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That Hateful Tail: The *Sirena* as Figure for Disability in Italian Literature and Beyond

Kate Noson

I feel like a mermaid—a little bit Miss World and a little bit monstrous. The mermaid sings and bewitches, but she can be destructive for those who let themselves be seduced. And I, at times, have had destructive impulses towards men: I liked seeing them at my feet and tormenting them. But now I've changed—I've become good. I beg any Ulysses who may be listening [...] don't be afraid! I'm sorry I caused you to suffer!

Antonietta Laterza¹

La sirena censurata

The first time I visited Antonietta Laterza in her home in Bologna, she was working on a piece for an exhibition entitled “The Wall of Dolls,” to take place during Men’s Fashion Week in Milan, an installation meant to raise awareness about violence towards women. Laterza’s contribution was a Barbie doll that had been fitted with a mermaid tail made out of tinfoil and a wheelchair with wheels constructed out of two compact discs (fig. 1). Later she wrote this statement about the piece:

La bambola che propongo all’installazione di Jo Squillo Wall of Dolls, è l’immagine di una Barbie-sirenetta rivisitata in chiave postmoderna sulla carrozzina, dove mi rappresento in modo autoironico con cenni autobiografici. Il cerchio è la sintesi iconografica tra ruota come movimento e libertà, [e] il disco come cd sonoro impresso dalla voce delle donne-sirene contemporanee, simbolo di energia infinita e di femminilità.

[The doll that I propose for the installation, Jo Squillo’s Wall of Dolls, is the image of a Barbie-mermaid refashioned in postmodern style in a wheelchair. Here, I am representing myself using autobiographical allusions. The circle is the iconographic synthesis of the wheel—as movement and freedom—and the disc, as musical CD imprinted with the voice of contemporary women-mermaids—a symbol of infinite energy and femininity.]²

¹ Antonietta Laterza, interview by Giuseppe Gazzola, “Antonietta Laterza: io, una sirena con tanta voglia di vivere,” *SM Italia* 5 (2008): 17. “Io mi sento sirena, un po’ Miss Mondo e un po’ mostruosa. La sirena canta e ammalia, ma può essere distruttiva per chi se ne lascia incantare. E io a volte ho avuto atteggiamenti distruttivi verso gli uomini: mi piaceva vederli ai miei piedi e fargliene di tutti i colori. Ma ora sono cambiata, sono diventata buona. Mi raccomando, Ulisse eventualmente all’ascolto [...] non temete, mi spiace avervi fatto soffrire!” All translations from Italian are my own, except where otherwise noted.

² Antonietta Laterza’s Facebook page, <http://www.facebook.com/antoniettalaterza>, accessed June 20, 2014 (used with permission).

Laterza uses the image of the *sirena* as a way to represent her own body as both disabled and female—unable to walk on land, the modern mermaid instead uses a wheelchair for transport. For Laterza, the mermaid, with its hybrid form, signifies corporeal difference (the fish tail) as well as physical beauty and allure (the naked, female torso), challenging stereotypes of disabled women as being asexual, an ableist assumption that has been the subject of much critique within disability studies.³ At the same time, the archetype of the *sirena* (as siren) foregrounds the importance of voice, and therefore of symbolic exchange, as I will discuss at length. In the above quotation, the wheelchair (as compact disc) is represented as being synonymous with voice, which for Laterza, as a well-known singer and songwriter in Bologna, is central to her personal and public identity. At the same time, both voice and wheelchair signify *movimento e libertà* (movement and freedom), and thus Laterza suggests that the capacity to speak out and the ability to move independently are both necessary in the construction of a strong feminine identity. The use of the *sirena*/wheelchair to represent this double sense of movement and self-representation implies that, for Laterza, disability does not impede the realization of her identity. To the contrary, her wheelchair both informs her identity and allows her access to it, implying a form of identity that is itself not static, but dynamic and flexible.



Fig. 1. *Barbie in carrozzina* (Barbie in a Wheelchair), photograph by Antonietta Laterza.

³ See Abby Wilkerson, “Disability, Sex Radicalism, and Political Agency,” in *Feminist Disability Studies*, ed. Kim Q. Hall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 193-217; Eunjung Kim, “Asexuality in Disability Narratives,” *Sexualities* 14, no. 4 (2011): 479-93. On women and disability, see Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Feminist Disability Studies,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 2 (2005); Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” *NWSA Journal* 14, no. 3 (2002): 13-47; Ellen Samuels, “Critical Divides: Judith Butler’s Body Theory and the Question of Disability,” *Feminist Formations* 14, no. 3 (2002): 58-76; Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Kim Q. Hall, “Reimagining Disability and Gender through Feminist Disability Studies: An Introduction,” in *Feminist Disability Studies*, ed. Kim Q. Hall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 1-10; Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1996).



Fig. 2. *Antonietta Laterza cantautrice: una sirena in carrozzina* (Singer-songwriter Antonietta Laterza: a mermaid in a wheelchair), photograph by Studio Pulga e Pedrini. Courtesy of Antonietta Laterza.

Laterza has been using the symbol of the *sirena* to represent herself in her art, music, and performance for decades (fig. 2). A musician and multi-media artist who calls herself a “sirena postmoderna” or “sirena cyborg” (fig. 3), she chronicles her experiences with sexuality, prostitution, and disability in her 1989 musical, *Pelle di Sirena*, later adapted for film. In 2005, she released a full-length album, entitled *Sirene*, which takes its inspiration in part from the censorship of her disability that Laterza experienced from within the music industry in the 1980s: “Antonietta Laterza è solo una sirena, che avrebbe voluto apparire sulla foto del suo cd con la sua «coda», ossia con la sua sedia a rotelle, sulla—e con la—quale vive fin da bambina. Ma quella foto di lei sirena venne tagliata per non far notare quella sedia e qualche giorno prima dell’uscita del disco fu anche costretta ad apparire nelle foto di lancio seduta su una sedia comune” [“Antonietta Laterza is just a mermaid who would have liked to appear on the cover of her CD with her ‘tail,’ with her wheelchair that is, in which—and with which—she has lived since she was a girl. But that photo of her as a mermaid was cut so that people wouldn’t notice that chair and a few days before the release of her CD she was made to appear in the photos for the launch seated on a regular chair”].⁴ Figuring her wheelchair as her “coda” [tail]—rather than, for example, her legs—concretizes the mermaid image, creating a kind of prosthetic relationship between the mermaid and her “tail.” The wheelchair, as a visible marker of disability, was censored by the record label, depriving Laterza of her mode of transportation, her source of *movimento e libertà*, and thus, ironically, divorcing her from what, for her, is symbolic of her capacity for vocal expression, prompting her to take on a new persona, the “sirena censurata”—the censored siren-mermaid (fig. 4).



Fig. 3. *Sirena nera cyborg* (Black Siren Cyborg), by Alfonso Maffini.

⁴ Marina Grasso, “Antonietta Laterza canta in un nuovo cd il mondo delle sirene,” *Il mattino di Padova*, March 4, 2005, http://ricerca.gelocal.it/mattinopadova/archivio/mattinodipadova/2005/03/04/VT2MC_VT202.html, accessed June 16, 2014.



Fig. 4. *Sirena censurata* (Censored Siren), photograph by Nicola Casamassima. Courtesy of Antonietta Laterza.

For Laterza, the mermaid figure brings together the two categories with which she most identifies and to which she has dedicated her life as an activist and artist. As both female and disabled, Laterza is well aware of the problems associated with what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has called “the cultural intertwining of femininity and disability,” though she repeatedly signals both as a source of strength and pride, and has played with this interconnection by exhibiting her sexual nature in order to challenge cultural taboos around sexuality and disability.⁵ Laterza’s latest project involves a series of public performances in which she dresses in a mermaid tail and navigates her wheelchair through populated areas of Italian towns, speaking into a megaphone about the barriers to access faced by disabled people. Dressing provocatively, Laterza uses the metaphor of the *sirena* in order to capture the attention of her listeners, causing them to rethink pervasive stereotypes regarding disabled women while also raising awareness about architectural and societal barriers.

Laterza is not the only person to use the mermaid as a symbol for disabled female difference. In fact, over the last three decades a striking number of disabled women writers, artists, musicians, and others have made use of the *sirena* metaphor. In the Italian context, recent texts include Mirella Santamato’s 1995 *Io, sirena fuor d’acqua*, which will be discussed at length below; Barbara Garlaschelli’s *Sirena: Mezzo pesante in movimento* (2001); and the semi-autobiographical *Sirena senza coda*, co-written by Cristina Tonelli and Giancarlo Trapanese in 2009.⁶ Fictional texts include Dacia Maraini’s *Donna in guerra* (1975) and *La lunga vita di*

⁵ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 16.

⁶ The connection between disabled women and the mermaid figure is not unique to the Italian context. See, for example, the American television special, “Tell Them I’m a Mermaid” (1983); disabled artist Joy Corcoran’s

Marianna Ucrìa (1990), and the list goes on. While this phenomenon is not limited to the Italian context, because the Italian literary tradition has such a strong connection to the image of the siren-mermaid, as the following will make clear, the *sirena*'s recent appearance in the context of this group of disabled Italian women is particularly cohesive and well articulated. And while perhaps the explicit link between the *sirena* and disability is only a recent development, the connection is one that in fact extends back to its first representations in Italian literature, beginning with Dante's *Commedia*.

Sirens and Mermaids from Homer to Cavarero

Sirens and mermaids appear throughout the history of Italian literature and philosophy but are rarely noticed, a presence that lurks just below the surface of consciousness.⁷ From its classical roots in Homer and Ovid to early mentions in Dante's *Purgatorio* and Boccaccio's *Genealogie deorum gentilium libri*; from the *fiabe* of Capuana, Calvino, and Gianni Rodari to the poetry of Ungaretti and Pascoli; from narratives by Marinetti and Tomasi di Lampedusa to, most recently, Stefano Benni and Laura Pugno, this mythical beast appears in every historical moment and genre of Italian literature. What is more, the *sirena*'s body subtends the very soil of the Italian peninsula: tradition holds that Odysseus sighted his sirens off the coast of Sorrento, and Naples was allegedly built upon the dead body of the siren Parthenope. The *sirena* thus has a special claim to Italian soil, as well as a particularly rich history within Italian literature and philosophy, a fact that suggests that the *sirena* figure be understood not only as a disabled female subject, but as a particularly Italian subject as well. The recent narratives that use the *sirena* explicitly as a figure for disability thus belong to a much larger literary arc, one that reveals shifting narrative norms alongside changing political and ideological landscapes, all of which are reflected in the image of the siren-mermaid, from Homer and Dante to Maraini, and, most recently, disabled authors and artists such as Laterza. For reasons of space, this history will not be fully developed here, but will instead be limited to a few salient examples before turning to just one text of particular interest, Mirella Santamato's *Io, sirena fuor d'acqua*. First, however, it is important to note some of the various symbolic meanings the siren-mermaid figure has accrued, the resonances of which are heard and felt in recent disability narratives.

Contrary to popular opinion regarding the latter-day fish-tailed mermaids, Homer's Sirens were able to seduce hapless sailors, not with physical beauty, but with the promise of knowledge:

Come this way, honored Odysseus, great glory of the Achaians,
and stay your ship, so that you can listen here to our singing;
for no one else has ever sailed past this place in his black ship
until he has listened to the honey-sweet voice that issues

"Wheelchair Mermaids," a series of fabric dolls inspired by the TV special; Bette Midler's "Dolores DeLago" persona, dating back to her 1978 tour, and Lady Gaga's more recent mermaid persona, "Yuyi"; the play, *The Average-Sized Mermaid* (2008), by Jessica Fleitman; as well as, most recently, Eileen Cronin's *Mermaid: A Memoir of Resilience* (2014).

⁷ There are numerous full-length studies on the *sirena* in the Italian context, including: Maurizio Bettini and Luigi Spina, *Il mito delle Sirene. Immagini e racconti dalla Grecia ad oggi* (Torino: Einaudi, 2007); Meri Lao, *Le sirene: da Omero ai pompieri* (Rome: A. Rotundo Editore, 1985) and Lao, *Il libro delle sirene* (Rome: Di Renzo Editore, 2000); Loredana Mancini, *Il rovinoso incanto: Storie di Sirene antiche* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005); Elisabetta Moro, *La santa e la sirena: Sul mito di fondazione di Napoli* (Ischia: Imagaenaria, 2005) and Moro, *L'enigma delle sirene: due corpi, un nome* (Napoli: L'Ancora, 2008).

from our lips; then goes on, well pleased, knowing more than ever
he did; for we know everything that the Argives and Trojans
did and suffered in wide Troy through the gods' despite.
Over all the generous earth we know everything that happens.⁸

What the Sirens promise to Odysseus is knowledge—not the pleasures of the flesh—and specifically knowledge of Odysseus's own past. As Pietro Pucci has argued, the syntax used in the Sirens' song echoes the poetic style of the *Iliad*, not the rest of the *Odyssey*, suggesting an alignment between the seduction of knowledge and that of narrative.⁹ In this sense, the Sirens are aligned with the poet or narrator, and their allure with narrative itself, though as we well know, they do not deliver on their promise, marking them instead as figures of deception and serving as a warning of the perils of fixating on one's past triumphs, as well as perhaps the deceptive quality of narrative. As the story goes, over time and across literary traditions, the *sirena* transformed from the winged hybrids of antiquity, who promised knowledge and poetic fame, to the beautiful fish-maidens of the sea, a metamorphosis that is as mysterious as it is overdetermined. This connection is less known in the Anglo context where the fish-woman has taken on the name "mermaid," marking a clear separation from her Siren antecedents. In Italian and other romance languages, however, the connection remains strong and is much theorized.¹⁰

The very name "sirena" has gone through as much analysis and transformation as the bodily image it invokes. Maurizio Bettini and Luigi Spina trace the various etymological possibilities from *seirào*, Greek for "to bind," to *seirén*, meaning either a type of bee or a type of bird, to *Séirios*, the Dog Star.¹¹ Anthropologist Elisabetta Moro's research also draws a link to the Syrian goddess ("la dea Siria"), to which Syria—as both mythical place and modern nation—owes its name, a connection, she notes, that was already drawn by Giambattista Vico in the *Scienza Nuova*. He writes of Parthenope, the Siren who gave her name to Naples: "[L]a Fondatrice fu detta Sirena; che deve la sua origine senza contrasto alla voce 'sir,' che vuol dire, o 'cantico' ovvero canzone; la quale istessa voce 'sir' diede il nome a essa Siria; e poi da' Greci fu detta Partenope" ["The founding goddess of Naples was Sirena, who was unarguably named from the word *sir*, meaning 'lyric' or 'song,' from which Syria was also named. Only later did the Greeks call her 'Parthenope'"].¹² In contrast to the classical Homeric Sirens who were first envisaged as bird-women only to later transform into fish-women, Moro explains that the goddess Syria was understood from the beginning as a woman with a fish tail. Scholars trace the *sirena*'s morphological transformation to the medieval period, attributing the influence of the Catholic church and its domestication of pagan figures.¹³ Wilfred P. Mustard cites the hypothesis that the

⁸ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 190.

⁹ See Pietro Pucci, "The Song of the Sirens," in *Reading the Odyssey: Selected Interpretive Essays*, ed. Seth Schein (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 191–99, as well as Pucci, *The Song of the Sirens: Essays on Homer* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).

¹⁰ See, especially, Moro, *L'enigma delle sirene*; Lao, *Le sirene*; and Lao, *Il libro delle sirene*.

¹¹ Bettini and Spina, *Il mito delle Sirene*, 95–96.

¹² Giambattista Vico, "Principi di una Scienza Nuova intorno alla Natura delle Nazioni," in *Opere*, vol. 2 (Milan: Mondadori, 1990 [*Scienza Nuova* (1725), 239]), 1095; Vico, *The First New Science*, trans. Leon Pompa (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 140. See Moro, *L'enigma delle sirene*, 119 n. 4, for a lengthy discussion of the term's etymology.

¹³ For an excellent and thorough discussion of the many permutations of the bird and fish morphology of the *sirena* from the classical through the medieval periods, see Leofranc Holford-Strevens, "Sirens in Antiquity and the Middle Ages," in *Music of the Sirens*, ed. Linda Phyllis Austern and Inna Naroditskaya (Bloomington: Indiana University

shift occurred “due to uniting the classical myth of the Sirens with the Teutonic and Northern superstition of the mermaid.”¹⁴ Sirenologist Meri Lao raises the somewhat dubious possibility that the transition occurred by way of a copyist’s error, transmuting *penne* (feathers) to *pinne* (fins), the image thus being irrevocably altered. In the *Genealogie*, Boccaccio, like many others in the medieval period, acknowledged the existence of both forms: “in marina monstra fuisse conversas, ora virginum habentia, et corpus ad umbilicum usque femineum, abinde infra pisces existentia, quos elatos Albericus dicit, et eis gallinacios pedes addit” [“they were changed into sea monsters with the face of a maiden and the body down to the navel of a woman, and from there down they were fish—with wings according to Alberic and the feet of a hen”].¹⁵

Even as early as the Anglo-Saxon work of an unknown author, *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus*—which was composed in the eighth century and counts Pliny, Virgil, Augustine, and Isidore of Seville among its sources—the siren appears as a fish-formed girl.¹⁶ Though, as Andy Orchard has argued, rather than—or in addition to—a description of a physical monstrosity, the siren/sea-girl is evoked in this work as a figure for the descriptions themselves—as a metaliterary form that implies a correlation between the siren’s hybrid form and the duplicity inherent in language itself: “And first I will discuss those things which are in some part to be trusted, and then let each judge for himself the following material, because throughout these monster-filled caverns I shall paint a little picture of a sea-girl or siren, which if it has a head of reason is followed by all kinds of shaggy and scaly tales.”¹⁷ So while the siren is here clearly understood as a fish-girl, her invocation serves to comment upon the author’s own composition, rather than a subject to be treated within it. As Orchard notes, the figure as described by the author of the *Liber* applies to the entirety of the work: “This model of the siren applies not simply to Book I, of course, but to the whole work, which commences by discussing monsters who share human shape and reason (Book I), and finishes by considering in turn tales (and tails!) both shaggy (Book II) and scaly (Book III).”¹⁸ So thus not only is the sea-girl here a metaliterary figure for a certain kind of narrative, she is also the figure for metaliterarity itself, or as Barbara Spackman has put it in a different context, a “figure for figuration itself.”¹⁹

However, the notion of a seductive woman with the tail of a fish as a discursive figure was not unknown to the classical period either. In the *Ars Poetica*, Horace invokes the figure in his critique of certain inferior poetic styles, by way of an analogy to painting:

Press, 2006), 16–51. See, also, Siegfried de Rachewiltz, *De Sirenibus: An Inquiry into Sirens from Homer to Shakespeare* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987).

¹⁴ Wilfred P. Mustard, “Siren-Mermaid,” *Modern Language Notes* 23, no. 1 (1908): 22. Mustard’s exploration contains a wide range of examples, from Shakespeare to Brunetto Latini, Boiardo, Guido delle Colonne, and many others.

¹⁵ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogie deorum gentilium*, in *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, ed. Vittorio Zaccaria, vol. 7–8 (Milan: Mondadori, 1998), 7:20.1.

¹⁶ See Bettini and Spina, *Il mito delle Sirene*, and Mancini, *Il rovinoso incanto*, for a longer discussion of the *Liber monstrorum*.

¹⁷ *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus*, in *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript*, trans. Andy Orchard (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 257. See also Bettini and Spina, *Il mito delle Sirene*, on the narrative figure of the siren.

¹⁸ Orchard, trans., *Pride and Prodigies*, 94.

¹⁹ Barbara Spackman, “Monstrous Knowledge,” in *Monsters in the Italian Literary Imagination*, ed. Keala Jewell, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 307. Spackman is here referring to the sirens of Maria Corti’s *Il canto delle sirene* (1989).

Imagine a painter wanting to attach a horse's neck to a human head, assemble limbs from everywhere, and add feathers of various colours, so that *a woman beautiful above the waist tailed into a revolting black fish!* Could you hold back your laughter, my friends, if admitted to view it? Believe me, Pisos, a book could be very like such a canvas, its images just empty inventions like a sick man's dreams: neither foot nor head would be rendered in a single form.²⁰

Here, the fish-woman is not explicitly given the name siren, but she is employed as a figure for certain pitfalls of poetic composition, criticized by Horace, and likened to various forms of bodily and psychic disorder. The siren in these examples is thus not a figure of feminine seduction and impending death, but one of narrative deception, mental illness, or even simply bad poetic taste.

One of the earliest and most well known appearances of the siren figure in Italian literature occurs in Canto XIX of Dante's *Purgatorio*, and it marks one of the first examples where the siren seems to represent a more purely physical seduction in concordance with the sin of concupiscence. In this episode, the "femmina balba" (stuttering woman) comes to Dante-pilgrim in a dream and, under his gaze, she transforms into the beautiful and alluring "dolce serena" (sweet siren). She entrances Dante, singing to him of her seduction of Ulysses and her ability to steer men off their course, promising to satisfy his desires:

mi venne in sogno una femmina balba
ne li occhi guercia, e sovra i piè distorta,
con le man monche, e di colore scialba.

Io la mirava; e come 'l sol conforta
le fredde membra che la notte aggrava,
così lo sguardo mio le facea scorta

la lingua, e poscia tutta la drizzava
in poco d'ora, e lo smarrito volto,
com'amor vuol, così le colorava.

Poi ch'ella avea 'l parlar così disciolto,
cominciava a cantar sí, che con pena
da lei avrei mio intento rivolto. //

«Io son», cantava, «io son dolce serena,
che ' marinari in mezzo mar dismago;
tanto son di piacere a sentir piena! //

Io volsi Ulisse del suo cammin vago
al canto mio; e qual meco s'ausa,
rado sen parte; sí tutto l'appago!». //

Ancor non era sua bocca richiusa,
quand'una donna apparve santa e presta
lunghezza me per far colei confusa. //

«O Virgilio, Virgilio, chi è questa?»,
fieramente dicea; ed el venía
con li occhi fitti pur in quella onesta.

²⁰ Horace, "To the Pisos," in *The Poetry of Criticism: Horace, Epistles II and Ars Poetica*, trans. Ross S. Kilpatrick (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1990), 72.

L'altra prendea, e dinanzi l'apria
fendendo i drappi, e mostravami 'l ventre:
quel mi svegliò col puzzo che n'uscìa.

[there came to me in a dream a female, stuttering,
cross-eyed, and crooked on her feet, with stunted
hands, and pallid in color.

I was gazing at her; and, as the sun strengthens
cold limbs that the night weighs down, so my gaze
loosed

her tongue, and then in a short while it
straightened her entirely and gave color to her wan
face, just as love desires.

Once her speech was loosened so, she began to
sing in such a way that I could hardly have turned
my attention from her.

“I am,” she was singing, “I am a sweet siren,
who enchant the sailors on the deep sea, so full of
pleasure am I to hear!

I turned Ulysses from his course, desirous of my
song, and whoever becomes used to me rarely
leaves me, so wholly do I satisfy him!”

Her mouth had not yet closed when there
appeared a lady, holy and quick, alongside me, to
confound her.

“O Virgil, Virgil, who is this?” she was saying
fiercely; and he was approaching with his eyes
fixed only on that virtuous one.

The other he seized and opened in front, tearing
her clothes, and showed me her belly, which
awakened me with the stench that issued from it.]²¹

The interpretations of this episode are many, though most agree that the *serena* is representative of the sin of earthly appetite. However, interpretations that understand Dante's *dolce serena* as representative of narrative are found as well. Naomi Yavneh makes a compelling case for understanding Dante's own role in the creation of the *serena*—through his gaze—as a warning against following one's own creation over that of God:

The “*dolce serena*” is explicitly the pilgrim's own creation, fashioned first out of the previous day's discourse [...] and then, within the dream, out of the “*femmina balba*” transformed by Dante's gaze. The transformation thus presents the “*serena*” not only as a figure for improper love but, even more significantly, as an

²¹ Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, XIX 7-33, trans. and comm. Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

idol; the pilgrim seeks to follow his own creation, his false “Beatrice,” “nel mezzo mar,” rather than the true mediatrix who will lead to salvation.²²

Since the *serena* is Dante’s own creation, we might connect the siren and the warning she represents regarding the glorification of one’s own creation to the *poetic* creation of Dante-poet as well, a link that Yavneh does not explicitly draw but that is suggested by her interpretation.²³

Others have more explicitly noted the possible connection between Dante’s *serena* and classical representations of the siren as either narrative or knowledge. Dante’s sources for the siren story are thought to include Isidore of Seville, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and Cicero’s *De finibus*, rather than Homer’s text itself, and as Teresa Caligiure and Luciano De Fiore have argued, Dante would have been familiar with Cicero’s understanding of the figure as promising knowledge and wisdom, but he does not include that element in his own siren episode.²⁴ Caligiure, however, notes that Dante does not describe the siren’s physical appearance, but instead emphasizes the song she sings: “ma il poeta non si sofferma sull’aspetto esteriore dell’incantatrice, bensí, come Omero e Cicerone, sul messaggio del suo canto” [“but the poet does not linger on the exterior aspect of the enchantress, but rather, like Homer and Cicero, on the message of her song”].²⁵ Caligiure shifts the discourse from one of earthly pleasures to suggest that Dante’s siren episode refers as well to the salvific nature of divine poetry, in contrast to the deceptive nature of pagan poetry.²⁶

However, as Barbara Spackman has argued, the distinction between the seduction of the flesh and that of knowledge, or narrative, is difficult to parse.²⁷ She cites the “femmina balba” as an example of the hermeneutic figure of the “enchantress-turned-hag,” where Virgil’s unveiling of the *serena*’s ugly “truth” corresponds to an epistemological model that cannot accept the

²² Naomi Yavneh, “Dante’s ‘dolce serena’ and the Monstrosity of the Female Body,” in *Monsters in the Italian Literary Imagination*, ed. Keala Jewell, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 117.

²³ Yavneh goes on to argue that the “dolce serena,” as a figure of female physicality and sexuality, stands in for “the threat of all earthly, physical ties, of a desire not directed toward God” (124), and does not return to the question of what exactly we are to understand as Dante’s “own creation.” She does, however, suggest that the episode of the *femmina balba* might be understood as a replaying of the *Inferno*, where again it is Virgil who must reveal to Dante the disgusting truth of his own sinfulness: “Dante must smell her true, putrid nature, just as he must physically visit Hell in order to learn where his actions are leading him” (ibid., 118).

²⁴ Teresa Caligiure, “La ‘femmina balba’ e la ‘dolce serena,’” *Rivista di Studi Danteschi* 4, no. 2 (2004): 333. See also Durling and Martinez’s notes in Dante, *Purg.* XIX, 318; Luciano De Fiore, “Sirene tra logos e desiderio,” in *La mente, il corpo e i loro enigma. Saggi di filosofia*, ed. Coccoli et al. (Rome: Stamen, 2007), 171–90; Naomi Yavneh, “Dante’s ‘dolce serena’”; Giuseppe Mazzotta, “Il sogno della Sirena (*Purgatorio* XIX),” in *Il sogno raccontato, atti del convegno internazionale di Rende (12–14 Nov. 1992)*, ed. Nicola Merola and Caterina Verbaro (Vibo Valentia, Monteleone Stampa, 1995), 117–36. For an extended discussion of the debate as to Dante’s sources for this episode, see Robert Hollander, “*Purgatorio* XIX: Dante’s Siren/Harpy,” in *Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio: Studies in the Italian Trecento in Honor of Charles S. Singleton* (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1983), 77–88.

²⁵ Caligiure, “La ‘femmina balba,’” 345 n. 31.

²⁶ On the perceived dangers of music and voice in relation to Dante’s Siren episode, see Nancy A. Jones, “Music and the Maternal Voice in *Purgatorio* XIX,” in *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*, ed. Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 35–49.

²⁷ Spackman, “Monstrous Knowledge,” 309 n. 11: “Dante’s siren is a figure for the seduction of the senses rather than the seduction of the intellect, but the overlapping of siren and enchantress-turned-hag already points to a difficulty that is inherent in the figure of the siren: how to keep the two seductions apart? If a (hetero)sexual seduction is the figure for the ‘seduction’ of the intellect, is not one seduction always ‘contaminated’ by the other? Their symmetrical relation would suggest as much.”

female body (and thus the body in general) as being compatible with knowledge or knowing.²⁸

What is of interest here is that the kind of reading that produces the “truth” of these figures (i.e., the “truth” that these are figures for truth) is itself dependent upon the hermeneutic model. It discards appearance and the literal in order to get to a “hidden,” figural meaning. It “seems” that we are talking about enchantresses and hags but “in reality” we’re talking about truth and artifice. In so doing, the literal embodiment of the metaphor is discarded in order to get to the truth of the tenor, which in turn is understood as untainted, in essence, by its vehicle.²⁹

Spackman’s theorization of the enchantress-turned-hag reveals the extent to which the discourses of truth, feminine sexuality, and narrative are bound to one another within the logic of the Western (read: male) literary tradition. What is more, this formulation finds a parallel within disability studies in discourses of disability and narrative, where a common argument holds that characters with disabilities are invariably made use of within literary texts in the service of some metaphorical meaning, and that literal disability—as embodied experience—is thus effectively erased from the text. If a villain’s limp is meant to convey his shady character, then the literal quality of his disability gives way to the “true” metaphorical meaning of moral decrepitude.³⁰ If a disabled character is “cured,” the underlying meaning or “truth” of that cure corresponds to a supposed return to moral or spiritual wholeness.

Of particular interest for my purposes here is the fact that Dante’s *femmina balba*, the hag that *precedes* the siren-enchantress of Dante’s dream, is depicted in terms that are indisputably evocative of disability, both physical and vocal or discursive: “there came to me in a dream a female, stuttering, / cross-eyed, and crooked on her feet, with stunted / hands, and pallid in color.” As Caligiure relates, in the centuries that followed the writing of the *Commedia*, commentators would have understood such “defects” as signs of moral turpitude: “Notevole interesse ha pure suscitato la rappresentazione della ‘femmina balba’: gli antichi commentatori attribuivano un significato morale a ogni singolo difetto fisico; in tempi recenti le deformità sono state interpretate come figurazione simbolica dei sette vizi capitali” [“The representation of the ‘stuttering woman’ has also aroused notable interest: the commentators of old attributed a moral significance to every single physical defect; in recent times, her deformities have been interpreted as symbolic figures for the seven capital sins”].³¹ Dante’s gaze “cures” the woman’s physical “deformities” and her speech impediment, transforming her into the *serena* of Homeric fame, and giving her back the voice she has lost. However, immediately afterward, her new appearance is then exposed as a ruse by the *donna santa* who prompts Virgil to reveal her stinking womb. It is this final movement—from *dolce serena* to the stench of the hidden *ventre* (belly/womb)—that makes this episode particularly interesting, for it suggests a return to the disordered corporeality of the *femmina balba* and thus the futility of Dante’s attempt to “cure” or make whole what was rotten at its core.

What all of this taken together suggests is that, whatever the various interpretive possibilities

²⁸ “Indeed, as transformed, monstrous, female bodies, the sirens are sisters of the enchantress-turned-hag; like her, they dramatize the relations between bodies and knowledge” (ibid., 300–01).

²⁹ Ibid., 298.

³⁰ This is commonly noted within disability studies scholarship beginning with David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

³¹ Caligiure, “La ‘femmina balba,’” 336.

to be drawn from Dante's *serena* episode, they all rest upon a foundational construction of a disabled female body, one that is transformed by Dante's gaze, whether that be understood as the poetic creation of a false beauty or a lustful projection of earthly desire. Thus, the metaphor of the siren, for its "truth" to be "revealed," must already be constructed upon a metaphor of disability, one that understands the disabled body—which is here inseparable from the female body—as evil and sinful, the deceitful putrescence of which reaches out to contaminate not only the pilgrim's quest for spiritual rebirth, but also truth, poetry, and narrative itself. And perhaps most important from a disability studies perspective is the fact that the corruption and treachery represented by the female body would not be possible without recourse to the metaphor of disability, for without the rhetoric of illness, amputation, and stuttering, the *dolce serena* would remain faithfully as such, offering no hidden form and thus no hidden truth.

The "problem" of the body and its impediment to salvation is thus concretized in the disabled body, here aligned with the siren body, as two sides of the same sinful coin. The mirroring of these two figures reveals a certain reciprocity between disability and feminine sexuality, a link that can be seen in more recent texts such as Dacia Maraini's *Donna in guerra*.³² At the same time, however, the figure of the *femmina balba* turned *dolce serena* implies a fundamental incompatibility between the two categories, whereby if one aspect is expressed, the other must be repressed. This very oscillation is, in fact, already contained in the body of the *sirena* itself and is particularly evident in those depictions that understand the siren as half maiden, half fish. The part that is visible and identifiable as a lovely woman hides an "ugly truth" that lurks below the surface of the water.

The description of the *Sirena* that appears in the episode of Falerina's garden in Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato* is indicative:

Non gionse il conte in su la ripa apena,
 Che cominciò quell'acqua a gorgoliare;
 Cantando venne a sommo la Sirena.
 Una donzella è quel che sopra appare,
 Ma quel che sotto l'acqua se dimena,
 Tutto è di pesce e non si può mirare,
 Ché sta nel lago da la furca in gioso;
 E mostra il vago, e il brutto tiene ascoso.

[The Count had scarcely reached the shore,
 when that water began to gurgle.
 The Siren, singing, came to the surface.
 Above, she appears, a maiden,
 but what stays beneath the water
 is all fish—and cannot be seen,
 for in the lake she stays from the fork on down:
 she flaunts the fair, and the ugly, keeps hidden.]³³

³² In Maraini's *Donna in guerra* (1975), Suna, the disabled protagonist, is compared throughout the novel to a *sirena*, because of her "abnormal" legs. Suna is an openly queer character with multiple sexual partners whose disability is figured as inseparable from her overt sexuality.

³³ Boiardo, *Orlando innamorato*, 2.4.36. All translations of Boiardo are mine.

In this and other depictions, the top half of the *sirena* is clearly marked as feminine, as *donzella*, while that which is below is “all fish,” and thus bears no gender, the genitals being hidden in the water (“*da la furca in gioso*”). This division separates the two halves of the *sirena* along lines of species (between human and fish or animal) as well as lines of gender. Of course, in Freudian terms, the female sex is itself defined by virtue of its invisibility or absence. In other words, the invisibility of the mermaid’s sex is both what defines it as female and, at the same time, what makes it inscrutable as gendered. The siren, as both gendered and not, as both female and not, thus exerts a contradictory influence upon her victims, oscillating between seduction and repulsion. In the context of Boiardo’s poem, in either case—the siren as female or the siren as genderless monster—the metaphorical “truth” of the representation is, in the end, the same, as it consists in a symbolic distraction of the narrative’s hero from his ultimate goal.

Again, however, the question of narrative is never far from the picture. In Boiardo’s tale, the fundamental distinction is made not between divine and pagan poetry, but arguably instead between the oral and written word. Orlando stuffs his helmet with roses in order to block the sound of the Siren’s song, with which she is capable of making animals and men alike fall asleep on the shore, leaving them vulnerable to attack. Unlike Odysseus, who *desires* to hear the Sirens’ song, itself a promise of knowledge and narrative, for Orlando the song presents only threat. Instead, he finds his source of knowledge in the written text of the “libretto” he carries, which describes each obstacle he is to face in the garden, much as does the book the reader of the *Innamorato* is holding.

If one is tempted to deduce that the poem is thus intended to have an instructional capacity, as Jo Ann Cavallo has argued, rather than simply acting as a source of entertainment and delight, the revelation is short-lived, as the text of Boiardo’s poem betrays a contamination as well.³⁴ The Sirena’s singing—“*Lei comincia a cantar sì dolcemente / Che uccelli e fiere vennero ad odire*” [“*She began to sing so sweetly / that birds and beasts came to hear*”]³⁵—echoes the words of the narrator at the start of the canto:

Luce de gli occhi miei, spirito del core,
 Per cui *cantar suolea sì dolcemente*
 Rime leggiadre e bei versi d’amore,
 Spirami aiuto alla istoria presente
 [...]
 Or questa cosa vi voglio seguire,
 Per dar diletto *a cui piace de odire*

[Light of my eyes, soul of my heart,
 for whom *I used to sing so sweetly*
 those lovely rhymes and pretty love poems,
 give me inspiration for the present story.
 [...]
 I would like to continue that tale
 to bring delight to *whoever likes to hear.*]³⁶

³⁴ See Jo Ann Cavallo, *Boiardo’s Orlando Innamorato: An Ethics of Desire* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1993).

³⁵ Boiardo, *Orlando innamorato*, 2.4.37 (emphasis mine).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.4.1, 2.4.3 (emphasis mine).

The narrator thus reveals the seductive nature of his own text, with which he causes readers to join the likes of Orlando and Odysseus, only we are powerless—without the aid of roses in our helmets or ropes binding us to the masts of our ships—to the seductive charms of the poem. If this dedication is addressed to Boiardo's former beloved, Antonia Caprara, as Cavallo has shown, and if we read Orlando's killing of the *Sirena* as a vindication of the female perfidy that Antonia represents for Boiardo, then we must also read the narrator himself as inhabiting the role of treacherous female or siren.³⁷ And given the fact that the narrator refers to his own sweet singing as having taken place in the past—in the *Amorum Libri* which he dedicated to Antonia—we might ask whether he is intimating here that his poetic output has been deceitful all along. The narrator then links this admission of past deceit to the continuing story, returning to the scene at hand, “to bring delight to whoever likes to hear.” The narrative power of the *Sirena*'s voice is thus appropriated by the author/narrator, while the materiality of her body is eradicated through her slaying.

In each of the cases discussed so far, the siren figure thus appears as a distraction to the hero, while at the same time acting as a representation of the narrative itself. The figure thus presents an interesting paradox, whereby the narrative enacts its own undoing, displaying the extent to which narrative is dependent upon the threat of its cancellation in order to continue propelling itself forward. Even as discourses and literary representations shift away from the epic and chivalric traditions where mythological monsters are commonplace, the *sirena* figure continues to appear in many other generic contexts throughout Italian literary history, though there is not enough space to detail them here. With each appearance, the siren continues to signal both a bodily and a discursive difference—each of which are seen as having the power to derail the guiding ideologies of the given time and place—even as it continues to serve as a figure for narrativity.

Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale, “The Little Mermaid,” marks a new trend in the *sirena* story, though the underlying logic is the same: here, she is the hero of her own journey, and is allowed to find her own Christian salvation, not only through the sloughing off of her mermaid tail—which incidentally leaves her disabled, as though she were walking on sharp knives—but through an eventual complete denial of the body, as she transforms for a second time into the spirit-like “daughter of the air.”³⁸ In an interesting twist on the more traditional iterations of the story, in Andersen's tale the conflict between narrative (as voice) and bodily difference is here played out within the very character of the little mermaid.³⁹ Trading her voice for human legs, the siren allows her vocal power to be silenced through a renunciation of her own physical difference, as she effectively trades one “disability” for another. We might go so far as to say, in rearranging the paradigms initiated in Dante's *Purgatorio*, that the little mermaid begins as a *dolce serena*, transforms into a *femmina balba*, and finally is promoted to *donna santa*, once she takes leave of her body entirely. However, the little mermaid's rejection of her mermaid tail

³⁷ For an excellent discussion of the ironic nature of the narrator's dedication at the start of Canto IV and its relationship to the *Sirena* as treacherous female, see Cavallo, *Boiardo's Orlando Innamorato*, 13–16.

³⁸ Hans Christian Andersen, “The Little Mermaid,” in *Andersen's Fairy Tales*, trans. Jean Hersholt (New York: The Heritage Press, 1942), 78.

³⁹ The various tropes of the Sirens episode in *The Odyssey* are subtly played out in Andersen's story, though here the Little Mermaid takes on the role of Odysseus. On her way to visit the Sea Witch, she encounters her own versions of Scylla and Charybdis and the Sea Witch is cast as the Siren to the Little Mermaid's Odysseus. (Many thanks to the students of my seminar, “Part of That World: Sirens and Mermaids from Homer to Disney,” at the University of California, Berkeley, Spring 2014, for their contributions to this idea.)

points up the extent to which the siren's body is itself already a marker of difference and disability. In this sense, the logic of Dante's *dolce serena* no longer holds: rather than hiding a disordered and rotten interior within a seductive siren-like exterior, the little mermaid has already internalized the "wickedness" of her own body, desiring only to be rid of it in order to attain love, normalcy, and redemption.

Andersen's story is known throughout the world and has had a notable influence on authors grappling with issues of identity, difference, and societal acceptance (including Oscar Wilde, the disabled authors of this study, the trans writer Vladimir Luxuria, and many others).⁴⁰ However, it is not until the 1960s and 70s, with the advent of feminist appropriations of the figure, that the *sirena* begins to be celebrated as an embodied subject in her own right, finding in her difference a correspondence to female empowerment. As part of a larger trend in feminist philosophy during this period of rewriting female mythical and archetypal figures, the *sirena* finds a variety of expressions: literary examples include Ingeborg Bachmann's "Undine Quits" (1961), based on the analogous figure of the *ondine*, and Dacia Maraini's *Donna in guerra* (1975), in which Suna, a disabled feminist activist, is portrayed as a mermaid. In the context of feminist philosophy, the voice of the mermaid takes on a number of meanings; for Hélène Cixous, in "The Laugh of the Medusa," the sirens become men: "Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing."⁴¹ A few decades later, feminist political philosopher Adriana Cavarero will take up the figure in her elaboration of a theory of voice as key to feminist identity:

Narratrici onniscenti, le Sirene di Omero presentano infatti un lato inammissibile per il sistema androcentrico. Esse usurpano la specialità maschile del *logos*. Si tratta, nel caso delle Sirene, ovviamente di un *logos* alquanto particolare, ossia di un *logos* poetico, narrativo, cantato e musicale che confligge con quello desonorizzato della filosofia. E tuttavia si tratta pur sempre di un *logos* nel quale la dimensione vocale del canto si accompagna alla dimensione semantica del mettere in parole un sapere.

[As omniscient narrators, Homer's Sirens in fact work to upset the androcentric system; they usurp the masculine specialty of *logos*. In the case of the Sirens, obviously, this is a highly particular *logos*—a poetic, narrative, sung, and musical *logos* that stands in opposition to the silent *logos* of philosophy. And yet it is still a *logos* in which the vocal dimension of song accompanies the semantic dimension in putting a knowledge into words.]⁴²

According to Cavarero, over time the Sirens lost the semantic dimension of their song and became associated with a pure vocality, a loss which she associates with the shift from the bird-

⁴⁰ On the reception and transmutation of Andersen's story in Italy, see Denise Sarrecchi, *Andersen e la Sirenetta. Iconografia di una fiaba (1873–2013)* (Rome: Arbor Sapientiae Editore, 2014).

⁴¹ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 885.

⁴² Adriana Cavarero, *A più voci: Filosofia dell'espressione vocale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2003), 120; Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 107.

Siren to the fish-mermaid, and which corresponds to a conception of the female subject as exiled from the Symbolic, relegated to a wholly corporeal existence.⁴³ This metamorphosis is taken to its extreme in the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale, in which the little mermaid loses her voice altogether.⁴⁴

As an example of the *sirena*'s loss of narrative capacity, Cavarero cites the René Magritte painting, *The Collective Invention* (1934), which depicts the mermaid in the inverse: the top half of the mermaid is "all fish," *tutto pesce*, while the bottom half is human and displays female genitalia.⁴⁵ Drawing from the idea that the capacity for language is what separates human from animal, according to Cavarero, the mermaid with a fish head cannot speak, relegating her to the animal realm. Cavarero sees in this image a representation of the female subject, reduced to a pure materiality that is silenced yet still sexually available. Cavarero instead puts forward an understanding of the female subject as uniquely capable of uniting voice and meaning—through a sonic expression that is endowed with semantic content, as were Homer's Sirens.

It is here that including a discussion of disability can offer new insight to discourses of the relationship between the female body and language. Recalling Laterza's figuring of her wheelchair as her "coda," I suggest that the figure of the tail or *coda* be understood as representative of both bodily difference and discursive excess. As a difference that points to that which is missing (i.e., legs), the tail speaks to the logic of lack that is common to discourses of femininity and disability, while also representing a possible advantage, depending on context or environment. The mermaid's disability is contextual in that she can only be considered disabled when she is on land, a fact that corresponds to the social model conception of disability, by which disability is understood as the product of one's environment (whether physical or social) rather than as a fault with an individual's body. The mermaid is thus variously disabled or "super-able" depending on her environment, a fluidity that defies attempts to define disability in static terms. The *textual* coda, by turn, exceeds the body of the text, implying a kind of linguistic "supplement" that operates outside of the bounds of that body even as it substitutes for that which is supposedly lacking. In this way, the mermaid's tail ostensibly acts as prosthesis, both materially as substitute for legs, and discursively as signifier to signified. However, I would like to suggest that, as with Laterza's wheelchair, the *coda* not be thought of as a detachable marker of difference, but as something inherent to both the body and the self.

For Laterza and—as I will show—Mirella Santamato, it is important that the *sirena* represent not only physical beauty and allure, but also "voice" understood as narrative capacity, suggesting a necessary relationship between the body—as both female and disabled—and self-expression or representation. The work of Laterza, Santamato, Garlaschelli, and others, insofar as they use the siren-mermaid as a way to represent the disabled body, ground the figure in a newfound materiality that has the potential to "correct" the conundrum presented by Spackman and others, by representing a body that is inseparable from narrative, a metaphor that cannot be separated from its material corporeal form.

⁴³ See also Adriana Cavarero and Matt Langione, "The Vocal Body: Extract from A Philosophical Encyclopedia of the Body," *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 21, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2012): 71–83.

⁴⁴ Other examples of silent sirens include those of Kafka's "Silence of the Sirens" (1931) and Pascoli's "Il vero," in *L'ultimo viaggio* (1904). For secondary criticism, see Giuseppe Pucci, "Le sirene tra canto e silenzio: da Omero a John Cage," *Classico Contemporaneo* 1 (2014): 80–97; Jacqueline Risset, *Il silenzio delle sirene: Percorsi di lettura nel Novecento francese* (Rome: Donzelli, 2006).

⁴⁵ See Cavarero, *A più voci*, 121–22.

The *Sirena* and the Disabled Female Body

In texts by disabled authors, the ambiguous morphology of the siren-mermaid reflects both an apprehension regarding the disabled female body—itsself often coded as “monstrous” or grotesque—as well as an attempt to reconfigure that body as desirable and capable. This oscillation reflects the ambivalence expressed by disabled authors regarding their disabilities—as a source of pride but also as the cause of repeated discrimination and an obstacle to full participation and inclusion in many of the aspects that comprise a rich human life. Because of this, not all of the women who use the mermaid metaphor see the mermaid, and specifically the mermaid’s tail, as unilaterally empowering as does Laterza. For Santamato in *Io, sirena fuor d’acqua*, it is—at least initially—a “coda odiosa” (hateful tail) that signals difference and invites discrimination.

The *sirena* is also, to a certain extent, a queer figure—the presence of a tail where there should be legs confounds the male gaze and raises the question of whether she in fact possesses a vagina or is capable of procreating. The mermaid’s singular *coda*, as we will see, acts as stand-in for both the phallus and the writing pen, and thus reveals a hybridity that bridges a series of binary categories: “normal” and “abnormal,” disabled and non-disabled, human and animal, oral and written, male and female. This proliferation of binaries points to a complex mechanism: in order for the mermaid-as-disabled to become “normal” (i.e., able-bodied/human/non-fish), she must by necessity effect a reciprocal movement among those other binary pairs as well. While this article has focused so far on the relationship between disability and gender, the division of these categories from their binary counterparts is itself dependent upon the human and animal binary—a division that is embedded in the body of the *sirena* and is constructed around the question of language. In order to “become human,” the disabled subject/*sirena* must thus first prove her femininity, renouncing her gender ambiguity. Thinking back to Boiardo and the sirena-as-woman versus the sirena-as-monster, the aim for Santamato, like Laterza, is to embrace the seductress in order to repress the monstrous. However, if in its most positive incarnations the *sirena* represents sexual power along with vocal or expressive capacity, using the figure to represent disability then poses a conundrum, for ironically the attainment of acceptance and normalcy must be effectuated through the rejection of difference and thus through a rejection of being *sirena*—which in turn ostensibly entails the loss of the capacity to narrate as well.

For reasons of space, the following discussion will focus on just one of the recent autobiographical texts constructed around the *sirena* metaphor as figure for the disabled female subject, though others follow a similar logical pattern. Mirella Santamato’s *Io, sirena fuor d’acqua* (figs. 5–7) is a memoir that covers the long arc of the author’s life beginning from her infancy, in which Santamato describes her childhood experience with polio and her mother’s obsession with her *guarigione* (healing), all too familiar in discourses of disability where the medical imperative to “cure” sends the message that disability must be eradicated at all costs. Santamato longs to be rid of her disability, which she calls her *coda di pesce* (fish tail), and to replace it with “normal” legs. Santamato’s story describes as well her struggle to see herself as a person worthy of romantic love and sexual attention, despite the negative messages she receives growing up that suggest this will never be possible. She draws an explicit link between her lack of voice—understood as a lack of self-esteem and self-expression—and a “defective” body, which she will eventually address through her own turn to writing as a means to reclaim her “voice” and find acceptance of both her inner and outer selves.



Fig. 5. *Io, sirena fuor d'acqua*, photograph by M. Pinna. Courtesy of Mirella Santomato.



Fig. 5. *Io, sirena fuor d'acqua*, front cover, photograph by M. Pinna. Courtesy of Mirella Santomato.



Fig. 6. *Io, sirena fuor d'acqua*, back cover, photograph by M. Pinna. Courtesy of Mirella Santomato.

The relationship between mind and disabled body for Santamato is explained in the first pages of the memoir, when she describes the effects of polio on her body: “Il mio cervello mandava impulsi che non venivano più eseguiti. Le mie gambe erano trasformate in una materia inerte; inerte e inutile, appunto, come una ‘coda di pesce’” [“My brain was sending signals that were no longer being carried out. My legs had been transformed into inert matter; inert and useless, just like a fish tail”].⁴⁶ The distinct separation of mind and body implies a kind of entrapment within a body that does not respond, and thus the *coda di pesce* is—at least initially—aligned with the “defective” body, and not with narrative or writing. As “inert matter,” the body is thus figured as incompatible with the realm of thought—*il cervello*—a division of mind and body that is foundational to the Western philosophical tradition. In order to restore function to her legs, Santamato wishes to have her *coda di pesce* surgically removed, a procedure that will presumably realign her interior and exterior selves. In figuring her disabled legs as a fish tail, Santamato suggests that the dividing line between the categories of able-bodied and disabled coincides with that which divides human and animal, leaving disability firmly on the side of the animal, here understood as “inert” and lifeless.

In *L'Aperto*, Agamben explains that the possibility of making an external division between the human and the animal stems precisely from an *internal* division: it is only possible to create the categories of human and animal because they both already exist within us.⁴⁷ For Santamato,

⁴⁶ Mirella Santamato, *Io, sirena fuor d'acqua* (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), 13.

⁴⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *L'Aperto: L'uomo e l'animale* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002), 23–24. Some have found Agamben's *nuda vita* to be a helpful term with which to think about disability. See, as one perspective, Stefano

the division between human and fish is placed precisely on the dividing line between ability and disability, suggesting that disability is left, not only on the side of the animal, but also on the side of inert matter, divorced from the brain and its active messaging. On the one hand, Agamben's understanding of this internal division offers a way to deconstruct the disability/ability binary by conceiving of both categories as always already constitutive of human life in general. On the other hand, the assumption that disability is equivalent to vegetative or animal life is clearly problematic. However, despite the fact that Santamato describes her disabled legs in terms that would suggest an equation between disability and non-thinking flesh, her account suggests that the real problem is actually a matter of "communication" between her legs—her *vita animale* [animal life]—and her brain, or *vita-di-relazione* to use Agamben's terms. What disables her is thus located, not in her legs, but in the relation *between* body and mind.

Agamben, following Bichat, notes that the advances of modern medicine such as surgery and anesthesia are founded precisely on a division between the vegetative life and the relational self within each human being. The fact that the mind can be "put to sleep" while the body still lives rests on a similar obstruction of internal communication. For Santamato, this loss of internal communication becomes externalized after her first attempt at "removing" her *coda di pesce*. Here she is describing the loss of self brought on by the experience of unrequited love: "Come nella favola della Sirenetta, avevo perso, o forse non avevo ancora acquisito, la capacità di esprimermi e di dire sempre e comunque la verità. Non ebbi il coraggio di parlare, mi adeguai alle sue paure e non dissi niente. / La mia voce l'avevo data in pegno per riavere le gambe" ["As in the fairytale, 'The Little Mermaid,' I had lost, or maybe I still had yet to acquire, the capacity to express myself and to always and forever tell the truth. I didn't have the courage to speak; I adapted to his fears and didn't say anything. I had given up my voice in order to have my legs back"].⁴⁸ The author's lack of voice is understood as inextricably linked to her abnormal physical body and, like the little mermaid, Santamato's voice is silenced as a result of her endeavor to obtain "normal" legs. Santamato thus implies that her voice was once there, but has since been removed in order that she might alter her body according to societal expectations, and the same is true regarding her legs: contrary to Andersen's little mermaid, Santamato claims to want her legs *back*, implying that she was once human and desires to be restored to her original form. However, Santamato's account then shifts in focus from her quest for normal legs and a normal body in terms of ability, to a quest for a decidedly *female* appearance and for sexual experience. For Santamato, true normalcy and "humanity" is gained through the proof that she can be an object of sexual desire. Again, the figure of the *sirena* is helpful in understanding this logic.

On the one hand, the representation of that which is human (the mermaid's upper body and its accompanying *cervello*) with a specifically female-gendered torso is highly problematic from the perspective of the Western enlightenment tradition, by which the female body is presumed incompatible with language and intelligence. Again, as Spackman has argued, the *sirena* might also be understood as a hybrid of mind and body, and more specifically of knowledge and the *female* body, which for the Western tradition "is necessarily monstrous."⁴⁹ This is, by some accounts, the underlying message to be drawn from Andersen's fairytale as well. In order to render herself acceptable to a patriarchal society, the little mermaid must give up her voice and alter her body to fit standards of femininity and docility. As Katrina Mann explains it: "The tale

Onnis, "Il dis-positivo: Dal diritto vigente alla nuda vita delle persone con disabilità intellettuale," *Italian Journal of Disability Studies* 1, no. 1 (2013): 109–32.

⁴⁸ Santamato, *Io, sirena*, 166.

⁴⁹ Spackman, "Monstrous Knowledge," 301.

of “The Little Mermaid” speaks to the pickle that is female subjectivity as rendered by Lacanian psychoanalysis. In this version of female subjectivity, the female must permanently abandon the safety of the womb in order to enter the Symbolic through language. She subsequently discovers that the Symbolic is a culture that silences her presence by making of her an object to be interpreted rather than a speaking and agential person.”⁵⁰ It is thus in the moment of passing into the Symbolic that the woman paradoxically must give up her voice, remaining an object within the phallogocentric order to which she has finally gained access.

The insertion of physical disability into the mind/body equation dramatically complicates the effects of this structure. Where the “normal” female body is sexually objectified, supposedly barring the possibility of an intelligent interior subject, the disabled female body incites instead either revulsion or non-sexual curiosity, according to the ableist logic of “the stare” as put forward by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson.⁵¹ What this suggests is that the disabled female subject is, at least partially, “freed” from the constraints of sexual objectification and oppression (though subject to a host of other oppressions and objectifications), allowing for the possibility of a female subject that is comprised of both mind and body. Interestingly then, in the case of Santamato’s text, the author chronicles not only the story of a physical (or medical) rehabilitation as a means to reclaiming the coveted state of “normalcy,” as one might expect, though elements of that tale are present here as well. Instead, the story centers on the rehabilitation of *femminilità*, a move that in part requires the modeling of a certain kind of body, but more importantly reinstates a position of objecthood and subordination, for it is in objecthood that a woman finds and retains her identity as a human within the logic of the phallogocentric Symbolic order.⁵² Thus, in order to shed the marker of her corporeal difference and be considered fully human, Santamato must take up an unambiguous gendered position, thereby ironically losing her status as a subject in the very moment she begins to reclaim it.

In light of this quest for *femminilità*, Santamato’s hatred of her fish tail begins to take on a different meaning. As long as it is present, her femininity is disallowed, a foreclosure which she paradoxically figures as a castration: “la polio non aveva colpito e paralizzato dei muscoli, aveva colpito e paralizzato la mia femminilità, la mia essenza umana. Ero stata castrata a tutti i livelli” [“The polio hadn’t affected and paralyzed my muscles, it had affected and paralyzed my femininity, my human essence. I had been castrated in every way”].⁵³ While according to Freudian logic, the woman is by definition castrated, here Santamato claims that it is her womanhood *itself* that has been castrated. The absence that should mark her femininity is denied her, instead being replaced by a very present *coda di pesce*. Rather than a castration via cutting off, hers is thus effected through an adding on, an excess of flesh that precludes her identity as a woman. In order to counteract this unwanted addition, she seeks at all costs to be rid of the “odiosa coda,” which she will attempt through the enactment of her own castration via surgery.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Katrina Mann, “‘Like a Mood that Passes into You’: Amphibious Subjectivity in *The Piano*,” *Michigan Feminist Studies* 15 (2001): <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.ark5583.0015.002>, accessed April 9, 2014.

⁵¹ According to Garland-Thomson’s theory, the stare is a desexualized version of the gaze, transmuting the “sexual spectacle” of the normative female to the “grotesque” one of the disabled subject. See Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 26. See also Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁵² To be clear, I mean to hold out the possibility that an alternative to this psychoanalytic logic might understand femininity according to something other than the restrictive constraints of a patriarchal order.

⁵³ Santamato, *Io, sirena*, 180.

⁵⁴ Santamato, in anticipation of her surgery, notably compares herself to a bride waiting for her wedding day: “Mi preparavo ad affrontare gli interventi chirurgici con la stessa trepidazione con cui, di solito, una ragazza si prepara al

The *coda* thus becomes somewhat predictably a phallic appendage, suggesting a different form of hybridity present in the body of the *sirena*, one that combines both male and female, a conjoining that is already prefigured in the monstrous coupling of the female body with supposedly “male” knowledge. The mermaid’s tail is thus representative of both disability and the negation of a “normal” femininity.

The following episode will prove instructive on this score. In it, Santamato describes one of the experimental methods of therapy she underwent as a child with her Swedish physical therapist: “Mi aveva avvolto le gambe con molti numeri di ‘Grazia’ (di cui mia nonna era assidua lettrice), dopodiché me le aveva strettamente fasciate con robuste bende elastiche, rendendole simili a due salami bianchi, rigidi e duri” [“She had wrapped my legs with a bunch of old editions of *Grazia* (of which my grandmother was an avid reader), after which she had bound them tightly with strong elastic bands, rendering them similar to two white salamis, stiff and hard”].⁵⁵ The description of her legs in these phallic terms suggests that her attempt at removing her *coda di pesce* is unsuccessful, causing two phalluses to appear where before there had been just one, like the head of the Hydra which, when cut off, only returns more numerous. This numerical malfunction recalls Irigaray’s *This Sex Which Is Not One*, complicating the idea that the feminine sex is always dual in contrast to the solitary male phallus.⁵⁶ In *The Acoustic Mirror*, Kaja Silverman writes:

What Irigaray advances [...] is the notion of a language which would be “adequate for the [female] body,” a language capable of coexisting with that body as closely as the two lips of the vulva coexist. This is the obverse of the linguistic model proposed by Lacan, which stresses the incommensurability of signifier and body, the loss of the latter constituting the price which must be paid for access to the former.⁵⁷

This, in turn, is the “obverse” of the little mermaid story, where the mermaid must give up the signifier (her tail/tale/voice) in order to have the body that is required of her by phallogocentric standards—most importantly, a body that is unambiguously bestowed with a vagina. For the little mermaid, the proof of this lies precisely in the visibility of two legs, rather than the sexually ambiguous, or even phallic, *coda*. The two legs then, for a *sirena*, are the external visible marker of the hidden and internal vagina. The legs become the extension of the vulva, on display for the man’s assurance, not tucked away for her own secret pleasure, as Irigaray would have it.

The medicalization of Santamato’s mermaid body, which necessitates this separation of her legs, recalls a surgical procedure conducted in cases of what is known as “sirenomelia,” also called Mermaid Syndrome or “mermaidism.” The term refers to a condition by which the fetus fails to develop two separate legs and is instead born with one appendage with an appearance

giorno delle nozze” [“I prepared to face the surgical procedures with the same trepidation with which, usually, a girl prepares for her wedding day”] (ibid., 24). On one hand, it is perhaps Santamato’s hope that surgery will allow her to be “normal” enough to have a chance at marriage. On the other, according to the logic of compulsory heteroability, marriage itself is presented as a *cure* for disability.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁶ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

⁵⁷ Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 144.

that resembles a tail.⁵⁸ There are only three known cases in recent years of children born with sirenomelia where the baby did not die within a few days of its birth. And in each of these recent cases, the child has been female.⁵⁹ While it is unclear whether the separation of the legs is necessary in doctors' efforts to save the life of the patient in these cases, there is indication that the procedure is at least partially cosmetic. In one case, the operating doctor is reported to have said: "We just need to finish up some touches on her lines [...] You have to give some form to a mermaid and make her look as a normal person. This would be a cosmetic issue and we will proceed as needed."⁶⁰ At the same time, procedures are undertaken to reconstruct the vagina, which in most cases of sirenomelia is either non-existent or shares an opening with the anus and urethra. The imperative to separate the mermaid's legs fuses heteronormative fantasies of controlling the monstrous female body with the normalizing imperatives of medical cure, illustrating the extent to which ableist ideologies undergird and reinforce normative expectations regarding gender and sexuality, and vice versa. In other words, the rehabilitation of the "normal" body in medical terms is inexorably bound to a rehabilitation of femininity and sexuality.

Santamato's "salami bianchi" thus could be said to mark the failure of her first attempt at the rehabilitation of her *femminilità*. Rather than restoring her dual sex, through the castration of her unitary *coda*, she instead finds herself in possession of two phallic appendages, no closer to her desired acceptance into the category of "woman"—if anything doubly marked as unfeminine. By a different account, however, Santamato's initial rehabilitation could be seen as all *too* effective, revealing the extent to which the presence of the female sex, the supposedly hidden lips of the vulva, is in fact betrayed by the presence of separate and separable legs. The woman's sex is thus never secret, but instead always and inexorably marked, existing for the pleasure of the male/other, not her own. Tellingly, Santamato's new carnal appendages are constructed out of issues of the women's magazine, *Grazia*, a representation of the media that prescribes societal standards of femininity in Italy. As Silverman writes, "not only is the subject's relation to his or her body lived out through the mediation of discourse, but that body is itself coerced and molded by both representation and signification. Discursive bodies lean upon and mold real bodies in complex and manifold ways, of which gender is only one consequence."⁶¹ For Santamato, this discursive molding is effected through norms of both femininity and ability. She is coerced by the discursive "normal" body—the body constructed by both medical discourse and societal norms of femininity that literally shape and mutate her physical body.

In the final instance, this "failure" is what leads Santamato to her final revelation regarding her body. Her disability is not the *cause* of her lack of confidence or romantic relationships—"il vero handicap" (the real handicap), as she calls it, is precisely that loss of self that societal

⁵⁸ Examples of such fetuses are displayed in Leslie A. Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), where he suggests that certain fantastical monsters and beasts were perhaps taken directly from real-life examples of "monstrous births."

⁵⁹ Regarding one of these recent cases, a girl named Shiloh Pepin, one article states: "had only one partially working kidney, no lower colon, no genital organs. And she was fused from the waist down. She was a mermaid baby." Laura Dolce, "Girl with Mermaid Syndrome Defies the Odds," *Seacoast Online*, August 2, 2007, <http://www.seacoastonline.com/article/20070802/News/708020394>, accessed October 26, 2014.

⁶⁰ The doctor in question here is Luis Rubio who treated Milagros Cerrón of Peru. See "'Mermaid' Girl Takes First Steps Post-Surgery," *ABC News*, September 25, 2006, <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/OnCall/story?id=2490038>, accessed June 2, 2014. A blog post connects Cerrón more explicitly to the Andersen fairy tale: "After her procedure on May 2005 [*sic*], doctors in Surquillo, Peru noted that some unknown psychological or physiological condition left Milagros unable to form proper speech patterns, leaving her mute," in "Mermaids exist! (but are very rare)," *AirLats*, December 30, 2012, <http://www.airlats.com/mermaids-exist-but-are-very-rare/>, accessed June 2, 2014.

⁶¹ Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 146.

prejudice causes: “L’handicap è un marchio, un pregiudizio, uno schema mentale condiviso da tutti, compresi gli stessi handicappati” [“Disability is a stigma, a prejudice, a frame of mind shared by everyone, including disabled people themselves”].⁶² This metaphorical “handicap,” of course, cannot be surgically removed, which suggests a subtle critique of a complete trust in medical cures, and in surgery in particular as a means to effecting one’s identity.

In Santamato’s case, she finds that her surgery has been only partially successful, leaving her with only the *appearance* of “normal” legs: “Le mie gambe rimanevano paralizzate; la bella forma non era sufficiente a reggermi in piedi come gli altri” [“My legs remained paralyzed: their beautiful form wasn’t enough to support me on my feet like everyone else”].⁶³ She is now faced with a different kind of internal/external disconnect: while her exterior body now appears functional, “inside” it continues to bear the mark of disability. She writes: “La mia coda di pesce era ancora attaccata al mio corpo, anche se non si vedeva più” [“My fish tail was still attached to my body, even if you couldn’t see it anymore”].⁶⁴ Whether that tail is immediately visible as part of her exterior body, or is only revealed once she begins to walk, revealing her limp, its presence continues to affect her interior self in profound ways. However, unlike in the *femmina balba* episode in the *Commedia*, this indelible mark need not be one of negativity, sin or evil. Though the removal of Santamato’s “tail” is unsuccessful, leaving her marked by her disability, its persistence suggests that she need not give up her voice or narrative capacity after all. If we understand the physical tail as being commensurate with the *tale* as language or narrative, it is apparent that Santamato’s “voice” and her *coda di pesce* are inexorably intertwined.

With her tail still attached, Santamato is left at the intersection of the binaries with which we began: rather than executing a complete switch between poles, in the end, Santamato is *both* human and animal, male and female, disabled and not. She writes: “Mi era stata data in sorte la doppia conoscenza di vivere la vita sia da persona perfettamente normale sia da handicappata; avevo passato il ponte che separa questi due mondi, conoscevo entrambi i linguaggi. Avrei fatto da ‘interprete,’ mostrando ad altri la strada” [“I was given by fate the double awareness of living life both as a completely normal person and as handicapped; I had crossed the bridge that separates these two worlds, I knew both languages. I would be an ‘interpreter,’ showing others the way”].⁶⁵ Here, Santamato refers to the importance of sexual exploration and relationship in gaining a strong sense of herself as both female and disabled. As an interpreter between two worlds, Santamato is able to restore the *external* lines of communication that were previously blocked as a result of an *internal* binary division or caesura. The fact that the *coda di pesce* cannot be surgically removed suggests that disability is not so easily aligned with the “inert matter” of the vegetative body after all. Santamato’s experience shows that disability is not simply “located in the body,” in the *vita vegetale*, nor is it in the relation between mind and body: it is instead central to her identity, fundamental to her *vita-di-relazione*, her life-in-relation.

Conclusion

In the final instance, Santamato blames the “short-sightedness” of other people for the construction of her disability. She writes: “Avevo fatto bene a non accettare il triste destino della Sirenetta che, privata della voce e dell’amore, si rigetta nelle acque del padre Oceano per

⁶² Santamato, *Io, sirena*, 151.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

dispersersi nella spuma del mare. Avevo fatto bene a riacquistare la mia voce, e a usarla per parlare di tutte quelle sirenette che la miopia umana ci fa vedere come infelici e ‘deformi’” [“I had done well not to accept the sad fate of the Little Mermaid who, without a voice and without love, throws herself back into the waters of Father Ocean to dissolve into sea foam. I had done well to reclaim my voice, and to use it to speak of all the little mermaids that human myopia makes us see as unhappy and ‘deformed’”].⁶⁶ For Santamato, it is not that the bodies of those who are different are inherently “deformed.” They are made that way only through the discrimination and judgment of those around them. Given this reversal of perspectives, it is thus not up to Santamato to become human (or woman) through the manipulation of her own body. It is instead up to the surrounding society to change its way of “seeing.”

Santamato’s use of the metaphor of myopia is perhaps problematic from a disability studies standpoint in that it equates a literal short-sightedness with a metaphorical intolerance, but at the same time it might help us to recall Dante’s gaze, now cast in a different light. Instead of the poet’s gaze making the hag into an enchantress, we might surmise that it is his gaze that made her a hag to begin with. In her *vita-di-relazione*, in her relationships both sexual and not, Santamato is able to act as siren-seductress, and *not* as *femmina balba*, effectively altering the vision of those who would see her mermaid tail as something to be hidden, as categorically *brutto* (ugly). Antonietta Laterza, too, with her provocative photographs in which she poses as the *sirena censurata*, insists that her body be seen, that it be enjoyed, confronted, displayed—“tail” and all. Turning the gaze back around on the poet, the *sirena* thus changes not her own body, but the way in which the poet sees.

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⁶⁶ Ibid., 254.

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