

# “A PHALLUS OUT OF WATER”

## The construction of mer-masculinity in modern day illustrations

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**ABSTRACT:** The article addresses the representation of the male equivalent of the mermaid – the merman – in contemporary western illustrations found on the Internet. The article relies on a theoretical framework of gender studies, queer theory, masculinity studies and previous studies of the mermaid including those informed by psychoanalysis and folkloric studies. The merman is examined with regard aspects of gender, sexuality, masculinity and the intertextual relation to mermaid mythology, folklore and research. The article concludes that contemporary illustrations of the merman perform a marginalised masculinity due to archetypally feminising components, such as sexual availability, exposing of erotic body parts, exoticisation and excessive beauty. The illustrations are mainly made to please a male homosexual gaze, although this is not always the case. Due to his marginalised position the merman does not oppose hegemonic conceptions of the binary gender system or the beauty ideals for the western man where whiteness, muscularity and youth are prioritised. The article counters earlier phallocentric explanations of the merman’s marginalisation and points to other feminising components, like the sensual round form of the fishtail and the merman’s close relation to nature.

**KEYWORDS:** Mermen, Mermaids, Masculinity, Male Pin-ups, Male bodies, Gay gaze, Female gaze, Medialore, Folklore, Gender, Gender studies, Queer theory, Cultural studies.

### An Introduction to the ‘male mermaid’

Merfolk are mostly represented by the appealing mermaid who, in many ways, portrays a general cultural understanding of femininity itself. Psychologist Dorothy Dinnerstein characterised the mermaid as the monstrous symbol of womanhood: “the treacherous mermaid, seductive and impenetrable female representative of the dark and magic underwater world from which our life comes and in which we cannot live, lures voyagers to their doom” (1976: 5) but identified the man-eating minotaur as an equivalent masculine monstrosity (ibid). The merman’s ‘fishyness’ seems to undermine a potential role as symbol of hyper-masculinity. He is also harder to catch in mainstream media. You can find the merman getting dry-humped from behind on stage by Madonna in her 1990 ‘Blond Ambition’ World Tour, sung about in Tori Amos song ‘Merman’ (1998)<sup>1</sup> or being the reason for the mockery of the lead character in *Zoolander* (Ben Stiller, 2001), on account of him acting as a merman in a commercial. Even in merfolk-themed movies like *Aquamarine* (Elizabeth Allen, 2006) or *The Lure* (Agnes Smorczynska, 2015), mermen are absent or only exist off-screen. The way the merman is ignored or referred to in a certain way adds to his construction as a symbol of meaning. This article investigates these meanings through modern illustrations of

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<sup>1</sup> A song dedicated to young American Matthew Shepard who was murdered in a homophobic attack in 1998 (Stanford, 1999: online).

the merman in order to unpack modern myths of gender and sexuality created in our culture.<sup>2</sup>

The article explores contemporary western images of the merman and how he is represented through digital medias, which is the most common way folklore is expressed today (Hayward, 2017: f17). This is interesting not only for a further understanding of how folklore acts and develops in a modern-day context but also because of the merman's potential to be read as a symbol for bigger cultural processes in society. The merman functions on multiple levels. He is included in mer-culture and the understanding of merfolk. He is also a portrayal of masculinity as he is gendered male in contrast to the mermaid. This makes him represent some of society's general expectations of gender and sexuality.

#### Earlier approaches to men with fishtails

Fish tailed men can be found early in the history of mer-cultures. Ancient Greek mythology, which adopted the concept of half-fish, half-human beings from Assyrian beliefs, showed many male figures depicted within the modern concept of merfolk. For example, the titan Nereus and the Nereid Triton were depicted as muscular men with big beards and fishtails replacing their legs, sometimes holding a trident or a seashell (Jepsen, 2015). Even though the merman had an early debut in human culture he does not seem to have as strong impact as the mermaid. This is, for instance, evident in the world of linguistics. Linguist Linda Ågren refers to the *Oxford Dictionary* that defines the term "merman" as something "like a male mermaid," while 'mermaid' stands by itself (2013: f21). Not all languages even have a word for 'merman'. Ågren demonstrates this by showing how all 33 languages represented in the *Collins Dictionary* have a word for "mermaid" meanwhile only 18 have one for "merman" (ibid). This indicates the marginalised status of mermen among merfolk. Sometimes other folkloristic water spirits fill the terminological gap of the male equivalent of mermaids. This is the case of my mother tongue, Swedish, which occasionally uses the term *havsman* to refer to a merman. According to the Swedish dictionary *Svenska Akademiens Ordbok*, he is a water spirit depicted without the iconic 'mermaid' tail (1948: online).

Previous explanations of the merman's shortcomings in cultural representation rely on an overtly phallogentric perspective. Hayward (2017), for instance, sees the merman's marginalisation as a result of his anatomy, with the fishtail negating his ability to have a penis, therefore making him symbolically unmanly. While the mermaid also suffers from this genital dilemma, she possesses erotic capital through her human breasts. Mermen lack this kind of strong gender marker. No matter what masculine attributes the merman may signal from his upper body, his gender position still gets questioned because of the lack of visible male genitalia. Hayward gives some examples of how this troublesome gender ambiguity is dealt with in various audio-visual texts that use the mermale figure. Usually the merman is given access to human genitalia through transformative abilities, making the merman able to shift between human and merman form (ibid: 151, 166). As my material consists of static images, this solution was, unsurprisingly, not represented. But there is another way of reclaiming phallogentric power, namely through a phallic formed object, such as a triple pointed trident. Lauren and Alan Dundes (2000) have contended that the triple-edged trident is a materialised symbol of patriarchal power and, not insignificantly, it is the tool that ensures King Triton's reign as patriarch in the mer-society of Disney's *The Little*

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<sup>2</sup> The article is based on my 2017 Master's thesis, for those who are interested in a more embellished version in Swedish.

*Mermaid* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 1989). The trident can be used both as a weapon and magic wand, resembling the penis' ability to give both pleasure and pain. Its patriarchal authority is explicit when Ursula, the evil sea witch, misuses the trident, bringing chaos and mayhem to the ocean. However, this is resolved immediately when Ursula dies and the trident (power) is released from her womanly tentacles (Dundes and Dundes, 2000: 124). The same misogynous powers are given to the trident in *Mako Mermaids* (2013-) in which it contains the power to destroy the mermaids' home (Hayward, 2017: 158).

Merfolk's fishtails can be read as phallic symbols and share similarities with the human penis. Thriving in its preferred wet environment the tail is seen erect and in movement, steering the owner wherever he wants. On dry land the tail is flaccid, powerless and locked in immobility. The phallic tail's replacement of the mermaid's genitals and the mermaid's transformational narrative have made her a symbol for transwoman identity: she is a woman in all ways except for her genitalia. This logic does not apply as easily to the merman who, in the symbolic sense, is both castrated due to his lack of visible genitals and in possession of the phallus with his phallic-formed tail (ibid: 14f, 151).

These psychoanalytical issues point, as psychoanalysis often does, to the genitals being the answer to the male merfolk's obscure state. While I acknowledge the relevance of this perspective, my analysis is built on a queer theoretical point of view. The psychoanalytic obsession over genitalia is based on a biological conviction of how gender is constructed. Gender is mostly understood through physical and biological components where a certain set of external characteristics defines the difference between the female and male body. Queer theorist Judith Butler (1988) acknowledged how gender is not only constructed through these components but also by everyday re-enactments, performing acts of gender, which she calls gender performativity. Factors like posture, body language, walking style, facial expression, clothing and haircut play a big part in how a body is gendered. This proves how notions of gender are ever changing and dependent on timely and cultural context. Gender is not something that you *are*; it is something you continually *do*. This conveys that it is other aspects than the mermaid's (non-)sex that have constructed her as a female symbol and therefore the same goes for the merman and his emasculated position. This view complements Galman's (2018) results from her research regarding female-identified trans and gender-nonconforming children and their self-portraits as mermaids. She does not agree with the consensus of the mermaid being appealing to trans and gender-nonconforming subjects because of the mermaid's implied gender dysphoria. Instead she underlines the mermaid's potential as a symbol for creative imagination, free in an alternative underwater world where anything is possible, and she considers the mermaid's strong feminine aspects, like long hair and shimmering fishtail, to be the reason for the popularity of her image.

Briggs (1977) claims that there are two different kinds of mermen available in the world of folklore, fairy tales and mythologies. One portrayed as handsome and strong, and another, more common one, is described as ugly, wild and uninterested in the human world and the lives of humans (ibid: 290). In modern *media lore* (Russian Laboratory of Theoretical Folkloristics, 2014), these categories have slightly changed. An image search on *Google Sweden's* search engine using the word 'merman', currently gives a general idea of the contemporary image of the phenomenon, it is noticeable that the handsome merman has outcompeted the ugly version by far.<sup>3</sup> The search suggests that there are (now) four different

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<sup>3</sup> The algorithm for *Google Sweden* has obviously effected my search result, but by using different computers not connected to my own search history, I believe the result gives a general view on what you

merman-categories. I call these: 'The Pin-up', 'The Romantic Couple', 'The Fishboy' and 'The Elderly Merman'. All categories, except the Elderly Merman-type, are read as handsome but in varying ways. Interestingly, the few illustrations I categorised as portraying the Elderly Mermen were considerably older than the rest of my material (for example 'A Crowned Merman a Sea God Sleeping on a Rocky Shore' by Arthur Rackham,<sup>4</sup> drawn in early 20th Century). To focus on the more contemporary image of mermen, this article does not include the Elderly Merman in the analysis.

It should be noted that most of the material considered in this study is drawn from subcultural webpages, most often *DeviantArt*, an online social network for artists and art enthusiasts, pointing to the fact that the merman image is more common outside of mainstream media than within. It is also interesting that the few merman characters appearing in mainstream media (eg King Triton and Urchin from the television series of *The Little Mermaid* [1992–1994]) and Zac from *Mako Mermaids*), or from mermaid-lore and myth, did not show in the search result. The disassociation from earlier merman portrayals in popular culture and myth suggests a gap and a change in the perception of the merman's symbolic and aesthetic function. This analysis may contribute to an understanding of this new function.

### Mer-masculinity built of muscles

The Pin-up category clearly dominates the image of mermen, as he is most frequently seen in the data. He strictly follows the modern idea of western beauty standards for the male body. He is generally depicted as white, often with a sun tan, young, with a muscular clean-shaven bodybuilder-body and thick, short hair. This is the attractive male body imagery that has been dominating popular culture since the 1980s (Gill, Henwood and McLean, 2003: 188). A good example portraying the Pin-up type is *Merman in Blue* by Daniel 'Daekazu' Kordek (2015) (Figure 1). The Pin-up is most related to the handsome and strong merman-type that conforms to Briggs' description and the ancient Greek version, except for the clean-cut face and waxed chest. This merman becomes a Pin-up because of the erotic tone featured in these illustrations and his expressed attractiveness. His appealing appearance suggests that he shares similarities with the mermaid's cultural function. In the Middle Ages the mermaid motif was frequently used as a symbol of lust, leading to the word 'mermaid' being a synonym for a prostitute in England. The Pin-up radiates sexual availability to the viewer that connects him with the historical treatment of mermaids. His excessive muscle-building and sun-tanned skin further points to a vain personality that is also applied to the mermaid, who is often depicted with a comb or a mirror, tending to her appearance (Hayward, 2017: 9, f14, 187). Still, the merman's attractive traits are significantly different from the mermaid's. His beauty and masculinity all depend on his swelling muscles, something that cannot be said about the mermaid. This conforms to the logic of the heterosexual matrix that constructs men and woman as opposites, fundamentally different from each other, and therefore complementary pairs (Butler, 2007: 69).

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can expect by googling 'merman' from a western location. There were around 400 images of mermen collected at: <https://www.google.se/#q=merman> – accessed March 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Archived online at: [https://www.1000museums.com/art\\_works/arthur-rackham-a-crowned-merman-a-sea-god-sleeping-on-a-rocky-shore?from=artists&app\\_id=713](https://www.1000museums.com/art_works/arthur-rackham-a-crowned-merman-a-sea-god-sleeping-on-a-rocky-shore?from=artists&app_id=713) – accessed 29th January 2018.



Figure 1 – (Daniel Kordek) Daekazu (2015) ‘Merman in Blue’, DeviantArt:  
<http://daekazu.deviantart.com/art/Merman-in-Blue-511789243> – accessed 5th March 2018

The merman’s muscles do not only enhance beauty and masculinity, they also symbolise power. Physical strength is regarded as something biologically connected to the male body and a reason for patriarchal domination. This logic legitimates men’s supremacy over women, and weaker men, and becomes inevitable because of its essentialist claim (Connell, 2008: 83). This hostile aspect is amplified in the illustrations that portray weapon-bearing mermen. The weapon is almost always a triple-edged trident, playing on the iconographic meanings reviewed earlier. The combination of weapon and wild nature elicits a reading of the merman as a hunter. This further implies a heterosexist division between merfolk where the male is out hunting, providing food to the female who only cares for superficialities like combing her hair.

Muscles also stand for activity and effort, hence the connotations of hunting, and give the body they are applied to square-like shapes that are read as masculine in comparison to round feminine coded forms (Dyer, 1989: 205). However, the merman’s body shape is mainly constructed of curves and his excessive muscles are manifest in big, round buttocks and enlarged circular breasts rather than square shaped hard lines. The fishtails emphasise the round forms in the illustrations as they always almost are curved. In this way, the fishtail becomes a feminising component. The femininity of the tail’s form and seemingly constant movement increases with its alluring shimmering scales in bright colors and the flamboyant fins at the end, waving in the sea resembling a piece of fabric. Maybe it is the beauty of the tail rather than its castrating function that feminises the merman the most?

At the same time as muscles radiate biological male dominance, such muscularity paradoxically requires substantial body modification in order to be apparent. This exposes the essentialist claim of biological male strength and shows how it in fact is a construction. Reshaping of the ‘natural’ body renders bodybuilding as an artificial activity. The artificial is strongly associated with femininity and marginalised masculinities that are seen as less

authentic than the hegemonic ideal of masculinity (Halberstam, 1998: f234). The hyperbolic depiction of the merman's muscles can be interpreted as an imitation or exaggeration of masculinity rather than as a manifestation of it. This vain longing for the hyper-masculine becomes an expression of artificiality and unmanliness, which connects to the heteronormative view of male homosexuality. The combination of the excessive muscles, feminine round forms and sexualised body parts, like the bottom and face, generates an implicitly gay gaze in these illustrations.

#### Sexless and impenetrable, or?

The previous discussion of the Pin-up can be offset by consideration of another category of merman illustrations, the Romantic Couple. This merman-type is closely related to the Pin-up with the difference that he is – as the designation suggests – always accompanied by a counterpart, often a human male or female, or another merman/-maid. In the company of a female, the implicit gay gaze in the illustration is replaced with an implicitly heterosexual female gaze. This does not change the constitution of how the merman is created as attractive, he is still depicted in the same generic good-looking way but, as a sexual object for a heterosexual woman, other aspects get highlighted in the image. This is, for example, seen in the selection of which body parts are emphasised. For the Pin-up, it is not unusual that the fishtail and scales start just beneath his bottom, exposing the buttocks for full view. If not, the gluteal region is at least enlarged in a noticeable way. This is not how the Romantic Couple is depicted in a heterosexual pair-ups. The male's backside does not take as central a role in the latter but is instead hidden, flattened and/or more fish than human flesh. For the heterosexual matrix, it is important that only one gender – the female – is penetrable. If male penetration is possible, what difference is there between the sexes? Male anal sex continues to be problematic for heterosexual society and is often considered a shameful practice (Gindt, 2014: 266). In a heterosexual pairing of the merman it is clear that the female is the penetrable one of the two, not only because the merman's bottom is hidden but also because of how the female's body is portrayed. It is her image that emphasises erotic body parts such as buttocks, breast, genitalia and face. A good example of this is the illustration 'A Merman's Kiss' by Emerald De Leeuw (2006) (Figure 2). This suggests that our culture still tends to sexualise women over men.

The issue of penetration is particularly interesting with regard to merfolk and the psychoanalytical approach to mermaids as an impenetrable female creature. This question is not only discussed theoretically but also continually referred to in popular culture, most recently in the movie *The Lure*, where the mermaids in their human form are shown not only to lack genitalia but also an anus. The same issue arises for mermen. In a video advertisement for 'Squatty Potty' toilet stools (2017),<sup>5</sup> for example, they are shown suffering from chronic constipation. Another example of this is in *Another Gay Sequel: Gays Gone Wild!* (Todd Stephens, 2008) where Stan the Merman tells the main character Nico that he is only capable of having oral sex. But, in contradiction to this, he is shown with a fishtail that does not hide his human buttocks and, in a scene when Stan climbs onshore to converse with Nico, the spectator almost gets a glimpse of Stan's anus when he bends over and exposes his bottom for full view by the camera. His outspoken impenetrable body becomes even less imaginable as he is played by gay porn actor Brent Corrigan, representations of whose anus are easily

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<sup>5</sup> Online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPLbyk7c-KM> - accessed January 29th 2018.

accessible on the Internet. All this makes it impossible to imagine the merman’s body as impenetrable (similarly to the various merman illustrations that flaunt mermale bottoms).



Figure 2 – Emerald De Leeuw’s ‘a Merman’s Kiss’ (2006), DeviantArt:  
[http://www.deviantart.com/art/A-Merman-s-Kiss- 31842176](http://www.deviantart.com/art/A-Merman-s-Kiss-31842176) – accessed 5th March 2018

Similar arguments apply to the idea of merfolk as castrated creatures. Despite the fishtail’s supposed inability to possess a human penis, some merman illustrations clearly depict something bulging in the lower regions, showing some dim contours of phallic form around the crotch or, at least, display a generous view of the *mons pubis*. An example of this is Markus Poppy Pogue’s illustration ‘Merman underwater’, which depicts a merman Pin-up with a somewhat abstract but still palpable erection. The tip of the penis is drawn in a warm flesh-like color unlike the root and the testicles that are sea green, as if the foreskin consists of fish scales concealing the human sex organ.



Figure 3 – Markus Poppy Pogue’s ‘Merman underwater’ (2009), DeviantArt:  
<https://poppypogue.deviantart.com/art/Merman-underwater-110068264> – accessed 5th  
March 2018

Evidently it does not require a lot of imaginative ability to envision human genitalia on the mermale body. Indeed, that there are more explicit illustrations depicting this for those who dig deep enough. Of the material viewed during my research, the most explicit was ‘Ariel, the big merman’ (2016) by Alex ‘Albron’ Bronnings (2016) (Figure 4). The image depicts a Pin-up merman flexing his muscles to a nearby swimming sailor who appears more infatuated by the merman’s manhood, which seems to be the same size as one of the man’s upper arms. Even though the image is censored, you can see through the pixels that the enormous limb has human skin color and that its roots are connected to the *mons pubis*, as if the fish tail had been pulled down or unzipped like a pair of trousers. With that set-up all mermen have access to their penis but they choose when to show it, just as human penis bearers do. My approach to this is that the merman’s position in the hierarchy of masculinity does not increase with or without a penis. The phallogentric power does not lie in the primary sex organ but on the social construction revolving around the male gender position (Cixous, 1996: f238). It is the *myth* of the phallus that represents power, not the penis’ visual appearance. Penises does not possess the authoritarian mysticism that the phallus symbol stands for, just as the ideals of masculinity can never be completely fulfilled by only having a penis. As cultural analyst Richard Dyer writes, adding a flaccid penis does not automatically add masculinity to an image, neither does an erection that tends to look unnaturally glued on to the male body (1989: 206). Mainstream culture seldom provides images of full frontal male nudity, yet it does not compromise privileged representations of men.





Figure 4 – Alex ‘Albron’ Bronning’s (2016) ‘Ariel, the big merman’ (2016), <https://www.redbubble.com/people/albron/works/23436814-the-big-merman-cards?p=greeting-card> – accessed 15th May 2018

Exotic (but white and binary)

If the merman is not castrated, then what other components emasculate him? I suggest the fact that he is half a fish. Nature constitutes a big part of merman illustrations. The fish-man’s fish part seems to determine his natural habitat to be out in the wild as he is constantly portrayed in the open seas or on the shore of white sand beaches. The western idea of paradise such as coral reefs, seashells, crystal clear water and sunny days are frequently used components for creating the surroundings. The naturalistic aspects of the illustrations not only add a tropical feeling to the images, they also affect the construction of the merman.

The fishyness of the merman has confined him to an aquatic environment, preventing him from ever developing beyond his watery domains. He has been reduced to a sexualised, uncultivated, natural being, unable to build or create anything other than primitive tiaras made of seashells or tridents for fish hunting. Dyer writes that it is normally racialised bodies that are connected to tropical nature in male Pin-up photographs (1989: 206). This puts an exotifying gaze on the racialised subject who evokes excitement in his otherness. The same may be said about the merman with the difference that he is depicted as white. I read this exclusion as a form of racism in sexual ideals as the modern merman image mainly symbolises the erotic male object. But this is an issue that needs to be looked further into.

As western culture (and most other cultures) construct gender through dualities, nature is often connected to women. Meanwhile its opposing counterpart, civilization, is linked to men (Gemzõe, 2012: 83f). Masculine subjects that are connected to nature, through exotic or primitive traits, are not included in the central hegemonic idea of masculinity but are, instead, a representation of marginalised masculinity. Masculinity theorist Raewyn Connell describes masculinity as fragmented and hierarchically arranged, with hegemonic masculinity is seen as the ideal in society. Masculinity that seems uncontrolled or unruly in terms of what's considered the norm and the respectable is portrayed as unwanted and is often associated with black and working class men (2008: 115, 119). This marginalised masculinity is connected to nature through its tendency to be regarded as uncultivated and sometimes violent and dangerous. The merman is a good example of how nature can be an aspect of danger as it is an emasculating element. This is shown even further in the third category of mermen, the Fishboy.

The Fishboy has more fish characteristics applied to his upper body (eg gills, fins, webs between fingers, fish scales) and is also read as more androgynous than other mermen. He is portrayed as young, skinny and with long mermaidish hair. Sometimes this type is drawn in a *manga*-influenced way, which may point to the Fishboy as more connected to an Asian version of mer-culture. An example of this category is 'Merman, Rin King of the Oceans' by Asano-nee (2013) (Figure 5). Because of his closer relation to nature, due to his increased fishlike appearance, the Fishboy appears as more monstrous than the other mermen types. Psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva writes how it is the in-between and ambiguous, which does not follow order, rules and frames, that is what constitutes horror, or the abject (1982: 4). The Fishboy becomes abject, or monstrous, in his in-betweenness of being human/animal, man/woman, child/adult, virgin-like/seductive, alluring/dangerous. These traits more or less define all merfolk but are typified by the classic image of a young mermaid luring men into the depths. Therefore, the Fishboy seems to stand closer to the female image of merfolk and further away from traditional merman depiction. He is not dangerous because of his swelling muscles or weapons but rather because of his ambiguous appearance. In comparison to modern illustrations of mermen he has less sexual capital, as his androgynous attributes do not have the same sexual connotations as the hyper-masculine Pin-ups. I interpret this in the same way as the racialised exclusion, that the non-binary gender expression is treated as less sexually appealing in culture. Yet, he is still portrayed as handsome but more in a more innocent way.

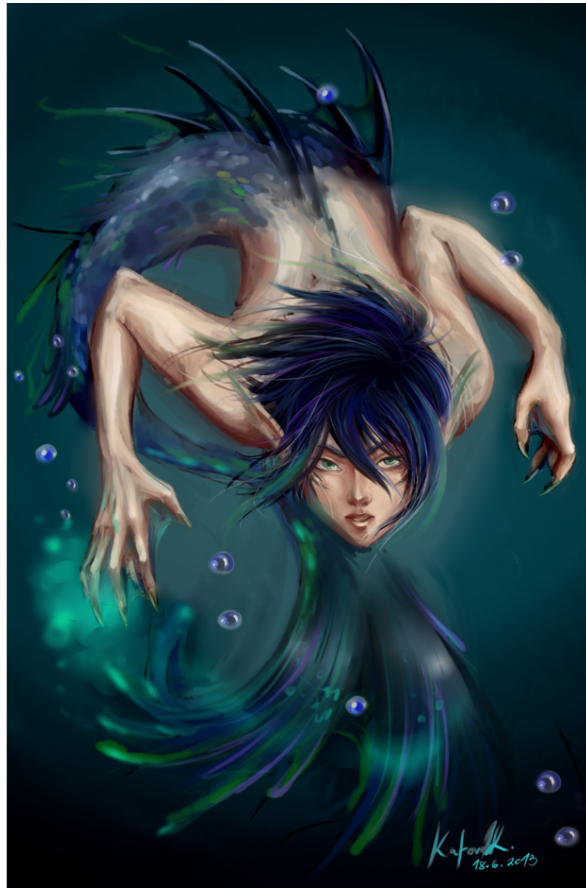


Figure 5 – Asano-nee (2013) Merman, ‘Rin King of the Oceans’, DeviantArt: <http://asano-nee.deviantart.com/art/Merman-Rin-King-of-the-Oceans-378905260> – accessed 5th March 2018

## Conclusion

This article discusses the merman’s marginalised position in culture in relation to the more popular mermaid image. By scrutinising modern western illustrations of mermen, it is clear that the merman has approached the mermaid’s function as a symbol of lust. Yet, the masculine object of lust is created differently than the female object. The merman’s beauty relies on western ideas of masculine beauty (consisting of whiteness, youth and muscles). The patriarchal power imbued in muscles is compromised in merman images, as his muscles have an excessive appearance that emphasises feminine round forms. In this manner, the merman’s muscles still construct the merfolk through the heterosexual matrix where men and women are seen as oppositional pairs with fundamentally different bodies and functions. However, these binaries are challenged by the merman’s frequently exposed bottom, which suggests that a male body is just as penetrable as a female’s. In these modern illustrations of the merman the fishtail does not castrate the merman or make him impenetrable. However, the tail emasculates the mermale body through its illusion of curvy movements and colorful

and shimmering appearance. A further feminising aspect of the merman is a close connection to nature that excludes him from a hegemonic masculinity.

I see the merman's obscure position in mainstream culture as an expression of heterosexist society's unwillingness to include the male body as a sexualised object. This is because the (heterosexual) male gaze still dominates in popular culture, marginalising representations that do not conform to hegemonic masculinity. This can be seen in the way that the few mermen represented in mainstream media, such as King Triton, are portrayed as hyper-masculine and violent, striving to control their female counterparts by force. Meanwhile, in culture made by subjects that are not heterosexual men, like female pop stars or gay male movie directors, the merman loses this hostile function and is solely read as a symbol of lust. The same goes for the artists creating merman illustrations. As a result, subcultural spaces clearly allow a more objectifying gaze of the male body. At the same time, they did not challenge normative ideals of beauty in terms of skin color, body type or performed masculinity. Due to the small selection of material addressed in this study, the issue of the mermen could be investigated further, for example, including more different texts (eg literary, audio-visual, photographic) and on multiple platforms. This article does not include all types of mermen and they are not fixed categories. There are hybrids and surely other merman-types hiding in the depths, yet waiting to be discovered.

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