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MATTHEW ARNOLD'S 'THE FORSAKEN MERMAN' AND 'THE NECKAN' AS REFLECTIONS OF VICTORIAN FEARS

Abstract: Based on folk tales of Northern European nations, Arnold's poems 'The Forsaken Merman' (1849) and 'The Neckan' (1853), both tell a story of human women who marry sea creatures, mermen, and replace their home on the land with the mermen's underwater world. By crossing the boundaries between their worlds, they cause numerous problems, most significantly the tension resulting from their different religious beliefs. In 'The Forsaken Merman', Margaret, the merman's wife, fearing that her soul will be damned because of her marriage to a pagan, decides to rejoin the human world on the most important Christian holiday, Easter. In 'The Neckan', in order to comfort his wife, the Neckan goes to the human world to find a priest who would be willing to baptise him, but he is rejected because he is a 'monster' who cannot be saved.

The paper will examine the way in which Arnold's poems reflect the fears of the Victorian era as well as his own anxieties. This will be accomplished by comparing the two opposite worlds of the poems – the human world of everyday activities, rules, laws, and expectations; and the mermen's home, the mysterious, colourful, and peaceful world of sea-beasts. In addition, the paper will analyse the reversal of traditional gender roles and re-examine literary, cultural, and social stereotypes. The paper will also attempt to find a connection between the main topics of these poems and Arnold's life and career of a poet and literary critic.

Key words: male, female, Victorian, conflict, religion.

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1. Introduction: Symbolism of Merfolk

Mysterious and seductive, mermaids, sirens or sea-nymphs have found their way in many poems written by British and Irish authors. They appear in some of Shakespeare's plays such as *The Comedy of Errors*, *Henry VI* (Part 3) and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and in various poems such as Samuel Daniel's 'Ulysses and the Siren', Milton's 'Sabrina Fair' from his play *Comus: A Masque*, Keats's 'Lines on the Mermaid Tavern', Tennyson's 'The Mermaid', Arnold's 'The New Sirens', Yeats's 'The Mermaid' and 'A Drunken Man's Praise of Sobriety', Walter de la Mare's 'The Mermaids', 'Mermaid' and 'Sam', Robert Graves's 'Mermaid, Dragon, Fiend', and T. S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'.

What makes mermaids so captivating is their beauty, their divine-like powers, the duality of their nature as well as their watery home, the sea, which is also believed to be the place of human origin. According to Alexander (2012), the first recorded story involving a mermaid comes from Assyria, circa 1000 B.C.E. (p.15). In one version of the story, the goddess Atargatis fell in love with a human shepherd, and after giving birth to a human daughter, which severely shocked her, she threw herself into a lake but, being too beautiful to die, she was transformed into a mermaid and remained divine (Ibid). Although the mermaid can be benevolent and bring good luck, she is mostly perceived as malicious and dangerous. Dinnerstein (1976) defines her as 'treacherous, ... seductive and impenetrable representative of the dark and magic underwater world from which our life comes and in which we cannot live, [who] lures voyagers to their doom' (p.5).

On the one hand, the mermaid's power, according to Hayward (2018), comes from her phallic-shaped fishtail, which makes her a 'supercharged' femme fatale, seductress and villainess in regard to men (p.3). On the other hand, her seductiveness can be associated with her feminine qualities, such as her beautiful appearance and alluring song, which led many love-stricken sailors into their watery grave. The most famous example is that of Homer's Odysseus, who had to be tied to the ship's mast in order to be able to listen to the seductive Sirens' song without wanting to jump overboard. In addition, his sailors had to stuff their ears with wax for their own protection (Alexander, 2012:p.24). In addition, coming from the mystical and perilous but still enticing world of the sea, the mermaid can stand for 'a challenge or disruption to the existing order and to categorisation systems in the existing schema of religious and folk belief' (Campbell Galman, 2018:p.168). This is also true in terms of the mermaid's sex and gender, where she can be seen 'as an early symbol of hybridity, challenge and contradiction' (Ibid).

When it comes to the merman, the early Babylonians spoke of the man-fish god Ea (or Oannes), who, among other things, taught humankind agriculture and architecture; the Phoenicians honoured a half-fish, half-man god called Dragon, and ancient Greeks and Romans depicted similar creatures, the most famous of them being Triton, whose parents were gods Poseidon and Amphitrite, the sea rulers (Alexander, 2012:p.15–16). Most often he is depicted 'blowing a curly conch shell, ... and his music was said to control the seas' (Ibid, p.88). Furthermore, he has a triple pointed trident, which is considered a materialised symbol of patriarchal power and can both be used as a weapon and magic wand (Dundes & Dundes, 2000: p.124). Considering their looks and behaviour, Briggs (1977) states that mermen are wilder and uglier than mermaids, and generally not interested in mankind (p.290). They can also be bad husbands, even eat their own children if hungry, and they seem to personify the stormy sea (Ibid). On the other hand, according to Benwell and Waugh (1961) as cited in Briggs (1977), the Scandinavian Merman or *Havmand* is a handsome creature with a green or black beard, who lives on cliffs, shore hills, and in the sea, and is regarded as beneficent (Ibid).

Although the merman appeared quite early in human culture, Jilkén (2018) claims that he was not as impactful as his female counterpart (p.196). This marginalisation of the merman, according to Hayward (2017) as cited in Jilkén (2018), can be attributed to his anatomy – the lack of a visible penis on his fishtail makes him symbolically unmanly (p.196). Because of this marginalisation, mermen are present only in a handful of British poems, most famously in Tennyson's 'The Merman' and in Arnold's 'The Forsaken Merman' and 'The Neckan'. Still, the most prominent account involving these creatures can be found in a Danish ballad 'Agnes and the Merman' (*Agnete og havmanden*), which most probably served as a source for Arnold's poem 'The Forsaken Merman'.²

²The ballad tells of a young woman called Agnes who accepts the wedding proposal of a merman and follows him into the sea-world. After eight years of marriage and the birth of seven sons, Agnes hears the church bells ringing from above and demands to get back to the land. The merman allows her to go but imposes several conditions in an attempt to ensure her return. Still, Agnes breaks each of the conditions and decides never to return. The merman comes to the surface and begs Agnes to go with him, claiming that one of their children is sick and needs her. However, Agnes stays firm in her decision not to go back since she no longer cares for her children. The merman leaves, and shortly after Agnes is found lying dead on the beach (Kramer, 2016:p.15)

2. Matthew Arnold and His Age

Although most Victorian poets addressed the problems of their age, it can be said that Matthew Arnold was the one who actually suffered from the disease usually referred to as 'the modern malaise' or 'depression and *ennui*'. When he was a student at Oxford, he was overwhelmed by the waves of modern thought including 'eighteenth-century rationalism, German transcendentalism, the new geology, theories of evolution, religions of humanity, Benthamism, Newmanism, [and] Chartism', which left him 'in a darkness of confusion and perplexity, without compass or stars to steer by' (Houghton & Stange, 1968:p.404). This, together with the fact that he had a very serious, dedicated, hard-working, and deeply religious father,³ whom he both emulated and rejected, turned him into a divided man, a victim of a series of inner conflicts. On the one hand, 'he thought he *ought* to ... lead a life of intellectual analysis and criticism, of moral control and disciplined work, and of social and political achievement' (Ibid, p.405). On the other hand, he desired 'a life of sensuous and passionate experience, and of artistic contemplation' (Ibid). In addition, as he grew older and more mature, his sensitive spirit became troubled with a great number of things such as:

'the loss of traditional religious faith and its moral imperatives; the loss of Wordsworthian joy in man's unity with nature; the overwhelming growth of knowledge, technology, and industrialism, with the consequent harvest of enlightenment and skepticism, faith in 'progress' and fear of materialistic enslavement, rapid and bewildering change in outward and inward ways of life, the manifest gulf between wealth and privilege and poverty, misery, and social unrest, and, because of all these things, the immediate personal pressure of loneliness and uncertainty of direction.' (Bush, 1971:p.xiv)

The central fact of his experience was, according to Bush (1971), the loss of traditional Christian faith (p.xv).⁴ Unlike most of his contemporaries, he was aware of the fact that 'religion cannot remain dogmatically stationary in the face of a great

³His father was Thomas Arnold (1795–1842), headmaster of the famous Rugby School, Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, and one of the pioneers in the Broad Church movement (Bush, 1971:pp.1–2)

⁴Although Arnold became an agnostic, he still emphasised the significance of the Bible and the Anglican Church: 'The Bible, to Arnold, was a great work of literature like the *Odyssey*, and the Church of England was a great national institution like Parliament. Both Bible and church must be preserved not because historical Christianity was credible but because both, when properly understood, were agents of what he called "culture" – they contributed to making humanity more civilized.' (Abrams, 1993:p.1348)

revolution in scientific knowledge and that, in order to remain vital, sacred texts must be interpreted anew by each age' (Machann, 1998:p.102). In addition, he was attempting 'to rescue Christianity from anthropomorphism and other vulgar errors of popular theology' (Ibid, p.111). In his book *Literature and Dogma* (1873), he described religion as 'morality touched by emotion' and God as 'the enduring power ... which makes for righteousness' (as cited in Machann, 1998:p.112). He insisted on moral improvement based on one's consciousness. Unlike Hebraism, which focuses on righteousness, Christianity, with greater sweetness and reason, leads to right conduct, and the right conduct leads to joy (Ibid, p.112).

Besides, Arnold was also afraid that the blind pursuit of wealth of the middle-class as well as the frustrations of the working-class combined with their tendency to do what they please would dismantle the structure of society and eventually lead to anarchy and chaos. This concern is in the focus of his most famous work of social criticism, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), which divides British society into three classes: Barbarians (aristocracy), Philistines (middle class), and Populace (working class), each with its distinctive qualities. Barbarians possess only exterior culture, which presents itself through their dedication to 'looks, manners, accomplishments, [and] prowess' (Arnold, 2006:p.76). Philistines are industrious, disciplined, and completely uninterested in culture. They stubbornly resist sweetness and light⁵ and instead 'prefer ... that sort of machinery of business, chapels, [and] tea meetings' (Ibid, p.75). When it comes to Populace, the majority of them are still uneducated, poor, and dangerous:

'But that vast portion, lastly, of the working-class which, raw and half-developed, has long lain half-hidden amidst its poverty and squalor, and is now issuing from its hiding-place to assert an Englishman's heaven-born privilege of doing as he likes, and is beginning to perplex us by marching where it likes, meeting where it likes, bawling what it likes, breaking what it likes.' (Ibid, p.78).

However, these classes still have some things in common. First, there is an element of each of these classes in the other two (Ibid); second, members of each class find happiness in doing what they like (Ibid, p.80); and third, there are in each of these classes *aliens*, people like Arnold, who mainly led by 'a general *humane* spirit, by the love of human perfection' (Ibid, p.81), rise above the interest of their respective class and, in that way, can serve as a bridge between different classes.

⁵The phrase 'sweetness and light' is an adaptation of Jonathan Swift's metaphor of the bee from his *The Battle of Books*, 'making sweetness stand for beauty of character and light for intelligence, with the additional connotation of spiritual illumination' (Machann, 1998:p.81).

The object of Arnold's most severe criticism are Philistines, the people from the rising middle-class and, unfortunately, the future leaders of the world. He exposes their materialism, selfishness, and their lack of humanity and compassion for the poor, but he thoroughly despises their narrow-mindedness, ignorance, and deliberate rejection of culture, which, in his opinion, is the only solution for the problems of society. He defines culture as 'a study of perfection [which] moves by force, not merely or primarily of a scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good' (Ibid, p.34). He opposes culture to machinery or material wealth. For him machinery represents hatred and leads to confusion, whereas 'culture looks beyond machinery, ... hates hatred, [and] has but one great passion, the passion for sweetness and light, [and] one yet greater, the passion for making them prevail' (Ibid, p.52). He believes that culture is a great equaliser since it enables people to rise above individual and class interests. It is resistant to ideology because it 'does not try to teach down to the level of inferior classes; it does not try to win them for this or that sect of its own, with ready-made judgments and watchwords' (Ibid). Actually, it 'seeks to do away with classes; to make all live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light, and use ideas ... freely, – to be nourished and not bound by them' (Ibid).

3. Matthew Arnold and His Poetry

Arnold's fears, insecurities, and profound inner conflicts are abundantly reflected in his poems. First, even as a very young poet, he was aware of the limitations and weaknesses of his poetry. In one of the 1852 letters to his fellow poet Arthur Clough, he states that his own poems 'have weight ... but little or no charm' (Arnold, 1993:p.78), while in another letter from 1853 he wonders why Clough likes his poem 'The Gipsy Scholar':

'[W]hat does it *do* for you? Homer *animates* – Shakespeare *animates* – in its poor way I think Sohrab & Rostum *animates* – the Gipsy Scholar at best awakens a pleasing melancholy. But this is not what we want.' (Ibid, p.92)

On the other hand, in a letter to his mother, he is quite optimistic about the place his poetry will have in the future although he is aware of the fact that the two leading poets of his age, Tennyson and Browning, possess better poetic qualities:

'My poems represent, on the whole, the main movement of mind of the last quarter of a century, and thus they will probably have their day as people become conscious to themselves of what that movement of mind is, and interested in

the literary productions which reflect it. It might be fairly urged that I have less poetical sentiment than Tennyson and less intellectual vigour and abundance than Browning; yet because I have perhaps more of a fusion of the two than either of them, and have more regularly applied that fusion to the main line of modern development, I am likely enough to have my turn as they have had theirs.' (Ibid, p.217)

Second, in the search of his true poetic expression, he combined elements of various artistic periods and, according to Bush (1971), became 'a mixture of eighteenth century rationality, Romantic idealism, Victorian skepticism, and ... modern existentialism' (p.xv). His literary role models were classical writers, such as Homer, Aristotle, Sophocles, as well as some Romantic poets like Goethe and Wordsworth, although his attitude to Romanticism as a movement was rather ambivalent. When it comes to his own age, he did not perceive it as poetical, which can be seen from his 1849 letter to his fellow poet Arthur Hugh Clough, in which he asks him to reflect 'how deeply *unpoetical* the age and all one's surroundings are. Not unprofound, not ungrand, not unmoving: – but *unpoetical*' (Arnold, 1993:p.52).

Still, he believed that poetry would have a crucial role to play in the future. Since religion and philosophy, in his opinion, were steadily declining under the attack of new theories and beliefs, he thought that poetry would eventually have to replace them: 'The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay' (Arnold, 1970:p.299). In addition, poetry would be expected 'to interpret life for us, to console us, [and] to sustain us' (Ibid). It should also become 'a criticism of life' and provide an answer to the question 'how to live' (Ibid, p.330).

Finally, in terms of his tone and topics, Arnold is described as 'a user of elegiac notes' (Ristić, 1992:p.75), whereas his poetry is usually associated with the feelings of depression and *ennui* and perceived as:

'an experience of frustration, restlessness and futility; of deep fatigue in body and spirit; of isolation, cosmic and social, with an acute sense of loneliness; of the suffering and misery of existence...; and above all... of a poignant nostalgia for an earlier age of peace and faith and moral integrity... and for "his own early youth, and all its bounding rapture"' (Houghton & Stange, 1968:p.407)

Most of these emotions were already present in his first collection entitled *The Strayed Reveller, and Other Poems* (1849), which took everybody by surprise, even his sister, who did not expect such serious and melancholy topics from the

⁶Based on Arnold's behaviour at Oxford, it could be assumed that the title refers to him.

brother who in his Oxford days appeared as a carefree and witty dandy, more focused on fishing than studying. In this way, his first collection of poetry served as an introduction to the new Matthew, who turned out to be a profoundly divided man (Ibid, pp.404–405).

4. ‘The Forsaken Merman’ and ‘The Neckan’

One of the poems from Arnold’s first collection, a dramatic monologue titled ‘The Forsaken Merman’, instantly became a popular favourite. Most probably inspired by a Danish folk ballad titled ‘Agnes and the Merman’ (*Agnete og havmanden*),⁷ it tells a story of Margaret,⁸ a human woman, who, fearing that her soul will be damned because of her marriage to a merman, decides to abandon their sea home, desert her husband and children, and rejoin the human world on the most important Christian holiday, Easter. The poem focuses on her husband and children, who emerge from the sea and follow Margaret to land, hoping that they will manage to persuade her to change her mind. However, Margaret is firm in her decision to stay in the human world and save her soul, leaving the merman and their children to cope with her betrayal and abandonment.

The poem is rather complex and unusual, with ‘lyrical, dramatic and narrative elements’ (Ristić, 1992:p.85). It has often been placed among nineteenth-century ‘poems of the supernatural’ (Machann, 1998:p.21) and compared to Romantic narratives of Coleridge and Keats and to some of Tennyson’s poems, especially ‘The Mermaid’, ‘The Merman’, and ‘The Lady of Shalott’. Some of its main topics are the loss of a beloved person, loneliness, treachery, fear and insecurity, and the question Arnold poses to his readers, which, according to Grob (2002), presents ‘undoubtedly the most fundamentally urgent of Arnoldian problems’ is ‘how to know and live’ (p.55), or how to continue leaving after realising that your life has been fundamentally altered.

When it comes to ‘The Neckan’, this ballad was published in Arnold’s 1853 collection of poetry, and it is considered to be a companion-piece to ‘The Forsaken Merman’. According to Hyder (1980), *neckan* is a nonce word. He believes that it comes from the German word *Neck*, which can be connected with Old English *nicor*,

⁷ It is generally assumed that Arnold discovered this ballad in George Borrow’s 1825 review of J. M. Thiele’s collection *Danske Folkesagen* (Hyder, 1980:p. 7).

⁸ Some critics believe that Margaret was inspired by ‘Marguerite’, a girl Arnold fell in love with when he was in Switzerland, and whom he left in order to marry Frances Lucy Wightman. According to Bush (1971), Marguerite might be interpreted as a ‘symbol of Arnold’s youth and his capacity for being swept away by feeling’ (p.52).

used in *Beowulf* for 'water-monster' (p.12). Hyder thinks that Arnold wanted to use a word which would not be associated with that part of the body, so he created *neckan*. In addition, an instance of *necken* is present in a review of a collection of old Swedish ballads, where it means 'the Water-King', and *Necken* could be the German plural of *Neck* (Ibid, p.13). Speaking of the sources for this ballad, Hyder (1980) finds them in Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythology* (1835), Benjamin Thorpe's *Northern Mythology* (1851), as well as in Thomas Keightley's *Fairy Mythology* (1828) (pp.13–14).

Although shorter and simpler than 'The Forsaken Merman', 'The Neckan' has many similarities with its more famous companion. Both of these poems are about male sea creatures who have children with human women, and their main topic is the 'disparity of religious faith in the creatures of the sea and mortals of the earth, the former being humanised' (Ibid, p.13). The poem starts with the Neckan playing a plaintive song on his harp of gold on the headlands along the Baltic Sea. He is singing about his wife, their wedding, and their life under the sea, but through this song he also expresses his sorrow caused by the cruel treatment of human knights and a priest, who do not want to accept him in their world although the Neckan is willing, for his wife's sake, to become a Christian.

4.1. Two Worlds in Conflict

Still, both of these poems primarily speak about conflicts or tensions which are the result of two opposite worlds coming together through the relationships of their characters and thus creating confused categories and upset boundaries. These worlds are sea and land, but metaphorically they represent a series of contrasting concepts such as: paganism and Christianity, monsters and humans, nature and civilisation, freedom and restraint, the heart (love) and the head (reason), the old and the new, the mysterious and the familiar, the magical and the realistic, Romanticism and Victorianism and, ultimately for Arnold, two different lives, on the one hand 'a life of the imagination' (Machann, 1998:p.22), experienced through his role of a poet, professor of poetry and literary critic and, on the other, the life of 'adult duties and responsibilities' (Ibid) of a husband and father, school inspector and social critic.

The world of the sea is presented as more attractive and pleasing than the land. In 'The Forsaken Merman', the first sharp contrast, according to Fulweiler (1992), is the one 'between the merman's free and colourful water-world and Margaret's walled and achromatous village' (p.207). The sea-world is associated with 'a red gold throne' (Arnold, 1942: p.81), 'a ceiling of amber, / A pavement of pearl' (Ibid, p.

83), the 'glistening beaches' (Ibid), and 'banks of bright seaweed' (Ibid); whereas the symbols of land are 'the white-wall'd town, / And the little grey church' (Ibid, p.80). Another contrast that Fulweiler (1992) notices is between the endless, unrestrained sea and the stuffy, overcrowded, and bounded land (p.207). While 'the great winds' (Arnold, 1942:p.80), 'the salt tides' (Ibid), and 'the wild white [sea]horses' (Ibid) represent freedom, 'the narrow pav'd streets' (Ibid, p. 82) and 'the small leaded panes' (Ibid) of the church stand for imprisonment. The third contrast, according to Fulweiler (1992), exists between 'the peaceful tranquility of life in the sea... [and] the ceaseless activity of the land' (p.208). The merman's family lives quietly below the surface, in '[s]and-strewn caverns, cool and deep, / Where the winds are all asleep; / Where the spent lights quiver and gleam' (Arnold, 1942:p.81). On the other hand, Margaret's town is full of noises of people's mundane, almost mechanical, activities. There is 'a murmur of folk at their prayers' (Ibid, p.82); the streets are 'humming' (Ibid), the spinning wheel is 'whizzing' (Ibid), and Margaret is 'singing' (Ibid, p.83).

Similar contrasts appear in 'The Neckan', where the beauty of the Baltic Sea and its inhabitants is presented through colours – the Neckan's harp is made of gold, the waves are green, the sea is full of 'shells and roses pale' (Ibid, p.227), and the Neckan's eyes are 'cold blue' (Ibid, p.228). On the other hand, the land is mostly devoid of colour. Its symbols are rather plain – 'castle, field, ... town' (Ibid, p.227), the chapel, and the bridge. The only two colours are the white of a mule the priest rides and the grey of the twilight. In regard to the activities of these two worlds, the sea is represented by the plaintive music of the Neckan's harp, whereas the knights of the land draw swords and the ladies scream after they see the Neckan in their church.

4.2. Reversing Roles and Challenging Stereotypes

Arnold's dissatisfaction with Victorian society as well as his anxieties and insecurities are channeled in these poems through the reversal of traditional gender roles and re-examination of stereotypes and expectations. The first unusual and surprising detail can be discovered in the titles of both poems. Instead of mermaids, who have been inspiring poets for ages, here we find the male versions of these mysterious creatures. Furthermore, unlike mermaids, who have been traditionally presented as beautiful and mesmerising but manipulative and dangerous creatures, femme fatales, and temptresses, the mermen in Arnold's poems are a force of good, devoted fathers, loving husbands, and overall sensitive and gracious non-humans

who have been betrayed or hurt by humans. Because of this humanisation of 'monsters', the reader starts rooting for the creatures of the sea and their animal instincts instead of supporting humans and their religious and moral standards.

The final shift of the reader's sympathies comes with Arnold's resolution of the mermen's family dramas. Since the forsaken Merman stays with his beloved children in their watery home, stoically enduring the pain of separation,⁹ the reader naturally turns against Margaret who, for the sake of the salvation of her own soul, selfishly abandons her family. Similarly, the Neckan is left in tears after the priest refuses to baptise him, thus preventing his entrance into the human society. In this way, Arnold, a self-proclaimed 'alien' or an outcast from his own class, sides with other 'aliens', water-monsters, and exposes the prejudice of Victorians against all kinds of strangers by demonstrating that these 'creatures', although different and unknown, can still be kind and decent, and that there is no reason to fear them. At the same time, it can be said that Arnold 'monsterises' Margaret, thus turning something familiar and generally perceived as good into something cruel and heartless.

Another reversal of roles is connected with one of the most significant Victorian institutions – family. It is common knowledge that the middle-class Victorians created the image of a perfect family in which the wife was the feminine 'angel in the house', pure, chaste, moral, obedient, gentle, loving, and pious. Her domain was home, often referred to as 'the private sphere', and her main responsibility was taking care of the children. On the other hand, the 'masculine' middle-class husband would leave his home every day in order to enter 'the public sphere' of business and earn enough money to support his family and keep their reputation and social status. This practice was supported by the pseudo-scientific claims that women were less intelligent and more sensitive than men.

Naturally, sometimes these roles were not as clear-cut, and gender identities got mixed up. This was particularly the case with male poets, who, according to Morgan (2000), inhabited an ambiguous cultural space: 'as poets, they were expected to express deep feelings and explore private states of consciousness, yet this was identified in domestic ideology as the preserve of the feminine' (p.204). Morgan states that in 'The Forsaken Merman' Arnold uses the fairy-tale setting to question the Victorian doctrine of separate spheres. Here traditional gender roles are reversed since the mother is the one who 'ventures out into the social world while the father stays at home with the children' (p.205). For Morgan, with his

⁹ According to Grob's (2002) categorisation, the merman could be placed among 'the stoic wise man' (p.57), who does not despair after experiencing a severe life change, but learns to except it and continue living.

‘wounded but defiant masculinity’ (Ibid), the forsaken merman becomes ‘a figure for the male poet, ... bitterly nostalgic for a lost ideal harmony between man and woman, symbolised by the gap between the realms of land and sea (pp.205–206). Besides, the reversal of gender roles can be found in the decision made both by Margaret and the Neckan’s wife to marry non-humans, which results in their leaving their sphere, breaking some unwritten rules, and failing the expectations of their society. At the same time, the Neckan’s ‘masculinity’ seems to be diminished by his readiness to accept his wife’s religion in order to make her happy as well as by his plaintive song and teary eyes. In this way the Neckan can also be perceived as Arnold’s double or a sensitive, sympathetic, effeminate poet. Furthermore, as it has already been stated, as sea creatures with a fishtail and no discernible male genitalia, the Merman and the Neckan appear emasculated.

By reversing gender roles, Arnold once more goes against the prejudice of Victorian society regarding the type of behaviour typically expected of men and women. In this fashion he attempts to prove that people can be selfish or selfless regardless of their gender, and that expecting someone to behave in a certain way based just on their gender means denying them a chance to be their true selves or forcing them to pretend to be something else due to their fear of judgement. Moreover, although it seems that Arnold mainly favours the two mermen and their choices, it could be assumed that in this particular instance he sides with Margaret. Her decision to leave her ‘merhusband’ and re-enter the human world and Christian church might be perceived as her desire to achieve security, which is similar to Arnold’s resolution to leave ‘Marguerite’, his Swiss mistress, symbolic of the world of love, passion, and adventure (Romanticism), and return home and take the more conventional road of marrying a nice English girl and finding a steady, well-paid job of a school inspector (Victorianism).

4.3. A Religious Crisis

The reason why Margaret abandons her husband and children is the fear that she will end up in Hell because of her marriage to a godless sea creature. On the Easter morning she hears the church bell, which reminds her of Jesus’s resurrection and gives her hope that on this very day she can go back to the human world and be born again into Christian faith. She shares her fears with her husband: “I must go, for my kinsfolk pray / In the little grey church on the shore to-day. / ’Twill be Easter-time in the world – ah me! / And I lose my poor soul, Merman, here with thee” (Arnold, 1942:p.81). Her husband kindly suggests that she should go back,

pray, and return to him: 'Go up, dear heart, through the waves; / Say the prayer, and come back to the kind sea-caves' (Ibid). She smiles, goes up, and never returns. The following day her husband takes their children and rises from the sea in order to look for her. They reach the little grey church on the windy hill, climb on the graves and stones, look through the small leaded panes, and see her sitting by a pillar and praying. They try to call her but she does not respond '[f]or her eyes were seal'd to the holy book' (Ibid, p.82).

In the following stanza Margaret is seen sitting at her wheel in the humming town and singing her heart out. For a while she seems content and happy with her decision to sacrifice her love for the sake of salvation, but then, like Tennyson's Lady of Shalott upon seeing sir Lancelot, she drops her shuttle and steals to the window. She looks at the sand and the sea, remembers her little daughter, and starts crying – the act which 'humanises' her because it shows her struggling between two positive concepts: the love of her family opposed to the love of God and the need for stability and salvation:

'And her eyes are set in a stare;
And anon there breaks a sigh,
And anon there drops a tear,
From a sorrow-clouded eye,
And a heart sorrow-laden,
A long, long sigh,
For the cold strange eyes of a little Mermaid,
And the gleam of her golden hair.' (p.82)

The poem finishes with the Merman taking the children back to their sea home and imagining his alienated wife starting from her slumber and listening to the winds howl and the waves roar.

The question remains whether Margaret's sacrifice has served its intended purpose. According to Armstrong (1993), '[t]he church is the only authoritative moral imperative in the poem, but it disrupts all other relationships' (p.202). By choosing the land over the sea, Margaret has 'chosen not fulfilment but abstract moral authority, not arousal but amnesia' (Ibid). What she has failed to obtain is the real acceptance back into the human world. When she marries the Merman, she is excluded from her community but this does not change when she leaves him:

'The estranged person can neither return to the community which has been left nor *back* to the same position of estrangement in the sea. For both "places", and the people in them, have been materially altered. The moral imperative is

no longer clear. Margaret's estrangement effects a multiple alienation, of herself and of those around her. That is why both merman and human "mermaid" are "Forsaken" in the double meaning of having been deserted and having given up something.' (Ibid)

Other critics also believe that Margaret's return is useless. Whereas Harrison (2009) proclaims her religious beliefs misguided (p.82), Fulweiler (1992) argues that for her 'Easter is not a symbolic resurrection from death to life; it is, as she implies to the merman, only a legal observance to save herself' (p.210). Hence this most joyous Christian holiday symbolises her ironic failure to accept real life: 'She is reborn, not into life, but into spiritual death' (Ibid). Moreover, Fulweiler concludes that:

'[T]hrough exquisite irony Arnold shows that her choice of conventional morality and her timorous rejection of the depths of being cause her to commit the most shocking immorality, the Judas sin – treachery.' (Ibid)

In addition, analysing the Danish ballad on which Arnold's poem is most likely based, Kramer (2016) claims that Agnes's attempt to return to the human world and 'put back into place, [and] reassert the divisions' (p.27) between conflicting worlds,¹⁰ can be interpreted as her third and final transgression, the first one being her marrying a monster and the second giving birth to their 'monstrous offspring..., a product of an unholy union' (Ibid). Since the boundaries between the two worlds, according to Kramer, are figuratively upset and transgressed by Agnes's transgressions, the ultimate 'penalty is death, and Agnes, depending on the variant, is either found dead on the beach or half-buried in the sand by the seashore' (Ibid). On the other hand, in Arnold's poem the penalty consists of Margaret's permanent separation from her family and the state of never-ending unhappiness and dissatisfaction.

A different religious problem is presented in 'The Neckan' although the cause of it is the same – a Christian woman marries a water king and thus brings into contact their two opposite worlds. When on his wedding day the Neckan reveals in the chapel that he is not a knight but a creature from the sea waves, the humans become scared of him: 'The knights drew sword, the ladies scream'd, / The surplic'd priest stood dumb' (Arnold, 1942:p.227). Because of such reaction, the Neckan flees the chapel and takes his bride below the surface of the sea. However, his wife

¹⁰ According to Derrida (1995) as cited by Kramer (2016), it is not possible to separate the pagan from the Christian because these worlds are incorporated one into another, and the sharp distinctions and boundaries between them no longer exist. For him, 'Christianity is not the destruction or annihilation of the demonic and the orgiastic mystery, but instead its sublimation, its maintenance of the demonic, but by secreting it and hiding it away' (p. 28).

cannot accept the fact that her husband is a stranger, and she seems to regret her decision to marry him: “False Neckan shares my bed,” she weeps; / “No Christian mate have I.” (Ibid, p.228). Feeling guilty because he took her away from her home and human society, the Neckan rises to earth, seeking a priest who will baptise him and thus give him a chance to gain Heaven. However, the priest refuses to receive him into the Christian fold because he does not believe the Neckan can be saved: ‘Sooner shall this my staff bear leaves, / Than thou shalt Heaven behold’ (Ibid). The priest then rides off on his mule, leaving the Neckan in tears, still singing his plaintive song because of ‘the unkindness of Christian souls, who, better than those outside the Christian pale, should know the value of what in his noble praise of the virtue St. Paul calls “charity”’ (Hyder, 1980:p.17). Christians seem to have forgotten their Christian duty – to be merciful and accepting of others. Instead, they show their prejudice against sea ‘monsters’, who metaphorically present people who are discriminated because of their different religious beliefs even if these creatures are ready to accept Christian faith. This only proves that Victorian society disliked outsiders and foreigners of all kinds.

The ambiguous message of the poem is actually connected with Arnold’s equally ambiguous attitude towards church and religion. First, he disliked the religious practices of Puritans and their stern discipline and fake morality, which he referred to as Hebraism. Second, as can be seen from his works of religious criticism as well as from his famous poem ‘Dover Beach’, he was painfully aware that ‘[t]he sea of faith / ... [was] Retreating to the breath / Of the night-wind down the vast edges drear / And naked shingles of the world’ (Arnold, 1942:p.402). Because of this, many critics interpret Margaret’s desire to save her soul and return to religion as man’s inherent need for a firm belief system which will give his existence a purpose and help him overcome the curse and pain of loneliness (Šerbedžija, 1991:p.70). In addition, the poem testifies to the doubts and deep concern of Arnold and the whole generation of intellectuals and agnostics, who felt anxious and insecure because they lost their spiritual foundation by rejecting religion and who still failed to find the desired safety in the scientific view of life (Ibid). Whereas ‘Dover Beach’ suggests romantic love as a compensation for the loss of faith, ‘The Forsaken Merman’ does not offer such solution since Margaret trades marital and filial love for the salvation of her soul. Besides, faith saves neither the Neckan nor his family from Hell because as a representative of all strange creatures, he is considered unworthy of being received into the church. To conclude, Arnold’s depiction of Victorian society in these poems is rather gloomy and pessimistic since it appears that comfort can be found neither in marital love nor in institutionalised religion.

5. Conclusion: Lessons for the Modern Age

As one of the most intellectual people of his age, Matthew Arnold was painfully aware of all the fears that tormented his fellow Victorians as a result of new scientific and philosophical theories, new religious beliefs, and new ways of living and working. He was a conflicted man, caught between a series of opposite and contrasting ideas. As a student at Oxford, he was living the life of a carefree dandy, after which he published a collection of very serious and dismal poems. His father was a religious leader and a paragon of morality and Arnold lost his faith and became an agnostic. As a young man Arnold fell in love with a girl in Switzerland, whom he abandoned in order to marry a daughter of an English judge. His first love was poetry but he soon replaced it with the job of a school inspector. His favourite poets were Romantics such as Wordsworth and Goethe although he was well aware of the weaknesses of that artistic era. He was born into a middle-class family but was highly critical of middle-class values, especially of their greed, ambition, self-centeredness, narrow-mindedness, as well as their complete disregard of culture. Besides, he was supportive of the improvement of the working class but also afraid of their pent-up anger and their destructive anarchic power.

His unresolved internal conflicts and his inability to 'pick a side' are reflected in most of his poetry, especially in his 'mermen' poems since they bring into contact two different worlds. The problems that arise with this joining of the worlds are never resolved, and the characters usually remain unsatisfied and disappointed. The merman is forsaken, forced to live without his wife's love in his underwater cave. Margaret is miserable without her husband and children, and the only thing that keeps her alive is the hope that by returning to God and humans, she will gain a place in heaven. The Neckan is left in tears because he is not welcomed into the human world and Christian religion. His wife continues living in their underwater home but regrets the fact that she has married a stranger.

On the surface, it often appears that Arnold takes the side of the mermen because their world is more aesthetically pleasing and represents positive values such as freedom, love, passion and selflessness, whereas the world of people is depicted as white and grey, and it mainly represents middle-class values such as ceaseless, almost mechanical activity, from everyday jobs to regular prayers at church. Still, he occasionally sympathises with the two wives, especially Margaret, because as an agnostic and outcast from his own class and church, he understands her need to have something firm to believe in as well as her desire to belong somewhere in the times of turbulence, change, and doubt. In addition, the path that Arnold chose for himself proves that he also yearned for stability and security.

However, the most significant thing in regard to these poems is Arnold's decision to use mermaids, water beasts, or monsters as his main characters. In this way he symbolically presents the world of 'others', who are quite often perceived as scary, threatening, inferior, and uncivilised by the majority groups unwilling to understand and accept them. Thus these poems can be associated with our modern world and the prejudice and fear that the majority of people still have in relation to migrants, who usually have a different skin colour and come from different religious background, or to people of a different sexual orientation, predominantly members of the LGBTQIA community. Moreover, Arnold's poems seem quite modern because he was suffering from 'the disease of the most modern society' (Houghton & Stange, 1968:p. 404) – depression or anxiety – which is generally a consequence of either personal insecurities and doubts caused by the lack of a firm identity and belief system, or of global problems such as wars, epidemics, overcrowding, and pollution. What Arnold was trying to accomplish is to teach people that different worlds often collide and intertwine and, since there is no turning back after this happens, people have to learn how to be more tolerant and welcoming. Finally, another message that Arnold was channeling through his poems is that anxiety, tensions, and conflicts are inevitable in the modern world, so people need to practice how to live with them or in spite of them, and to feel comfortable in insecurities or in the presence of the unknown or the other.

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‘НАПУШТЕНИ ВИЛЕЊАК’ И ‘ВОДЕНИ КРАЉ’ МЕТЈУА АРНОЛДА КАО ОДРАЗИ ВИКТОРИЈАНСКИХ СТРАХОВА

Резиме

Инспирисане причама народа Сјеверне Европе, Арнолдове пјесме ‘Напуштени вилењак’ (1849) и ‘Водени краљ’ (1853) доносе причу о женама које се удају за морска створења, вилењаке, и мијењају свој дом на копну подводним свијетом вилењака. Преласком граница између њихових супротстављених свијетова, оне стварају низ проблема, од којих је најзначајнији тензија изазвана њиховим различитим религијским увјерењима. У ‘Напуштеном вилењаку’ Маргарета, вилењакова супруга, страхујући да ће бити проклета због свог брака са паганином, одлучи да се поново врати у људски свијет на најважнији хришћански празник, Ускрс. С друге стране, како би усређио своју супругу, водени краљ из истоимене пјесме одлази у људски свијет у нади да ће пронаћи свештеника који би био вољан да га крсти, али на крају је ипак одбачен због тога што је ‘чудовиште’ које не може да се спаси.

Рад истражује начин на који Арнолдове пјесме одражавају страхове викторијанске епохе, као и Арнолдову властиту анксиозност. Ово ће се постићи поређењем два супротстављена свијета – људског свијета свакодневних активности, правила, закона и очекивања; и дома вилењака, тајанственог, разнобојног и мирног свијета морских звијери. Поред тога, рад ће анализирати обрнуте родне улоге и преиспитати књижевне, културне и друштвене стереотипе. Рад ће такође покушати да пронађе везу између главних тема ових пјесама и Арнолдовога живота те његове каријере пјесника и књижевног критичара.

► *Кључне ријечи:* мушко, женско, викторијанско, конфликт, религија.

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