"A THING OF DREAMS AND DESIRES, A SIREN, A WHISPER, AND A SEDUCTION"

Mermaids and the seashore in H. G. Wells's *The Sea Lady: A Tissue of Moonshine*

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ABSTRACT: *The Sea Lady* (1901) is one of the more neglected early novels of H. G. Wells, particularly compared to his more famous scientific romances. Both a social satire and a mediation on the limits of human imagination, Wells's only mermaid story has drawn surprisingly little attention *as* a mermaid story. The novel is highly intertextual with legends, written tales, and artwork about mermaids in the 19th Century, which, I argue, Wells deploys in pursuit of the narrative's interests in gender politics, the critique of social conventions, and philosophical reflection on the possibility of reaching for greater knowledge. Traditional associations of mermaid figures with sexual and ontological transgression and with liminal zones of the sea and the seashore are used to invite reflection on late Victorian social practices around sea-bathing and clothing, as the mythological mermaid's incursion into the real everyday world exposes its profound vulnerability to radical alternative ways of thinking and being.

KEYWORDS: H. G. Wells, mermaids, folklore, sea-bathing, seashore, clothes

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More usually analysed as social satire, H. G. Wells's novel *The Sea Lady* (originally published in serial form in the *Pearson's Magazine* in 1901 and in book form in 1902) also rewards serious attention as a mermaid narrative. The novel exists within a tapestry of mermaid narratives and representations in written prose, visual art, and folklore, and has explicit relationships with specific earlier intertexts including Friedrich de la Motte Fouque's *Undine* (1811). Recurring devices from mermaid stories underpin the plot, while conventional associations of traits such as the mermaid's fishtail and hair are used to critique late Victorian social conventions, intervening into topical issues such as the changing practices of sea-bathing. Further, the mermaid's existence as a liminal being who traverses worlds of land and water enables the novel's oft-noted commentary on the limits of human imagination, offering "dreams and desires" that lie beyond normal human reach. The Sea Lady's status as mermaid is far from incidental to Wells's project, and I argue here that only a mermaid, out of the panoply of mythological figures, could produce this novel's cultural work.

Wells's apparent departure from his acclaimed earlier scientific romances disappointed some contemporary readers who did not know quite how to take *The Sea Lady*, and critics since have neglected it compared to other early works (McLean 2013). In particular, for

reasons I'll explore, but which have to do with the narrator's technique of undermining his own claims, *The Sea Lady* has apparently been difficult to take seriously as a mermaid story. Bruce Somerville (2003), indeed, has argued persuasively that the titular protagonist of *The Sea Lady* may not be a mermaid at all, but is equally interpretable as a woman with legs. Instead, critics have tended to analyse it in terms of its broader genre and position within Wells's literary output and social and political thinking. William J. Scheick, for example, reads it as a satire on "the lack of imagination and wonder in those who encounter [the sea lady]" and as being "pessimistic" about "the possibility of human reform" because readers are invited to "contemplate (not act to change) the limits of the dreamlike human condition" (1987: 402, 403). For Mclean, the way the sea lady disguises herself as a conventionally passive Victorian lady and invalid in order to gain access to the human world is part of Wells's comment on gender politics and New Woman debates. In her valuable advocacy of middlebrow writing through an analysis of *The Sea Lady*, Emma Miller identifies the mermaid as "a particularly apt figure" in this regard, a fantastic device used to approach controversial subjects (2015: 137). However, the specific reasons why Wells should choose a mermaid to put at the centre of such interventions have not been probed.

The Sea Lady: A Tissue of Moonshine recounts the startling arrival of a mermaid on a beach at Folkestone. The sea lady ingratiates herself with the Bunting family under the pretence of yearning to join the human world, in order, it turns out, to seduce a certain man, Harry Chatteris, and take him back with her into the sea. The story's narrator pieces together the events from his own knowledge and the accounts of other characters (especially his cousin, Melville), while, by his own admission, populating omissions or unwitnessed scenes with his own best guesses or speculations. Simon James has noted that *The Sea Lady* is "a fantastic narrative that, unlike most fantastic literature, does not seek to overcome the reader's incredulity towards the truth" (2012: 47), to the extent that any sense of surety about the mermaid and the details of events is ultimately unobtainable.

Yet, just as *The Time Machine* (1895) stands convincingly as a time travel story regardless of whether or not the time traveller really did travel in time, *The Sea Lady* rewards analytical attention as a mermaid story.[1] The satire and social comment discussed in the studies I have just cited are not undermined but enhanced by considering seriously the Sea Lady's status as mermaid – and indeed, I suggest they depend upon doing so. It does not matter whether the Sea Lady is a 'real' mermaid or if anything she tells her listeners (or any of the gaps Wells's narrator creatively fills) is true; what matters are the meanings and effects generated by the novel's use of stories and other discourses about mermaids. Tara Pedersen has pointed out the futility of attempting to pin mermaids down to certainty or clear understanding, because they are by nature ambiguous and multivalent; she argues that "the richness and import of this figure only emerges within a practice of reading that resists this goal and holds contradictory possibilities in tension" (2016: loc. 47). Following Pedersen's lead, I read Wells's novel as a story that "holds contradictory possibilities in tension". Through a narrative strategy that relentlessly draws truth into question, Wells's novel exploits the slippage between, and interweaving of, observation, folklore, literature, artwork, and invention that produced the mermaid in different and conflicting ways in his cultural historical moment.

The sea lady's 'mermaidiness' is integral to the novel's social and philosophic aims about the tension in human existence - or at least in middle-class late Victorian existence -

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[1] See Sommerville (1994) on this potential reading of *The Time Machine*.

between public performance (be it in the realm of society, romance, or politics) and the virtually unobtainable transcendence of what the sea lady calls "better dreams". Mclean characterises the same tension as being "between Wells's use of fiction as a vehicle for social reform and Chatteris's flight to the imagination" (2013: 83). He identifies *The Sea Lady* as the "principal example" of "a definite impulse in Wells to embrace the purely imaginative at the expense of social reform" (ibid). Emma Miller, however, observes that "it was written when Wells was becoming increasingly interested in sexual adventurism" (2015: 124) and suggests that "Wells intended *The Sea Lady* to be both a mass market product and a social fiction, as, underneath the surface humour, the work grapples with some serious and pertinent questions" (ibid: 123) related to the author's own unconventional co-habitation with Amy Robbins. Miller considers the "embedded social message" to be "disguised by the fantastic nature of the mermaid" (ibid), but arguably aspects of that social message are embedded *in* the nature of the mermaid, given the associations in many mermaid representations with an overt, alluring, or transgressive sexuality. Taking *The Sea Lady* seriously as a mermaid story, therefore, can enhance a critical understanding of the novel's social as well as aesthetic and philosophical targets, and the novel's handling of the mermaid figure's contradictions shows that whatever else a mermaid might be, she is never pure imagination.

As Bacchilega and Brown (2019) show, narrative structures involving mermaids, sirens, and other water spirits live on in oral and literary histories the world over.[2] The complex history of the mermaid's representations and often contradictory meanings resolves her "not simply as a figure who often escapes adequate definition, but also as one who takes shape precisely within the nexus of various artistic renderings" (Pedersen 2016: loc. 42.6). Similarly, writing about Hans Christian Andersen's story 'Den lille Havfrue' ('The Little Mermaid') (1837), Nancy Easterlin argues that "that even a superficially simple artwork results from enormous complexity', and points out that Anderson's mermaid "descends from a rich genealogy of water deities, as well as the essential form and content of fairytale plots" (2001: 254). *The Sea Lady* is a further such descendant, presenting a figure who takes shape at the nexus of other renderings, yet retaining a degree of her own agency over that shaping. As I explore, Wells does not treat mermaid traditions uncritically, but allows his heroine to exploit famous legends for her own gain.

Allusions within the text reveal that Wells was well-versed in traditional mermaid stories, literature, and art, such as Edward Burne-Jones's 'The Depths of the Sea' (1886), which Melville recalls once seeing.[3] This painting is one of a constellation of mermaid stories and artwork that was prominent in nineteenth century European culture (and beyond) and which stemmed from longer and worldwide oral and folkloric traditions. Further, as a journalist and popular science writer Wells was aware of the prominence and treatment of mermaid legends and sightings in the press (Young, 2018). Wells's general approach to the narration - in which, details Bruce Somerville (1987), the narrator constantly sheds doubt on his evidence and witness reports, and draws attention to where he has invented dialogue, descriptions, or entire scenes - is in keeping with the public attitude towards mermaid sightings in the late nineteenth century. As Simon Young sets out in his discussion of nineteenth century eyewitness accounts of the Reay mermaids of Caithness and their afterlives, a sincere report was often afflicted with doubtful circumstances and ridiculed by sceptics and satirists. Nevertheless, mermaids' possible existence as either (or

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[2] See also Hayward (2017) and Pedersen (2016) on cultural traditions of mermaids.
[3] For discussion of this painting, see Mclean (2013) and Pettitt (2019).

as both) "supernatural denizens of the deep and by others as unidentified zoological creatures" meant that "belief in mermaids continued to be credible among the educated through the Enlightenment and well into the 19th Century, with the second option being socially acceptable" (Young, 2018: 31). Young's article demonstrates that the lines between legend and folklore, art and poetry, and witness observations are highly blurred in the discursive construction of mermaids.

Wells's novel plays on the exchanges between credulity and scepticism that characterised the public discussions of mermaid sightings (such as the newspaper reporting satirised in chapter 3, 'The Episode of the Various Journalists').[4] The narrator's description of the sea lady as the 'Folkestone mermaid' recalls the 'Reay mermaids' and other famous cases such as the hoax of the 'Fejee Mermaid' in 1842 (Bacchilega and Brown 2019). The novel's opening line takes early advantage of the "flavour of doubt" usually given by reports of mermaids, citing the 'Bruges Sea Lady' as an example.[5] Wells plays on that ambiguity - and so does the sea lady within the plot. However, I am less concerned here with *The Sea Lady's* relationship with real historical reports of mermaid sightings – though it would be an intriguing line of enquiry for another study – than in its relationship with mermaid stories and mermaids' conventional associations. Traditional features of stories about mermaids include her characteristic fishtail and hair combing, her desire for a soul and often for a human man, and her ontologically and sexually transgressive associations. Wells uses the mermaid narrative traditions on one level to plot the sea lady's motivations and actions, and on another level for social critique by giving the sea lady herself an awareness of mermaid fictions, which she weaves into her cover story.

The Sea Lady's literary intertexts include Oscar Wilde's 'The Fisherman and his Soul' (1891), Andersen's 'Den lille Havfrue', and Fouqué's *Undine*, which all deploy the convention of a mermaid's lack of soul and desire to get one through winning the love of a mortal man; Pedersen observes that "for many mermaids, a soul is achieved through either forced or voluntary marriage" (2016: loc. 40.4). Fouqué's eponymous heroine is a water spirit adopted as a fisherman and his wife, and with whom a lost knight, Huldbrand, sheltering in their home, falls in love and later marries. Undine is not a mermaid in that she has legs, not a tail, but mermaid-like she is able to traverse both worlds of land and water. Upon marrying the knight, Undine reports she has gained a soul, and they travel home to his castle of Ringstetten. In due course, Undine is rejected by Huldbrand in favour of rival Bertalda, and returns to the world of water; Huldbrand never forgets her, though, and eventually dies in her arms.

Mrs Bunting's familiarity with the trope of the mermaid's soul leads to the one mention of *Undine* in Wells's novel, during a conversation with Melville (the narrator's cousin and his supplier of most of the story's details):

> *"You know it's most extraordinary and exactly like the German story," said*
> *Mrs. Bunting. "Oom – what is it?"*
> *"Undine?"*
> *"Exactly – yes."* (47-8)

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[4] James (2012) offers a full discussion Wells's treatment of journalists and literary culture in *The Sea Lady*.

[5] Wells refers to a medieval legend of a mermaid sighted at Damme, near Bruges. One rendering of the story is offered by Fabel (2015).

She goes on to explain:

> And it really seems these poor creatures are Immortal, Mr. Melville – at least
> within limits – creatures born of the elements and resolved into the elements
> again – and just as it is in the story – there's always a something – they have
> no Souls! No Souls at all! Nothing! And the poor child feels it. She feels it
> dreadfully. But in order to get souls, Mr. Melville, you know they have to come
> into the world of men. At least so they believe down there. (49)

Mrs Bunting recognises the parallels with *Undine* based on what the mermaid has told her
in order to explain her presence. The sea lady, then, evidently knows enough about what
human stories about mermaids are to make the most of them.

She owes her knowledge of the human world and its stories to the drift of books that sink
into the underwater world, dropped or blown from ships or shore: "Many books have been
found in sunken ships," the narrator summarises, while others are left on beaches,
deliberately thrown overboard, or, like fashion pages and other "lighter sorts of literature"
get "blown out to sea" (34). For Simon James, the mer-people are thus constructed as an
undiscriminating, misled "literary underclass" (2012: 49). However, centuries of
accumulated reading material allow the sea lady to construct *herself*, out of pre-existing
mermaid representations as well as her impressions of Victorian femininity. The persona
she generates for Mrs Bunting's benefit is one meaning of the "tissue of moonshine" with
which the novel is subtitled; the sea lady is what she accuses Adeline Glendower of being:
"a mass of fancies and vanities" who "gets everything out of books… You can see her doing
it here…. What is she seeking? What is she trying to do?" (162-3). These remarks, which
express one of a number of parallels and contrasts drawn between Adeline and the sea lady,
invite reflection on the nature of the real world and the ways in which any or every social
truth is discursively constituted, including Adeline's identity as a New Woman and social
activist, Chatteris's as politician, or the sea lady's as a mermaid. All three identities are
ultimately undermined, exposed as 'dreams' and discarded in favour of the "other dreams …
another existence, an elsewhere" (173), which is the liminal realm the sea lady comes from
that lies beyond human reach.

I will return to the sea lady's intentions for Chatteris and the novel's denouement later. In
her early days with the Buntings, she finds it necessary to offer a more legible, graspable
version of herself that suits their narrower worldview and more limited capacity for
imagination and understanding. The narrator, from an early stage, makes clear that the sea
lady's appearance at Folkstone is not accident but plan, all geared towards facilitating "her
extraordinary raid upon humanity" (31). Her alleged desire for a soul may be
"extraordinarily" like "the German story" to Mrs Bunting, but it is far from coincidence: the
sea lady is exploiting her hosts' familiarity with such stories to gain acceptance into the
Bunting household. It works because, as Easterlin (2001) suggests, mermaid mythology
offers Mrs Bunting a means to make sense of her guest. Inferring that the sea lady is
someone who understands Christian values and wants to be welcomed into the fold, Mrs
Bunting is willing to overlook her paganism, her illegitimacy, and her problematic tail, even
to the extent of pretending they don't exist.

The story about needing a soul is spun to deceive Mrs Bunting, to convince her of the sea
lady's innocence and sincerity, but this contradictory mermaid turns out to be no Undine
after all. In Fouque's story, Undine is the abandoned lover, not the successful one. Undine
is a figure of constancy, like Adeline in Wells's novel, whose faith in her lover (Chatteris)

takes a long time to shake. Yet, Brett Cooke, discussing European mermaid or Rusalka narratives (including in folk stories, poetry, opera) that share many plot features with Undine, notes that "[a] major commonplace of mermaid tales is that the nobleman tries but is unable to leave his non-human lover" (1998: 135), and both Chatteris and Undine's knight end their lives (re)united with their water ladies. Traditionally, "a forbidden liaison or extramarital affair" with a mermaid that results in "the man's disappearance from the human world" produces a "silence in the narrative [that] furthers the perception of the captivating mermaid as monstrous" (Bacchilega and Brown, 2019: xix). However, the narrative's refusal to unequivocally demonise the sea lady, while stressing Chatteris's fickleness, effectively refuses to condemn unmarried cohabitation, as Emma Miller (2015) argues. The sea lady's capacity to play the role of Undine as well as operating as predatory abductress demonstrates Tara Pedersen's point that the mermaid usually "fail[s] to conform to one easily understood and interpreted role" but "simultaneously embodies contradictory positions" (2016: loc 40.4).

The sea lady, like Undine, and Andersen's little mermaid, desires a human male, but in contrast to them she has no real belief in Christian souls (she gives away her heretical nature more than once, carelessly revealing the failure of the underwater world to observe Sundays, for example). Unlike many mer-wife tales, she has no desire to remain in the human world (Bacchilega and Brown 2019: xviii). Rather, she seeks to take Chatteris to her own, following another common plot of a mermaid or water spirit claiming a human man at the expense of a human woman rival (sometimes, the faithful woman rescues him again, for example in the 'The Nixie in the Pond' as recorded by the Brothers Grimm). Cooke, however, identifies one variant of Rusalka narrative in which "a not-entirely-human woman will conceive a passion for a mortal noble only in social status, not in sexual fidelity" (1998: 123). Chatteris, nephew of an earl and aspiring Member of Parliament, is an aristocratic public figure, a "versatile, brilliant, first-class political young man" (7) with a proven record of infidelity. McLean analyses the latter characteristic in context of *fin de siècle* debates about male worth and women's education, drawing on the contemporary writings of Sarah Grand. In this way, Wells brings this traditional Rusalka plot into a contemporary cultural context. Wells's approach resembles that of Clara Guernsey's 1871 novel *The Merman and the Figure-Head*, discussed by Marea Mitchell, which uses:

> 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.' (2018: 182).

In a similar manner, Well's story demonstrates its close relationship with pre-existing mermaid stories, which are used purposefully in the plot as well as for comic effect and social satire.

In other ways, too, Wells uses his mermaid to engage with contemporary cultural concerns. I turn now from *The Sea Lady's* intertexts to focus on the novel's specific strategies for representing the mermaid, and their significance. The scene of the sea lady's arrival, for example, invites consideration of the gender politics surrounding sea-bathing, and I suggest that Wells's contemporary readers would have received this scene in light of some of the conventions and controversies attendant on women's increasing public presence on bathing beaches and in the water at the *fin de siècle*. In the novel's opening chapter, the bathing women can only remove the gowns that cover their bathing dresses at the last

moment, at the high water mark, because of the concerns attendant on clothing and decency that were particularly problematic in relation to public sea bathing. The sea lady later challenges a shocked Melville over the illogical rules around clothing and social propriety:

> *"Just think of the things - even the little things - you mustn't do. Up there on the Leas in this hot weather all the people are sitting in stuffy ugly clothes - ever so much too much clothes, hot tight boots, you know, when they have the most lovely pink feet, some of them [...] Suppose you were to go up there in a bathing dress and a white cotton hat -"*
> *"It wouldn't be proper!" cried Melville. [...] "It would be outrageous!"*
> *"But any one may see you like that on the beach!"*
> *"That's different."*
> *"It isn't different. You dream it's different." (160)*

Melville's world, by this conversation, is exposed as a social construction, made of dreams that nonetheless exert a lot of power over people's behaviour. In this case, as in others, the sea lady's unhampered perspective is used to generate what Miller describes as a "siren call, with which to entice [Wells's] readership to consider another way of life" since "the fantastic nature of the plot gives Wells greater creative freedom to consider provocative issues" (2015: 121, 125). Amongst the issues targeted by Wells's story are those surrounding women's sea-bathing and attire at the turn of the 20th century. The figure of the mermaid lends itself particularly well to exposing the contrived nature of the social and sartorial etiquette that grew up around the popular new 19th Century practice of sea-bathing, demonstrated in the novel's opening chapter.

The sea lady's arrival on a bathing beach is significant because across the 19th Century the social uses of beaches were changing. Discussing French coasts, Butkus, Fleury, and Raoulx explain that from the 18th Century:

> *cultural representation of the sea began to shift from intense fear to desire. The invention of shoreline tourism was a major factor in this transition... At first visitors did not go to the seaside to bathe but to enjoy the fresh air and sociability. This shifted, however, and bathing became popular among the bourgeoisie.* (2018: 106).[6]

Accordingly, *The Sea Lady's* first chapter depicts exactly such a scene. The narrator describes the Miss Buntings and Mabel Glendower "in their beautiful Parisian bathing dresses and headdresses – though these were of course completely muffled up in huge hooded gowns of towelling – and wearing of course stockings and shoes – they bathed in stockings and shoes" (10). One French style, the *London Journal* noted in 1895, was to wear espadrilles, "light shoes with hempen uppers" that "lace high up the leg", particularly on stony beaches (Unattributed, 1895: np). Another common practice was to wear specially designed bathing stockings alone (Unattributed, 1897: np). Christine Schmidt remarks that some late 19th Century outfits, which often included corsets as well as stockings and shoes, "could weigh up to thirty pounds when wet" (2012: loc. 31). As a result, the Bunting girls' 'bathing' would not have involved them in water out of their depth, and Mrs Bunting further safeguards her daughters with a rope around the waist.

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[6] See also Corbin (1994) on changing philosophical and aesthetic attitudes to, cultural representations of, and social uses of the seashore in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

The sea lady, by contrast, has free movement in the water (paralleling her greater agency within the plot), and really swims. On sighting the mermaid for the first time, "Betty, the elder Miss Bunting, stopped splashing", while the sea lady looks "as if she were swimming back to land" and "swimming very gracefully". The onlookers can see her "lovely face and very beautiful arms" but not "her lovely shoulders because of the red costume she wore" (12), suggesting a fairly typical outfit of the time with sleeves covering the shoulders and most of the upper arms. Her golden hair, too, is at this point hidden under a "fashionable Phrygian bathing cap, picked up - as she afterwards admitted to my second cousin - some nights before upon a Norman plage" (12). So far, despite her being seen swimming relatively far out from the shore, the sea lady's appearance (which is all the Buntings consider) presents her as a conventional turn-of-the century bather (Figure 1). Though the Buntings are "surprised not to have noticed her going down into the water", otherwise "her apparition had no shadow of wonder for them" (12). However, although her costume is later identified as a "very long-skirted dress of red material trimmed with coarse white lace" (27) she is not, of course, wearing the conventional stockings and shoes underneath; she is "swimming", rather than "bathing" or "splashing", and so "gracefully", because she swims with a tail.
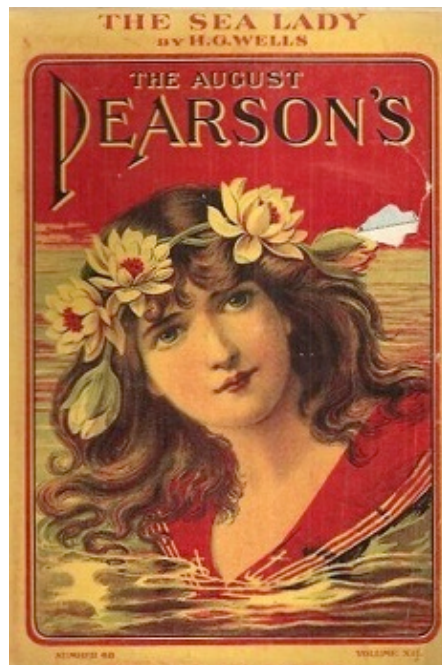

Figure 1 – Front cover of *Pearson's Magazine* (August, 1901).

Ironically, the sea lady's mermaid's body contributes much of the grace and loveliness to her facade of conventional late Victorian femininity that will convince the Buntings to take her in. That impression is further bolstered by her sense of fashion, and, later, her vulnerability when she pretends to be drowning: they suppose that, "Fred had rescued a lovely lady of indisputable fashion... from some neighbouring house" (20). This possibility has already been undermined for readers, partly through the narrator's direction, and partly by the fact that it was the sea lady who saved Fred and especially Mr Bunting from difficulty in the water – but the onlookers are taken in. All the characteristics the sea lady

wishes to convey are visible on the surface of the water; figuratively and literally at this point, the Buntings have no sense of depth and don't notice what lies underneath: the unobserved tail. Here again, the mermaid embodies contradictory features: perfect conventionality on the surface, unspeakable controversy underneath.

Despite the chapter's strong comic tone and the sea lady's artfully-chosen clothing, Wells's readers would receive the appearance of a mermaid in context of the figure's contemporary cultural representations, which include as a symbol of the mysteries and new discoveries of the deep sea (Pettitt, 2019) and as a sexually ambivalent figure. Although in the French context, Butkus, Fleury, and Benoit's discussion of artwork in this period is relevant here. They discuss erotic paintings of sirenes, including by French painter Adolphe Lalyre, which associate sea-bathing and shorelines with fantasies of feminine flesh.[7] The seashore, they observe, is a powerfully liminal space, and "Lalyre's evocations of the Carteret coastline linger, as it were, in a space between mastery and letting go, between stimulation and fears/fantasies of submission to the natural" (2018: 122). As a mermaid, the sea lady is unavoidably implicated in this imaginary. The scene of her appearance would conjure for Wells's readers topical associations between beaches, bathing, clothing, and exposed bodies that were part of the period's changing sexual politics.

The sea lady's tail, and the lack of lower body clothing it insists upon, aligns her with a more radical and dangerous construction of femininity associated with resistance to the kind of bathing costumes worn by the Bunting daughters. Christine Schmidt describes beaches, along with pools, as "democratic zones" that were sites of active resistance to "the attempts of councils and government bodies to enforce modesty laws and restrictive, impractical swimwear" in the late nineteenth century, especially for women (2012: loc. 28). In this period, however, the tide was inexorably changing as women's swimming gained prominence as a sport. In 1905, Annette Kellerman, known as the 'Australian Mermaid' (she was a sportswoman and performer who later made mermaid films), became famous in Britain for her swimming feats in the Thames (Schmidt 2012). Kellerman popularised the use of form-fitting one-piece swimsuits for women, for which, so the story goes, she was arrested in the US.[8] In the leisure context, too, Butkus, Fleury, and Benoit report on the shift in the 1900s towards more visible flesh and less clothing, a

> *transition from heavy head-to-toe flannel garments to one-piece form-fitting suits with knee-length shorts that first came on the market in the early 1900s... Previously forbidden female flesh came to have more visibility on the beach.* (2018: 108).

Published in 1901-02 and set in 1899, *The Sea Lady* rests on the cusp of these changing styles.

The sea lady's mermaid swimming, which in its gracefulness looks like conventional femininity, is enabled by her physical possession of a tail that resists being modestly clothed, and so marks the challenge she poses to gender codes, sartorial conventions, and other aspects of bathing etiquette. Contemporary readers – especially looking back from 1902 – would receive her arrival on the beach in the context of contemporary bathing beach

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[7] Tara Pedersen notes that the terms 'mermaid' and 'siren' were often used interchangeably (2016: loc. 36) and Hayward (2017: 7) discusses the relationship between the two terms.
[8] Schmidt explains that there is a degree of uncertainty over whether the arrest incident actually happened (2012: loc. 364)

politics and the battles over appropriate bathing wear, or indeed, any sartorial rules. The sea lady's very deliberate arrival on a bathing beach, in a carefully-chosen costume, marks her not simplistically as a generalised mythological mermaid, but as one who belongs to a wider network of cultural representations of mermaids at this historical moment and who shares with them certain associations with sexual transgression or ambiguity. The cultural anxiety coalescing around women's presence on beaches and exposure of their bodies finds particular coding in the novel through her tail.

The sea lady's tail qualifies as "forbidden female flesh", since its physical function as a swimming aid (as unencumbered legs would be) identifies it as equivalent to exposed limbs. Discussing the latest bathing suit fashions in 1897, the *London Journal* emphasised that it "is not necessary to have the skirt reach the ankles in order to have it modest; but it is quite bad style to have it too short"; and knees, especially, should never be exposed (Unattributed, 1897: np). Despite her "very long-skirted dress", the sea lady can never entirely hide her lower limb, and glimpsing the mermaid's tail is hardly more shocking to the Buntings than her nude legs would be once out of the concealing water and exposed on the beach:

> "Mother," said Nettie, giving words to the general horror. "Mother! She has a tail!"
> And then the three maids and Mabel Glendower screamed one after the other.
> "Look!" they cried. "A tail!"
> "Of all – " said Mrs. Bunting, and words failed her.
> "Oh!" said Miss Glendower, and put her hand to her heart. (22)

The onlookers' surprise here is due to more than merely the sight of a mythological creature made real, it also depends upon the connotations of the fishtail. Philip Hayward has argued that

> the polyvalent sexual-symbolic signification of the mermaid's form and, especially, her tail (the very root of her difference and, thereby power), have ensured her longevity and prominence in popular culture… the fish-tailed mermaid is visually and associatively given a variety of phallic powers in Western audio-visual media fictions that make her a type of 'supercharged' femme fatale whose charismatic agency frequently 'overflows' the various narrative fates assigned to her. (2018: 3)

Hayward is writing in the context of contemporary audio-visual media, but the modern media representations arise from the earlier depictions in stories and art; for example, Butkus, Fleury, and Benoit describe the mermaid figures in Cesare Viazzi's 'Sirene' (1901) also as femmes fatale: "viscerally threatening" with "sharp, weapon-like, gun metal grey fish-scaled legs ending in fins" (2018: 114).

Hayward interprets the mermaid's tail both as phallic and as visual compensation for her concealed genitalia, often with a "design placing it at something of an unstable midpoint between (piscine) flesh and a garment when at rest, and as an element of a muscular body when utilised in swimming" (2017: 14). Lewis Baumer's illustrations for 1902 publication of *The Sea Lady* never depict the lady's tail;[9] she is drawn clothed, from the waist up only or

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[9] Most subsequent editions followed suit by choosing to depict a woman or other illustration in their cover-art, though now that Wells's work is out of copyright, there have been a number of recent, e-

with her lower body concealed by a rug or her bathchair (see Figure 2). However, the one direct description of her fishtail draws attention to the "unstable midpoint". The narrator reports:

> She had a beautiful figure, I understand, until that horrible tail began (and the fin of it, Mrs. Bunting told my cousin in a whispered confidence, went up and down and with pointed corners for all the world like a mackerel's). (26-27)

The awkward reality of the physical transition between human figure and mackerel's tail, alluded to again while she lies "all wet and still visibly fishy on the couch in Mrs. Bunting's dressing-room" causes worries that the Sea Lady realises she must sooth. As Bacchilega and Brown observe, mermaids plotting abduction "cannot be trusted and act stealthily; their hybrid bodies and the fluid ways they move in and out of water are interpreted as duplicity" (2019: xix). Preparing to convince Mrs Bunting of her lady-like goodness and sincerity, the sea lady makes a point of "[drawing] the antimacassar modestly over her deformity" (44). Her performance includes "sometimes looking sweetly down and sometimes openly and trustfully into Mrs. Bunting's face, and speaking in a soft clear grammatical manner that stamped her at once as no mere mermaid but a finished fine Sea Lady" (44-45). The effects of class identities and appearances, so characteristic of Wells's work, are at play here. With the disruptive reality of the tail hidden, Mrs Bunting can interpret the sea lady's surface appearances rather than having to account for her impossible depths: no longer a "mere mermaid" who cannot be accommodated into Mrs Bunting's world, but a "fine Sea Lady" who can.

Figure 1 - Illustration of the protagonist of *The Sea Lady* by Lewis Baumer (Wells, 1902).

book, or publish-on-demand new editions, many of which portray, perhaps carelessly, a fishtailed mermaid on the cover.

Ironically, Mrs Bunting's acceptance of her mermaid guest depends on concealment of her most iconic feature, so that she can be socially presented as an invalid. Even Melville is uncertain whether the tail is real, and cannot bring himself to tell Chatteris about it in a crucial scene where he attempts to warn the other man of his danger. For Sommerville (2003), the narrative's obfuscation over the tail undermines its authentic existence - the sea lady is not in fact a mermaid. However, the doubt cast over whether the sea lady has legs or a tail invites recognition that one set of limbs stands for the other, drawing attention to the undeniable reality that Victorian women have bodies at all. The mermaid's fishtail, then, draws attention to the physicality of the female body in a way that is unacceptable to Mrs Bunting's late Victorian social context. Only Lady Poynting Mallow, Chatteris's aunt, refuses to allow the tail to be a problem, but her dismissal, during a comical conversation with Melville, is one more form of denial, rather than a genuine acceptance of difference.

As well as the tail, Pedersen (2016) and Hayward (2017) also note the significance of a mermaid's hair, the beauty of which significantly contributes to her dangerous allure; Hayward cites Elisabeth Gitter on the associations Victorians made between luxuriant hair and feminine sexuality. It is therefore significant that the sea lady is careful to conceal her hair as part of her early costume of a decorous lady bathing. The narrator draws attention to its beauty, calling it (though he never sees her himself) "wonderful golden hair", but the Lady's illusion of innocence depends on keeping it "hidden in a fashionable Phrygian bathing cap" (11). Later, once her hair is properly dressed according to the latest fashion, it helps her to appear to Mrs Bunting as "palpably a lady, with her pretty hair brought up to date and such a frank innocence in her eyes" (69-70), which are "sea-blue" (27). The sea lady encourages Melville's speculation over the legend of mermaids combing their hair and hints that a properly feminine desire for fashionably dressed hair is part of her motivation for coming on to land:

> "Of course," said Melville. "Why! – you can never get it dry!"
> "That's precisely it," said she.
> My cousin Melville had a new light on an old topic. "And that's why – in the
> old time – ?"
> "Exactly!" she cried, "exactly! Before there were so many Excursionists and
> sailors and Low People about, one came out, one sat and brushed it in the
> sun. And then of course it really was possible to do it up. But now – "
> She made a petulant gesture and looked gravely at Melville, biting her lip the
> while. My cousin made a sympathetic noise. "The horrid modern spirit," he
> said – almost automatically…. (37)

In this way, the sea lady exploits the convention that mermaids sit out of the water to comb their hair to bolster her own performance as a modest lady who would not expose her personal toilette to prying eyes.[10] Again the mermaid's capacity to encapsulate conflicting features is deployed, because by the story's end, once she's abandoned her cover of being an invalid lady and obtained the commitment of Chatteris, she exposes one bare arm, and her hair is fully revealed. The porter describes it as "a tossing mass of gold", as Chatteris carries her out to sea (294). As "a tossing mass", her glorious hair resembles the sea itself, a

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[10] References to hair-combing mermaids in the 19th Century include Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem 'The Mermaid' (1830) and John Waterhouse's painting 'A Mermaid' (1901). Wells may have had Waterhouse's recent painting in mind; its representation of the mermaid's unclothed body directly contrasts with Wells's sea lady's care over her costuming. For details of Waterhouse's painting see Royal Academy (n.d.)

reminder of hair's importance to a mermaid's identity as both "supercharged" femme fatale and an aquatic creature who can traverse the worlds of both water and land.

Lastly, then, I turn to the relationship between the sea lady and Chatteris, and consider another central concern of the novel (and, as Mclean (2013) identifies, of Wells's work much more widely, which is the human capacity for imagination and the aspiration towards "better dreams". To this, too, the sea lady's identity as a mermaid is crucial: in the "aquapelagic imaginary," writes Hayward, aquatic humanoids "reflect and transcend the limits of human existence in the aquatic realm" (2017: 6-7). As a mermaid and immortal, the sea lady possesses a broader and deeper understanding of existence, represented through her liminal hybrid physiology and her capacity to exist in two worlds, the land and the sea. Despite her exploitation of conventional mermaid legends to explain herself and the world she comes from to Mrs Bunting, Adeline, and Melville, she also drops hints of a rather different reality.

These include, for example, not observing Sundays and not having children, and when asked by Adeline what clothing mer-people wear, the sea lady answers evasively "[i]t's a different costume altogether" (69). Such hints lead even Mrs Bunting (or so the narrator imagines) towards "an indistinct, imperfect glimpse of pagan possibilities" (69), while Adeline is consistently suspicious, and Melville has understood enough of the sea-realm's strangeness to admit that "the old ideas of the submarine life as a sort of perpetual game of 'who-hoop' through groves of coral, diversified by moonlight hair-combings on rocky strands, need very extensive modification" (31). Of the three, Melville comes the closest to deciphering the sea lady's mystery, as she urges him to understand "[t]hat other things may be conceivable even if they are not possible… there are better dreams!" (165). In one of several moments in which he tries to grasp or articulate what she is and represents:

> it seemed to Melville that he had been addressed by something quite other than the pleasant lady in the bath chair before him. "But how – ?" he began and stopped. He remained silent with a perplexed face. She leaned back and glanced away from him, and when at last she turned and spoke again, specific realities closed in on him once more. (161-62)

As also occurs in their conversation about appropriate clothing quoted earlier, Melville tries and fails to move beyond his internalised quotidian comprehension of the world. Instead, he falls back on superficial empirical certainties:

> He looked at the Sea Lady as if he were already incredulous of the things they had said, as if he had been asleep and dreamed the talk. Some light seemed to go out, some fancy faded. His eye rested upon the inscription, 'Flamps, Bath Chair Proprietor,' just visible under her arm. (169)

The reminder of solid objects grounded in familiar Victorian realities such as bath chair manufacturers reassures Melville, but also marks him as a creature limited to a particular experiential world governed by social and epistemological conventions.

By contrast, Chatteris is able to take the ontological step that the mildly jealous Melville cannot. Chatteris gives up his political career because he perceives its meaninglessness as a "game" and "a phantom gratification" (185). Where Melville is said to "like women to be finite" (141) and, by his own admission is, "much more shockingly inadequate even than he had expected to be" (228), when he attempts to explain the sea lady to Adeline, Chatteris is

able to express his sense of her as a "mystery" that is "not merely beauty" (142). He has the capacity to value effect over substance: "All women are impressionists, a patch, a light," he observes (141); "[t]here's plenty of beauty in the world. But not of these effects" (142). Chatteris appears to be the only character (although Melville gets close) genuinely to accept the sea lady for what she is, fishtailed and sea-dwelling nonetheless. The mermaid, as I have been suggesting, is not a figure to be pinned down to a stable empirical physicality, but rather is one who acquires meaningful reality through the effects generated by the network of narratives and representations that produce her.

While it must be supposed that Chatteris's descent into the sea leads to death, even the narrator's flexible imagination cannot follow him far enough to guess whether he ends his life in ecstasy or horror: "[i]nto these things we cannot pry or follow, and on the margin of the softly breathing water the story of Chatteris must end" (299). Both narrator and reader must remain on the seashore, contemplating "the mysterious vast serenity of night" (299). Here, the sea lady's discarded "soft and costly wrap" that perplexes the policeman with the "inexplicable abandonment of a thoroughly comfortable and desirable thing" (299) stands a reminder of the seductive superficiality not of the sea-realm, but the land-realm, a social world predicated on outward appearance, valuing wealth and commodities, and vulnerable to ontological exposure. The sea lady's arrival and departure via the liminal zone of the seashore is bound up with her identity as mermaid and both are important for a full understanding of the novel's wider concerns with imagination and dreams, surfaces and depths, and a questioning of the rationales behind social conventions.

The Sea Lady, I have argued, deserves dedicated attention as a mermaid story with a significant place in a wider network of long 19th Century mermaid narratives and representations. A comic novel that delights in playing with the period's mingled credulity and scepticism about mermaids as well as with the opportunities offered by pre-existing mermaid plots, *The Sea Lady* is also a satire crafted shrewdly by a master of the art. The novel's satirical impact is more greatly felt by accepting Wells's mermaid as a mermaid, even while, at the same time, text, narrator, and sea lady herself expose the fictionality of mermaid legends and stories. As an incongruity in quotidian late Victorian society, which cannot accommodate the mythological into its common-sense worldview, the mermaid is a device for satirising the values and superficialities of the Mrs Buntings of the world, and characters' varied responses to the sea lady reveal the extent to which narrow perspectives prevent them from gaining that greater understanding of "better dreams". *The Sea Lady* also draws attention to and leaves at the high tide mark the nonsense of certain pieces of social etiquette – bathing suits, marriage, clothing, smoking – which are also exposed as fictions. The figure of the mermaid offers Wells a ready-made multivalent signifier capable of housing simultaneous contradictory possibilities and yielding multiple meanings both to characters and to readers, demonstrated, for example, through her purposeful exploitation of conventional mermaid traits alongside her unavoidable physical, behavioural, and ontological transgressions that arise from her liminal mermaid identity.

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