characteristics.

¹⁴ See Hayward, (2017, 21-50).

¹⁵ The story of 'Abdalla of the Land and Abdalla of the Sea' in Lane's and Burton's translations is a story of the clash of cultures, one (the land) representing the west, specifically Christian values, the other (the sea) representing the east, and specifically Muslim beliefs and rituals. While Abdalla of the sea helps his counterpart on the land in providing jewels and gems, the two Abdallas fall out over incompatibility in understandings of life after death. Abdalla of the land is exiled from the sea world when he criticises his counterpart's celebration of death. Abdalla of the sea regards the other Abdalla's grief as a failure of faith. Lane's notes on this are an exercise in cross-cultural understanding, as were Richard Burton's: "theoretically we should rejoice that they [the dead] are at rest; but practically we are afflicted by the thought that we shall never again see their pleasant faces" (Burton, 1855: online).

¹⁶ There is also a merman in *Moby Dick*, but here it is an ambiguous creature. It first appears in second mate Stubb's dream as a "sort of badger-haired old merman, with a hump on his back" (1851: 142). On the second occasion, it appears when the cabin-boy Pip jumps overboard in fear at the closeness of a whale. Having been:

carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and for before his passive eye [where] the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that

Producing scenes of vivid detail and humour, loaded with intertextual allusions, Guernsey invites the reader to play along with a story that at times parallels and at other times diverges from common human situations. A tale of a recalcitrant, love-sick and delusional merman, determined to stick to a piece of wood, takes centre-stage while the human saga of a happy and successful man tamed and then constrained by a society-lady with less warmth than a piece of wood carries on off-stage. Part of the strategy of the novel, part of the way it works, is through transference. While we are reading about mer-people and talking whales, we are invited to transfer our understandings to human relationships.

Conclusion: *Serio ludere*¹⁷ or playing seriously in imaginary spaces in *The Merman and the Figure-Head*

What are we then to make of this tale of the merman and the figurehead? It is a central proposition of the story that the merman is deluded. Every figure in the story thinks and says so. A reader can be in no doubt that it is not wise to miss the obvious fact that the figurehead is made of wood. The merman might be a clever student, but he is oblivious to the obvious, and worse still, refuses to take advice. The figurehead itself refuses its chance to take on human feelings and becomes the unwitting killer of her admirer. But what of the human characters? Master Torrey sees Anna Jane's beauty, but his marriage to her seems to have brought him no happiness. While other people laud the changes in him as improvements, the man himself is now silent or speaks "sharply" (116). Gone is his enthusiasm for books and fancy. In its place is a dyspeptic sourness about the world. He agrees not to talk about what he and Job saw on the beach:

'What would be the use?' said Master Torrey, sharply. 'Half of them would not believe you; and who wants to set all the fools in the place chattering?' (116)

In the cases of both the merman and Torrey there is a sense of great loss. The merman loses his life and the poignancy is increased by the reader's sense of the alternatives presented by the merman's young mermaid admirer. Unlike the merman, the mermaid seems happy in her mermaidness. The reader feels the loss of Torrey's exuberance and unconventionality, in the implied unhappy marriage. Both Torrey and the merman fall for images of femininity that are chimeric. Neither object of desire is what it appears to be, and the result of false desire is loss of self. The merman grows to hate himself, and Torrey loses those characteristics that made him different from the others.

What of the female figures that are the cause of these losses? As I have suggested before, there is a clear parallel between the figurehead and Anna Jane, in that both are wooden images, the figurehead literally, Anna Jane metaphorically. Job Chippit, the figurehead's creator, clearly understands the limitations of the ideals that Torrey sees in the figurehead. As Torrey angrily defends its exaltation "above humanity" (57), Job's response sounds as a warning clearly heard by the reader, if not by Torrey:

out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. (ibid: 463).

The mer-man and the sea are far from benign presences in this novel: "The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul" (ibid: 462). For a Jungian interpretation of the significance of the merman here see Adams (2014: 140-153).

¹⁷ The phrase *serio ludere* or 'to play seriously' has been used to describe More's *Utopia*. See Duncombe (2012: xl).

'Waal now, that ain't my notion of exaltation,' said Job. 'Seems to me that's more like havin' no feelin's at all, kind of too dull and stupid and full of herself to keer very much about anything. This wooden girl of ourn is uncommon handsome, though I say it, but bless you, Master Torrey! she hain't got no more brains in her skull than a minnow. She'd be a kind of dead-and-alive sort of a critter always. If she had a husband, she'd never bother herself if he was in trouble. If she had a baby, she wouldn't care for it, only maybe to dress it up.'
(58)

To underline the point even further, in the next paragraph the reader gets a very rare insight into Anna Jane's thinking. While Torrey and Job have a heated conversation about the merits of the figurehead, and by implication Anna Jane, the human subject of the conversation is oblivious to its significance: "Anna Jane sat calm and still, and wondered whether that light green colour in the nymph's robe would become her" (58).

The class lines are very clearly drawn here. It is the labouring craftsman who can see through the rhetoric of middle-class gender values. But in saying this, it is also the case that Anna Jane has understood her position and the requirements of that position well. At no point in the story do we have any insight into Anna Jane's feelings about the marriage. We do not even see her agreeing to it. The arrangement is between Torrey and her father the Colonel. It is also more than likely that Anna Jane's marriage would not require her to "bother" about either husband or baby, given her financial status as wife, mother and daughter. In Anna Jane's defence, it could be argued that she has understood the requirements placed on her rather better than Torrey does.

It is only through the (mostly) implicit comparisons between mer-world and human world that criticism of her conduct, or, more importantly, of the lack for Torrey that she represents, arises. Put in those terms Anna Jane is the symbolic absence that devours Torrey. It is her very passivity that renders him less than he was before. To carry this one step further, she becomes the contradiction at the heart of patriarchal society. The silent, compliant, desirable woman who represents the perfection of her kind brings about the diminution of the vibrant and successful figure that Torrey once was. Be careful what you wish for, might be one message that both Torrey and the merman might have heeded. Wooden is as wooden does.

If the mermaid is the alternative that the merman ignores, then the question that readers might ask is what kind of women would have been more appropriate for Torrey. Asking this question reveals some of the reasons why the focus of the story is on the mer-world rather than the human world. It is uncontentious to suggest that a merman should not fall in love with a wooden figurehead for many reasons. First, and not least of all, mermen do not exist, so whatever happens to them is story rather than fact. Readers can lament for him, but there is a level of displacement that distances them from his fate. Torrey, however, is all too real, and whatever happens to him is of closer proximity to the reader. Furthermore, it is telling that readers are given very little insight into the 'wooden' Anna Jane. A fuller understanding of her position might engage the reader more sympathetically with it. What is a young woman of her standing supposed to do? Certainly not express opinions and fancies of her own. An Anna Jane that might have suited Torrey better is not an Anna Jane that the Colonel would allow as a daughter, let alone one that a mother (absent here) would have approved. A non-wooden Anna Jane is then, literally, inconceivable.

The textual spaces of *The Merman and the Figure-Head* are full of vocal, lively and powerful female figures, but they are not human. The wittily drawn scenes between the three Nereids, Arethusa, Cymodoce and Panope, are vibrant depictions of female friendships, where Cymodoce's incessant praise of her lover, "the pious Aeneas" is incisively debunked by her friends; thus undercutting the status of one of the most renowned male figures in classical literature: "I do wish you ever could talk about anyone else, Cymodoce! I am tired to death of the pious Aeneas.' 'So am I,' said Arethusa; 'he was a humbug if ever there was one'" (97). It is Arethusa's revealing of herself, showing her full physical perfections, dressed only in her hair, to the bedazzled merman that provides the only, brief, chance of him coming to his senses. But witches able to transform themselves into lobsters, and Greek goddesses able to cover expanses of land and sea uninhibited by restrictions of gravity, time and space, exhibit behaviours not available to mortal women.

Anna Jane's space in the text is limited by the conventions of 19th Century femininity. The possibilities of other behaviours are explored in the mer-world and the marine spaces of the text. The wonder of Guernsey's story is that it takes a sledgehammer to those 19th Century conventions while appearing to be telling a tale of talking whales and mermaids. If, like More's *Utopia* and the Beatles' 'Octopus's Garden', Guernsey's *The Merman and the Figure-Head* are kinds of "hallucination[s] in the desert" (Duncombe, 2012: xlv), then readers can be forgiven for preferring the hallucination to the rest of the desert. Who wouldn't rather be under the sea with Moby Dick, magical mer-professors, goddesses, wise and kind mermaids and mermen, than stuck in the culturally stifling desert of 19th Century gender conventions, where silence, far from being golden, is wooden?

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