

## “My dear mute foundling with those telling eyes of yours’: Female Agency, Visual Forms, and the Disabled Gaze in ‘The Little Mermaid’”

### Abstract

This article explores the disabled female gaze through the titular character in Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale “The Little Mermaid” (1837), arguing that sight is a strategy of empowerment that challenges the able-bodied male gaze. I place Andersen’s fairy tale – and its accompanying visual forms, including sculpture and illustration – in dialogue with Literary Disability Studies, examining how the little mermaid is depicted as an objectified spectacle. Throughout the narrative, she contends with gendered constraints and bodily impairment as a result of her transition from mermaid to human. However, I also suggest that the little mermaid’s gaze is an implicit, interrogative device for female emancipation because she challenges the able-bodied male gaze. Existing scholarship has considered gender and disability in “The Little Mermaid”, but the gaze is yet to be addressed in relation to these arguments. Examining the intersections between femininity, disability, and the gaze disrupts and reimagines critical traditions of the gaze, and Andersen’s representation of the little mermaid character does in part uphold feminine and ableist norms. However, this representation also offers a tantalising glimpse into how new approaches towards the female disabled gaze (in contrast to the highly theorised male gaze) can be derived from nineteenth-century children’s literature.

### Introduction

This article explores the concept of the disabled female gaze through Hans Christian Andersen’s titular character in “The Little Mermaid”, arguing that her gaze is a strategy of empowerment that challenges the able-bodied male gaze.<sup>1</sup> Whilst the little mermaid is objectified through the gaze of other characters, her own gaze – which I term the disabled female gaze – functions as a site of resistance. The gaze is understood as the application or positioning of social power: one gazes at another in order to subjugate them and impose limits on individual subjectivity, and the concept has been heavily theorised in Western culture since the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I use the “female gaze”

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “able-bodied gaze” in line with Benjamin Fraser’s definition: “the visual moorings of the able-bodied gaze to which the vast majority of disability studies scholars speak [...] is a social and political power” that functions as a “visual mechanism of subjugation, discrimination, and marginalization” (38) towards people with disabilities. I understand the “able-bodied *male* gaze” as a specifically androcentric form of visual power, which I then use to interpret a disabled female character’s subjugation in “The Little Mermaid”.

<sup>2</sup> Notable examples include Sigmund Freud’s scopophilia; Jacques Lacan’s examination of the gaze in relation to individual consciousness and the Other; Michel Foucault’s panoptic gaze as a form of institutional power and surveillance, and Laura Mulvey’s feminist engagement with the male gaze in cinematic representation.

as a term that is antithetical to the “male gaze”, and the male gaze is defined by disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson as “a position of privilege in social relations which entitles men to look at women and positions women as objects of that look” (*Staring: How We Look*, hereafter *Staring*, 41). A similar display of gendered power is examined here, and I argue that the female gaze, like the male gaze, is a social construction grounded in normative values.<sup>3</sup> In the context of “The Little Mermaid”, Andersen uses his titular character to reimagine the gaze as an emancipating tool, and he presents a disabled character who gazes back at the human kingdom that objectifies her.

I argue that Andersen uses the little mermaid’s gaze – directed at the prince and the human kingdom – to “see” through or overcome obstacles presented by her gender and physical form. Drawing on the gaze as a method for challenging human prejudices, I explore how Andersen emphasises the little mermaid’s visual agency. This progressive approach moves away from the damaging tropes assigned to disabled characters in nineteenth-century children’s literature, which include “unrelenting tragedy, cure, or death” (Michals, 3), whilst also intervening in current developments in the field of Disability Studies. According to Nick Watson, emancipatory research agendas aim to change perceptions of disability: “With its focus on [...] the emancipation and empowerment of disabled people, emancipatory research aims to be transformative” (“Agency, Structure, and Emancipatory Research”, 134). I would argue that these objectives extend beyond sociological explorations of disability, demonstrating how an “emancipatory” or generative reading of “The Little Mermaid” can also support this agenda. In presenting a new interpretation of Andersen’s tale using the gaze,

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<sup>3</sup> In my discussion of the “disabled female gaze”, I recognise that the “disabled male gaze” is also linked to a disempowered identity position. For example, Michael Gill examines the “disabled male gaze” in film, highlighting the intersections between gender and disability and the ways in which disabled characters can be rendered powerless: “disabled male characters [...] are not allowed to participate in sexual relationships based on their male gaze” because “disability hides [the male gaze’s] violating nature from the viewers” (27). In this article, I am more interested in a female character’s feminist potential to challenge male objectification and ableism, which are perpetuated in Andersen’s tale by an able-bodied male character who is driven by erotic desire.

I attend to this critical call for emancipatory viewpoints of disability by testing its methodological application within literature. Ascribing new meaning to the gaze through explorations of femininity and disability facilitates “new models of expressive power for disabled people” (Dolmage, 213) in line with Disability Studies’ emancipatory research agenda.

In my analysis, I draw on two key terms used within Disability Studies to conduct a disability reading: “impairment” and “disability”. I deploy the term “impairment” to interpret a character’s physical or cognitive condition, and I understand “disability” as the construction of impairment within the social environment. Representations of the little mermaid’s body, along with attitudes voiced by the human kingdom, are indicative of both medical and social approaches to disability. The medical model locates disability on the site of the body; it has been criticised for being essentialist and for “reduc[ing] the complex problems of disabled people to medical prevention [or] cure” (Shakespeare, 216), whereas the social model builds on the ideological viewpoint that disability is registered in a social context. I argue that “impairment” and “disability” are interconnected because I posit that overlaps between the little mermaid’s impairment and environment signal an early articulation or awareness of disability as a social issue. Throughout the narrative, the character contends with her bodily impairments and a human world that does not accommodate for her differences.

I also use a Literary Disability Studies approach to locate this article within a broader body of scholarship that has explored gender, disability, and the gaze. For example, I engage with the work of Lori Yamato and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, who respectively examine Andersen’s fairy tale and the links between sight and disability, in order to argue that the little mermaid uses sight to challenge her oppression. In doing so, I explore how the little mermaid is positioned as subject, rather than object, of the gaze because she uses her powerful, “telling eyes” (“TLM” 52) as tools for liberation. In *Staring*, Garland-Thomson

labels disabled bodies “stareable bodies” (9), arguing that “[b]ecause we come to expect one another to have certain kinds of bodies or behaviors, stares flare up when we glimpse people who look or act in ways that contradict our expectations” (6).<sup>4</sup> Although Garland-Thomson focuses more on the “stare” than the “gaze”, I similarly interrogate how visual exchanges are loaded with hidden meanings and moments of realisation, revealing “how we look *at* each other and how we look *to* each other” (4) within the context of Andersen’s tale. The link between staring and gazing is supported further by Fraser, who claims that staring “is complementary to the gaze” and that both terms “help us adopt a productively ambivalent perspective” (64) on disability.

Recent scholarship has begun to consider the intersections between gender and disability in fairy tales, but these areas are yet to be assessed in relation to the gaze.<sup>5</sup> Yamato has written one of the only studies on “The Little Mermaid” using disability frameworks. She states that “disability studies, which often centers on the representation of bodies, allows us to be more attentive to the physical being of the mermaid” (295), and she analyses the little mermaid’s hybridised body and patterns of doubling in the text. However, Yamato overlooks how the little mermaid’s gaze complicates her subordinated position as a result of disability. Further, Adrion Dula has written the only article on the gaze and disability in fairy tales, but she focuses on how the gaze “serve[s] to dehumanize or devalue the disabled individual as in the medical model of disability” (204) rather than considering it as a form of empowerment. Vivian Yenika-Agbaw also examines disability in children’s literature, citing “The Little Mermaid” among her examples, and she claims that Disability Studies “invites us to draw

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<sup>4</sup> Garland-Thomson’s *Staring* (2009) has been used as a methodological framework for analysing disability in film as well as literature. For example, Fraser argues that literary representations of disability differ from “cinema in particular”, as “the generative potential of staring [...] become[s] even more productive [in film]. To put the matter somewhat more crudely, what Garland-Thomson calls the ‘generative potential’ of staring is made possible by the mere fact that visual art renders disability visible” (65).

<sup>5</sup> See for example Ann Schmiesing, *Disability, Deformity, and Disease in the Grimms’ Fairy Tales* (2014) and Amanda Leduc, *Disfigured: On Fairy Tales, Disability, and Making Space* (2020).

attention to these differences, while reflecting on how they position characters with disabilities as marginalized citizens” (105). Although I would agree that the little mermaid is limited in the human kingdom, her ability to gaze mobilises her marginalised position. All of these scholars working on “The Little Mermaid” consider themes of gender and disability. However, the fact that scholars continue to overlook more progressive interpretations of disability using the gaze exemplifies Carrie Hintz and Eric Tribunella’s recent claim that “[t]here is still a great deal of research to do in children’s literature with regards to disability” (175).

In the following sections, I examine how the little mermaid’s impairments are experienced within the humans’ social environment, a setting used by Andersen as a platform for disability to register. Despite the little mermaid’s struggles on land, I outline how she draws on an implicit, interrogative gaze to challenge her subordination. I draw on selected visual forms influenced by the tale – namely sculpture and illustration – to further support a reading of the female disabled gaze. In particular, I explore how the vandalised mermaid sculpture in Copenhagen has similarly “taken on a life of its own” and has been “viewed and revered by the millions of tourists who visit and photograph it” (Finn Hauberg Mortensen, 437), thereby continuing themes of gender, disability, and the gaze beyond Andersen’s tale. I also investigate how the prince’s unnamed bride represents the little mermaid’s able-bodied counterpart. Her position within the text contrasts with the little mermaid’s non-normative body and perpetual gaze, further complicating the boundaries between ability/disability and human/mermaid.

### **The Little Mermaid as Spectacle**

Although I place this article in dialogue with contemporary disability scholars and frameworks, it is important to briefly explain how disability was perceived and understood within a nineteenth-century context. According to Rachel Adams *et al*, “[i]t was in the

nineteenth century that disability became firmly linked, through the discourses of statistics, medicine, and law, to words such as ‘deviance,’ ‘abnormality,’ and ‘disorder’” (6), whilst Clare Walker Gore highlights how “to be called ‘disabled’ *is* to be defined by incapacity and inability” (2), referring to the capacity to “work” in an economically productive sense. Further, Martha Stoddard Holmes outlines variations in terminology, stating that the “Victorians rarely used ‘the disabled’ as a term to describe people with a range of physical and mental distinctions”, and muteness in particular was often equated with the modifiers “deaf” and “dumb” (310).

These ideas can be used to interpret the little mermaid character because she experiences impairments such as chronic pain and muteness in her transformation from mermaid to human. The little mermaid becomes “dumb and could neither sing nor talk” (“TLM” 50) as a result of sacrificing her voice, and speech impairments (including muteness) are largely overlooked in contemporary Disability Studies. For example, Watson states that “[s]peech impairment is another area that disability studies has not yet fully engaged with” (“Disability Studies: Into the Multidisciplinary Future”, 8), and I support efforts to fill this critical gap by examining representations of the little mermaid’s muteness. The idea that muteness is a “hidden” or overlooked impairment is implied by Yamato in her examination of Andersen’s tale. She argues that the little mermaid’s muteness is powerful because it is invisible and unacknowledged by the humans: “The transformation of tail into legs may be more dramatic, but the traces [of muteness] are entirely hidden inside the mermaid” (307). As Yamato suggests, the little mermaid’s internal pain stems from her loss of voice; this occurs as a result of amputation, where she sacrifices her voice (and fish tail) to the witch in order to become human.

The little mermaid’s tool for voicing her intellect and individuality is removed as a result of her self-sacrifice. Due to her muteness, the prince cannot understand who she is or

why she has arrived in the human kingdom; as the little mermaid silently reflects: “if he only knew that I had parted with my voice forever so that I could be near him” (“TLM” 51). The little mermaid becomes his “dear mute foundling” (“TLM” 52) because of her impairment. The term “foundling” reinforces the prince’s view of the little mermaid as infant rather than romantic partner, which is further supported by her characterisation as a “silent child” (“TLM” 52). In her exploration of speech impairment in children’s literature, Chlöe Hughes argues that “although each [character] possesses a world of words and wisdom inside, societal ignorance and intolerance obstructs their ability to express their insights” (188). This sentiment can similarly be seen here: the prince, an able-bodied, male character, makes little effort to understand the little mermaid because his method of communication (speech) is built on norms that exclude her. As a result of her disability, the little mermaid fails to marry the prince: he “loved her as one would love a good little child, but he never thought of making her his queen” (“TLM” 51). She is relegated to the status of object or pet, and “she was to have a velvet pillow to sleep on outside his door” (“TLM” 51). The little mermaid therefore undergoes her own transformation in order to exist within the human world, but the prince’s ableist society refuses to accommodate her differences.

The little mermaid’s muteness also means that she is perceived as an object of entertainment by the humans. She is unable to communicate, and so she “danced time and again” (“TLM” 53) for them as a performing spectacle, exemplifying Bill Hughes’s argument that individuals with disabilities become the object of the gaze: “people with impairments are patronised, ignored, abused, and subjected to [...] the demeaning and disturbing non-disabled gaze” (90-91). In the nineteenth century, individuals with disabilities were often associated with entertainment, and this can be contextualised further using Andersen’s own experiences. During his early years, Andersen’s passion for creativity stemmed from the theatre. Fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes outlines how “Andersen’s greatest love was unquestionably the theater

and the musical world [...] his experience with the theater influenced the way he shaped many of his stories” (19). Restrictions in Europe at this time prohibited spoken dialogue in several theatrical productions, and Stoddard Holmes links these restrictions to disability: “representations of speechlessness and other disabilities are historically rooted in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century censorship of theatrical performances” (*Fictions of Affliction*, 23). According to Stoddard Holmes, “bodies distinctive enough to ‘speak’ without words were invaluable”, and only “a limited number of theaters [could] perform those ‘legitimate’ plays that used spoken dialogue” (*Fictions of Affliction*, 23), which emphasises how mute characters were used to create meaning without relying on the spoken word. These restrictions were lifted in 1843 (six years after the publication of “The Little Mermaid”). Although these laws applied in England and France rather than Denmark, Andersen’s interest in other cultures, where he “took trips outside Denmark to seek fresh impulses for his writing” (Zipes, 8) and nurtured a close friendship with Charles Dickens, suggests that he may have drawn upon this cultural restriction in his creation of the little mermaid. This bolsters an interpretation of the little mermaid as a performing spectacle who is able to entertain the humans despite her muteness.<sup>6</sup> As “[e]veryone cheered her, for never had she danced so wonderfully” (“TLM” 53), the little mermaid uses her physical beauty and body – not her voice or intellect – to communicate within an inhospitable social environment.

It is productive to examine Edvard Eriksen’s bronze sculpture of the little mermaid here, which was produced and exhibited in Copenhagen in 1913. The statue has been subject to vandalism since the mid-twentieth century, and these instances can be linked back to disability. The sculpture was also left unfinished, which supports how other aspects of “The Little Mermaid” – as both an eponymous character and a fairy tale – are “unfinished” or

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<sup>6</sup> A parallel can be drawn here between the little mermaid character and Andersen’s passion for theatre, as he was fascinated by the Pierrot character and explored it through his paper art. The Pierrot – like the little mermaid – is mute, alienated, and uses bodily movement to entertain others. For a more detailed discussion on the subject, see Beth Wagner Brust’s *The Amazing Paper Cuttings of Hans Christian Andersen* (2003).



overlooked in the cultural imagination. Overlapping themes of femininity and disability are generated within Andersen's fairy tale, but these interpretations also exceed what the text itself does as a children's story written for entertainment purposes. It is meaningful to consider the sculpture as a reincarnation of the little mermaid's character in order to further contemporary understandings about disability and gender, and the following two images are useful for my purposes here:

**Figure 1:** "The Headless Little Mermaid" (1964)

**Figure 2:** "The Armless Little Mermaid" (1984)

In Figure 1, the mermaid sculpture is headless. Unlike the tale, where the little mermaid "was naked, so she clothed herself in her own long hair" ("TLM" 51) within the human kingdom, the mermaid sculpture's own body is exhibited and placed on public display. In Figure 2, the mermaid is missing one of her limbs. This reinforces themes of disability in the tale but also adds impetus to the little mermaid's own impairments and how they become discernible in a public context. In a similar thread to the tale, the sculpture inscribes the same physical incompleteness that engulfs the little mermaid as a consequence of her self-sacrifice and unrequited love. The sculpture's physical placement is also worth noting here; her positionality strengthens the view that the sculpture, like the little mermaid character, is a public spectacle. In her article on the subject, Anne Clara Bom states that the mermaid sculpture "is alive because of its placement" (353) and, following the decision to temporarily move the sculpture to Shanghai in 2010, one Danish citizen stated the following: "[a]way from her familiar surroundings [the sculpture] will hardly attract the same attention as that we ascribe to her" (354). These reports emphasise the little mermaid's cultural legacy and point to how, like Andersen's little mermaid, the sculpture is animated and personified in human-like terms. However, the sculpture is ultimately a passive object that entertains the humans

and becomes subject to their own perpetual gaze, reinforcing the little mermaid's own limited position and agency in the human kingdom.

### **Challenging the Able-bodied Male Gaze through Female Agency**

In contrast to obstacles presented by her gender and disability, Andersen uses the little mermaid's gaze as a strategy of empowerment. Although the little mermaid's impairments can be interpreted as disabilities once she becomes human, Andersen also underscores her initial subordination by highlighting the gaze. Therefore, whilst Andersen is not presenting a feminist text in many ways because he limits the little mermaid through her gendered constraints and impairments, he does provide glimpses into the character's feminist potential. The little mermaid in part overcomes her struggles by exercising a gaze that "looks" back at and challenges the ableist human kingdom, and the work of Garland-Thomson is useful for my purposes here. In *Staring*, Garland-Thomson argues that staring produces disabled identity, which also has gendered implications. She writes:

[T]he desire to stare and the social prohibitions against it fills staring encounters with angst that can be productive, leading starers to new insights. Triggered by the insight of someone who seems unlike us, staring can begin an exploratory expedition into ourselves and outward into new worlds. (6)

In Garland-Thomson's conception of staring, she suggests that the act is borne out of fascination but also a secretive desire to understand and learn about others. This is relevant here because the little mermaid gazes in order to comprehend a world that she is excluded from. However, whilst Garland-Thomson argues that the disabled are objectified through sight, I posit that the little mermaid becomes powerful through it. Her ability to gaze is also linked back to her natural habitat: the ocean. Her gaze is sustained by, or occurs within, the same natural setting that foregrounds her characterisation. For example, the little mermaid looks through the ocean: "she stood at her open window and looked up through the dark blue waters" ("TLM" 43). She witnesses the human world without being watched herself, as "she

could peep in through the clear glass panes” (“TLM” 45). The ocean also facilitates her ability to gaze at the humans because, when observing the prince from a distance, “the swell kept bouncing her up so high that she could look into the cabin” (“TLM” 45). The ocean is a place where the little mermaid can observe without being observed herself, which contrasts with her spectacle status in the human world: her invisibility within water provides an opportunistic site for her gaze.

The colour blue is a prominent motif in the tale that is linked to disability and the gaze. Returning to Yamato’s work, she calls attention to the links between the colour blue and water as a mirroring device in “The Little Mermaid”: “The text trades on the familiar notion of a pure body of water as a physical mirror and yet makes the mirroring morally ambiguous” (299). She discusses how distortions of water link to the indiscernible boundary between mermaid and human. However, Yamato’s argument can be extended because the little mermaid uses the ocean to gaze at and question the “morally ambiguous” or unintelligible differences between the humans and mermaids from a safe distance. Further, in Andersen’s original Danish tale, he describes the colour blue through the natural world, where blue is a simile; for instance, the sea is “blue as sulphurous flames”, and the colour is also used to describe weather conditions, as “the blue lightning flash” (Dahlerup *et al*, 421) dominates the sky. In both examples, connections between the colour blue and the natural world – seen through the ocean and weather conditions – link back to representations of disability. When comparing these quotations from the Danish tale with the English translation, the term “flash” is used instead to emphasise the little mermaid’s chronic pain: “[w]hen the sun rose over the sea she awoke and felt a flash of pain” (“TLM” 50). This ultimately strengthens the intersections between disability, the ocean, and the human world as factors that influence and impact the little mermaid’s ability to gaze.

Literary theories of colour can be used here to newly interrogate blue as a recurring motif in “The Little Mermaid”. In her investigation of colour symbolism, Beth Tauke explores the significance of colour within various examples of literature and film. Although she does not examine Andersen’s work, she does briefly consider tales written by Andersen’s contemporaries Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, who compiled their own collection of fairy tales at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Tauke argues that “color is assumed to be both a phenomenal and a literary element in the physical world and in the imaginative worlds” (21) and that, in fairy tales, “color acts as a vehicle to explain, enhance, and/or symbolize” (23). Recognising the symbolic qualities and impact of colour within literary examples taken from Andersen’s era, Tauke illustrates how colour is used to reflect the “concerns and contradictions of the age” (23). This can be seen in the context of “The Little Mermaid”: blue is used in relation to the setting and plot, but it also serves to highlight links between disability and the gaze. In her analysis, Tauke focuses mainly on the traditional fairy-tale colours of red, white, and black (which are seen in stories such as ‘Little Snow White’, for example). However, she does state that blue connotes a “quality of fierceness” (26), whilst Marisha McAuliffe further claims that blue symbolises “vigilance, perseverance and justice” (59). These ideas are suggestive of “The Little Mermaid”: the colour blue links back to the little mermaid’s ocean as a setting for her gaze, but the motif also emphasises her empowerment, agency, and acute observation of others. These ideas can be explored further through the following image of the little mermaid sculpture, which was vandalised with blue paint in 2017:

**Figure 3:** “The Blue Little Mermaid” (2017)

In this photograph, the little mermaid is drenched with blue paint; this act of vandalism visually enforces her vulnerability within the human world, and associations drawn from

these photographs can be linked back to Garland-Thomson's work on staring. In her examination of staring, disability, and photography, Garland-Thomson argues that "photographs organize our perceptions, shaping the objects as they depict them by using conventions of presentation that invoke cultural ideas and expectations" ("The Politics of Staring", 57-58). This visual "presentation" of the mermaid sculpture intersects with normative expectations about gender and society but also themes inherent within the fairy tale itself. Although the blue paint has been used in a negative manner through vandalism, the paint that taints the mermaid sculpture can be linked back to the prominence of blue in the tale. As Carol Mavor explains in her study on the subject, blue is "self-contradictory" (10) and it "yields meaning, but paradoxically will also give way to opposite meanings" (96), thereby supporting how blue underpins representations of femininity, disability, and the gaze in ways that are emancipating for the little mermaid character but objectifying and hostile for the sculpture. This photograph also captures a sense of fragmentation associated with the little mermaid's experiences, which is evidenced by the fact that only half of the sculpture's body is stained by the paint. In the tale, the little mermaid is similarly tied to her blue underwater world, but she is alienated within the human world, which can be seen here through the sculpture's isolated position. Like the little mermaid character, the sculpture bears the inscriptions of a hostile society that she is simultaneously a part of yet excluded from.

When the little mermaid first arrives on land in Andersen's tale, she is able to challenge the able-bodied male gaze. Although the little mermaid desires the prince and undergoes a transformation from mermaid to human to pursue his love, she recognises the gendered implications of the gaze when she becomes the object of it. Links between gender and the gaze are supported by Diane Ponterotto, as she claims that the male gaze is "covertly disseminated through the imposed and controlling definition of the 'ideal' model of the

female body” (133). Although I would agree that the operations of the male gaze are “covert” and based on normative principles, in this context the gaze is more progressive. In contrast to the mermaid sculpture that is naked and fixed on the shores of Copenhagen, the little mermaid arrives on human land and conceals her body to challenge the prince’s gaze: “directly in front of her stood the handsome young prince, gazing at her with his coal-black eyes [...] she was naked, so she clothed herself in her own long hair” (“TLM” 50-51).

Similar to links previously outlined between the colour blue and the little mermaid’s ability to gaze, the prince’s “coal-black” eyes merit close attention. In 1810, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote a treatise on the symbolism of colour, discussing how colours “have direct, unmediated effects on people” and “excite particular feelings” (304-5). Goethe identifies the same colours of black and blue that are later described in “The Little Mermaid”, paying particular attention to “[t]he cold nature of black and its affinity to blue” (398). However, I would argue that Andersen highlights the colours’ contrast rather than “affinity” to one another in order to emphasise differences between the little mermaid and the prince. The “cold nature” or harsh qualities of black align with the prince’s characterisation. His “coal-black” eyes – where “cold” and “coal” are phonologically similar – “excite particular feelings” once he encounters the naked little mermaid. Discussing the psychological effects of colour, Goethe also explains how colour “produce[s] a harmonious, characteristic, often even an inharmonious effect on the eye” (304). This reinforces links between the gaze and Andersen’s use of colour but also the contradictory patterns that arise from it: the little mermaid’s own visual agency is incompatible and “inharmonious” with the prince’s dark, threatening gaze. Tauke further states that the colour black is used in fairy tales to symbolise “self-determination” and “patriarchalism” (24), which adds impetus to this interpretation. The prince’s eyes are linked to patriarchal desire and his sexual objectification of the little mermaid, but his “self-determination” or motivation to do so is counteracted by her own

visual agency. The following image is useful for examining this moment in the narrative in further detail:

**Figure 4:** Helen Stratton, “When the Sun Rose Over the Sea She Awoke, and Felt a Sharp Pang” (1899)

The illustration above was created by Helen Stratton, a British artist who produced approximately four hundred illustrations for the 1899 collection of Andersen’s tales. This illustration depicts the little mermaid moments after she arrives on human land. However, her gaze is directed not at the prince but at the reader, supporting how her perpetual gaze is emphasised here. Stratton’s visual representation of the little mermaid’s gaze demonstrates how her “eyes seemed to question” (“TLM” 52) the motives of the prince but also the reader who gazes at her body, broadly exemplifying Watson’s claim that “[d]isabled people are active agents and are able to challenge the structures and practices” that oppress them (“Agency, Structure, and Emancipatory Research”, 135). In particular, the little mermaid conceals her body using her hair just as she does in the tale. This depiction can be linked to discussions relating to hair by disability scholars Xanthe Hunt *et al*, who recently argued that long hair is correlated with femininity. For disabled women, “long hair [is] an important symbol of their femininity”, which “compensate[s] for their sense of otherwise lacking some socially defined aspects of femininity” (70). Andersen does emphasise the little mermaid’s long hair shortly after she becomes impaired as a result of her transition from mermaid to human. However, I would argue that she uses her hair to conceal her “socially defined aspects of femininity” as opposed to displaying them for the benefit of the prince’s gaze.

Returning to Garland-Thomson’s work in *Staring*, she claims that “the male stare is a potentially hostile instrument to be mastered [...] To freely look and be looked upon shift from privilege to threat for women” (70-71). Garland-Thomson’s argument can be mapped onto the little mermaid’s ability to “master” the prince’s gaze in this example. The little

mermaid uses other aspects of her body as protection, and her hair thus becomes a totalising barrier that protects her from the prince's patriarchal gaze, rather than a titillating expression of her femininity. Through an ability to "sit and watch the young prince" ("TLM" 47) without being clearly watched herself, the little mermaid is able to comprehend her able-bodied goals whilst also shielding herself from a male gaze that could subordinate her.

### **The Disabled Female Gaze: A Challenge to Normative Femininity**

Although the little mermaid continues to gaze throughout the tale, the prince no longer gazes back when he marries his unnamed bride at the end. The prince's bride has evaded scholarly attention. This oversight eclipses important discussions surrounding gender and disability because the bride can be read as the little mermaid's able-bodied counterpart in a tale where normativity is a structuring principle. The prince's decision to marry the bride over the little mermaid is used to uphold normative ideals of femininity and able-bodiedness and, like the little mermaid, the bride is nameless. This lack of a definitive identity means that her character becomes a site to inscribe everything that the little mermaid strives for but cannot achieve or communicate as a result of her impairment. This idea can be supported and understood from the little mermaid's perspective; she gazes at the bride during their first encounter and saw that her "skin was clear and fair, and behind the long, dark lashes her blue eyes were smiling and devoted" ("TLM" 53). The connotations of "devoted", along with the bride's metaphorically "smiling" gaze, emphasise how the bride is equally "devoted" to the normative societal order that the prince represents. In contrast, the little mermaid is excluded from it. As Yenika-Agbaw argues, the little mermaid "may look like the humans, but culturally she feels alienated and remains an exotic other" (97) due to her outsider status and inability to communicate.

The motif of blue also reappears when considering links between the little mermaid's gaze and that of the bride. Mortensen writes in his article on Andersen's tale that "the use of



color symbolism is but one of the very effective narrative devices” (447), but he overlooks the significance of blue by analysing the colours of red and white instead. Andersen’s comparable description of the bride’s eyes and the little mermaid’s ocean can both be linked back to the gaze, as the bride’s “blue eyes” bear similarities to the little mermaid’s “dark blue” (“TLM” 43) ocean that she must travel through in order to first “see” the human world. Yet, the “dark blue” or ambiguous differences that exist between the mermaid and human worlds culminate in barriers that can only be “seen” or understood through the bride’s – not the little mermaid’s – perspective. Through her own gaze, the bride can envision and pursue a path to conventional marriage with the prince, leaving the little mermaid forgotten and “unseen by them” (“TLM” 55) despite her self-sacrifice. Ultimately, the bride can “see” and subscribe to normative human conventions such as marriage, whereas the little mermaid is restricted and eventually ignored due to her impairment. Through her own expressive, “telling eyes” (“TLM” 52), the little mermaid can perceive the same trajectory that able-bodied characters follow, but she cannot participate due to her own non-normative differences.

At the end of the tale, the little mermaid “hurl[s] herself over the bulwarks into the sea, and felt her body dissolve in foam” (54) instead of working to destroy the prince. The little mermaid’s self-sacrifice, which she chooses over a return to her previous life, signals a feminist rebellion against the patriarchal order that limits and silences her. Further, Hunt *et al* investigate the intersections between feminine roles and disability, and they state the following: “Due to internalised doubts regarding their physicality and femininity, women with physical disabilities may feel that success in relationships or marriages bolsters their normalness” (73). Hunt *et al* acknowledge how perspectives on marriage are made complicated by disability, and this idea can also be seen within a literary context. The little mermaid cannot conform to these normative, human roles despite her physical sacrifice.

However, she is not entirely powerless because she continues to interact with and watch over the humans in the afterlife, where they can no longer gaze at her: “Unseen by them, she kissed the bride's forehead, smiled upon the prince, and rose up with the other daughters of the air” (55). Andersen punishes his heroine because she fails to marry the prince, but he does hint at her continued agency through sight. On one level, then, Andersen restores social order by destroying a non-normative female character, but on another level he allows her to retain her visual agency. Therefore, the little mermaid is non-threatening in her ability to look at or challenge the prince's patriarchal society, but her continued emancipation allows Andersen to complicate her narrative purpose.

### **Conclusion**

Although Andersen restores social order at the end of “The Little Mermaid” by punishing the little mermaid's transgression, he also provides a tantalising glimpse into her feminist agency using the gaze. The character of the little mermaid is objectified and prized for her entertainment value; however, her ability to gaze back at those who objectify her means that the gaze can be reimagined as a liberating, rather than an oppressive, visual activity. Bringing Andersen's fairy tale into dialogue with Literary Disability Studies allows for a more nuanced perspective on representations of femininity and disability in nineteenth-century children's literature; the little mermaid's narrative purpose goes beyond damaging tropes of pity, tragedy, or villainy. In calling attention to the character's visual agency, this article serves to question the place of disabled female characters in fiction, as Andersen presents a heroine who contests her marginalised status through sight. Ultimately, I have argued that reading the little mermaid's visual agency as a form of empowerment offers new perspectives on the highly theorised subject of the gaze, contributing a more progressive reading of disabled female characters and their purpose within literary culture.

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