The Sea Calls: A Selkie's Liminal Existence

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THE SEA CALLS: A SELKIE’S LIMINAL EXISTENCE

by

Frances Avery

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

Approved:

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2021
ABSTRACT

The Sea Calls: A Selkie’s Liminal Existence

by

Frances Avery, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2021

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Traditionally, the selkies (or seal people) of Scottish-Irish lore exist between spaces: the land and the sea, human and animal, childbearing and childless. Their existence at sea is voluntary but their existence on land is forced. Once the selkie has left behind its sealskin and both the literal and metaphorical sealskin has been stolen, the selkie becomes subject to human will. The lenses of body, reclamation, violation, and abuse prove that the reason why selkies have faded from popularity is because the lessons are too mature for a young audience. A feminist and queer reading and interpretation of this traditional tale not only demonstrates the sexual and domestic subjugation that marginalized characters in folklore endure, but also explores the non-belonging that occurs when existing in the liminal.

(56 pages)
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Lynne S. McNeill for her constant support, reinforcement, and guidance through this process of completing a master’s thesis. Additionally, I would like to thank my other committee members, Dr. Beth Buyserie, and Dr. Claudia Schwabe, for their care and assistance throughout the entire process.

I give special thanks to my family and loved ones for supporting this wild endeavor, enduring endless hours of me sharing my research, providing myriad of pep talks, and being extremely patient during the emotional breakdowns and midnight caffeine purchases. I could not have achieved this without you. Thank you to my mother who introduced me to selkie stories, gave me a thousand pep talks, and has always and will always support my academic endeavors. Thank you for listening to me when I shared the latest discovery and addition to this thesis. Thank you for putting up with me as I wept in fear of not finishing. Thank you for watching The Secret of Roan Inish over and over again when I was a child. Thank you for braiding my hair just like Fiona’s. Thank you for encouraging me to live up to my potential.

Thank you to the artists whose work I used throughout this thesis. Their willingness to offer their art and any commentary is greatly appreciated. Thank you to the women who came before me, both in my family and in this discipline, for trailblazing a path that I can follow. I am very blessed to have their guidance and love from near and far.
Finally, to young me: thank you for dreaming big, enduring trauma, and consistently forcing current me to be better, kinder, and smarter. Thank you for doing your best.

Frances Avery
CONTENTS

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... iii

Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................................ iv

Introduction ...................................................................................................................................... 3

Her Origins ...................................................................................................................................... 8

Selkies in Film and Art .................................................................................................................. 12

Selkies, Subjugation, and Entrapment ......................................................................................... 28

Duality ............................................................................................................................................. 30

Liminal or Littoral .......................................................................................................................... 33

The Symbolism of Water ............................................................................................................... 35

Violations of Agency, (Re)Capturing Herself, and the Orientations of Body ......................... 37

Conclusion: What Selkies Teach Us Now ...................................................................................... 45

References ....................................................................................................................................... 47

List of Images ................................................................................................................................... 50
Figure 1: Selkie Soul, Caroline, The Mercurial Moon
“Once a selkie finds her seal skin again, neither chains of steel nor chains of love can keep her from the sea.” -Tadgh Coneelly, *The Secret of Roan Inish*
The story begins with a fisherman spying a lone seal upon a rock and, because
seals do not normally bask alone, he watches it rest and then it begins to wriggle—a head
emerges from the seal skin and then shoulders, a torso, hips, finally legs. A human
woman steps out from her sealskin, neatly folds it up, leaves it on the rocks, and walks up
the beach. Intrigued and under the spell of her intoxicating beauty and mystery, the
fisherman picks up her sealskin and tucks it under his arm. As he does this, the selkie
woman essentially becomes his property. She follows him to his house, he introduces her
to his family, they fall in love (but perhaps that is induced by her sealskin being stolen,)
get married, and have a litter of children. One day, several years after they establish their
family, one of their children tells the selkie woman that they saw their father hiding an
odd coat. Excited by this, the selkie woman runs to the house, finds her skin, and returns
to her original ocean home never to be seen again except in her seal form; the only trait
that is recognizable is her eyes. In essence, a man picks up the abandoned sealskin and
the woman who would normally inhabit it is enslaved and made into a wife and mother
without her consent; some magical power connects her to her skin, and she must follow it
wherever it goes.

Of course, there are many other versions of this story but this is the main plot
associated with the traditional motifs B651.8 or B601.18 (Thompson); Christiansen’s
migratory legend type ML 4080, ‘The Seal Woman’; or as a subtype of AT 400 (ATU
400), ‘The Man on a Quest for his Lost Wife.’ Donald Archie MacDonald classifies it, in
his own classification scheme, as F75 ‘Man captures fairy woman by hiding her seal’s
skin (McEntire 126.) Other stories tell of a seal who is caught in a fisherman’s net and he saves her life; some stories state that the selkie is never held against her will; one story iterates that the woman the fisherman brings home from a faraway island is not a mythical creature, she is just from a different tribe. No matter how the story is told, the fact remains that the tale persists. The selkie herself persists because she is strong, independent, resourceful, resilient, persevering, sensual and sexual, unafraid, and self-reliant. The selkie woman has been alive for decades before me and she will live for decades after.

The discipline of folklore recognizes that tales of the selkie persist over time, but the reason behind that continuing relevance is not immediately clear. Mermaid stories quickly gained popularity in literature and popular culture due to their more appealing main character, fast-paced story, and sexy depictions, but selkie stories have been here all along, just out of the limelight. It takes a little more digging to understand why the selkie story has remained on the backburner for so long. My own awareness of the selkie began when I was only six, by which time my wonderful mother had exposed me to all sorts of bizarre and slightly age-inappropriate forms of media: ballet, opera, the symphony, and odd and uncommon folklore. I lovingly blame her for my fascination with selkies. The Secret of Roan Inish (1995) was my favorite movie and I watch it today with the same awe and disbelief that I did when I saw it for the first time. The Irish landscape, the uncontrolled ocean, the lore, the music all captured me, and I could not look away—I would not look away. Every detail of the movie overwhelmed me, and I was in love. Now, as an adult, when I ask my mother why I was in love with the movie so much, she tells me that I loved Fiona’s hair, and then she changes her mind and says I was obsessed
because Fiona, the main character, was sent away to a faraway land with a tag on her coat button and I longed for that. Or maybe it was my love for the lost little boy in the film, Fiona’s younger brother Jaime. But that’s not the way I remember it. It’s true, Fiona had fabulous hair; it was long, curly, strawberry blonde—just like mine. I remember begging my mom for a “Roan Inish braid” with a rag to tie it off in my hair just like Fiona had; until fifth grade, I wore my hair in a “Roan Inish braid” every day. I was terrified of being abandoned with a tag on my coat button; but I loved Jaime and his seashell tea party, and I loved how the family came back to the island after years of being away. I was truly mesmerized by the scene where Newla the selkie slips out of her seal skin and becomes a woman.

Maybe I did love Fiona’s hair. Maybe I wanted to keep Jaime safe. Maybe I wanted to slip out of my seal skin and transform into something else. Whatever my childhood fascination with the film was, as an adult I grew to identify with the selkie woman. I see myself reflected in her. Newla the selkie is silent, strong, spiritual, and connected. Newla exists on two planes—oceanic and terrestrial—but she is not limited to the spheres she occupies. Similarly, I feel as if I have for a long time existed both spiritually and physically while occupying a single physical space. Selkies symbolically articulate that existing in the in-between-ness is not a weakness; rather it is a space to grow and redevelop forgotten or stolen agency. Selkie tales are metaphorical for sexual subjugation and trauma, and they persist because they help women articulate and negotiate a perceived binary: the cultural assumption that they need to choose between personal freedom and sexual subjugation.
My life has not been one devoid of trials and difficulties, but it also has not been one without joy and wonder; it is only in writing this thesis have I truly begun to understand the impact that the folklore of selkies has had on my life. Selkies teach me about the connection between spirit and body; they teach me how to overcome a violation of personhood and agency; they teach me what it means to be a woman and the hundred facets it includes; they teach me how to look back in love and look forward in hope and excitement; they teach me that bodies are more than what holds our spirits. Selkies teach me that womanhood is transformative, beautiful, and deeply connected to the proverbial village. The violation of personhood and agency intrinsic to the selkie tale is a lesson that I did not realize I had learned until I began writing this thesis. At ages fourteen and eighteen, personal experiences significantly altered my world view and sent me into a state of nonacceptance. Now, at age twenty-five, I see how studying selkies brought me out of spaces of misery and into a bright place of enlightenment, appreciation, and true gratitude for my life experiences—positive and negative. My research makes explicit what my child self knew implicitly: that selkie lore held an important message for me, as it surely does for other women.

In late 2017, I woke up one day to my Facebook feed flooded with #MeToo in response to rape and abuse allegations against Harvey Weinstein. All these women, many of whom I knew personally, were participating in social media activism and coming forward as victims of abuse. It was a power I had never experienced previously, and I was floored by the support and love I received when I realized that I was a part of this community. As I remembered my past, I knew I was immediately at a crossroad: would I let myself be trapped by the trauma, or would I overcome it? This thesis explores this
apparently binary, the trauma inherent in the violation of one’s bodily agency—rape, sexual assault and harassment—and the ways that women perceive and negotiate that trauma in their lives. Selkies stories maintain that making choices is both possible and powerful, and that the right choice is whichever choice brings joy. For selkies, this often means leaving behind a family in favor of the more animalistic life they so desperately long for. For contemporary women, the options can often feel equally as dichotomous, abandoning one self in favor of another.

Although the stories of selkies are not included in anthologies in the same way Little Mermaid stories are, they stand to teach us something much more mature, nuanced, and valuable. Perhaps selkie stories are for an audience who learned what the Little Mermaid tales teach, and are now looking for something more empowering. Whoever the audience is, the fact remains that the meanings and lessons learned from the folklore remain relevant. Folklore that is meaningful will never become obsolete. Thus, because selkie stories are still in the broad repertoire of folklore, their lessons are meaningful and useful. Selkie stories teach lessons of independence, strength, and power; they warn against delving into the unknown; they celebrate womanhood; they are delicate communications that express wonder and exploration; they are anything but blubbery, slippery, and grey. In this thesis I will argue that much as stories of selkies have provided me with a cultural touchstone for the trials of women, these stories persist because they articulate similar themes to a wide audience through folklore, popular culture, and art. Selkie stories consider the binary choices that women have to make, or at least believe they have to make. While selkie stories do not necessarily offer a solution, they do articulate the tension within this perceived binary. In reality, the two options can coexist,
and of course there are not only two options. The metaphorical articulation of this struggle is what keeps tales of the selkies relevant and applicable today.

**Her Origins**

A selkie is whole human, whole seal—a shape-shifting woman present in the folklore of the Northern British Isles. According to many selke tales, she is typically beautiful but not conventionally so. Her hair is long, thick and black; her eyes are big and dark and to look into them is to see the crashing waves and the ocean storms; her skin is dappled with freckles and spots like the skin of a seal. Her name comes from the Orcadian word for “seal” (Towrie “Selkie-folk.”) The Orkney Islands of Scotland and the faraway Western islands of Ireland are the breeding ground for such tales. In these stories, the selkie comes to shore every once in a while to shed her seal coat and stretch her human legs. Because the stories of selkies vary so much, there is “no agreement on how often they are allowed to change” (Towrie “Selkie-folk”) or what she does once she has changed. Often times, she will bask in the sunshine but occasionally she is swept up in the permanent amour of a lover. When she is a woman “she retains her knowledge of the sea…and the remarkable instinctive capabilities of a marine mammal” (Turner 95.) Her mental processes are not augmented depending on her physical shape. Naturally, all types of selkies must be acknowledged. That being said, there are instances of male selkies that appear in tales originating in the Faroe Islands of Denmark. However, these male selkies do not often appear in the Scottish variations. There is one story that outlines how a human woman calls a male selkie to her: she “has to cry seven tears into the sea at high tide…[and] the selkie man [will] come ashore, shed his skin and seek “unlawful
love” (Towrie “Selkie-folk.”) This “unlawful love” is that between a human and an animal; however, it is not labeled as unlawful when a female selkie and male human have a relationship of a sexual nature. The difference in context here is unknown, but it is well-known that romantic and sexual love between a mythological female-presenting character and a male mortal is not uncommon. In fact, it is a trope seen throughout many folk tales, like Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid.”

Unlike a mermaid, a selkie can be entirely one thing or the other. And unlike a siren, she does not lure any man to his death. The tales of mermaids and sirens are often tried against the logic of the human mind; after all, how can something be half fish and half woman? These tales have been explained, or at least explanations have been attempted; their origins are Greek and Japanese—they are folkloric explanations for real life events, emotions, or trials. In Greek mythology, the sirens function allegorically to explain the treachery of worldly temptations. In Japanese mythology, the ningyo, a fish-like creature often translated as “mermaid,” exists as an omen of warning. The ningyo’s flesh, if eaten, will provide incredible longevity but catching one in your net symbolized great misfortune and a potential storm. As the story goes, an old man trespassed into unlawful fishing waters and as his punishment he was transformed into a ningyo and cursed to be half-fish and half-man forever (Ancient Origins.)

Just as there is a folkloric approach to what selkies are, there is also a type of scientific approach. Mark Turner, author of “The Origin of Selkies,” writes that because seals are so human-like in their movements, semi-apparent emotions, and gathering practices, “we immediately forge a mental blend of ourselves and the seal” (90) and “we can imagine what it is like to be a seal with seal-like abilities and preferences, or we can
imagine what it is like to be something like us clothed in seal form” (92.) Because of this mental blend as Turner puts it, humans and seals are more closely related than one would initially think. Of course, that is the psychological theory. There is also the mythological connection between the two species. Turner relays the common origin story of a selkie as a tale of a fallen angel who dropped into the sea and upon touching the “surface of our mortal plane, was transformed into a terrestrial species, and the type of species was determined by point of contact: fairies of land, selkies at sea” (95.) Thus, selkies are just fairies or angels trapped in an oceanic form, rather than seals who can transform.

The hypothesis that selkies are a traditional articulation of the similarities between seals and humans makes sense when compared to Walter Traill Dennison’s scholarship. Traill Dennison was a budding folklorist in late 19th century Orkney. He did his fieldwork in Sanday, after a long sabbatical of working in Edinburgh, and noted that “selkies always appear in groups, never [sitting] alone” (172) which matches human behavior. He also noted that each island in Northern Scotland had their own version of the selkie tale but it was a common belief from island to island that the larger seals “were classified as selkies because they had the power of assuming human form” (172.) Traill Dennison documented tale after tale that outlined the experiences of others who claimed to have seen selkie women. He wrote of their experiences that “to see a bevy of these lovely creatures, their seal skins doffed, disporting themselves on a sea-side rock, was enough to fire with admiration on the coldest heart” (172.) All of his informants who claimed to witness the stripping of the seal skin were changed after seeing such an event. Both he and Towrie, a 21st century author, write that “selkie folk are gentle creatures while fin-
folk are malicious.” Whether the selkies are gentle or not, the overall reaction to them is one of awe and admiration rather than fear.

Selkie tales are a form of family history according to Duncan Williamson, an amateur folklorist who took to Loch Fyne, Scotland to dig up the stories of the town. In his small book *Tales of the Seal People: Scottish Folk Tales*, Williamson illustrates how stories from traditions are magic because they are given to you the listener as a present, you are let into the personal lives of your new friends and are accepted as one of the family. In one of Williamson’s collected stories which he calls “The Shell House,” both a male and female selkie (named Angus and Margaret) marry and during their times on land, occupy a small house decorated with shells seaweed, and driftwood. This selkie couple occupies the Shell House mostly year-round, but in the summertime, they leave for several weeks. The folk in the town gossiped about where they went and when they would return. And every time they came into town, they wore their long coats. “Whenever they walked along the beach, they always appeared in their long coats” (26) and when they died, they were buried with the long coats draped over their caskets.

According to Duncan Williamson, this story was told by the minister who buried their bodies, who told it to his grandson, who told it to his grandson, who told it to Williamson. This generational act of story-telling is also a way of understanding ancestry. Not only are the stories a way of tracking ancestry and progeny but it is a way of protection as well. In Loch Fyne, selkies were viewed as protectors of the sea. Therefore, by default they protected the income of the town: fish. Play nice with the seals and the nets will be full.
Selkies exist in a space where they are not one or the other but are both. The selkie is either a woman trapped in seal form or she is a seal trapped in human form; either way, her mind, habits, and emotions are one and the same. This life in limbo makes them easy targets for entrapment and subjugation, both literally and metaphorically.

Selkies long for the sea when they are on shore and long for the land when they are at sea, yet they do have the best of both worlds as seals, and their preferred form is the seal form. This duality is similar to what many mythical creatures—most notably mermaids—are famous for. So why then have the selkie tales not taken root the way mermaid stories have?

The selkie story does not so much fight against the tales of mermaids for popularity because the two stories reflect something different depending on when and where they are read or told. Mermaid stories, although problematic in their media representation and blatant sexual presentation, often serve as cautionary tales. Selkie tales, on the other hand, teach of queerness and liminality that could be presented in another story or story type, but because of the duality of selkies and their double-identities, the queerness and liminality is rendered less metaphorical and more real. The studio art representation of selkies sometimes expresses more metaphorical lessons, and sometimes it represents less—and as is well-known, the meaning of folk art always manifests itself uniquely.

**Selkies in Film and Art**

In this section, I will offer case studies of selkies depicted in film and art, focusing on how the selkie is portrayed and what different artists and creators choose to
highlight from the traditional tales. Then I will analyze the themes that emerge, looking at specific patterns in the case studies and considering them in light of recent scholarship on selkies. The lessons from selkies require more investigation than a simple analysis, thus a synthesis of the art will also be provided. I have selected several artists and creators to highlight because I believe their depictions enhance the idea that selkie stories have much to teach us.

One of my favorite variations is the one told in the 1994 film The Secret of Roan Inish (Sayles): young Fiona Coneelly is sent to Donegal, Ireland to stay with her aging grandparents. As she spends the summer there, she learns about her family history which includes a big secret. Her ancestor, Sean Michael Coneelly was a very successful fisherman and he always caught enough to provide for his mother and his siblings. One day, as he was out setting nets, he rowed past a small rock near the island of Roan Inish. Upon this rock sat a seal that was behaving abnormally. He pulled his boat up to the shore, crept behind her, and stole her seal skin. Upon taking her skin, it appears as if she willingly became his partner. In an effort to make her comfortable, he took off his coat, wrapped it around her naked body, and brought her home to his family. He introduced her as Newla (spelled “Nula” in the book version of Roan Inish called Secret of the Ron Mor Skerry (1959) by Rosalie K. Fry) and she quickly assimilated into the family.

She was odd and quiet, but she was good to Sean Michael and she took care of those around her. She had a great knowledge of all things littoral and deep ocean—she made salve and medicine out of kelp bulbs and fish parts, food out of kelp leaves and sea water, and a floating crib out of driftwood and seashells. According to the movie, Sean Michael and Newla married, had children, and were apparently happy until one day their
oldest child reported to Newla that she had found an odd and uncommon leather coat. Newla, knowing exactly what it was, handed the baby to the eldest, collected her skin and disappeared. Sean Michael came home from a day of fishing, inquired after his wife then promptly got back into his boat to go find her. He spent all night looking for her only to return without his wife.

I chose this selkie movie to include because of how well-known it is in comparison to the other two selkies movies mentioned. Additionally, the theme of subjugation and agency is pretty mild, especially compared to Ondine. However, I highlight this film especially because of the example of Newla. In her state of subjugation and motherhood, she bore the challenge with dignity and quiet strength but when it came time to make a choice, she made it confidently. Newla was unafraid of the consequences of her choice and she boldly returned to the sea.

Although this is my favorite version, there are some versions in which the selkie woman does not bear children, nor does she marry the man who finds her skin. In fact, there is one tale in which she is related to the man in a purely symbiotic relationship, entirely sans romantic connection: she keeps house, mends clothing, performs house-wife duties, he keeps her fed and housed. In another story, the selkie’s subjugation is explicit and clearly noncompliant—she is often kidnapped and her feminine qualities are exploited and she has no choice “but to marry her captor” (Towrie.)

Scholars Emily F. Selby and Deborah P. Dixon explore femininity and identity in this movie in their article entitled “Between Worlds: Considering Celtic Feminine Identities in The Secret of Roan Inish” published in 1998. Their main research question asks if the representation of feminine identity “runs against the grain of patriarchal
discourse on the place of women, or does it instead reinscribe such norms?” (5). They conclude that there is no intrinsically empowering characterization of feminine identity because Fiona is too young for fertility and maternity (7). However, they do summarize that the “feminized mythical landscape embodied in the rocks, sea, and animals that make up Roan Inish as a ‘place’ that empowers the heroine to reunite her family and home” (7). Fiona then becomes the mediator between worlds, the natural and supernatural. Her name recalls the legendary hero Fionn or ‘fair one’ who passes easily between the human and fairy worlds. Fiona is bound to the island of Roan Inish, “one giving life and meaning to the other” (25.) And as she is bound to Roan Inish, she is bound to her family; she is able to join the once split worlds back into one. Given this analysis of the film, viewers are able to draw comparisons in their own lives. Duality, split worlds, silent strength, and subjugation are powerful themes that might be present in the lives of viewers. Thus, the story of selkies is more applicable than originally perceived.

Similarly, but in much bolder terms Ondine (2009) explores the same themes. In the film Syracuse, a simple Irish fisherman (played by Colin Farrell) goes to pull his nets in and in it he finds a nearly drowned woman tangled in a black backpack, kelp, and flopping fish. Shocked, he quickly brings her aboard, resuscitates her, and takes her back to his home after she insisted against going to the hospital. She calls herself “Ondine.” Syracuse takes her to his late-mother’s abandoned home and she lives there for a while in peace and quiet. When Syracuse tells his daughter Annie a story about a fisherman who dragged up a woman in his net, she insists that the woman must be a selkie. Leaving the tale be, Syracuse takes Annie back to their home and he goes to set his lobster pots. As he sets them, he hears Ondine singing a song in a strange language. The next day, each pot
has a catch. Syracuse begins to believe Ondine is indeed a selkie. This happens time and time again with the lobster pots and with the fishing nets and Syracuse becomes a successful fisherman.

A turn of events occurs and although Ondine was once bringing good luck, Syracuse believes she will eventually bring bad luck. In a drunken stupor, he maroons her on a rock island and assumes she will take her seal form and leave him and Annie alone. As he sails away from her, his eyes deceive him and he thinks she has taken her seal form and jumped into the water. In reality, she is swimming towards him. He picks her up in his boat, realizes she is not a selkie but was playing into the tale to protect herself.

She confesses that she is a drug mule and in order to save her own life, she swam away from the drug lords with a backpack. She swam right into Syracuse’s net, buried the drug-packed backpack in his mother’s backyard, and started to live a normal life. She fell in love with Syracuse and in attempt to come clean to Annie, she explains her mysterious arrival, her curious backpack, and her love for Syracuse.

The ending is ultimately happy—a direct contradiction the others selkie stories mentioned—but the movie is much more than that. Ondine, unaware of the selkie tale before spending time with Annie, saw an opportunity to play into the mystery of the sea and the mythical creature it calls home. The backpack full of drugs is a direct parallel for a selkie’s skin, or complete and true identity. As in other selkie tales, the skin is hidden out of sight so as to keep the true identity tucked away, thus confirming the common phrase “out of sight, out of mind.” Annie, who otherwise lacks a positive female influence, latches onto Ondine in more than one way: she is entranced by the prospect of meeting a selkie and she is grateful for a loving woman in her life.
This movie tells a mysterious story which fits right into the general scheme of selkie tales—they too are a mystery. When this movie is read with the skeleton of selkie tales imposed upon it, the subjugation may not be clear at first. However, Ondine’s role as a drug mule is an explicit example of her subjugation. She was never subjugated to the will of Syracuse, but her kidnapping and forced profession were direct violations of her personhood. In fact, Ondine’s position as the film’s “most caring, self-sacrificing character [stereotypes] her as an ideal woman” (Mollegaard 101.) She is the perfect character when she is being acted upon but once she starts to make her own decisions, her story turns into one no longer focused on “men’s cruelty toward captured selkies” (102) and instead becomes a story of how Ondine needs Syracuse to rescue her from the sea (103.) If the ocean symbolizes the destructive forces of change, it is no surprise that Ondine needs rescuing when other women throw themselves into the waves.

Most recently, the children’s movie *Song of the Sea* (2014) depicted selkies in a way they previously had not been: animated illustrations. The movie follows Saoirse, a young girl who is selectively mute and has a mysterious coat, and her brother Ben, who must work together to release the faerie creatures from the grasp of the grumpy Celtic goddess, Macha. Years before their quest, their mother Bronagh returned to the sea. On top of figuring out how to free the faeries, Saoirse must decide if she wants to be a part of the ocean, or a part of the land. Bronagh sheds her sealskin just once to help Saoirse decide where she should go. When Saoirse decides to give up her sealskin and her selkie powers to stay with her father and Ben, Bronagh takes Saoirse’s coat from her and dives back into the ocean. Bronagh’s last words to her little human family is that she is
remembered in the songs and stories of selkies. Saoirse sings the selkie songs and Ben tells the selkie stories and their mother lives on.

This movie is mostly music; there are very few lines that indicate what is going on. But the illustration, composition, and animation are exquisite. The story is wildly endearing and family friendly, and the lesson of familial ties is a valuable one. *Song of the Sea* teaches that no matter what, family always comes first. Bronagh’s choice to return to the sea was likely not an easy one, and leaving her family was likely heart wrenching, but the return to her true self is one of the lessons that are learned from this movie. By no means, am I asserting that in order to be ones true self, one must leave behind a husband, children, and an otherwise comfortable life. But the power Bronagh wielded when she made that decision is marvelous: she untangled herself from her terrestrial life for one that suited her better.

These film examples show that the selkie is deeply connected to a family, whether it is hers or not. The only thing that releases her from her family is the rediscovery of her sealskin. In all three examples, the selkie is only attached until she has to be. Once her sealskin, or backpack in the case of *Ondine*, is found, she is released from her duties as mother, wife, and human woman. In *Roan Inish*, Newla is better off with her sealskin than not because her happiness is not being sacrificed for the “better good” of a husband and family. In *Ondine*, Ondine is better off without her “skin” because it allows her to be herself. She is finally released from the torture of being a drug mule and is at last permitted to live a life of her own volition. *Song of the Sea* varies slightly from the theme of subjugation and marriage as the main character is a mute child. However, the seal skin being gifted and then taken away is still an aspect of the story. Saoirse must decide, as
Newla and Ondine had to, whether or not to leave behind her seal skin or take it and assimilate into an oceanic home. Even though Saoirse acted differently than the other two characters, her fate is the same: she lives a life she is happy with. These three films highlight unique themes of individualization and empowerment which solidifies the idea that what empowers one woman empowers another.

Themes of empowerment are also common in selkie-themed visual art. Upon a simple Google search of “selkie art,” many resources pop up, including some Etsy shop links. Etsy, Pinterest, and DeviantArt—all popular venues for the creation and dissemination of folk art—are full of various interpretations of the story and depictions of the mythological creature. This art is readily accessible to the everyday person, whereas fine art is not usually. Stylistically, a lot of what is on Etsy could be labeled as “fine art,” while the art on Pinterest is often DIY-oriented. DeviantArt is full of cartoon or anime-style selkie art, which is particularly interesting because of the exaggerated features that anime art is known for. These differentiations are important when considering the vernacular themes of the artwork and its accessibility. Oftentimes, art that is circulated on the internet is more accessible than films or literature. Additionally, the more folkloric a venue is, like DeviantArt versus an art museum, the more we can see the vernacular themes emerging from the artwork.

Generally, Etsy shops have comments under each listed piece of artwork for sale but those comments do not always match up with the art being sold. For example, a print of a selkie sketch could have a hundred comments underneath it but only thirty are related to that listed piece of art. Also, these comments do not necessarily mention the art itself, rather the quality of packaging and speed of delivery. While these are important
aspects to consider when purchasing from an Etsy artist, they do not help in the understanding of why the art is being purchased or how it is being displayed. DeviantArt, on the other hand, is much more colloquial and casual. A simple search for “selkie” on DeviantArt brings up about fourteen thousand of results. There is a mix of the selkie of traditional lore and an anime character whose name is “Selkie.” For the most part, the comments on the artwork are positive, encouraging, and friendly; however, none of the comments are focused on the folklore of the selkie itself. Nevertheless, the mere presence of the art is wildly important to the story gaining traction.

Figure 2: Screenshot of deviantart.com/search?q=selkie
One of the most popular
depictions of a selkie woman, and
my personal favorite, is Kopakonan.
She is 2.6 meters and 450 kilograms
of bronze and steel statue that
emerges from the sea in the Faroe
Islands. The Faroe Islands have a
rich folkloric history that includes
folk beliefs, legends, and tales of the
sea. Scholars argue that the selkie
tale originated in the Faroe Islands
and then spread to the British Isles,
Denmark, Norway, etc. She is called Kópakonan which translated from Faroese, a
derivative of Old Norse, means “Seal Woman.” She is depicted as a naked and svelte
Faroese woman and in her left hand she carries the part of her selkie skin that she has yet
to step out of. Her right foot is extended forward as she steps towards the dry land and
away from the water signifying her terrestrial transition. Or maybe she is turning around
to take one last look at her home on land before she slips her other leg into the seal skin,
dives in, and is never seen again. Either way, she rises above the fluid water below her
and with that boldly states that she is in control and she is going nowhere.

Her face is emotionless from afar but upon closer inspection her eyes are lifted
up, her lips are full and slightly upturned at the edges. She is beautiful by most standards.
What is particularly interesting about this statue is the absence of a male counterpart—

Figure 3: Kópakonan: A statue of the Seal Woman was raised in Mikladagur on the island of Kalsoy on 1 August 2014. Photo by Annbjørg Andreasen.
there is no human man to guide her out of the water; there is no man to wrap his coat around her and take her home to his parents. She is complete by herself, seal skin in tow.

An interesting aspect of this statue is the presence of pubic hair. Most Western ideals of a sexy woman include being hairless, but I hypothesize that because she is a selkie and seals are covered in a thin layer of hair, the only clue of her seal-ness (besides the obvious seal skin she hold) remains in her pubic hair, the only lingering evidence of her animal nature. The hair on her head is slicked back, wet from just walking out of the ocean. Whether or not a woman has pubic hair is of no consequence because there is no right or wrong way to be a woman. The feel of this statue is very Aphrodite-like: a daughter of the ocean rising above the sea to transcend human barriers. She appears like Venus does in Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*. Her initial identity is that of a human woman; her secondary identity is oceanic indeed. To some she may appears triumphant over the
ocean. To others she is merely a statue depicting a local legend or folk belief. But to a folklorist, she is a representation of the power that it takes to overcome subjugation and abuse. Köpakonan is evidence that there is no right way to be a woman; rather the right way to be a woman is the way that is best for each individual.

Also coming from the Faroe Islands is a postage stamp that depicts seals and a woman dancing in a circle. Going clockwise from the left side of the stamp, the seal is metamorphizing from seal into woman. The shape to the right of the woman is mostly a seal shape but is less defined and the texture of the art is different in that seal than in the other ones. The woman herself is not fully human or fully seal; rather she appears more like a mermaid than a selkie because her legs are limited by a fish-like tail. Mail art is a unique genre that places culturally, historically, or artistically unique miniature art on stamps, envelopes, and letters to provide a type of personalization. For the Faroe Islands, the inclusion of the selkie on their stamp is culturally significant. Compared to the United States’ mail art, the Faroe Islands are
focused more on folklore rather than history. Clearly the cultural impact of selkies is
great enough to merit a postage stamp.

Although the physical impact of this piece of art is small and the significance of
this mail art may seem little, when tested against the hypothesis of selkies not becoming
popular because they aren’t sexy enough, this art supports that claim. The only “sexual”
part of this art is the bare buttocks of the woman. She is not particularly curvy; her face is
not shown so the sexiness in features is limited; her hair is not flowing or voluminous—
she appears to be a regular woman rather
than a visually stunning one.

Similarly, the selkie from Cartoon
Saloon’s *Song of the Sea*, a children’s
movie about a mute
girl who discovers her voice through interaction with seals, is not depicted as anywhere
near sexy. That is related to the fact that the movie is a cute introduction into folklore and
selkies and it would not be appropriate to show children with overtly sexualized bodies,
folkloric or not, in a movie. This still taken from the movie is not depicting a selkie in her
seal form or even transforming from one form to another; Saoirse is the little girl who is
surrounded by seven seals. Eventually Saoirse does turn into a seal but the depiction of
her here is very sterilized. The medium by which this art was created is also notable. In
this discussion at least, there are no other animated versions of this tale, or aspects of this tale. Although in this instance animation is used in a market concentrated with children’s stories, animation is becoming more and more of an adult medium of art where it shows explicit adult content. Because this is a movie geared toward children, it makes sense that the animation would not be sexy; instead Saoirse is a cherubic child with wide features that assume innocence or even naivete. Saorise is a young girl and she does not yet know what is required of her in womanhood. However, as her mother did in the movie, she made a choice and that choice empowered her to make more choices.

Animation, postage stamps, and statues are just a few of the various genres that show selkies in art. A personal favorite art form of mine is giclée: fine art print making.

Gina Lee, owner of MaisonSATURN a fine art Etsy shop creates a few pieces that are focused on scenes from folk tales, legends, or folk beliefs. She electronically creates her art and then makes it into prints as customers order copies. This one in particular is very reminiscent of Song of the Sea if Saoirse was an adult. Lee stated that she was inspired by the children’s movie as
This selkie is much more graceful looking than the art found on the postage stamp. The lines are smooth, the colors are soothing, the features are soft. The postage stamp’s art is more traditional, some would even say primitive. What is particularly interesting about Lee’s piece is the modest depiction of the selkie—she is entirely clothed: her white coat covers her whole body and the only skin that shows is on her wrists and a peek of her shoulder. This modesty could be a result of the nature of the topic or it could be a direct contradiction of the art that is currently being produced. It could be argued that this selkie is sexy in her own way, just not the typical way people would consider her sexy. She has the type of curves that are medically generated, she has petite facial features that some pay for, she has the look of pious innocence.

In Western culture there is nothing less sexy than a blubbery seal, which suggests the possibility that selkies are not sexy for the pleasure of humankind; selkies are sexy for themselves. That idea is saturated with great power and strength; the idea of being sexy not for the purpose of pleasing other people but for themselves is an empowering (and difficult) one for many women. This interpretation cannot entirely be proven, of course—this is merely one interpretation of the tale—but the prevailing themes in much selkie art suggest this is the case. Again, there is no one way to be sexy or appealing or empowering. What works for one does not work for another. Perhaps this art is suggesting ways to break out of the binary that women perceive by offering many depictions of the same thing; or perhaps it is merely articulating that there is a binary.

A poem, entitled “The Seal’s Skin” posted by The Viking Rune, a blog about Northern European folklore, reads: “Where have I to flee?/ I’ve seven kids in the sea/
And seven kids on dry land.” It is told in this poem that the selkie woman whispered these words before she dove into the water. For years afterwards, her children “went to the shore for a walk [and] people often saw a seal that swam in the sea not far from them…and [the children] threw motley fish and nice seashells. But their mother never came back.” The selkie mother mourns her earthbound children before she abandons them, which must be a very complicated experience. That pull to the ocean is stronger than blood, stronger than love.

The art, although subjective and entirely up to the artist’s imagination and talent, depicts selkie women of all shapes and sizes and maturities. There is no one mold or form to fit into as a woman. There is no right or wrong way to present yourself. Sexuality for sexuality’s sake is fine, and depending on who you ask, encouraged. Currently, the movements of body positivity or body neutrality, size acceptance, and embracing one’s body are very popular. These movements go against the general patriarchal conventions that have been in place for eons. Perhaps, the selkie tale speaks to this idea on a subconscious level. Once bodies are accepted for what they are, the conventions that would have women belittled and judged will break. Having a body is not a fault and using that body to utilize agency is a beautiful gift.

Additionally, the selkie stories like The Secret of Roan Inish, teaches us that the power in family lasts, even after years. To reunite a family after years apart and separate memories formed is a special act of creation. It also teaches how to embrace a new life as exemplified by Fiona’s determination to enjoy her time in her new home. Most importantly, it teaches the viewers to learn from the past. As Grandfather says, “East is
our future; the west is our past. The islands are to the west.” Yes, Roan Inish may lie
behind us, but oftentimes a return to the past is what sends us catapulting to the future.

Although there are varying ways in which selkies are depicted in film, poetry, and
art, the overall story remains mostly the same; the interpretation, however, does not. For
some, the selkie is a headstrong, defiant woman; and for others she is round, voluptuous,
and sensual. However, it does not matter too much how a selkie is depicted because what
matters is how the story persists. The story continues in the art and movies; it remains
because the audience requires it. The story keeps getting told over and over again because
something speaks to the audience and keeps them returning. My feminist instinct tells me
that the lesson that persists through the art and films is one of perseverance and dignified
silence. This section has presented many examples in art, film, and literature of how
selkies stand out in folklore, and all of the selkie women depicted have a mysterious air
about them that implies strength and diligence in their endeavors. In the next section, I
will expand upon the various themes and patterns within the artistic examples.

**Selkies, Subjugation, and Entrapment**

Selkie tales unfortunately perpetuate the common literary trope of subjugated
women—think Lilith of the Jewish Talmud, or Eve of the Christian Bible, or Mary
Shelley the authoress, or even Lizzie Bennett from Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*
(1813). Lilith was thrown from Heaven down to Hell because she would not comply with
God’s will. Mainstream Christian rhetoric would have us believe that Eve, the original
complier, was always subject to her husband’s desires and will after she partook of the
fruit. In fact, it could be argued that Eve’s only moment of independence was making the
choice to listen to Lucifer; her entire purpose in her creation was to be a companion and wife to Adam, not to be an independent thinker or sexual being. She was punished for her one moment of independence and thus humanity is punished as well.

According to Gregory Darwin’s work with mermaids and related creatures, selkies are their own agents until their skin is taken and their agency is removed. The selkie skin acts as the littoral element of the seal: it keeps her as a part of the sea as well as a part of the land. This “uneasy and ambivalent relationship” between the land and the sea, the man and the selkie, the human and the animal, the terrestrial and aquatic, the natural and supernatural, “mirrors the common human experience of the wilderness, and especially the sea, as both [are] necessary for structured human existence, and is utterly unpredictable, capricious, at times destructive, and often fatal” (134). Duality is not an uncommon theme in any type of literature, folklore or not. Oftentimes, the “sea is presented as unstable, liminal, and often feminine” (137) whereas the land and sometimes the seashore are considered concrete and masculine locations. Remember, humanity has often referred to the sea as a cruel mistress for her unpredictability and uncompromising ways—that goes back to the Greek and Roman days when water was feared and respected. Although Poseidon rules the sea from the depths, Aphrodite was born from the sea foam and thus the femininity of the sea was conceived. Darwin theorizes that “marriage is agency-compromising both for the man and the selkie” (125) meaning the selkie loses her autonomy and the man loses his singlehood. This claim is absolutely baseless compared to the piles of evidence that highlight how the selkie has it worse. Her agency, which is directly tied to her seal skin, is literally and figuratively taken away when a handsome fellow snags it off the rocks. Within the context of agency, the moment
the selkie mother leaves her family behind the husband becomes the main caregiver which technically limits his agency. However, this supernatural presence is sought out “and tamed for a while” only for her to escape “often with disastrous consequences” (134) which include: leaving her human children to remain on land, heartbreak, and the horrible reality that she will never be able to return to land. Once a selkie is reunited with her skin, she is never allowed to part from it again. The poetic justice is not lost. Role reversal is a nice break from the perpetual subjugation that selkies experience.

**Duality**

Building off Darwin’s ideas on duality is a thesis by Peter LeCouteur entitled “Slipping off the Sealskin: Gender, Species, and Fictive Kinship in Selkie Folktales.” Duality is a vital theme to acknowledge because the tale itself is double in almost all aspects. Le Couteur writes of the traditional tale that it “reads like an allegory for abuse and possession,” and that a children’s book entitled *The Selkie Girl*

“is essentially about a magical seal-woman who is kidnapped and raped repeatedly during her long captivity.” Most versions make explicit the selkie’s awareness that her husband is her captor. Without her sealskin, the selkie woman is naked – literally and metaphorically – and it is this that both attracts the man and gives him power, making her dependent on his clothing and housing. In many versions of the story, it is directly stated that the selkie woman is a “good” wife and mother. But it is also often explicit that the selkie is extremely distraught, staring longingly out to sea for hours, or searching repeatedly for her skin” (68).
This tale is explicitly gendered. The male captures the female against her will, “coercing her into sexual, domestic, and childbearing roles” (68.) He removes her from her family, her removes her magic from her. LeCouteur outlines this story as one of extreme dualism: “male/female; mundane/magical; civilized/wild; clothed/naked; human/animal; and land/sea” (65.) Darwin agrees with him: “male and female; human and animal; civilized and wild; terrestrial and aquatic; natural and supernatural” (125.) Everything in the story is hyperseparated. LeCouteur suggests that the binaries are trying too hard. He writes: “To this dualist mindset, distinctions between male and female are as clear, as natural, and as unbridgeable as those between people and seals” (57.)

While this gap may be unpassable for LeCouteur, the dualism is not as hyperseparated as he proposes. Martin Puhvel wrote that “coast dwellers who caught glimpses of…a seal, were struck with some rough physical resemblances between [them] and man… The flippers seem…to resemble human hands; the movement of a seal on ice or land resembles the crawling of a baby” (326.) In Roan Inish, the townspeople describe Fiona as being as “pale as a seal’s belly” with eyes just as wide as the creature’s.

LeCouteur writes that the selkie woman is white just as her seal skin is (65.) Sigurd Towrie described seals as having “uncannily human eyes.” Selkies have a relation to their seal skins much like the relationship that humans have with their clothing. “Selkies take off their clothes to have fun, and we are vulnerable when thus ‘naked’” (Turner 93.) So, again I assert that the duality between seal and human are not as clear cut as LeCouteur presents.

Veronique Heijnsbroek writes about duality and life-giving in her article “Imagery of life and death in the Scottish Gaelic water folklore.” She states that selkies
are distinctly dualistic because they “wish to live on land when they are at sea” (108) and vice-versa. They always long for what they do not have. She added that “selkies are representations of both the life-giving and death aspect” (109) of life; when they transform out of their skin they are given new life and when they go back to the sea, they die. Or, they die when they shed their skin and are given new life when they return to the sea. Either way, the dualistic manner of selkies is present, although perhaps not always as clear cut as we would like. But, Heijnsbroek turns it around and writes that selkies are “life-giving creatures but through the theft of their seal-skin, this is not always given entirely with their consent” (115.) They give birth and raise families but the whole exercise of family planning and raising is one hundred percent not up to her. She is an “unwilling partner,” (330) as Emily Heistand writes in “South of the Ultima Thule.”

Just like in *Roan Inish*, Heijnsbroek asserts that “humans sympathize with selkies because of their human eyes” (110.) Fiona becomes attached to the seals because they are attached to her and because she believes her little brother is being protected by them. Newla left her human children to return to the sea but maybe she took care of Jaime as a surrogate mother figure. Although the duality is a little more subtle in *Roan Inish* than in the other adaptations of the story, it is still important to note. Even though their pull to the land will always be present, their oceanic identity will always dominate. For the most part, the similarities between selkies and humans are alarming. But no matter what, the duality which selkies possess will always be a struggle.
**Liminal or Littoral**

Although there are many variations of the selkie tale, nearly every single one collected by David Thompson and outlined in his book *The People of the Sea: A Journey in Search of the Seal Legend* adheres to the basic tale type provided earlier. The main theme throughout Thompson’s book is the idea of the littoral and liminal spaces existing as one. *Liminal* is defined as the “in-between” or a space of transition. Similarly, *littoral* is the space on the seashore where the waves crash against the sand and rocks, like tide pools full of soft anemones, stiff starfish, and sometimes an octopus; or the soft sand in which you dig your hands down and bring them up covered in crawling little sand crabs. In the case of selkies, they exist both liminal and littorally.

Emily Selby and Deborah Dixon, in their article about *The Secret of Roan Inish*, write how Fiona is a mediator between two realms. Fiona is the liminal character. She has to communicate between the Coneely family and the seals who have her younger brother (20.) Her main goal is to bring those two aspects of her life together so that they may exist peacefully. Additionally, the island Roan Inish, or Island of the Seals as it is translated, is a liminal space. It exists between the expanse of ocean and the mainland of Ireland. The liminal is a powerful space to occupy—it is where magic happens.

Similarly, Anne Collett asserts that selkie women are wives and not wives at the same time in her article “The Significance of Littoral in Beverley Farmer’s Novel The Seal Woman.” Selkies inhabit the world between tides, between land and sea, air and water. Collett states that the littoral is “the space where transformative magic occurs” (124.) This transformative magic is vital to the life of selkies. They rely on their
transformation to keep them safe. Additionally, the origination of selkie stories is also
an example of liminality. The Orkney Islands sit in the middle of the ocean between the
north-west of Scotland and Norway. This separation from solid ground makes the islands
liminal. The things that happen on those islands are mystical, magical, and unbelievable.

Collett brings up an interesting point that “skin is littoral” (129.) From her
perspective, because skin touches water and land, it must be a type of littoral or liminal
aspect of bodies. With that in mind, the seal skin takes on a whole new meaning—it acts
as the most liminal characteristic of a selkie’s existence. When she is a seal, she exists in
the sea and when she is a woman, she exists on land. And when she is separated from her
seal skin and it exists on its own, it becomes a littoral object. The skin crosses categories
of natural and culture, human and animal, and it is with this “mytho-logic” as Le Couteur
calls it, that the selkie becomes intersectional: centered among gender, race, species, and
sexuality (63.) Donna Heddle, author of “Selkies, sex, and the supernatural,” argues that
the selkies themselves are liminal; not just their skin but their entire being. Because of
their dual identities, selkies “transcend the limits of the body [thus transcending]
liminalities by functioning on both land and sea” (1). Learning, growing, and blooming
happens in the liminal spaces of life. But so does dilapidation and heartbreak. The womb
is liminal; childhood is liminal; loss is liminal; a break-up is liminal. some perceive death
as liminal. Although we may not exist proximally to the littoral, we do exist in and out of
the liminal throughout our entire lives, just as selkies do.
The Symbolism of Water

If the littoral seashore is a poignant symbol in selkie lore, the ocean itself is also a potent metaphor. The symbolism of water is a necessary conversation for the purpose of this thesis. Water has long been an element of communication: ships sail carrying messages, goods, and provisions; mysterious messages in bottles wash up on shore. Biblically, water is a widely used symbol. Water provides for all the life that bursts forward in ancient Israel and Egypt. Jesus Christ visited women at wells; the Pools of Siloam were used to heal infirmities; Noah took to the ark as water cleansed the earth. Jesus Christ taught lessons on the shores of the Sea of Galilee and he turned water into wine.

However, the symbolism of water is not exclusive to the Bible. In fact, many, many scholars currently debate the meaning and symbolism of water throughout various texts. Jason Marc Harris, in his article entitled “Perilous Shores: The Unfathomable Supernaturalism of Water in the 19th-Century Scottish Folklore,” writes that there is a “fundamental struggle to define identity and power amid a chaotic world whose borders ebb and flow with countless perils” (6) in regard to Scottish supernatural folklore. He discusses the seashore as a “metaphysical contact zone along a shore is the realm where the known and unknown worlds collide” (6.) It is generally believed that the ocean is a fierce and formidable place—sailors drown, ships sink, and many natural disasters are results of intense oceanic uprise. On the other hand, the ocean is also a very rewarding place: fishermen make a living, treasure can be found, it is beautiful, it has bountiful
resources, and is a vital ecosystem. The “ocean is a power that is fertile as well as lethal” (9) and even though it is so lethal, the folk return again and again to its shores to thrive.

Whether the ocean treats you gently or roughly, whether it inspires growth or fear, it always tells a story. As the element that can take mold to any shape it is put into, it has a memory that supersedes any other element, so it is no surprise that water plays an important role throughout mythology and folklore. In Gaelic folklore, the hero Fionn MacCumhail proves himself on the water. Legend has it that he built the Giant’s Causeway as stepping stones to his quest to conquer Scotland so that he would not get his feet wet (Wikipedia.) Another source for the legend states that Fionn used the Causeway as a step to his final resting place. It is said that when you look out to sea towards the Isle of Man, you are actually looking at Fionn’s slumped and sleeping body (Carlingford.org.) No matter the story, it is a common theme throughout all of folklore that water is a special supernatural force.

Folklorist Jason Marc Harris writes that “the fierceness of the sea is characterized as a powerful and preternatural hag whose form and force appear to embody the aspects of a sea” (7). In Gaelic folklore, Cliodna is the water goddess who controls the tides (Beck). It is her selkies can thank for their postponed return to the water as a storm is “a temporary victory to momentarily prevent a selkies from returning to the sea” (10). Harris also remarks that water is where humans and magical beings have clandestine meetings. The noise of the crashing waves covers up the conversation of the meeting. Water is also automatically liminal, as discussed previously. It exists “between life and death” (13) and it represents the immediate “struggle to define borders” (23). This liminality and struggle
to define borders is precious, especially considering the beliefs many hold about how selkies came to be.

Heijnsbroek outlines that many Irish and Scottish believe that the “drowned [are] transformed into selkies” (110). Some believe that selkies are descended from Clan Na Mara, which is a branch of the royal family, thus making selkies superior beings (107). Through the metamorphic power of water in combination with royalty, selkies are the beings that rule the water.

On the other hand, there is a family who routinely sings to draw selkies to them when they are fishing so that they may kill the seals and use them for their blubber. Clan Carrigan’s (also spelled “Carrigon”) occupation is fishing, and the meaning of their name is “spear” (Yolen 407.) Jane Yolen, author of “The Literary Underwater World” writes that “we came from the sea, so in our dreams and visions we return” (404). Always, humans will be connected to the ocean in one way or another as they have been for millennia.

Violations of Agency, (Re)Capturing Herself, and The Orientations of Body

Hanging over the existence of selkies is a theme of danger and insidious consequences for anyone who purposefully or accidentally harms or kills one. There are tales, collected by Stith Thompson and other folklorists, that suggest that killing seals is a serious folkloric offense. Thompson writes casually about the danger as if the threat is there but is not something to be overly concerned about. Evident in his book, there is a pressing folk belief to avoid killing seals as “you’d be drowned and your boat lost” (29), which readers see in several of the tales documented. Additionally, the Irish people
compare the killing of the seals with “the death of the albatross in ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’” (7). Thompson mentions the dangers of killing a seal a third time at the very end of the book. He writes “there is no luck in the presence of a seal that is dead” (174). Of these folk beliefs, Thompson does not prescribe to any—but because his informants did or do, the mention of them is important.

Even though selkies sometimes have ominous clouds floating over their heads, they are much more likely to be violated than to incite violations. Kirsten Møllegaard, in discussing Ondine and a novel, Seal Woman (2007) writes that animal bride tales “interrogate woman’s cultural role as other in relation to man” (93). The woman is secondary to the man and her primary purpose is to be the “locus of sexual desire and wellspring of children” (93). Her secondary purpose is to be the “bearer of culture” meaning she is exploited for her exoticness. The idea of “otherness” is a very common theory in queer theory as those who identify as queer are often separated from the rest of society due to their straying from the heteronormative experience. In the stories of selkies, the woman’s otherness is “symbolized by her transbiological transformation from animal to woman and by the assumed subservience of both woman and animal to man” (94). Because she transformed from woman to animal, and because animals are subservient to man, she is automatically destined to subservience. Considering that the transformation of selkies is not typically voluntary, this violation of agency is particularly poignant. Møllegaard’s article posits that Ondine is a “colonial fantasy [of] the sexualized, exotic woman who willingly betrays her own kind out of love for a White man” (101). But this is not what the movie is about. The movie is about a woman who is tired of being forced to live a life she does not wish to lead. The movie about a woman
who is a link in a chain “of women whose entire existence has been defined by their
gender roles” (103). In an effort to reconcile her past with her present, she takes on the
identity of a selkie, even if it was a lie, and this reconciliation further divides her identity.

Because Ondine no longer wishes to be forced by the hand of the drug lords, she assimilates into a world she desperately wants to belong to. While some may argue that her hidden backpack full of drugs is her sealskin, I propose that Syracuse is her sealskin and he is the exception to the expectations of the patriarchal society that is so often imposed upon women. As Møllegaard outlines, “when the seal wife finds her skin, she follows her heart and returns to the sea, thus demonstrating women’s capability of taking agency and breaking free” (94). Thus, when Syracuse is the sealskin and Ondine is compelled to choose him over Vladic, the drug lord, she becomes free. She is exercising her agency to make the choice to stay with her sealskin and not with the abusive “husband.” Møllegaard also asserts that Vladic exercises “men’s hegemonic power over [Ondine] and the way marriage, as a patriarchal institution, enforces [his] right to control [Ondine’s] sexuality” (94). After being subject to the will of someone else, Ondine is finally able to reclaim her personhood. After living a life of being acted upon, she finally has an opportunity to act for herself. She is no longer trapped in a man’s world, a patriarchal system that destines her to fail—now she is herself; she has full autonomy.

In an interview that Møllegaard conducted with the movie’s director, Neil Jordan, Jordan stated that Ondine was “his version of ‘The Little Mermaid’” (98), which is an interesting comparison considering the lack of agency expressed in that Disney film. Sure, some argue that Ariel had the most agency—after all, she did willingly sign Ursula’s contract to trade her voice for the chance to meet her prince. However, the
exchange was coerced. Ursula, a master manipulator, practically forced Ariel to sign her voice away. For Jordan to assert that *Ondine* was his version of Disney’s movie automatically sheds an unpleasant light on the movie. In the traditional tale of the finfolk, as documented by Sigurd Towrie, the mermaid-daughter had one goal “to acquire a human husband, discard her tail, and become a beautiful mortal woman” which is much like Ariel’s goal. Unlike Ariel who has to physically and magically transform with the help of a sea-witch, when the mermaid-daughter was on land, her skirt “formed into a beautiful, embroidered petticoat and while at sea, it was gathered together at the bottom into a tail-like garment that covered her feet.” Her transformation is much more voluntary than that of Ariel’s. And yet, the two stories are wildly similar: both the selkie and the mermaid lose some part of themselves when they come to land. The mermaid loses her voice and the selkie loses her entire identity. Perhaps that is a reason why selkie stories faded away while mermaid stories monopolized the spotlight.

As I conducted research for this thesis, it became very obvious that despite mermaids being better known, selkie stories have not disappeared. In fact, they are just oriented differently now than they were a hundred years ago. Relatively speaking, queer and feminist theories are new to the academic sphere. Queer theory was recognized as a legitimate branch of academia in the 1990s and feminist theory was widely accepted after the third wave of feminism in the 1980s. When these approaches are used as lenses through which to view selkies, the stories transform from ones of subjugation and limitation to ones of reclamation and reorientation. Rather than asking why selkie stories fell out of popularity, we should instead be asking the question of what these stories can provide us with in the 21st century.
Sara Ahmed, author of “Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others,” discusses how bodies are oriented and how we orient our lives around objects or people. Orientation in this sense is a literalization of the figurative orientation of sexual preference; Ahmed is considering sexual orientation in terms of directional orientation. She also notes that “orientate” is naturally a racist term as it refers to othering a group. However, in her introduction, she writes that if orientating is a thing, then similarly bodies can be “knocked off course.” She writes:

“…it is often loss that generates a new direction; when we lose a loved one, for instance, or when a relationship with a loved one ends, it is hard to simply stay on course because love is also what gives us a certain direction. What happens when we are “knocked off course” depends on the psychic and social resources “behind” us… It is usually with the benefit of “hindsight” that we reflect on such moments, where a fork in the road before us opens up and we have to decide what to do, even if the moment does not present itself as a demand for a decision. The “hind” does not always give us a different point of view, yet it does allow those moments to be revisited, to be reinhabited, as moments when we change course” (19).

The redirection that the selkie woman experiences is directly related to a breach of her agency. The hot-blooded young man steals her seal skin and immediately her life is redirected in a way she never would have anticipated. And then when her child finds the skin in the attic and ands it to the selkie mother, her life is redirected yet again. She is given the choice to replace the seal skin where her child found it and continue her life on land; or she can put the seal skin back on and return to the water, her original home. She
is presented with a fork in the road, as Ahmed describes, and she chooses the option that she dreamt of for so long. I do not know if, in hindsight, she feels as if she made the wrong choice; but at least she made the choice to orient herself in a direction that she felt was most appropriate. Perhaps her hindsight is exercised in her ability to look back at her life as a landlocked woman. Wherever her “hindsight” comes from is not as important as the choice she consciously makes to return from whence she came.

The selkie’s loss is not only evident in the stealing of her seal skin. Her agency is lost; her conscious decision making, the very core of her existence is violated. This violation does not direct her or orient her towards a path of her choosing; her life after the theft of her seal skin is planned for her. She will become a wife; she will become a mother; she will perform those duties expected of her; she will support her husband in their effort of raising a family. Adversely, she will not return to the ocean; she will not make a choice for herself. Her agency only exists when she is in seal form, not woman form.

Throughout our lives, we are exposed to violations of our bodies and personhood; agency is removed unwillingly; we are subject to comments from loved ones or even strangers on the function and health of our bodies; our kindnesses are taken for granted and abused; our bodies succumb to their natural tendencies; and some violate the bodies of others in incomprehensible ways. Nevertheless, our bodies persist; women persist. Much like the selkie, we reclaim ourselves after trauma. With that in mind, we begin to see more clearly what selkies can offer us in the 21st century that they did not in the 19th or 20th centuries.
Selkies offer us a folkloric example of what it is like to be subject, to suffer, and then to find one’s own self again, put it on, and return to our natural home. Perhaps this interpretation is just a new way of understanding the complexities of human nature or perhaps this interpretation is a new way of viewing ourselves as we experience trauma. Just as the selkie is patient with her time away from her skin, we must be patient with ourselves as we are disconnected from our core understanding of ourselves. When the body of the selkie reunites with its skin, the being is made whole again. Likewise, when our spirit or psyche is disconnected from our physical bodies, we are afloat on the sea, subject to the current and waves and flotsam; but when the two reconnect we can fight against the current—we can finally be ourselves again.

This reclamation is not a one-time event; it is a recursive process that takes years. We reclaim our bodies and spirits over and over and over again. Bodies undergo change as they grow. Unlike selkies, human women undergo many bodily reclamation: victims of sexual assault or other crimes reclaim their bodies and minds after trauma; pregnant women reclaim their bodies after childbirth; every month, a woman’s body reclaims itself after bleeding profusely; contemporary feminism gives women permission to reclaim their bodies in any way they feel comfortable and empowered. That does not disqualify the comparison, however, because this is the key lesson that the stories of selkies teach us: the fluidity of body and spirit and the (re)combination of the two is much more apparent than we initially consider it.

Nancy Cassell McEntire, a scholar of folklore and folk music from Indiana State University, completed her doctorate fieldwork by bicycle in Scotland and Ireland. In 2010, she wrote an article entitled “Supernatural Beings in the Far North: Folklore, Folk
Belief, and the Selkie” in which she discusses the gender relations of selkies with their human counterparts. She states that it is a matter of balancing power between men and women. She summarizes her main points:

“The male ‘keeps’ the female by claiming a part of her and keeping it hidden from her. The sealskin, so much a part of the woman’s first identity, is taken away from her. As long as it belongs to the man who has found her, she must allow that man to have the position of power. Her life on the land is physically and socially contained. Her world is narrow and its rules, determined by her husband and his community, are rigid and predictable. She is obedient. She bears children and feeds and cares for them lovingly. However, the selkie ‘keeps’ a sense of self through sympathetic connection with her sealskin. Even though she is physically separated from it, she maintains a longing for it and for the freedom that it represents. As soon as she discovers it, she wastes no time in returning to the sea” (135).

The female selkie is stuck, her presence being controlled by the man who first found her lone sealskin on the rocks. But once she reclaims her sealskin, she wastes no time—the ocean is her number one priority and thought. When she does reclaim her body and her sealskin, some could say that she is acting selfishly by returning to the sea.

This reclamation is not a selfish one though. This reclamation is one of power and fortitude. She knows what she needs to do and that is return to her original home and to herself. When women stand up to captors or abusers, they are not doing it out of selfishness; they are doing it because they have to. They do it because they are in a state
of self-preservation. And once they do reclaim and recapture themselves and overcome those violations, they are better for it.

**Conclusion: What Selkies Teach Us Now**

Even though selkies have faded into the background of actively circulating folklore, their lessons have not. As any folklorist will tell you, folklore does not persist unless it is meaningful and useful. Selkies teach lessons on independence, strength, the dangerous and systemic subjugation that women experience, and the dedication it takes to remove oneself from situations in which one is uncomfortable or not thriving. Selkies teach lessons of survival, not selfishness. The selkie persists because she is strong, independent, resourceful, resilient, persevering, sensual and sexual, unafraid, and self-reliant. The selkie woman is unafraid of her strength and will not hesitate to use it if necessary. She understands the power that is given when one makes a choice. She understands the power of agency and how wicked it is when agency is taken away or ignored. Yes, selkies may not be as popular as mermaids are but the stories still have great lessons and deep symbolism embedded in them. Folklore that is meaningful will never become obsolete. We need these stories. The stories of selkies do not need to resolve anything for us, they just need to tell it how it is.

The liminal existence of selkies is a representation of power. She has the ability to choose land or sea, human or animal, family or solitude. And in that power, she chooses the place where she most belongs. Selkie stories teach lessons of independence, strength, and power; they warn against delving into the unknown; they celebrate womanhood. Contemporary womanhood deals with many dualities: the paradox between domesticity
and independence; the juxtaposition of subjugation and freedom. Selkies do not resolve these issues by any means, but the symbolic articulation of these issues is why the stories have persisted for so long. To encounter a tale that represents what one struggles with is potentially both therapeutic and terrifying. Until a story finds you, you bear the burden on your own; until the story manifests its lesson to you, you are alone in your struggle.

If the presence of selkie stories in popular culture, art, or even anthologies of folk tales increases, I anticipate that more folks will relate to the lessons taught by the stories. Subjection, loss of agency, violation of body, and orientation of self are all valuable lessons that are taught in other folktales, surely. But the poignancy that selkie stories carry is incomparable. After all, it was through the tales of selkies that I realized by own static existence. As I wrote this thesis, I began to understand just how necessary these stories are to my learning—without them, I would never have recognized just how trapped I was in elements of my own life. Just as selkies make the choice to leave their terrestrial homes in favor of their oceanic ones, I chose to leave the life that did not guarantee agency and freedom and independence in favor of a life that offered choices, strength, and power. Selkies teach us to own our narratives, and I have learned their lesson. My definition of womanhood is enhanced by knowing both the folklore and the messages behind it.
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# LIST OF IMAGES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. “Selkie Soul,” Caroline of The Mercurial Moon</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Screenshot of results of “selkie” on DeviantArt.com</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <em>Kópakonan</em>, Annbjørg Andreasen</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Close up view of <em>Kópakonan</em></td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Faroese stamps produced with the Kópakonan theme</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. “Song of the Sea” (2014) produced and animated by Cartoon Saloon</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>