

The Case of the Cross-Media Mermaid: From Drag Performances to Bath Toys

In reference to the queer readings of fairy tale texts, Pauline Greenhill observes that “[d]espite their heteronormative reputation, fairy tales’ traditional, literary, and mediated adapted forms resist attempts to constrain them within prescribed limits” (Greenhill forthcoming 2018). Digital cultures and mobile technologies have increasingly become key modes for engagement with and extension of fairy tale narratives for young audiences, and “transmedia storytelling” provides the potential to negotiate and subvert the central discourses of fairy tale texts across old and new media forms (Jenkins 2006). Henry Jenkins (2006) argues that the practices of contemporary fandom has strong linkages to pre-industrial folk cultures, and thus, the proliferation of cross-media interconnected adaptations of fairy tales are part of this older model of participatory and dynamic storytelling. Cristina Bachillega defines this phenomenon as “the fairy tale web” (2013, 1-30).

The image of the mermaid presents a cross-media case study of how fairy tale web in the context of transmedia storytelling may offer opportunities for disruptive play and the potential for reimagining queer identities. Nat Hurley (2014), for example, has usefully mapped the relationship between transgender young people and the image of the mermaid across medical and advocacy discourse produced by and about young people. Nevertheless, the ubiquity of Disney’s animated adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid* across tie-in picture books, affiliated products, apps and digital fandom often results in the privileging of heteronormative paradigms and dominant discourses of gender, race, and sexuality in cross-media narratives related to the figure of the mermaid. This paper will move beyond direct engagement with the Disney film to address interconnections between cross-media toys and texts that offer engagement with the image of the mermaid including: baby board books and bath toys with tactile and participatory implications of water play; mermaid games on mobile apps, and the youtube make-up tutorials of drag performers. Building on Bachillega, Greenhill, and Hurley, this paper explores how the affordances of cross-media texts invite participatory play and performance and the potential for queer readings and engagement. Taking into consideration that the majority of fan fiction and videos that work to subvert fairy tale narratives are produced by adults and adolescents, this paper will focus on the public and private sites of play across media for the youngest readers/users of these texts (from infants to tweens).

Works Cited

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