Performing Transgender Identity in The Little Mermaid: From Andersen to Disney

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Performing Transgender Identity in *The Little Mermaid*: From Andersen to Disney

Leland G. Spencer

This essay considers narratives that are not typically read as stories about performative identities. Adapting queer criticism, I suggest that inherent in “The Little Mermaid,” both Hans Christian Andersen’s short story and the Disney film, is a story about a performance of transgender identity. Exploring parallels between transgender identity development and the mermaid narratives, I argue that the possibility of a transgender reading resides in the mermaid stories, which can be understood as coming out narratives of sorts. In both transgender identity development and the mermaid stories, themes of mind-body dissonance, familial tension, and self-censorship are evident. Further, I suggest that transgender criticism is one of many potential offspring of queer criticism for critics interested in messages related to sexuality and gender identity in texts.

Keywords: Criticism; Feminism; Identity; Little Mermaid; Queer; Transgender

In “The Mermaid Sets the Story Straight,” poet Debra Cash (2003) retells Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” from the point of view of the mermaid: “Hans lied. He didn’t know the prince was just an excuse for me to change my life, to stop being a sister, a daughter” (para. 4). In the same spirit as Cash, I argue that from the perspective of transgender criticism, “The Little Mermaid,” both Andersen’s short story and the Disney animated adaptation, can be read as stories about a performance of transgender identity.

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This essay begins by defining transgender criticism, an adaptation of queer criticism (Doty, 1993; Slagle, 2003), to offer a critical transgender reading of the texts in question. Then, I apply a close transgender reading to Hans Christian Andersen’s (1837/1974) “The Little Mermaid” and Disney’s The Little Mermaid (Clements & Musker, 1989). My argument is based on loose but poignant parallels between the mermaid’s story and the process of identity development among transgender persons. Finally, I contend that this analysis illustrates that for the rhetorical critic interested in exploring the range of meanings and possibilities in texts that may address sexuality and gender identity, queer criticism is a beginning point that invites extension and extrapolation.

Transgendering Queer Criticism

In his groundbreaking book Making Things Perfectly Queer, Alexander Doty defined queer criticism. For Doty, queer texts and textual elements are those discussed with a reference to a range or network of nonstraight ideas. The queerness in these cases might combine the lesbian, the gay, and the bisexual, or it might be textual queerness not accurately described even by a combination of these labels. (1993, p. xviii)

With respect to the mermaid narratives I consider here, transgender is a better term than queer to describe the reading I undertake. Although Doty did not address the potential transgenderness of texts, he recognized that “texts and people’s responses to them are more sexually transmutable than any one category could signify,” to which he added a caveat, “excepting, perhaps, that of ‘queer’” (1993, p. xix). For my purposes, queer is perhaps too capacious a term because queer describes a larger range of performances and identities than I consider here; understanding the mermaid narratives as transgender texts is more precise. In this case, a close reading through a critical transgender lens reveals a particular type of queerness “not accurately described even by a combination” of Doty’s labels. At the same time, it is important to recognize that an approach like this is a perspective or lens for reading texts more than a prescriptive method with defined steps that are identical in every case. In part, my effort here extends Doty’s work by exploring the possibilities of specifically transgender readings of texts.

Queer criticism, according to Slagle (2003), offers alternative readings of mainstream texts. He argued that “queerness is pervasive in texts, even those that are not intentionally queer” (Slagle, 2003, p. 132). Queer readings highlight elements of familiar texts that defy heteronormativity. For Slagle, then, queer criticism “is aimed at uncovering and emphasizing sexuality in general, and sexual difference in particular, even though the dominant or traditional reading of a particular text might differ from a queer reading” (2003, p. 132). My analysis is a transgender criticism because it looks at stories that do not ostensibly seem to be about embodied gender identity and argues that within those narratives, the mermaid is performing a transgender identity, an identity other than that which is socially assumed or assigned for her character. As a
corollary to Slagle’s definition, I suggest that transgenderness is present in these texts, even though they are not intentionally stories about transgender identity. Further, my analysis uncovers and emphasizes embodied identity performances in these texts even though mainstream and other academic readings differ.

In articulating and performing a critical project from a transgender lens, I heed a call from transgender studies scholars to engage with texts from beyond queer or feminist studies perspectives. Stryker (2006) noted that transgender scholarship has a tense historical relationship with queer and feminist scholarship. Stryker suggested that some queer studies scholars, especially in the early 1990s, questioned whether transgender studies really fits with considerations of sexual orientation; some scholars even argued that transgender people were pathological and should not be considered a part of the (social or academic) gay and lesbian movement (e.g., see Prosser, 1995, 1998). Transgender scholarship’s reception among some feminists has been challenging, too. Some feminist scholars have accused transgender people of buying into gender oppression rather than resisting it (e.g., see Daly, 1978; Raymond, 1979; Hausman, 1995). More so than queer or feminist studies, Stryker (2006) argued, “the field of transgender studies is concerned with anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist” between biology, gender roles, and social expectations (p. 3). Noble (2011) lamented that, although transgender studies scholarship has established itself as an independent discipline, many “field-forming texts” suffer from “a decidedly noisy lack of engagement with cultural production—narrative, film, documentary and/or experimental film, poetry and mixed-media performance work, literary texts, and so on” (p. 268). My work in this essay acknowledges the traditions of feminist and queer scholarship out of which transgender studies emerged and simultaneously departs from those traditions in important ways. Furthermore, I engage with and find possibility in a mainstream short story and narrative film.

Performing Transgender Identities in Mainstream Texts

Transgender Identity Development as a Critical Perspective

My argument for a transgender reading of the mermaid story, both in the Andersen tale and the film, is based on research about transgender identity development and coming out experiences. Transgender people are not monolithic, and researchers have found that some people who might be denotatively classified as transgender use other terms to describe themselves (Bilodeau, 2005; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008). With the important qualifications that no two stories are identical and no single identity label has a universally agreed upon definition, some themes and patterns emerge across many transgender narratives (Chavez-Korell & Johnson, 2010; Gagne, Tewksbury, & McGaughey, 1997).

Morgan and Stevens (2008) found that transgender individuals often experience “a sense of body-mind dissonance” in which their internal gender identity does not match the biological sex of their physical bodies (p. 587; see also, Fraser, 2009). In other words, transgender individuals’ desired identity performances are often at odds
with familial and social expectations. These feelings of dissonance can cause anger, conflict, confusion, and frustration for transgender adolescents, as well as for their parents. Many transgender youth display an affinity for the clothing and accessories of those whose identities match the identities they desire to perform or understand as natural for themselves. For example, Gagne et al. (1997) discussed several research participants’ accounts of dressing in their moms’ clothes when they were left at home. One of Bilodeau’s participants described feeling exhilarated at the chance to wear men’s clothes for a theatrical production when there were no men available to act in the role. As transgender young people come to recognize their gender identities as socially unacceptable, they begin to censor their words and behaviors. Gagne et al. reported that “as children begin to understand the binary gender system, they become ashamed of their feminine or transgendered feelings [and] learn to hide their behaviors” (1997, p. 488). Morgan and Stevens (2008) recounted the story of one male-to-female transgender person whose father chastised her (when she was a young boy) for using the word divine (as in, “that outfit is divine”). She realized that until she could come out entirely, she needed to censor or silence herself, especially in particularly hostile contexts.

While these transgender experiences do not map onto the short story and film exactly, they provide a perspective for thinking about the narratives from the lens of transgender identity performance. Admittedly, this perspective is different from that of an audience of consumers who simply see an entertaining story. So too is it different from several common critical feminist (e.g., Lacroix, 2004; Picker, 2001; Sells, 1995; Trites, 1991) and queer (Erb, 1995; Griffin, 2000) readings of the film. I am a feminist and believe this perspective is compatible with feminist principles. For instance, I offer alternative interpretations of some parts of the story that feminist analyses have found troubling. Still, I recognize that there are no easy responses to the mermaid’s decision to give up her voice (in both stories), Ariel’s father’s abusiveness, or Ariel’s youthfulness (in the film). Whether my analysis dovetails or departs with previous treatments of the narratives, my task as a rhetorical critic is to make an argument about one way to understand these texts (Dow, 1996). A close transgender reading of the texts brings different parts of the narratives into focus or offers different interpretations from previous analyses. Any particular lens provides an opportunity to examine again even texts that seem familiar or have already been explored from other perspectives.

Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid”

Andersen finished “The Little Mermaid” in 1837 after significant revisions. Biographer Jackie Wullschlager (2000) contended, in part based on Andersen’s conflicted feelings about his own sexual identity, that “The Little Mermaid” is a story about the fear of sexuality. Andersen’s several unrequited crushes on women and men were compounded by an abiding self-perception of ugliness. Though he was aware of his intellect and the quality of his creative work, his unfortunate appearance and romantic failures haunted him. In fact, he worked on the first draft of “The Little Mermaid”
instead of attending the wedding of a man he loved (Wullschlager, 2000). Andersen’s
anxieties and curiosities about sexuality emerge throughout the story.

In both the short story and the film, the main character (unnamed in Andersen’s
tale and called Ariel in the Disney film) has a fascination with humans and the
human world from the beginning. In the short story, all six mermaid sisters are
curious about the land, but the youngest is the most eager to learn about the world
outside of the water. All the sisters have a garden under the sea, but the youngest
“planted red flowers in hers; she wanted it to look like the sun” (Andersen, 1837/
1974, p. 58). The mermaid’s fascination with humans mirrors many transgender
people’s fascinations with transgender role models. Stone (1991) explained, “The
Obligatory Transsexual File [...] usually contains newspaper articles and bits of
forbidden diary entries about ‘inappropriate’ gender behavior” (p. 285). Stone and
several research participants in other studies mentioned the news of Christine Jorgen-
sen’s well-publicized 1952 transition as a turning point in their self-identifications
(Brown & Rounsley, 1996; Gagne et al., 1997; Hill, 2013). Just as many transgender
people move from reading articles to trying on clothes to meeting other transgender
people, the mermaid moves from fascination to interaction with humans.

In Andersen’s version of the story, contact with the human world is permitted
rather than prohibited (as in the film), but the mermaids must wait until they are
15 years old to swim to the surface. When it is finally her turn to swim to the surface,
the youngest mermaid witnesses a storm that shipwrecks a handsome prince’s
maritime birthday celebration. As in the movie, the mermaid rescues the prince,
and afterward, “she grew to love human beings and wished that she could leave
the sea and live among them” (Andersen, 1837/1974, p. 65). Notably, her love is
for human beings, not just the prince. Andersen explained further:

It seemed to her that their world was far larger than hers; on ships, they could sail
across the oceans and they could climb the mountains high up above the clouds. Their
countries seemed ever so large, covered with fields and forests; she knew that they
stretched much farther than she could see. There was so much that she wanted to
know; there were many questions that her sisters could not answer. (Andersen,
1837/1974, p. 65)

The little mermaid desires to perform the human identity that feels natural for her
and wants to be in a relationship with the prince (unnamed in the story and called
Eric in the film), but the question of identity is complicated in the short story by the
introduction of immortality. The mermaid’s grandmother explains that mermaids
“can live until we are three hundred years old; but when we die, we become the foam
on the ocean. When we die, we shall never rise again,” but “men [humans] have souls
that live eternally, even after their bodies have become dust. They rise high up into
the clear sky where the stars are” (p. 66). The little mermaid is indignant that she
does not have an immortal soul, so her grandmother tells her it is possible for a mer-
maid to gain an immortal soul if she marries a human. The desire for a soul strength-
ens the mermaid’s urge to perform as a human. She wants both the handsome prince
and an immortal soul: “I would dare to do anything to win him and an immortal
“soul!” she thinks to herself (p. 67). The obsession with performing as human is less clearly distinct from the mermaid’s affection for the prince in the short story than I will argue it is in the film because the mermaid in the film sings an entire song about how she longs to be part of the human world; however, the importance of a successful performance as human is amplified in the story. The mermaid wants the prince’s love, but his love is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Winning his love by performing as human is significant because the mermaid wants an immortal soul.

Reflecting Andersen’s discomfort with sexuality because of his own feelings of rejection and physical awkwardness and the difficulty often inherent in a subversive performance of identity, the shift from mermaid to human is very painful in the short story. The mermaid’s voice, lost when the sea witch cut out her tongue, serves as her payment for her transformation into a human. Additionally, the witch warns the mermaid that her everyday performance of human identity would not be easy:

I will mix you a potion. Drink it tomorrow morning before the sun rises, while you are sitting on the beach. Your tail will divide and shrink, until it becomes what human beings call “pretty legs.” It will hurt; it will feel as if a sword were going through your body. All who see you will say that you are the most beautiful child they have ever seen. You will walk more gracefully than any dancer; but every time your foot touches the ground, it will feel as though you were walking on knives so sharp that your blood must flow. If you are willing to suffer all this, then I can help you. (Andersen, 1837/1974, p. 68)

A transgender reading of the story recognizes that to find love and hence immortality, the mermaid must successfully perform an identity that others do not recognize as natural for her, including making decisions about whether to undergo painful changes to her body. It is notable that the sea witch warns the mermaid in detail about the pain she will undergo in transition and then leaves the decision up to the mermaid. She can help only if the mermaid is willing to suffer through pain as severe as that from knives and swords. The mermaid’s transition in the story is magical, but no less surgical than a transition performed with a scalpel. Indeed, transitioning from mermaid to human requires violence on the mer body. Gagne et al. (1997) found that some transgender individuals harm themselves, including attempting to mutilate their genitals, before they become aware of medical options like hormone treatments and surgery. Once they become aware of medical options, transgender people have to decide whether to receive “treatment” and what kinds to have. Undergoing surgery is painful, time-consuming, and (often prohibitively) expensive (Gagne et al., 1997). Despite the cost and the pain, the mermaid chooses to change her body to enable the identity performance she desires. The mermaid is willing to pay the price and endure the pain of knives and swords for a body that matches the internal identity she claims. Butler (1990) noted that those who perform an identity different from the one others assume to be essential are often disciplined for their apparent nonconformity. In this case, the very performance of the identity the mermaid understands to be natural for her brings constant pain to the mermaid. But this “she suffered [ . . . ] gladly” because she so desired to perform human identity and obtain an immortal soul (Andersen, 1837/1974, p. 70).
In time, the mermaid suffers the ultimate penalty for her embodied identity performance. The prince falls in love with and marries someone else. Since the potion comes with a stipulation—the the mermaid will die on the day after the prince marries another—she loses her chance to get an immortal soul, dies, and turns into sea foam. Just before her death, the mermaid reflects on her impending doom: “A dreamless, eternal night awaited her, for she had no soul and had not been able to win one” (Andersen, 1837/1974, p. 74). The mermaid’s identity performance is focused on her desire to be with the prince, but, on the whole, her grief is centered on the larger concern of losing the opportunity to acquire a soul. The prince’s choice of another partner also represents a rejection of the mermaid and implicitly of her identity (performance) as a human.

From a feminist perspective, the story is troubling in many ways. Wullschlager (2000) noted that the story is “sentimental, misogynistic, and moralizing; it shows Andersen enjoying the Mermaid’s suffering and offering an oppressive mix of self-sacrifice, silence, and expiation as ideals of female behavior” (p. 174). Wullschlager’s main concern is the text’s constant reiteration of how painful the mermaid’s new body is, as if Andersen took pleasure in reminding readers of the mermaid’s agony as often as possible. However, stopping at a feminist reading of the story may overlook some of the nuances of a queer or transgender reading. Wullschlager went on, offering a queer reading:

As the drama of the suffering of a social outsider and an unrequited lover who cannot express his or her passion, [this story] is still poignant. This is certainly how Andersen identified with the tale, allying himself in his bisexuality to the mermaid’s sense of being a different species from humankind. (2000, p. 174)

Furthermore, the mermaid’s failure to win the prince’s affection mirrors Andersen’s own disappointment in finding mutual love (with either a woman or a man).

The story’s unhappy ending—especially when contrasted with that of the Disney film—reflects a sad reality for many transgender people. Identity performances beyond the social norm, whether intended to find love, self-actualization, or some sense of authenticity, are not always well received by others. Ostracism, rejection, violence, and even death may result when identity performances are not consistent with normalized expectations. Even within ostensibly welcoming places, like support groups for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and, nominally at least, transgender people, transgender people often feel judged or misunderstood (Stryker, 2006). More seriously, rates of bias crimes, self-harm, and suicide are alarmingly higher for transgender populations than for cisgender people (Gagne et al., 1997; Sausa, 2005).

Though interpreting this unfortunate ending through a transgender lens is sad, the story’s conclusion is consistent with this reading. Before the mermaid dies, her sisters sell their hair to the sea witch in exchange for a knife. They give the knife to their sister and tell her that she can return to the sea to live as a mermaid if she will stab the prince and kill him in his sleep. Instead, the mermaid casts the knife into the sea. The choice to give up her life rather than returning to a body that feels wrong for her
illustrates that the mermaid’s journey is not just for love but for a soul and an identity that fits. Her sisters offer her the response of a scorned lover, but the mermaid’s story was never (just) about love. The final decision of her life is an affirmation of the identity performance she most desires, to live—and die—as a human.

**Disney’s The Little Mermaid**

Next, I turn to the Disney adaptation of Andersen’s short story. While the Disney film sanitizes the Andersen story in some ways, particularly by removing the masochistic moments where the audience is asked to enjoy the mermaid’s pain, it is also rich for interpretation from a critical transgender lens. Gail Dines, speaking of Ariel, argued that “ultimately, she is willing to give up her voice to get the man” (Picker, 2001, 18:04). Dines was referring to Ariel’s decision to trade her voice to the sea witch in order to be transformed into a human. Dines’s argument is that the film is problematic because it teaches girls that a romantic relationship with a man is more important than a woman’s independence or freedom of speech. The dominant academic/critical and feminist interpretations of the film support this reading (Lacroix, 2004; Trites, 1991). For instance, Trites contrasted the film with the short story on which it is based: “Andersen’s mermaid quests for a soul, but Disney’s mermaid, Ariel, quests for a mate” (p. 145). Trites went on to bemoan that Ariel “wants to gain only marriage” (p. 146).

Griffin’s (2000) queer reading of the film, in some ways compatible with my transgender reading, argued that the influences of openly gay lyricist and producer Howard Ashman (largely celebrated as the film’s most profoundly creative mind) and openly gay animator Andreas Deja seem to authorize approaching the text with a queer lens: “Deja has announced in various interviews that his sexual orientation has had its effect on the characters he draws” (Griffin, 2000, p. 141). Griffin contended that *The Little Mermaid* tells the story of a character who is denied access to the male love she desires. This idea echoed Erb’s (1995) observation that the film is about “fantasy, escape, and forbidden romance” (p. 61). For Griffin, the film is structured around resolving the problem of unsanctioned love.

Alongside (and occasionally alternatively to) these feminist and queer readings of the film, I argue that possibilities for transgender readings are inherent in the film; that is, the film may be understood as a story about a character’s struggles between her desire to perform a human identity and the societal and familial pressures she feels to perform as mer. A transgender reading of the film sees Ariel’s quest as a journey toward performing human identity rather than foregrounding her romantic fascination with Eric. Evidence from the film supports this reading.

The argument that Ariel gives up her voice to get a man overlooks the chronological development of the story. Her fascination with humanity begins far before she ever sees Eric. Indeed, Ariel’s interest in humans is revealed in the very scene that introduces Ariel to the audience. Ariel and her friend Flounder are exploring a sunken ship. Ariel is excited to discover a fork: “Oh my gosh! Have you ever seen anything so wonderful in your entire life?” she exclaims. Later, the audience learns that Ariel has an
extensive collection of human artifacts: several dishes and pieces of silverware, 20
corkscrews (that she calls “thing-a-ma-bobs”), books, a lamp, mirrors, eyeglasses,
pocket watches, a framed painting, and even a functioning music box.

Many transgender individuals, early in their identity development, seek infor-
mation and artifacts about the gender with which they relate and long to dress in
clothes considered socially appropriate for that gender (Fraser, 2009; Morgan &
Stevens, 2008). So too, Ariel collects human artifacts and desires to be “part of that
world.” Her performance as human begins, then, long before she sees Eric. Ariel’s
curiosity about the human artifacts, which Trites’s (1991) feminist reading of the film
dismissed as merely materialistic, leads her to the surface where she seeks information
about them from the seagull, Scuttle. As a bird, Scuttle has access to the land and sea,
so Ariel goes to him to learn about the names and uses of the human objects in her
collection. Humorously, Scuttle gets the information wrong (for example, he tells
Ariel that a fork is called a “dinglehopper” and that humans use it to comb their hair).

Ariel’s encounter with Eric only intensifies her understanding of herself as a
human, and the story continues to focus on an identity conflict. Sebastian, the crab
assigned to watch out for Ariel, attempts to persuade Ariel to abandon her hopes of
becoming a human by singing the Academy Award-winning song, “Under the Sea.”
If the story were only about finding love or getting a man as feminist critiques seem
to suggest, the song would arguably encourage Ariel to fall in love with someone else
by way of a “plenty of fish in the sea” argument. Sebastian could have explained that
the ocean is full of eligible mermen and urged Ariel to date one of them. Instead,
Sebastian’s song centers on performative identity. Introducing the song, Sebastian
insists that “the human world is a mess” and that Ariel, as a mermaid, belongs in
the sea. “Down here is your home,” he admonishes her. He goes on, singing about
the relative advantages to life under the sea. The song argues that the ocean is more
aesthetically pleasing than land and that sea creatures spend the day swimming while
humans have to work in the hot sun.

Just as family, friends, and loved ones of transgender persons cannot always
understand their loved ones’ identity (performance), Sebastian believes that Ariel’s
identity is essentially connected to the body in which she was born. Sebastian’s musi-
cal admonition is a normalizing discourse that officially sanctions particular perfor-
mances as appropriate or acceptable. His comparison frames the ocean as superior to
the land, but also a more fitting place for Ariel. As a mermaid, she should be happy in
the ocean. The song asks what more Ariel could be looking for, but Sebastian is not
interested in an answer. The implication of the rhetorical question is that she need
not look elsewhere because she belongs in the sea and could never be satisfied
anywhere else.

Sebastian’s transformation into an understanding friend is a result of his recog-
nition that Ariel will be happy only if she can perform as human instead of mer. After
Ariel is turned into a human, Sebastian encourages her to return to the sea witch, to
ask for her voice back, and to become a mermaid again: “If we could get that witch to
give you back your voice, you could go home with all the normal fish, and just be.”
Then, he notices the look of dejection on her face and relents, continuing “just be,
just be miserable for the rest of your life.” Sebastian’s facial expression in this scene powerfully announces his moment of transformation: He recognizes finally that Ariel’s identification as a human is central to her happiness and agrees to help her. When Ariel fully comes out of the closet (or ocean) as a human, Sebastian initially protests but eventually accepts the identity performance she is finally able to embrace. Sebastian’s use of the word *normal* to refer to life in the ocean is the last instantiation of his resistance to Ariel’s identity performance. In addition to reflecting the common experience of friends and family members of transgender people, who may initially respond with hostility but often become accepting of their loved ones’ performative identities (Morgan & Stevens, 2008), Sebastian’s statement reveals the link between discourses of normalcy and transgender identity. As Schuh (2006) reported, transgender persons who seek medical treatment are often expected to make a case for the normalcy of their gender identities. As such, for Schuh, the medical establishment “reifies the culture’s grammar of what is natural,” though transgender individuals understand their own identities as natural, or normal, for them (2006, p. 41, emphasis in the original). In a similar vein as Schuh, Gressgard (2010) argued that because transgender individuals “voluntarily break with dominant norms,” they are often “considered to comprise a ‘difference’ that must be regulated by society” (p. 543). Sebastian’s conversation with himself (and with Ariel’s nonverbal cues) begins in a place of regulation, gatekeeping the boundaries of “normal,” but by the conclusion of his statement, Sebastian’s position has changed. His acceptance and affirmation of Ariel’s understanding of herself is a recognition either that she is normal, or that being normal is not of paramount importance if it also means being miserable.

Ariel’s identity development as a human born in a mer body began with a fascination with human artifacts and continued with the story of Sebastian’s growing acceptance of her as a human, and so too does her story parallel the experience of many transgender people with respect to parental tension. A mainstream reading of Ariel’s relationship with her father might cast Ariel merely as a rebellious teenager and her father, King Triton, as an overprotective but loving man with occasional outbursts of temper. Sells’s (1995) feminist reading of the story sees King Triton as patriarchal, enforcing restrictive rules that Ariel must obey. His eventual decision to give assent to Ariel’s marriage to Eric is reminiscent of patriarchal wedding ceremonies where fathers “give away” their daughters in a sort of property transfer from one man to another.

My approach to the film by no means endorses Triton’s patriarchal and borderline abusive behavior in certain scenes; however, viewed through the lens of a transgender reading, Triton’s behavior is consistent with typical parental reactions upon discovery that their child’s desired identity performance does not match his or her body. The anger, confusion, and frustration that Morgan and Stevens (2008) identified as characteristic of parents’ relationships with their transgender children are evident in Triton’s behaviors and reactions throughout the film. Upon first discovering that Ariel went to the surface to learn about the fork she had found in the sunken ship, he chastises her: “How many times must we go through this? You could have been seen by one of those barbarians, by one of those humans. They are dangerous!” Triton
constructs a terribly negative image of an out-group of whom he knows no one. Children who seem to resist constructed social norms in their gender performances and identities can expect similar exhortations from their parents about their language use, play behaviors, and clothing choices (Brown & Rounsley, 1996; Gagne et al., 1997; Morgan & Stevens, 2008). The frustration of “How many times must we go through this?” and the fear of defying social expectations for behaviors of someone born with a particular body are very real concerns for parents with transgender children and significant complications in many such parent-child relationships. Although a broader queer reading or a reading informed by critical race theory might find some similar resonance with the implications of Triton’s tirade, I argue that the pain, misunderstanding, and confusion is particularly poignant from a critical transgender lens because transgender people often face similar kinds of questions and assumptions not only from their families but in nominally affirming places as well. For Brown and Rounsley, transgender persons’ coming out experiences are more challenging than the coming out experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people: “Although the basic concept of revealing a long-held and deeply personal secret (to which people may react strongly and negatively) is the same, coming out as gay does not challenge people’s basic notions about human nature—at least not in the same way” (1996, p. 119). “People’s basic notions about human nature” are rooted in social, biological, and medical discourses of cisgender normativity—the expectation that the sex assigned at birth will match a person’s eventual gender identity (see Johnson, 2013). While heteronormativity means that heterosexuality is a common presumption for family members as well, understanding sexual attraction to members of the same sex is less difficult for anyone who can understand what it means to feel attraction than identifying with a family member whose gender identity does not seem to match one’s body. Further complicating the coming out process, when family members do not understand or are hostile, their rejection is more hurtful and damaging to transgender people than rejection from those who are not related (Gagne et al., 1997). Many transgender people find themselves educating not just their families of origin but also their families of choice (Stryker, 2006). At this stage in the narrative, Triton is angry because of Ariel’s fascination with humans. If Triton is so upset about Ariel’s interest in humans, his reaction is even worse when he learns that she identifies as a human.

After Ariel sees Eric and becomes smitten with him, Ariel’s sisters conclude that she is in love. They tell Triton, and his immediate conclusion is that Ariel’s crush is mer: “Let’s see now. Who could the lucky merman be?” Triton’s assumption represents the fictional oceanic equivalent of heteronormativity. Just as most parents who hear a doctor say “It’s a girl” expect their daughter to grow up, to perform as a woman, and to be romantically attracted to men, Triton expects his daughter to identify as mer and to fall in love with a merman. This expectation is normative because Triton does not question it. He never even considers another possibility and just presumes that Ariel is attracted to a merman.

Before this point in the film, Ariel had kept her grotto full of human artifacts a secret, not unlike the respondent in Gagne et al.’s (1997) study who remembered...
waiting until she was home alone to try on her mother’s panty hose when she was a young boy. Gagne et al. reported that “she liked the silky feeling and the way they looked. As she got older, she began putting the entire ensemble together” (1997, p. 489). Like mom’s pantyhose, Ariel’s grotto of secret artifacts provided comfort, but she dared not let her father see it. When Triton finds the grotto and discovers that the object of Ariel’s desires is a human rather than a merman, he goes into a rage. He destroys Ariel’s collection of human artifacts with his magic trident, reminding her that: “Contact between the human world and the mer world is strictly forbidden.” When Ariel protests that her father is judging someone he has not even met, his anger again emerges. He responds, “I don’t have to know him. They’re all the same: spineless, savage, harpooning fish eaters, incapable of any feeling.” In taking for granted that he knows everything he needs to know about Eric because Eric is a human, Triton others humans, erroneously assuming that they are more similar as a group than they truly are (see Ackerman et al., 2006). Like Triton’s destructive tantrum, transphobic feelings are often based on ignorance. Those who have no (known) familiarity with transgender people often make assumptions about entire groups based on stereotypes, limited knowledge, and unwarranted fears. These assumptions evolve from prejudicial attitudes to discriminatory behaviors when people take action based on those feelings, and sometimes those actions are violent or destructive (Sausa, 2005). In this particular case, Triton is the king of the sea, so his unfortunate and uninformed biases are the basis of laws, rules, and restrictions.

Another parallel between Ariel and transgender experience is the issue of (temporal) voicelessness. Traditional feminist interpretations of the film are justifiably most uncomfortable with Ariel’s choice to give up her voice; indeed, this is a difficult question for any feminist who thinks about this film (Sells, 1995; Trites, 1991). Nonetheless, from a critical transgender perspective, this too is consistent with Ariel’s journey toward embracing her desired identity performance. Ariel’s process of coming out as a human being is difficult and ongoing; it requires that she silence herself, albeit for a few days, before she can perform her human identity completely. Transgender persons often report temporary self-censorship; several transgender adolescents go through “periods of ‘purging’ when [they] stop engaging in transgendered behavior,” though “the need to ‘be themselves’” remains strong (Gagne et al., 1997, p. 488). As in the aforementioned case of the boy who learned the sanctions for calling an outfit divine (Morgan & Stevens, 2008), Ariel finds that she must be silenced for a short time on the way toward performing her identity fully. Even while she is finally expressing the identity that has always felt natural to her, Ariel cannot immediately live into the fullness of that identity without passing through a period of silence. Like many whose “need to ‘be themselves’” eventually prevails, though, Ariel’s voice is not silenced forever.

After a struggle with the sea witch, Ariel gets her voice back. However, she turns back into a mermaid because her three days as a human have expired, and her original deal with the witch required that she kiss Eric within three days or turn back into a mermaid. Ultimately, it is Triton’s acceptance of Ariel’s humanness that allows her to live into the fullness of her identity performance. When Ariel turns back into a mermaid, she becomes the property of the sea witch, and in a moment of recognition,
Triton offers his own life in exchange for hers. Triton is freed when the sea witch is destroyed. As a logical conclusion to the culminating scene where Triton’s self-sacrifice reveals his unconditional love for his daughter, Triton finally recognizes that Ariel identifies as a human, and he uses his magic trident—in a reversal of its violent, destructive role earlier in the film—to transform her into a human permanently. Reasoning with Sebastian, Triton says, “She really does love him, doesn’t she?” Sebastian responds, “Children got to be free to lead their own lives.” Sebastian’s answer reflects something stronger than an encouragement for Triton to grant assent to Ariel and Eric’s relationship. He recognizes that Ariel’s performance as a human—not a mermaid—is integral to her freedom and happiness to define the terms of her life. Therefore, Triton’s final act is more than something tantamount to walking his daughter down the aisle and giving her away; instead, his decision to turn Ariel back into a human is a sign of his acceptance of her desired identity performance. Earlier in the film, he had only harsh judgment and suspicion for humans, but, by the end, he comes to understand that Ariel identifies as a human. Triton is an initially reluctant parent who eventually comes around to his daughter’s identity performance. His acceptance is so great that he participates in Ariel’s living into her humanity. Finally, as if winking privately, Triton puts a rainbow in the sky in the film’s last frames.

**Conclusion**

Neither of these stories is commonly understood as a story about the performance of transgender identity. Still, I argue that the possibility of a transgender reading is inherent in these texts. A transgender reading understands that all identities are, in Butler’s words, “fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (1990, p. 173). Though these narratives of performativity may not be recognized as such by mainstream audiences, they are nevertheless potentially powerful when read with transgender-shaded glasses. The mermaid’s performative permeability on the nature/human-culture divide suggests that identity performance drives the narrative in this transgender reading of these stories. From the mermaid’s fascination with humans, to the painful changes she decides to make to her body, to the challenge of coming out to her family and friends, to her relationship with the prince—in one case, the ultimate rejection of her identity and, in the other, a consummate acceptance—both stories reflect the excitement, anticipation, struggle, pain, silence, and beauty of coming out, of performing transgender identities, and of the search for love and the identity that seems to fit best.

In addition to the new insights a close transgender reading offer about the mermaid narratives, these conclusions also have implications for rhetorical criticism as a discipline and a scholarly practice. Setting the stage for transgender readings like mine are several rhetorical critics who have ably analyzed transgender activism (Chavez, 2010; Johnson, 2013; West, 2008, 2010, 2011) and mediated discourse about transgender people (Booth, 2011; Landau, 2012; Sloop, 2004). My argument here, both about these texts and about the rich possibilities for rhetorical criticism, is focused not on
transgender people or on discourse about them but about the potential transgenderness of mainstream texts themselves. In this essay, I have demonstrated the usefulness of a close reading from a critical transgender lens, a particular type of queer criticism, more specific and focused than queer criticism as Doty (1993) conceptualized it. Doty himself acknowledged that queer criticism is always already unbounded, incomplete, and ripe for expansion and extension. He wrote that queer criticism “includes specifically gay, lesbian, and bisexual expressions; but it also includes all other potential (and potentially unclassifiable) nonstraight positions” (Doty, 1993, p. xvi). Although Doty offered a passing acknowledgement of the potentially unclassifiable nonstraight positions also included, his own work focused on basic lesbian, gay, and bisexual readings of media texts (e.g., a woman who takes pleasure in the potential same-gender love between the title characters in Laverne & Shirley reads the show from a lesbian lens) and queer readings of texts (e.g., a gay man who takes the same pleasure in watching Laverne & Shirley). In other words, for Doty, queer criticism typically means taking pleasure in a media text in a nonstraight and orientation-divergent way. Transgender criticism explicitly considers gender identity performances, not (just) sexual orientation.

My work in this essay narrows to a critical lens absent in Doty’s work that offers a useful perspective for thinking about Andersen’s and Disney’s mermaid narratives, consistent with Dow’s (1996) contention that the job of a critic is to make an argument for how a text can be understood, to offer one perspective about a meaning of a text—always looking for possibilities rather than certainty. Similarly, Zarefsky (2004) noted that rhetorical scholars are “concerned with the uniqueness of exemplary cases as well as recurrent patterns, and they seek insight and appreciative understanding” (p. 607).

Therefore, I call on rhetorical critics with an interest in the myriad possibilities of texts to consider not just lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer readings à la Doty (1993) and Slagle (2003) but also to think about the possibilities within and beyond those always already incomplete categories and perspectives. Consistent with Doty, I suggest that critics regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation can read texts as or alongside queer audiences. As a cisgender gay man, I read the mermaid narratives as stories about transgender identity performance. What other perspectives and critical lenses might offer generative and nuanced analyses of texts? An intersex reading of these mermaid narratives might interrogate Ariel’s body as half-human and half-fish: Is this a story about the disciplining or normalization of an intersex body? I wonder what a critical polyamorous perspective would look like. How is a pansexual reading different from a bisexual reading? On the whole, this project suggests that thinking about a text from a transgender lens must simultaneously acknowledge the roots that transgender studies has in feminist and queer studies and also must enumerate the differences and tensions with those traditions. Transgender criticism—and other potential critical lenses—are importantly independent from and interdependent with these other traditions that are concerned with questions of gender, sexuality, and embodied performativity. The true challenge of transgender criticism and its many potential kin seems to be keeping the range of possibilities perpetually unlocked,
and perhaps telling the mermaid’s story (and several others!) in and with a variety of voices requires such openness.

References


