

MERLERIUM

Mermaids, mythology, desire and madness in Robert Eggers' *The Lighthouse* (2019)

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ABSTRACT: Robert Eggers' 2019 film *The Lighthouse* provides an idiosyncratic representation of the mermaid as a Jungian *anima* in a film that revolves around the homoerotic tension between two lighthouse keepers on a remote, windswept island. While the mermaid theme is essentially a minor aspect of the film, juxtaposed with other mythological motifs, it is significant for the intensity of passions it catalyses in one of the film's two male leads. Analysing the film, its script and statements of directorial intent, this article first discusses aspects of the interaction of the masculine characters and their relation to mythic figures, before going on to discuss the role and design of the mermaid, and of the sex scene she appears in. Additional consideration is given to the role of music and sound design in building nuance and thematic intensity within the film.

KEYWORDS: *The Lighthouse*, mermaids, mermaid genitalia, maritime mythology

Introduction

The Lighthouse was the second feature film directed by US director Robert Eggers and followed his critical and commercial success with *The Witch* (2016), an atmospheric horror film set in New England in the 1600s. Co-written with his brother, Max Eggers, *The Lighthouse* is set on a small New England island and the narrative revolves around the interaction of two male characters, Thomas Wake, a grizzled older lighthouse keeper (a "wicked") played by Willem Dafoe, and Ephraim Winslow,² a handsome, younger recruit to the sector, played by Robert Pattinson. The film mixes realist sequences of everyday life in and around the lighthouse with more nightmarish scenes that are ambiguous as whether they are fantasies or hallucinations. The relationship between the two male characters develops from the stark authoritarianism of early scenes, where Wake orders Winslow to undertake various arduous activities, to a warmer – although no less fraught – relationship that is advanced through numerous bouts of drunken carousing. The latter lead the characters to a point where sexual attraction manifests itself before being angrily rejected, shifting the narrative into open conflict. Eventually Winslow murders Wake and then dies after falling down the lighthouse steps and being pecked to death by seagulls. Colouring these interactions, Wake evokes various maritime mythologies to reinforce his authority and personal mythology, while Winslow seeks to undercut these (and Wake's general

¹ A colloquial term for lighthouse keepers that originated with reference to staff who had to keep the wicks of oil lamps trimmed in order to ensure consistency of lighthouse beams.

² The film reveals that identity fraud has occurred with Pattinson's character having assumed the identity of a dead man. Despite becoming aware of this, Wake continues to refer to the younger man as Winslow and I follow this lead in the article.

persona) by means such as commenting to him (with reference to Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick* [1851]), that he is a "second rate Ahab." Along with its human protagonists, the film includes a mermaid (played by Valeriia Karaman), who does not so much feature as a character rather than as an alluring but malevolent type of siren. Much of the film's atmospheric intensity is provided by stark, high contrast, black and white imagery (which recalls early 20th Century Expressionist cinema such as Fritz Lang's *M* [1931] in its use of light and shadow) and through a rich and intense combination of sound design and original score. The following analysis focuses on representations of mythological themes in the film with regard to both the male characters and the role and representation of the mermaid.

I. Mythic Maritime Masculinity

As Robert Eggers has emphasised, *The Lighthouse* consciously employs and inflects established mythology in rendering the interaction of two lonely men in a lighthouse in epic terms:

we start to see a story take place. And then we're saying, "Okay, what fairy tales or folktales or myths is this starting to line up with?"... Then we realized, "Well, Prometheus and Proteus never hung out in any Greek myths before, but that seems to be what is kind of happening here," and Prometheus might be taking on some characteristics that he hasn't in the past. But you know what? The classical authors did that all the time. (Wilkinson, 2019)

During the early part of the film these elements are (at best) latent within a narrative that shows the film's two male characters locked in rivalry in the (coterminous) professional and domestic spaces of the lighthouse, with the latter, in particular, requiring Wake to assume roles traditionally assumed by women in mixed gender, shore-based communities.³ Wake successively tries to assert his dominance over his junior, tries to coerce him into drinking and then – having succeeded in the latter – alternately carouses and spars with him. Indeed the odd couple literally circle around each other in scenes where they dance to their drunken renditions of traditional and neo-traditional songs, such as the sea shanty 'Doodle Let Me Go (Yaller Girls).'⁴ The shanty reminisces about the lyrical protagonist's sexual liaisons in the port of Callao (Peru), a frequent stopover for New England whaling ships working the Pacific grounds (with the term "yaller" referring to mixed race women and the establishment referred to as "Madame Gashay's" being a brothel). The song also notably prefigures Winslow's encounter with a mermaid (described in Section II below) with lyrics that recall that:

*As I was out a-walking all in the bright moonlight
Hurrah, me yaller girls, doodle let me go
It was e'er I seen this girl a-swimming and arise*

Whatever the camaraderie expressed while celebrating commercial sexual transactions, other scenes rapidly spiral into extreme posturing and aggression that Robert Eggers has characterised as being typical of "toxic masculinity" (Rife, 2019) enacted in an isolated

³ See Father Gore (2020) for further discussion of this aspect.

⁴ The song is subsequently reprised over the end credits, in the film's original source version sung by A.A. Lloyd in a recording made in 1972.

location whose built structure clearly symbolises assertive masculinity in an overtly Freudian manner. As the director has succinctly characterised, “nothing good happens when two men are trapped in a giant phallus” (Rife, 2019), let alone when both are afflicted by loneliness and confusion over sexual orientation.

In a scene of fury precipitated, somewhat incongruously, by Winslow expressing his dislike of Wake’s cooking, the latter becomes incandescent with fury. The original script describes him as speaking “more powerfully and passionately than any Tamburlaine or Lear. He calls out to the gods of the sea -- a man possessed” (Eggers and Eggers, 2018, p. 61). Evoking mythological referents, Wake launches into an elaborate sailor’s curse using what Robert Eggers has characterised as “faux Shakespearean/Miltonian language” (Matheou, 2019), declaiming:

Dam ye. Let Neptune strike ye dead, Winslow... Hark! Hark Triton, Hark! Bellow, and bid our father, the sea king, rise up from the depths, full foul in his fury, black waves teeming with salt-foam, to smother this young mouth with pungent slime... to choke ye, engorging yer organs till ye turn blue and bloated with bilge and brine and can scream no more... only when, he, crowned in cockle shells with slithering tentacled tail and steaming beard, takes up his fell, be-finned arm -- his coral-tined trident screeches banshee-like in the tempest and plunges right through your gullet, bursting ye, a bulging bladder no more, but a blasted bloody film now - a nothing for the Harpies and the souls of dead sailors to peck and claw and feed upon, only to be lapped up and swallowed by the infinite waters of the dread emperor himself, forgotten to any man, to any time, forgotten to any god or devil, forgotten even to the sea... for any stuff or part of Winslow, even any scantling of your soul, is Winslow no more, but is now itself the sea.⁵

Wake’s elaborate curse invokes Triton, a merman-formed son of Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea. Wake calls for him to smother, transform and run Winslow through and leave his remains to be consumed by various creatures and for his identity to be forgotten and absorbed into the ocean. The massive escalation of what is essentially a domestic dispute is highlighted, with presumably intentional comedy, by Winslow’s eventual response, which returns the interaction to the realm of the everyday, “alright, have it your way, I like yer cooking.” As Patricia Simons has identified in her study of male sexuality in the Premodern period, cooking and eating have often been considered as metaphors for sexuality in that, first, the “act of coitus was associated with ingredients, heat, motions and [kitchen] implements” (2011, pp. 262); and second, on occasions when males feasted together, these were:

Accompanied by witty or bawdy entertainments and conversation, much of this eating primarily enabled male bonding, which had both homosocial and homoerotic possibilities. (2011, p. 264)

Viewed from this perspective, Wake’s reaction to Winslow’s disdain may be based on a different kind of disappointment.

⁵ The speech has minor variations to that in the original script but is essentially similar in theme and imagery.

The rage and fury channelled by Wake in his elaborate curse resonates with the film's representation of the island, its lighthouse and outbuildings as solid structures besieged by wind and heavy seas. These elements are vividly captured by cinematographer Jarin Blaschke's black and white imagery of waves and storms on the Cape Breton shore and by elements of Damian Volpe Wolfe's sound design. Wolfe complements Blaschke's images with an impressionistic collage that includes sampled recordings of waves crashing on rocky shores and ambiguous muted roaring sounds, suggestive of the churning ocean.⁶ Wolfe's sound design also provides the score with the sustained, unsettling tones that recur throughout the narrative, seemingly produced by the horns shown mounted on the lighthouse outbuildings. These tones result from a digital mixing of low-frequency diaphonic foghorn sounds (of a type designed to be heard far out at sea) and mid-range siren sounds (Grobar, 2019). Wolfe conceived these to both function within the film's diegetic space, as sounds experienced by Wake and Winslow in their everyday inhabitation of the island, and to create unease and tension in audiences; aiming for a sonic motif that:

should be driving you mad, as it drives the characters mad. Then also, it had to be a note of warning, right from the beginning of the film. I mean, that's the nature of a foghorn, right? (Grobar, 2019)

Although composed independently, without liaison with the sound designer (as per standard, if somewhat surprising, industry practice⁷), the aforementioned elements combine with Mark Korven's score to create an intense atmosphere and tension. The opening two minutes of the film typify this, commencing with low sustained sounds that suggest unease and with a high trumpet that joins the mix to produce drama as the title appears on screen. After sliding up to a major 7th, the tone slides down, joined by unsettling scraping sounds that become louder and more rhythmically insistent, prefiguring the appearance of the bow of a boat approaching the island.⁸

Along with the elemental aspects of the sea and storms, *The Lighthouse* also explores the Prometheus theme, referred to earlier by Eggers, with particular regard to the role and personae of lighthouse keepers. In Greek mythology Prometheus was a descendent of the early, pre-Olympian gods known as Titans who were displaced by Zeus and his allies after an extended conflict. Prometheus is best known for creating humans (from clay) and for stealing fire from Mount Olympus to enable them to develop. The Olympians responded by condemning him to have his liver eaten each day by an eagle, only to regenerate each night – a plight he was liberated from through the intercession of the (human) hero Heracles. As a result of his actions in the service of humanity Prometheus is often associated with heroism, intellectualism and technology (most notably by Friedrich Nietzsche in *Also sprach Zarathustra* - 1883-1885). The linkage between fire, the light it

⁶ Achieved, appropriately, by placing microphones inside shells and recording the sounds resonating within them (Grobar, 2019).

⁷ See Goldowitz (2019) for Korven's comments on the shortcomings of combining these elements at a later stage without liaison or consultation.

⁸ The manner in which the sirens and foghorns are modified and mixed with the musical score can be understood to be protean, with reference to Eggers' previously cited reference to the film, drawing on the Greek myth of Proteus. In works such as Homer's *The Odyssey*, Proteus was a minor sea-god (often described as one of Poseidon's sons) with two notable abilities. Unlike Poseidon, whose form was fixed, he was chimeric, being able to change shape at will. His shape-shifting abilities gave birth to the term "protean", to describe polymorphic entities in general.

provides for the lighthouse and Prometheus's gift of it to humans is obvious, and the arduous and important nature of the lighthouse keepers' occupation as represented in the film casts its characters in a heroic mould.

The mythic elements are not simply allusive. The lighthouse flame, enmeshed in mirrored reflectors, is assiduously guarded by Wake, who has a powerful fixation with it that leads him to prevent Winslow from gaining access to it. Ambiguously as to whether it is Wake's, Winslow's or the director's fantasy, the upper levels of the lighthouse are also represented in fleeting images as being visited by trailing tentacles, linking the Promethean theme to the *meerwunder* and mermaid scenes discussed below. While these elements are left to 'hang', another element of the lighthouse's power closes the narrative in a manner that recalls another Nietzschean association. Wake's preoccupation with his ownership of the light and Winslow's covetousness of and final traumatic access to it evokes Nietzsche's famous aphorism:

Whoever fights with monsters should see to it that he does not become a monster in the process. And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you. (1886, Aphorism #146)

With both Wake and Winslow becoming "monsters" as their delusions, paranoid and ('toxic') alpha-masculinities overwhelm them, the (metaphoric) light (enlightenment?) they seek and cherish overwhelms them. Indeed, using an allusion that was not subsequently commented on by Eggers in interviews, Wake informs Winslow that his deceased predecessor had "notioned" that St. Elmo had "cast his very fire into" the lighthouse light, rendering it a portal for "salvation." St. Elmo is a fitting figure for invocation in that he is both the patron saint of seaman and a figure who gave his name to the (once mysterious) phenomenon of glowing plasma that aggregates around items such as ship's masts in electrical storms (commonly referred to as Saint Elmo's Fire). While the 'fire' was sometimes viewed as a positive omen, in that it usually occurred as a storm was ending, it was also cast more negatively in literary works such as Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, where it is referred to as "death fires." Building on this revelation, Wake returns to the Promethean theme later, in a cautionary manner, as he lies, battered, in a pit, with Winslow shovelling earth on him in an attempt to suffocate him. Resuming his previous Shakespearean/Miltonian floridity, he pronounces that rather than "salvation" awaiting his murderous young colleague:

Protean forms swim up from men's minds and melt in hot Promethean plunder, scorching eyes with divine shames and horror and casting them down to Davy Jones.

Affecting the blending of Promethean and Protean legends referred to by Eggers in the quotation that prefaces this section, Wake characterises Winslow's obsession with the light as a "hot" act of "plunder" akin to Prometheus stealing fire from Mount Olympus and associates Winslow with other plunderers (such as pirates) via a reference to more recent aspect of maritime mythology, Davy Jones' Locker⁹ - the oceanic depths where modern mariners are cast when they fall foul of fate. Underlining Winslow's transgressive desires as unnecessary, Wake continues by referring to those who remain "blind" to such

⁹ The term appears to have entered (English language) usage in the 18th Century and has been recently repopularised by the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films. Its etymology remains unclear (see Mambra, 2020).

temptations as being able to see “all divine graces” in light and end up, at the end of their working days, in the Elysian “Fiddler’s Green... where no man is suffered to want or toil, but is ancient, immutable and unchanging as the she who girdles ‘round the globe.” Like the reference to Davy Jones’ Locker, Fiddlers Green is a modern entity, a place (on land, far from the sea) where aged sailors are reputed to be able to spend their final years in carousing.¹⁰ The final phrase, concerning girdling the planet, references Oberon’s dialogue with Puck in Act 2 Scene 1 of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Oberon asks Puck whether he remembers that he once:

*...sat upon a promontory
And heard a mermaid on a dolphin’s back
Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath
That the rude sea grew civil at her song
And certain stars shot madly from their spheres
To hear the seamaid’s music?*

He then asks the mischievous sprite to fetch a herb that causes someone to fall in love with the first creature s/he sees, to which his retainer replies “I’ll put a girdle around about the Earth in forty minutes.” While the association of the two elements is cryptic (rather than coherent) in the film, it suggests the seductive mermaid and her song as offering a gentler, safer entrancement than the mysteries of the light.

After dispatching Wake with an axe, Winslow climbs to the top of the lighthouse and stands in awe before the illuminated set of glass prisms that resemble a geometric Futurist egg at the centre of the structure’s holophotal revolving light. As high, eerie tonalities rise in the soundtrack, Winslow opens a panel and puts his hand inside, only to be consumed by its light/heat, emitting a roar of pain that is heavily filtered and processed for dramatic effect, before he falls down the tower’s spiral staircase, ending up battered and bleeding on the rocks at the bottom, where seagulls peck at his limp body in an echo of Prometheus’ daily fate.

II. The Mermaid

I hope it’s a movie where both Jung and Freud would be furiously eating their popcorn. (Robert Eggers, in Jacobs, 2019)

In addition to acknowledging the Freudian elements of his film, Robert Eggers has identified the mermaid (in general and in its specific instantiation in his film) as an *anima*. This term was originated by Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung and developed in the 1920s and 1930s to refer to a female archetype (and related sensibility) imagined by men. In his essay ‘Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious’ Jung characterised mermaids and related semi-human creatures as “entrancing,” figurative echoes of primordial beings with “peculiar erotic charms” who were “as much dreaded as adored” (1968, p. 25). Later in his essay, Jung ascribes a particular purpose to these creatures’ erotic enchantment of male humans that is particularly pertinent to the mermaid’s role in Eggers’ film:

Behind all her cruel sporting with human fate there lies something like a

¹⁰ See ESC (2002) – and previous posters – for discussion of the term’s origins.

*hidden purpose... It is just the most unexpected, the most terrifyingly chaotic things which reveal a deeper meaning. And the more this meaning is recognized, the more the anima loses her impetuous and compulsive character. Gradually breakwaters are built against the surging of chaos, and the meaningful divides itself from the meaningless. (p. 31)*¹¹

A mermaid first appears six minutes into the film in the form of a figurine discovered by Winslow secreted in a hole in his mattress (suggesting its placement by his predecessor, who had gone mad and died). The shooting script describes it as “a small trinket, about six inches long... carved from ivory, with scrimshawed scales on her tail... [a] primitive but pretty effigy” (Eggers & Eggers, 2018, p. 5) and the figurine shown on-screen closely matches this description. Winslow is clearly captivated by the miniature. He is shown caressing its tail and bringing it close to his face to gaze at it before placing it inside his jacket and staring intently off-screen, as if preoccupied. The mermaid returns, albeit in a very different form, shortly after. In one of the many scenes in the film which are ambiguous as to their status as Winslow’s dreams, hallucinations or actual incidents, Winslow is shown gazing at a moon glade on the sea before wading into the water and finding the corpse of a young man (implicitly, his predecessor). Sinking beneath the waves, he hears high-pitched vocalese tones and glimpses a mermaid swimming underwater towards him. This association appears to inform a subsequent scene in which Winslow is shown masturbating to his figurine, implicitly interpreting its materiality in terms of his glimpse of the mermaid’s underwater form. Cementing the association between the mermaid and his predecessor, Wake subsequently relates to him that the last junior keeper “died, went mad... raving about sirens, merfolk, bad omens and the like.”

The elements described above foreshadow the mermaid’s vivid presence in one of the film’s more complex and dramatic scenes, which commences 67 minutes into the film. In the Eggers Bothers’ original script, the scene involves Winslow using the mermaid figurine as an object of erotic attention as he commences to masturbate in his room before shifting into a fantasy sequence where he is having intercourse with an actual mermaid. The script describes him as masturbating in a dark room, “furious... angry... confused.” Expressed in the film through a rapid montage of images and fragmented sequences, the scene directly explores the visceral sexuality of the mermaid in a manner only hinted at by the figurine, and the image of a mermaid swimming underwater. As Winslow’s masturbation – and the score accompanying it – gain momentum and intensity, his fantasy object assumes material form as an ambiguously unconscious or dead figure lying on the shore (Figure 1). While she initially appears unremarkable in her conformity to the established form of the creature, having the face and upper body of a slim, attractive, young woman and a fish tail that begins around her waist, a unique aspect is quickly revealed. As shown graphically on-screen, she also has an ornate vulva (Figure 2). As Robert Eggers has asserted in various interviews, this anatomical feature represents his attempt to resolve the classic dilemma of how mermaids mate (and thereby reproduce). As he has identified, his design consciously returns to the earlier figure of a split-tailed mermaid, often represented with her tail ends apart to reveal or suggest a vagina,¹² thereby making the creature more anatomically plausible as an object of penetrative desire (Wilkinson, 2019). The mermaid’s genitals represented in *The Lighthouse* were designed to combine elements of a human vulva with

¹¹ For an expanded discussion of the mermaid as anima, see Hayward (2017, pp. 10-12, 59-63 and 111-128).

¹² A type that inspired the (more modest) logo currently used by the Starbucks coffee franchise. See Robert (2014) for discussion of the evolution of the Starbucks logo from a sexually suggestive medieval-type figure to the more ambiguous contemporary image.

a shark's vulva and its adjacent pelvic fins, with the final version featuring large, dual labia created by prosthetic artists Kathy Tse and Adrian Morot. The size of this area is striking in the mermaid, not only in proportion to her general body but also considering the absent or, at best, implied vaginas of other fictional mermaids.¹³ Indeed, the explicit bio-plausibility of Eggers' mermaid represents the film's most significant contribution to the substantial corpus of 20th and early 21st century mermaid films that I have documented at length elsewhere Hayward (2017). It also suggests further possibilities for the imagination of sexual – and, potentially, reproductive – relationships between human males and mermaids, even if a significant degree of mystery and transgressive allure is removed in the rationalisation of previously enigmatic physical interactions.



Figure 1 – Close-up of the (unconscious) mermaid's face from *The Lighthouse*.

Aroused by the prone mermaid's physique (and, perhaps, by her inability to resist), Winslow engages in vigorous intercourse with her that becomes troubling as disturbing images flash on screen and as his lust object becomes animated, writhing in an aroused (albeit semi-conscious, trance-like) state. Interspersed with shots of the mermaid's face and body, and of Winslow on top, penetrating her, are ambiguously symbolic sequences of writhing tentacles, of a stabbing motion with a harpoon, of the lighthouse's prismatic light and of a young, blonde male. The momentum of the scene then shifts as Winslow is flipped on to his back and then pushed underwater by the mermaid shortly before he reaches orgasm.

¹³ At least one of whom - Miranda, in Ken Annakin's eponymous film (1948) – managed to have successful congress with humans without any suggestion of her transforming to human form to achieve this.

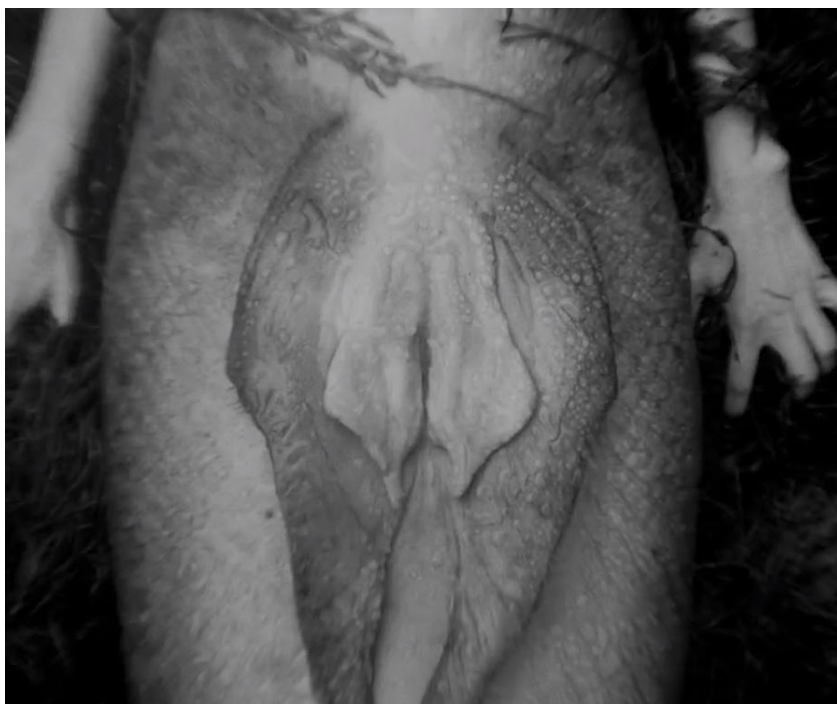


Figure 2 – Close-up of the mermaid's vulva from *The Lighthouse*.

Winslow's orgasm causes him to reject his fetishistic connection with the *anima* at the very point where the mermaid's physique provides him with an opportunity for vaginal intercourse *not* suggested by the figurine (whose smooth tail neither possesses such an orifice nor any suggestion of it). It is worth reconsidering Winslow's original erotic attraction to the mermaid at this point. As I have asserted elsewhere, through the muscularity of the mermaid's tail, its ability to propel her through the water and its defining aspect of her being:

The mermaid's tail can be understood as a complex phallic object that evokes the male penis in several ways... Understood in this manner, human characters' attraction to the mermaid and her tail might best be understood to constitute a particular form of 'Queer' activity that merits analysis within such a context. Indeed, as a half-fish, half-human creature who has persisted in vernacular culture for many centuries the mermaid is both queer (in the everyday sense of the term) and those who are attracted towards her might be deemed Queer (in the more specific sense) for manifesting and indulging that attraction. (Hayward, 2017, pp. 14-15)

Considered in this regard, Winslow's preoccupation with the mermaid and his frenzied masturbation to it may be understood as "Queer" in terms of an ambiguity as to whether his arousal results from imagination of an abstracted male or female physique or persona. More specifically, his rapid disenchantment with the female anatomical feature he engages with might suggest a rejection of either the female human form more generally (as

represented, *queerly*, by the mermaid) and/or of the mermaid herself as a queer, inter-gender entity. The latter aspect, and his post-orgasmic desire to be rid of the enchantment he is under, is made apparent in the film's original script (which refers to Winslow as "YOUNG"). After orgasming, his fantasy breaks and he is transported back to the shed:

YOUNG howls, an animal in an iron trap!

HE THROWS THE MERMAID CARVING...

IT BREAKS IN TWO!

Desire quickly turns to shame. The foghorn calls. The wind howls. Rain pours into the shed.

YOUNG looks at the broken MERMAID and curls into a ball on the wet ground with his pants around his hips...

He seems like he is about to cry...

But he laughs. He laughs as if a great weight has been lifted.

YOUNG

*I fixed you. You bastard. You can't git
to me. I'll get yer gullet!*

*He crawls to the broken carving and starts wildly stabbing it with the
DINNER KNIFE! (Eggers & Eggers, 2018. p.67)*

Perceiving either the (piscine) femininity he has been engaging with as monstrous (as represented by the tentacles that appear on screen during his intercourse) or sensing the homoerotic element of the coupling (suggested by the phallic nature of the creeping tentacle tips, the harpoon and fleeting images of the young male), he is revolted and violently assaults the figurine that represents these monstrosities. Lashing out in a frenzy of shame, he experiences satisfaction at having "fixed" his anima by rendering himself immune to "her" charms. The scripted sequence is given even greater pathos in the filmed version by Winslow being shown half-naked and despairing in a dark room whose roof freely lets in the rain that falls outside, striking his exposed back and shoulders as he slumps, spent.

As Jung's previously referenced passage suggested, the scene is purposeful within the film in that the mermaid's "unexpected" and "terrifyingly chaotic" character reveals "a deeper meaning" that causes the *anima* to lose "her impetuous and compulsive character" (1968, p. 31). However appropriate Jung's characterisation that such processes allow men to build "breakwaters... against the surging of chaos" (*ibid*) may be, his contention that through this process "the meaningful divides itself from the meaningless" is more ambiguous in the film, as the scene precedes the intense disruption of the male characters' lives and roles that leads to their deaths. In this regard, the *anima* is the least of their worries.

Despite the fracturing of the figurine, the mermaid's chaotic influence lingers on. She reappears in a subsequent scene that features a rapid montage of images that cross-

associate the masculine mythologies discussed in Section I with those explicated above. Losing all semblance of restraint when denied access to the light by Wake once again, Winslow attacks the older man by pummeling his head. Amidst the frenzy of blows, Wake's earlier curse and its evocation of Triton returns as Wake's face is transformed into that of a monstrous Triton (shown in close-up in Figure 4 below), closely modelled on the face of the male figure from Albrecht Dürer's engraving 'Das Meerwunder' (c1498) (Han, 2019) (Figure 3). The lower half of Wake's (transformed) body is not shown in this transformation but it is significant – at least allusively – that the *meerwunder* ('fabulous sea creature') represented by Dürer has an extended scaly, piscine tail, suggesting Wake as being transformed into something other than human in his rage. This reading is reinforced by a recurrence of writhing tentacle imagery, this time behind Winslow's back, threatening to choke him as he strikes at Wake. The mermaid reappears in this context, aroused and amorous, on the floor, where Wake's body had been laying moments before, voicing a scream that is so heavily processed it bears no hint of humanity. The blurring of Wake, the Tritonic *meerwunder* and the mermaid as troubling presences indicate Winslow's deep confusion and presage his murder of Wake and his own dazzled demise.



Figure 3 – *Meerwunder* with turtle shell shield, detail from Albrecht Dürer's 'Das Meerwunder' (c1498).



Figure 4 – Wake, rendered as a sea monster, after Dürer (c1498) in *The Lighthouse*.

III. Breaking the surface

There is a significant disjunction between the elements of the film that many of *The Lighthouse's* reviewers and commentators focussed on and the themes emphasised in promotional material for the film. As Thilk has characterised, the initial (pre-release) marketing campaign was subtle and allusive, with minimal reference to the story, because the goal was “to create a tone and sense of mystery about the movie” (2019). The first promotional poster used in the North American market emphasised this with a stark image of an isolated lighthouse on an island accompanied by the caption “There is enchantment in the light.” The enigmatic nature of this message was only complemented by a small, easily missed image of an ambiguous fish tail breaking the surface of the sea at the bottom centre-left of the image (Figure 5). The second promotional poster (also used on the North American DVD release) dispensed with the sea altogether and introduced the two main characters standing either side of the lighthouse (easily interpreted as a phallic symbol) accompanied by the cryptic (archaic) phrase “Keeping secrets are ye?” The majority of other posters designed for international release campaigns retained similar images of the two men and the lighthouse and no subsequent ones featured a fishtail (let alone a mermaid). The two trailers for the film (released in July 2019) are similarly sparse in detail. They do however introduce the mermaid element, although not in a manner that suggests it as playing a significant role in the film. The first trailer included a shot of Winslow holding a mermaid figurine while the audio track plays an isolated phrase (voiced by Wake) asking the question from the film’s second poster “Keeping secrets are ye?” To which Winslow replies, “No sir”. Later in the trailer a dark, indistinct image appears briefly, showing a figure swimming underwater with what looks like a fish tail, which is followed shortly after by image of writhing octopus tentacles, succeeded by an image of Wake’s frightened face. The second trailer (released in September 2019), like the second promotional poster, centres on the two men and dispenses with representations of mermaids entirely, only showing a brief image of a trailing tentacle to suggest any unearthly otherness.

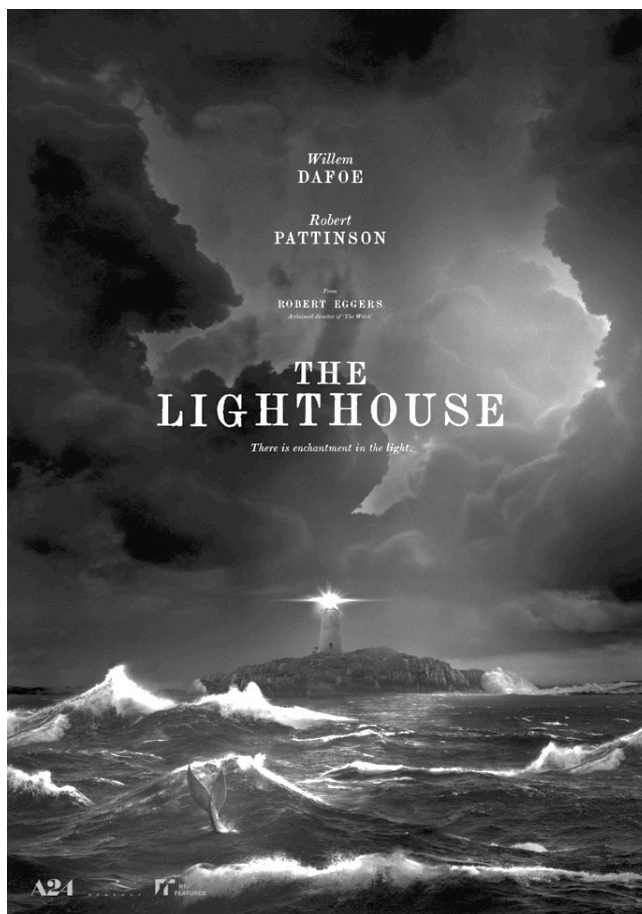


Figure 5 – Initial North American pre-release poster for *The Lighthouse* (featuring fishtail detail at bottom centre-left).

But while the film's mermaid element played a minimal role in pre-release publicity, a number of critics seized upon it as a defining element of the film. Bettina Makalintal, for instance, contended that *The Lighthouse* "is a movie about being horny for mermaid vaginas [and] specifically, about Robert Pattinson being weirdly, grotesquely, maddeningly horny for mermaid vaginas" (2019). Other critics also centred on the mermaid's genitals as he most notable aspect of the film, with Zuckerman (2019) asserting that, "one of the most shocking parts of *The Lighthouse* involves a big mermaid vagina." But despite characterisations of the 'weird' and 'grotesque' nature of Pattinson's character's sexual desire for and congress with the mermaid, there is little evidence in review material and/or social media that men experienced any particular disturbance when viewing the sex scene, even when its images were accompanied by the previously discussed dense and disturbing score. Indeed, Valeriia Karaman (the actress who played the mermaid) has related that she received an number of messages from male viewers of the film who were particularly appreciative of the mermaid sex scene and its representation of mermaid genitals (Nostromo, 2020).

The potential for the images and sequence to be consumed by male heterosexual viewers in a relatively straightforward manner was amply demonstrated by an anonymous respondent who extracted two scenes from *The Lighthouse* and edited them into a four-and-a-half-minute sequence entitled *Fucking a Mermaid – The Lighthouse* (henceforth referred to as *FAMTL*), which was uploaded to the Pornhub web site in early 2020. What is most notable about *FAMTL* is that it is *not* presented as a representation of bizarre/extreme sexuality (such as, for instance, the zombie-themed sex videos discussed by Marsh, 2011) but, rather, was packaged to conform to a more standard erotic audiovisual aesthetic – suggesting little (or perhaps, surprisingly, *anything*) that is assumed to be particularly troubling for male heterosexual desire (let alone patriarchy) in the trimmed and looped version of the extracted material. Rather than the unsettling music of Korven’s score, discussed above, *FAMTL* is set to a soft, mid-tempo jazz funk track. The video opens with images of the mermaid swimming underwater, then shows Winslow discovering the mermaid, brushing seaweed from her torso and cupping her breast before the camera shows us her vulva. The sequence then cuts to a close-up of her open mouth before pulling back to a shot of Winslow on top of her, rhythmically penetrating her. By repeating these sequences, synchronised to the backing music, the video extends its representation of intercourse for three and a half minutes and adds a vocal sample of female orgasm (or, rather, of a standard porn sound representing a female orgasm) before the scene fades out. This interpretation entirely changes the meaning of the original, which ends in Winslow’s withdrawal and disgust. Instead – aside from the novelty of the mermaid’s vagina – the scene represents fairly conventional heterosexual intercourse acquitted in the archetypal male-on-top (‘missionary’ position), with shots of the mermaid’s face and sounds suggesting her enjoyment of Winslow’s penetration.¹⁴

Conclusion

The Lighthouse resists simple decoding in terms of the articulation of its mythological referents and the deployment of these in service of the narrative. In this regard the film reflects Robert Eggers’ statement that while he has “a fondness for [H.P.] Lovecraft” he didn’t want the film to be a dramatisation of a simple scenario such as, “Willem Dafoe is part of a Dagon cult and Pattinson finds the Codex with the fucking sea runes” (Wilkinson, 2019). It is also apparent that the mermaid strand that provides a minor theme within the film, in terms of running time (and which terminates before the film’s dramatic denouement), has provided some of the most enduring – even “indelible” (Read, 2019) – elements of the film for reviewers. While not a film *about* mermaids (like *Miranda* or *Splash*), nor arguably even a film in which an actual/fictional mermaid is postulated as *existing* (outside of a single character’s fantasy), *The Lighthouse’s* mermaid stands out vividly. The graphic anatomical representation of the mermaid and, therefore the credibility of her penetration by Pattinson’s Winslow character, mark a novel twist in the considerable corpus of mermaid themed film, television and video. Indeed, it might be asserted that the mermaid’s presence as the materialisation of an *anima* – rather than as a credible person capable of speech and relationship building – is key to her dramatic impact and associative lustre in the film. The mermaid’s symbolic “polyvalency” in terms

¹⁴ An aspect far more in line with the representation of mermaids as easily aroused and satisfied by male attention in the corpus of films discussed in Hayward, 2017, pp. 91-101).

of her ability to be interpreted with regard to multiple identity affiliations and symbolic associations,¹⁵ is, if anything, enhanced by her anatomical realisation in *The Lighthouse* and by the manner in which her presence disrupts the male space of the film and resounds beyond the text. In this regard, *The Lighthouse's* mermaid offers new symbolic and/or narrative deployments of her form that confirm the enduring mutability of the folk-, and now media-, loric figure at the same time as they confirm the predominance of masculine heterosexual paradigms, fantasies and discourses in mainstream western cinema.

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¹⁵ See Hayward (2017, pp. 188-198) for discussion of symbolic polyvalency.

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