

# POSIDAEJA AND MAMI WATA:

The online afterlives of two mermaid goddesses

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines two examples of fanfiction on oceanic mythologies: ‘Another day, another offering’ by sweetbydesign (2021), about Posideaja, and ‘Mami Wata’ by lucien\_cramp (2021). Through both stories, age-old archetypes of mermaid goddesses are harnessed for the environmental agenda. In their fannish rewritings, the authors inverse many Romantic mermaid tropes to empower the mermaid and to confirm the connection between the mermaid and oceanic awareness. Moreover, in their latest remediations, Posideaja’s and Mami Wata’s bodies go against widespread standards for physical beauty and for fitness (i.e. functionality, such as being fit for labour). As such, these two updated mermaids open up a wide range of possibilities for identification and inspiration for their creators as well as their audiences. With their new representations of Posideaja and Mami Wata, the authors thus address two interconnected problems: the oppression of women (in terms of beauty and fitness norms) and the environmental damage done to the oceans (in terms of the acidification of oceans, increases in ocean temperatures and rising sea-levels).

**KEYWORDS:** mermaids, mermaid goddesses, Posideaja, Mami Wata, fanfiction, feminism, ecofeminism, oceanic mythologies.

## Introduction

*We exist in a sea of powerful stories: They are the condition of finite rationality and personal and collective life histories. There is no way out of stories; but no matter what the One-Eyed Father says, there are many possible structures, not to mention contents, of narration. Changing the stories, in both material and semiotic senses, is a modest intervention worth making.* (Haraway, 1997, p.45)

Since the beginning of the 21st century, many new renditions of mermaids have challenged, changed and expanded existing intermedial storytelling, based on fairy tales and myths about mermaids. Some recent examples of this act of changing the stories can be found in the realm of fanfiction. Various fan-authors have taken a mythological mermaid goddess as a starting point and subsequently empowered her to speak out against ocean pollution. To illustrate this fannish eco-feminist rewriting of oceanic mythologies, two 2021 exemplary case studies were selected: ‘Another day, another offering’ by sweetbydesign (2021) and ‘Mami Wata’ by lucien\_cramp (2021). After a short introduction to the contexts of mermaids and feminist fanfiction, these two works of creative (re)writing will be analysed. Each story analysis starts with a short summary of the

narrative, after which its mythological backgrounds will be explored and its eco-feminist interventions will be discussed.

## Mermaids and Feminist fanfiction

From Lorelei to Rusalka, from Galatea to Undine, from Mami Wata to the Ningyo: many of the folklores of Europe, Russia and South-East Asia have produced their own variants of the water-woman. From the Romantic Movement up till the 21st century, the mermaid was usually a victim of her fate, at the mercy of the vagaries of life, tossed about by the actions of the more privileged figures in their stories. But the times, “they are a-changin’”. As Philip Hayward’s book *Making a Splash* (2017) shows, recent decades have seen an explosion of mermaid imagery in global popular culture, across cinema, television, literature, music, design, performance, cosplay, and web-based forms. New media have fostered a “phenomenally increasing proliferation of fairy-tale transformations in today’s ‘old’ and ‘new’ media” (Schwabe, 2016, p. 81). Often, the newest mermaids are hybrids of earlier types, adapted to their new context, but with recognisable traces of their origin. Many of these new mermaids were born on the Internet, the “wonderfully sprawling repository of arcane fictions and crypto-everything” (Hallerton, 2016, p. 112). As she goes on describe:

*Its fragmentary and often inter-generative texts thrive and gain momentum with the slightest (and often most erroneous) of pretexts, generating threads of online mythology that variously intersect with older folkloric and mythological stories or else develop independently.* (Hallerton, 2016, p. 112).

In between the lines “once upon a time” and “happily ever after”, fairy tales like Andersen’s – and the subsequent adaptations by Disney and others – offer a glimpse into the morality of the times, wherein “many of them owe their longevity to an ability to address tabooed subjects in a symbolic manner” (Ashliman, 1997). Building on these traditions, in 20th century representations, the mermaid’s body has often been fetishised, both in the realms of beauty standards (wide-spread standards for physical beauty, that are often rooted in racism as they concern whiteness and thinness) and in the realms of fitness standards (standards for functionality i.e. being fit for labour). Disney’s Ariel, for example, follows many Romantic ideals, as a beautiful, white, submissive girl, living only for the male in her life. By running away from her dominant father in hopes of marrying Prince Eric - whom she does not even know - she basically just trades one manifestation of female oppression for another. But in the 21st century, mermaid mythology gained new power through modern media (Mussies 2019). Through rewriting familiar, time-tested stories, the authors of fanfiction reinforce as well as invert many Romantic mermaid tropes, by reiterating as well as changing elements of heritage. Diverse communities of fans express their concerns about cultural politics, for example concerning various types of social inequity and environmental awareness. By using two present day online mermaids in fanfiction we can analyse the mermaid’s developments.

Fanfiction is a written form of fan art, a type of user generated content and a form of participatory culture that is distinguished by relatively low barriers of entry to artistic expression and a stronger level of support. Fanfiction can act as a special kind of socio-politically activist tool bringing about awareness and visibility to minor and supporting characters as well as alternative and additional narratives that were excluded in the original work (Walsbergerová, 2017). In this way, fan art brings about diversity and

representation for many ages, ethnicities, genders and cultures internationally, thereby contributing to global feminism (Brough & Shresthova, 2011). This is not to say that all fans or fandoms are inherently political or feminist in nature. Some may never be political. However, fan art has a potential to form content around worlds that may not be explicitly political or feminist in nature, but that can offer spaces and/or resources for feminist engagement.

With an increase in feminist discourse in the media world, there has been clamour for more visibility and representation of female characters especially in hero roles. In mainstream media, women have often been condemned to portray stock character tropes and storylines that show “hostile and violent treatment of women across many media forms” (Cucklanz, 2003: 32). Through fan art, fans are able to reveal their fascinations and frustrations about what is mainstream or conventional in the media (Brough & Shresthova, 2011). Fan art reveals a fascination with innovative and empowered heroine roles thereby celebrating such stories as progressive and feminist. By doing so, fan art emphasises character traits and plots that align with the feminist quest heroine including girls’ physical prowess, agency, notions of sisterhood, the importance of friends and allies and the reworking of hegemonic binary scripts (Hohenstein, 2019). Fan art also shows the frustrations of fans with oppressive or exclusionary media, for example by depicting the little mermaid as a prince, or as a dominatrix gagging prince Eric (Milton, 2020).<sup>1</sup> Through practices such as ‘race-bending’, fan art is able to represent diverse ethnic, racial and cultural groups and also criticise dominant misrepresentation and/or absence of said groups in media (Amaral, Vieira de Souza & Monteiro, 2021). Emphasis on empowering, heroic, progressive, diverse, feminine and ‘race-bent’ drawings transforms the visual appearance of females and engages in an intersectional feminist discourse by criticising the lack of diversity in mainstream popular culture in general (Hohenstein, 2019). All these developments are reflected in fan fiction about mermaids, as will become clear by the analysis of the two case studies that explore themes of anthropocentrism or speciesism and sexism.

My analysis of two case studies shows that through the feminist act of rewriting the stories, age-old archetypes of goddesses are harnessed for the environmental agenda. After their initial publication online, the stories continue to evolve as fans rewrite them. As Jenkins proposes:

*fans reject the idea of a definitive version produced, authorised, and regulated by some media conglomerate. Instead, fans envision a world where all of us can participate in the creation and circulation of central cultural myths.* (2004/2003, p. 289).

As such, the metamorphosis of the mermaid is an ongoing process.

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<sup>1</sup> Also see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNXV\\_KGjV1I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNXV_KGjV1I)

Case study I: 'Another day, another offering' by sweetbydesign (2021)<sup>2</sup>

The 2021 story 'Another day, another offering' by an individual writing under the username "sweetbydesign", is about a giant mermaid goddess called Posidaeja and her thoughts on the human race: "[t]hey would always be simple creatures, but their newest actions towards her made her wonder if they truly were as stupid as she thought they were" (sweetbydesign, 2021). In the fanfic, Posidaeja is offered a human sacrifice, but rejects it. Instead, Posidaeja blows a bell of air around the sacrificed woman, to keep her alive, and tells her that she is not interested in human sacrifices. She does, however, have a message for the people who threw this woman into the ocean: to stop polluting my sea. As such, this writing raises awareness around the anthropocentrism or speciesism – humans should not pollute the sea – and female oppression – men should not harm women. Moreover, the protagonist contests the tossing away of a woman who is considered less valuable to society as she (who cannot swim) is less fit for labour.

Writer sweetbydesign did not choose the name for her mermaid sea goddess by chance: Posidaeja is one of the first traceable mermaid-like figures, a goddess who was important in the Mycenaean state of Pylos (1600–1100 BCE). Nestor's kingdom of "sandy Pylos" was an important centre, as recalled by Homer in the *Odyssey* (XVII 108–112). The Pylian deity appears to be a female version of Poseidon. The theology of Poseidon and Neptune may only be reconstructed to some degree, since early times they appear to have been identified as one and the same God.<sup>3</sup> Such an identification may well be grounded in the strict relationship between the Latin and Greek theologies of the two deities.<sup>4</sup> The name of the sea-god Nethuns in Etruscan was adopted in Latin for Neptune in Roman mythology, while linear B inscriptions on clay tablets show that Poseidon was already venerated at Pylos and Thebes in the pre-Olympian Bronze Age. The origins of Poseidon's cult can be traced back to the Mycenaean period (Mylonopoulos, 2012) and he was later on integrated into the Olympian gods as being a brother of Zeus and Hades. In the Greek-influenced tradition, Neptune was the brother of Jupiter and Pluto and the brothers presided over the realms of Heaven. Again, a very masculine mythology. But Richard Vallance, a specialist in Mycenaean Linear B, states that when thinking about the Gods worshipped at Pylos, "it is of great significance that there are both masculine and feminine versions of each god, and [that] even where there is no masculine, there is always a feminine, because the Minoan and Mycenaean religious hierarchy is matriarchal" (p.c. March 2016). This can be traced in the surviving clay tablets from Pylos (Bennett, 1955, p. 213).

In the Minoan and Mycenaean civilisations, writing has not been observed for any use other than accounting.<sup>5</sup> The clay tablets served as inventory lists, labels and summaries.<sup>6</sup> In our quest for the mermaid, an interesting example is the Pylian tablet known as PY Tn 316. It is written in Linear B – the oldest language we can read – and records golden

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<sup>2</sup> With the author's permission, I have republished her work at my website, to give it a stable home. <http://martinemussies.nl/web/another-day-another-offering/>

<sup>3</sup> See reference to his presence in the lectisternium of 399 BCE (Livy, 5.13).

<sup>4</sup> Livy v. 13.6; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 12.9; (Showerman, 1901: 223).

<sup>5</sup> As was the case in many cultures, see Scott (2017: 139), for example/

<sup>6</sup> In this cultural region the tablets were never fired deliberately, as the clay was recycled on an annual basis. However, some of the tablets were "fired" as a result of uncontrolled fires in the buildings where they were stored. The rest are still tablets of unfired clay, and extremely fragile; some modern scholars are investigating the possibility of firing them now, as an aid to preservation.

'Mycenaean goblets' and 'Minoan chalices', dedicated to various deities.<sup>7</sup> As Joann Gulizio explains, "Tn 316 contains a strikingly high number of female divinities". It mentions, among others, po-ti-ni-ja, di-u-ja, e-ra and: po-si-da-e-ja, female Poseidon. This possible precursor of Amphitrite appears in line four, which reads: ma-na-sa, AUR \*213VAS 1 MUL 1 po-si-da-e-ja AUR \*213VAS 1 MUL 1.<sup>8</sup> According to Barbara Olsen, this could be translated as "Given to ma-na-sa with Gold vessel; given to po-si-da-e-ja along with Gold vessel" (2014; 285). This strongly suggests the existence of a female version of Poseidon, dated to c. 1200 BCE.

But what about the people that are depicted on this Phylia clay tablet? My first thought was that they might be a part of an offering to the mermaid goddess - just like in the fannish reimagining by sweetbydesign. This was confirmed by the literature, as various scholars believed that the men and women drawn near the golden vessels were human sacrifices (Buck, 1989: 131-137). But more recently, scholarship has contended the people in the tablets were priests and priestesses who perform the ritual of offering the gold. Richard Wallace is not so sure at all that the Minoans ever sacrificed humans, as they "were much too civilised and peaceful to indulge in such barbaric acts".<sup>9</sup> Perhaps it is possible that the Mycenaeans may have done this, as they were quite warlike, but the so-called "evidence" for human sacrifices - painted people near the offered gifts - is very slim. With her story, sweetbydesign engages with the current research agenda, and puts a new and original spin on a possible answer to the question of human sacrifices in this sea-faring society: people who were not fit for labour were drowned. Moreover, the author presents us with an alternative body ideal - whereas most Romantic mermaids are presented small and petite, her Posidaeja is gigantic - a powerful female creature, who shapes her world "through her own magic" (sweetbydesign 2021).

Until recently, it seemed like most mermaids were doomed to lead a tragic life, stuck between longing and belonging, in a space that Homi Bhabha (1994) calls "Unhomeliness". Mermaids seemed helpless at the mercy of the vagaries of life, tossed about by the choices of male figures in their narrative. Authors and artists alike framed the water woman in different versions (including *Undine* by Friedrich de la Motte Fouque that inspired Hans Christian Andersen's little mermaid) as a tragic figure, commonly a victim of love, often relegated to the sea. This image of the mermaid as oppressed is apparently so strongly rooted in our common consciousness, that it was even used by feminist scholars, such as activist and psychology professor Dorothy Dinnerstein (1967 and 1976), who uses it to illustrate "our longstanding general awareness of our uneasy, ambiguous position in the animal kingdom" (1976, p. 5). But as the ancient mythology of Posidaeja shows, the mermaid has not always been a victim of her fate. Moreover, her depiction is subject to change. With the turn of the 21st century, various mighty mermaids and related water women are making their comebacks, both in cosplay and online, such as in sweetbydesign's story, in which the mermaid has gained agency. The once powerless mermaid became a goddess again, much more powerful than the human being in the story. This is symbolised by Posidaeja's voice, for while whispering, the goddess is "aware of how strong her voice was, even through the waters of the ocean" (sweetbydesign 2021). Around 1600-1100 BCE, Posidaeja was a goddess, worshiped and adored, as people built her temples and dedicated offerings to them. Around 2000 CE, she came back in online

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<sup>7</sup> See for example Cook & Palaima (2016).

<sup>8</sup> Raymoure (2016).

<sup>9</sup> Private conversation, March 2016

fan art, in which she is (re)presented as just as powerful as three and a half millennia before.

#### Case Study II: 'Mami Wata' by Lucien Cramp (2021)<sup>10</sup>

In the 2021 story 'Mami Wata,' by a writer with the username *lucien\_cramp*, a man called John walks along the coastline, lost in thought. John broods about the oil that is polluting the rivers and waters of his country: "The creeks and rivers teeming with fish and sea life became a pool of death. Entire ecosystems wiped out in just a few years." For a moment, he thinks that he is still dreaming, as the singing had woken him up from a nap against a tree trunk. When he looks around, however, he sees a beautiful dark-skinned mermaid. He cautiously walks towards this fascinating creature, remembering that in the village, the fishermen used to tell fairy tales about "mami wata". He is already very close to the mermaid when he accidentally steps on a twig - causing the mermaid to plunge into the water and give him a good look at her fishtail. Now John has no more doubts. He calls the mermaid, begging her to come back and sing more, because her voice sounds like that of an angel. Silence. Just when he was about to give up, he hears her again. She asks him if he likes her voice and promises to sing for him more often, if he in return will stand up against water pollution.

The whole story is just a little over 500 words and only describes this scene, told via an auctorial (omniscient) narrator, but still offers an interesting retelling of the many Romantic storytelling tropes and traditions about mermaids. In this version of the story, the character of Mami Wata presents an alternative to the more mainstream Romantic mermaids. Andersen's and Disney's mermaids were powerless, literally had no voice, which conveys their:

*aloneness in both worlds: merfolk didn't understand her and without the ability to communicate neither shall the prince... Being voiceless, the mermaid cannot manipulate the prince or mirror his actions with her emotions (like Lucia di Lammermoor and Norma). (Mussies, 2016).*

In the rewriting discussed, Mami Wata makes her voice heard. But not to shout or command, to sing. With this addition, Mami Wata becomes as seductive as the classical Greek sirens. But not to lure sailors to their deaths, she sings in order to save the world, by pointing out the anthropocentrism and speciesism of the people polluting "her" oceans.

Akin to the first case study, also writer *lucien\_cramp* did not choose the name for her fannish mermaid story by chance. Mami Wata, also known as Mother Water, is a water spirit revered over most African and African Atlantic countries. Among other aquatic spirits, she is surrounded by various arts that honour water's fundamental, sacred nature. According to research by Drewal and Houlberg (2008), Mami Wata's paintings have been significantly affected by symbols of historic snake charmers, original African water spirits, Muslim saints, European mermaids, Christian, Hindu gods, and goddesses.

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<sup>10</sup> This work was also republished with the author's permission and can be read via:  
<http://martinemussies.nl/web/mami-wata/>

Mami Wata's tremendous and all-pervasive presence is due to several things. She can bring money and good fortune, whereby her power expanded as a consummate capitalist between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when Africa's trade with the rest of the globe exploded. Significantly, Mami Wata's name is written in pidgin English, a dialect used in facilitating trade. Mami appeared in new places and under new guises throughout the diaspora, including Santa Marta la Dominadora, Oxum, and Lasirèn, Yemanja, and was re-visualised, re-established, and revived. African-based religions thrive in groups across the Americas, including the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Brazil (Drewal et al., 2008). The power of Mami Wata, on the other hand, is far more than just about money. Although she gives good fortune and ranks through monetary means, she also assists individuals with reproductive issues like infant death, infertility, and impotence (Roberson, 2013). Individuals are attracted to her as an enticing seductress who promises the powers and pleasures that come with spiritual commitment. She also constitutes a threat because a relationship with Mami Wata frequently necessitates a high cost in the mortal realm, such as celibacy or the life of a family fellow. Regardless, Mami Wata can assist both men and women in navigating their sexual urges and preferences (Niblett, 2019). Through Mami Wata, women could acquire a professional and spiritual way to become great healers and priestesses of both physical diseases and psycho-spiritual and demonstrate female agency in a male-dominated society. Traditionally, the worshippers of Mami Wata have chosen global and local ideas, images, actions, and arts, interpreted following indigenous beliefs. She instilled them with new senses and represented them in dynamic as well as novel customs to serve their own aesthetic, social, economic, political, and devotional goals (Drewal et al., 2008).

Mami Wata is frequently depicted with a woman's torso and head, half-human, and half-fish. She may also undertake the form of conjunction with her mermaid abilities, sometimes independently and sometimes in snake charmer, shown as a human-goat-priestess with a snake and a bird. She can also effortlessly take on the appearance of a Hindu goddess or god while maintaining her individuality. Individuals are attracted to her because of the seemingly unlimited possibilities she represents, but they are also terrified of her destructive potential (Peterson, 2006). Mami Wata remains a source of inspiration, as, in the words of Lesley Braun (2021, p. 36), she “shows us a structure by which rumours, memes and in-group culture endure through time, not despite, but thanks to their mysterious origins and fluid meanings”. Those who study her, adore her, and brand works of art about her motivate a wide range of attitudes, emotions, and acts. For instance, the US rap artist Azaelia Banks has been perceived to represent Mami Wata in her early 2010s songs and music videos (Burton, 2016).

In conclusion, Mami Wata is a symbol representing the mystical world of amazing creatures, mermaids, seductive powers, and their myths in Africa and its Diasporas. This also concerns economics, globalisation, art, belief, and the power of moving ideas in addition to pictures altering communities' and people's lives. As the story by lucien\_cramp exemplifies, cross-cultural and human creativity interchange foster creative representations of the unique aquatic goddess, that both literally and symbolically give her a voice.

### Reflections (on the water and in the mirror)

Central to the two case studies in this paper is the connection between the mermaid and oceanic awareness. This connection is not a novel one, as websites like

www.savethemermaids.org and www.mermaidsforchange.com are exemplary for present-day virtual uses of the mermaid advocating oceanic awareness. But depictions of the mermaid archetype on websites like these are often problematic. The mermaids on there are an example of the way popular media visually connects the feminine with nonhuman animals, while empathising or even fetishising distinctive 'female' traits such as body figure (curves, small waist) and large eyes with long eyelashes. Moreover, the Disneyfied version of the mermaid's story has been critiqued by scholars like Patrick Murphy (1995), for the colonial relationship between the land and the sea that, as also touched upon in these two case studies, allows for ocean pollution. In the realm of online fanfiction, however, the mermaid has regained agency as various authors are re-writing the stories. By creating more powerful mermaids - mermaid goddesses, even - they are thus making feminist interventions. As has become clear from the analysis above, this is also the case in the two stories selected for this article, in that are both rooted in ancient mythological traditions - one is about a goddess from Ancient Greece, the other about a goddess from Africa. By using these two goddesses as mirrors that make us look at ourselves and our society with insight and involvement in an equal way, this article has identified an ecofeminist development in fanfiction.

A close reading of the two case studies shows that both texts draw on mythologies and folklore that are much older than the Romantic stories about dependent mermaids. When re-writing the stories, the authors make use of the Romantic idea of the mermaid and reverse many of its tropes. In the fanfished re-imagination of Mami Wata, the powerful mermaid uses her voice to make humans obey. Moreover, Mami Wata challenges standard western convention because she is a dark mermaid - explicitly *not* white skinned. The rewritten version of Posidaēja also agitates against current beauty standards with her body. Whereas many modern mermaids still resemble a Barbie doll-type mermaid - with unrealistic bodily features such as too big eyes, thin waist, long legs and flouncy bosoms, Posidaēja is literally larger than life. Her size gives her the power to kill a human without effort, but she does not. Due to her hybrid nature, the mermaid as a border-crossing figure can be framed as deconstructing binaries and hierarchies (Mussies, 2018). The latest remediations of Posidaēja and Mami Wata open up a whole range of global possibilities for identification and inspiration, for example by exploring themes of biotechnology and by looking at matriarchal diving communities like the Ama (Japan) and Haenyeo (Korea), that future research might address. With their re-writing of the stories, the authors of mermaid fanfiction show that we can overcome sexism, anthropocentrism and speciesism and allow the mermaid to function as a new role model to raise awareness about, and provide us with an alternative for, two connected problems: the oppression of women and the environmental damage done to the oceans.

Figure 1, a digital artwork was created by a Russian fan artist under the pseudonym of Efa and posted and reblogged on many social media websites, such as Tumblr, DeviantArt and WeHeartIt. Although at first glance, this image rather emphasises mainstream female ideals (such as whiteness, thinness, long hair etc.) the fanfished texts that accompany it carry emancipatory potential. In addition to the hashtag containing the title of the work, Efa and her rebloggers have also added all kinds of other hashtags and explanations, about the artwork itself - like #blue and #digitalpainting - about the mythology behind it - like #posidaēja, #seagoddess, #mermaid, and about the reclaiming of agency - such as #mighty #feminist and #powerful. By adding to these paratexts and, therefore, transmedial storytelling around Posidaēja, the people involved in fanfiction thereby aim to empower Posidaēja in a similar way to sweetdesign in her story. This confirms the trend in reclaiming mermaids' agency in fan art described in this article.





Figure 1 – Mermaid artwork by Efa (date unknown)

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