The Essential Tension of the Selkie Bride: Masculinity/Femininity

Ava McCartin

Dr. Larson Harris

Honors Distinction Project

Spring 2021

Abstract

This paper seeks to overview several imaginings of the "selkie story," a common motif in the canon of Irish folklore, and analyze the tensions within this motif. In doing so, this paper will show how tension between masculinity and femininity is central to this motif, and express the ways in which that tension is present in other binary themes within the texts, such as human/animal, civilization/wildness, natural/supernatural, and terrestrial/aquatic. Associating the masculine with the left side of those binaries and the feminine with the right side of those binaries, this paper argues that they can all be reduced to an essential tension: male and female. Ultimately, this paper seeks to highlight the tension between masculinity and femininity, and use theoretical frameworks to demonstrate how deep rooted this tension is both in the selkie motif, the realm of Irish folklore, and literary fiction conventions as a whole.

The mythological character of the "mermaid" is a semi-aquatic woman, who exists in folkloric traditions globally. While the details of these shape-shifting female motifs differ regionally, they are connected by their shared themes of femininity, liminality, a connection with nature, and discussions of agency in their respective contexts. In Ireland specifically, one particular version of the mermaid motif has endured, namely the half-woman half-seal shapeshifter known as *the Selkie*. According to Patricia Monaghan's *Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore,* the seal woman motif adheres to the general principles below:

> ...it was believed that seals were human beings wearing fur coats. Women of the seal people were thought to make splendid wives, except that their children had webbed toes and fingers. As with the *Swan Maidens*, a man had to steal their animal-cloak and keep it

> hidden, for if the seal woman ever found her skin, she would disappear instantly into the ocean.[1]

Notably, when examining the scholarship and primary source material on this topic, the *selkie*, can also be spelled "silkie," as Monaghan does, or simply as "mermaid," when other attributes indicate she is half seal.[2] Additionally, in all of the stories the selkie is dependent on her sealskin to return to the ocean and assume her natural marine state, though this skin is also often referred to as a "cap," "mantle" or "cloak." For the purpose of this paper, we will examine several different iterations of the selkie both from the late nineteenth century/early twentieth century, and also several contemporary reimaginings of the myths.

Another important note to make before delving into the stories and motifs of the Irish selkie woman is the traditionally Irish belief of "the otherworld," to which all mystical and otherworldly creatures belong. A fitting description of this realm comes from scholars Jan R. Veenstra and Karin Olsen who refer to it as "the invisible world of supernatural agency,"[3] central to most Irish folktales, beliefs, and songs. Within this realm "the spirits of the woods, fields, mountains, rivers, and lakes, the little folk from fairy stories, the familiar spirits of witchcraft lore and the ghostly inhabitants of the four elements"[4] are the main characters, and can interact with the human world in ways that are both nefarious and helpful— though more often the former. This realm, which underlies almost all aspects of Irish folklore— loosely defined as "a chain of transmission that connects generations through a set of beliefs known to a particular community, or a shared store of narratives, or a common musical tradition"[5]-- is understood as its

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[1] Patricia Monaghan, *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore* (Checkmark Books, 2008), 411.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Karin E. Olsen and Jan R. Veenstra, "Preface," in *Airy Nothings: Imagining the Otherworld of Faerie from the Middle Ages to the Age of Reason: Essays in Honour of Alasdair A. MacDonald* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), vii.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Audrey Robitaillié and Marjan Shokouhi, "Introduction: New Perspectives on Irish Folklore," *Estudios Irlandeses* 2, no. 12 (2017): pp. 1-7, https://doi.org/10.24162/ei2017-7497, 1-2.

own domain, and only interacts with the human world through liminal times and spaces. Examples of these liminal moments include, but are never limited to, nightfall/daybreak, changes in seasons, mounds/hills, and in the case of the selkie: shorelines.

With an understanding of the importance and elusiveness of the traditional Irish "otherworld," it becomes possible to explore the position of the selkie as she exists in folktales both within and without "the otherworld." Due to the inherent duplicity of her character, the selkie is able to occupy both realms depending on her form, though this ability is dependent on her ability to possess her removable sealskin. This ability, and unique constraint, makes the selkie stories ripe for interpretation and analysis, as individual tales both conform to and reject aspects of the traditional narrative. Although some aspects of the selkie motif recur more often than others, a integral part of exploring this folklore is the understanding that "'every telling of a myth is part of that myth: there is no Ur-version, no authentic prototype, no true account.'"[6] For our exploration, this idea allows us to examine selkie stories from three different decades, as it establishes that all of the accounts are equally valid in the canon of Irish folklore.

A final area of scholarship before jumping into the texts addresses the collection and preservation of the oral accounts of folklore, primarily organized by the Irish Folklore Commission. The Commission, which was formed in 1935, sought to preserve the culture and heritage of Ireland— a goal certainly connected to the long and bitter struggle Ireland fought to be free from British rule. Predating the commission by nine years is the Folklore of Ireland Society and its journal on Irish folklore and vernacular culture, *Bealoideas*, which still publishes on the subject.[7] Particularly in the wake of the war of Irish Independence, preserving folkloric traditions was seen as tantamount to projecting a strong national history for the people of Ireland and the larger world alike. Another important point to note is the language of these oral

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[6] Ibid., 1.
[7] Rachel B Richardson, "The Great Endeavor," 6.

traditions, many of which had been passed down in the traditional Irish language, which added another layer of urgency to the collection project, as the language steadily declined in popularity. All of that being established, following are summaries and excerpts from several formative selkie tales spanning three centuries.

Two early accounts of the selkie myth appear in Padraic Colum's anthology *A Treasury of Irish Folklore*, which was printed in 1967. The first account, which he calls "The Shannon Mermaid," is sourced from the 1899 edition of the Irish literary magazine *The Gael*. In this version, a man admires a beautiful woman combing her hair on the shoreline— whom he recognizes as a mermaid. Eventually, the man "caught her by the two shoulders of her, and brought her to his house, where his mother lived."[8] From here, the man marries the woman:

> and she had three children to him, and all the time she was doing all the work a woman might do, but never a smile or a laugh out of her, except one day when he was doing something with the child on the floor, playing with it, and then she let the sweetest laugh out of her that ever you heard. Now the man had taken the covering from her that she had the day sitting on the rock, a sort of an oily skin, and he had been told to keep it from her… [9]

It is then revealed that the man had accidentally dropped her oily cloak without realizing, causing his wife to head "down to the shore… with a laugh as never you heard with ringing in it, and into the sea, and she never came back again."[10] This account of "The Shannon Mermaid," is relatively standard as a form of the selkie folklore motif, and adheres to many of the guidelines earlier presented by Monaghan's *Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore*, including the

[8] "The Shannon Mermaid," in *A Treasury of Irish Folklore*, ed. Padraic Colum (New York: Bonanza Books, 1983), 478.
[9] Ibid., 478-9.
[10] Ibid.,479.

inclusion of the “fur coat,” and the importance of hiding it from the woman.[11] Just as outlined in the *Encyclopedia*, as soon as the selkie regains her coat, she regains agency over herself and plunges into the sea, never to be seen again.

Similarly anthologized by Colum is the story of “The Kerry Mermaid,” which he attributes to the June 1903 issue of the same magazine, *The Gael*. In this version, just as in the last, the selkie is spotted on the shoreline while combing her hair; “As soon as she beheld them she seemed to get alarmed, and quick as lightning she disappeared into the water. In her great anxiety to get away she forgot her mantle, and Donal instantly seized it.”[12] Again, just as the man in “The Shannon Mermaid” knew to control the selkie by stealing her seal skin, the man, Donal, in “The Kerry Mermaid” knows to do the same. This is interesting as a recurring plot point within this motif, and also as an indication of the ubiquity of the selkie motif in Irish culture. In both of these stories, the characters know exactly what they are looking at: a selkie. They are aware of her liminal position as a shapeshifting woman, and also already possess the knowledge needed to domesticate her.

The story then goes on to describe thirty years of “loving” marriage between Donal and the selkie, and makes note of their many children. Despite the story’s description of an idyllic seaside life shared by the couple, ultimately it adheres to the conventions of the selkie motif, and the woman does eventually find her hidden sealskin. After her skin falls in front of her while moving, “no sooner did she grasp it than she laughed so loudly that her laugh was heard all over the village… in an instant she regained her former youth and beauty, she no longer cared for husband and children,” and she returned to the sea, where she belonged.[13] No matter how the selkie is treated during her involuntary stay on land, she has an innate longing to return to the

[11] Monaghan,*The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore,* 411.
[12] Michael Reilly, “The Kerry Mermaid,” in *A Treasury of Irish Folklore,* ed. Padraic Colum (New York: Bonanza Books, 1983), 480.
[13] Ibid., 482.

sea, where she can be free. Just as with "The Shannon Mermaid," the Kerry selkie too emits a laugh before deserting her family to return to her natural state in the ocean.

These two short selkie stories, both originating from Munster County and dated around the turn of the twentieth century, share both plot points and themes with each other. Additionally, the stories both adhere to the conventions of the motif outlined by Patricia Monaghan. This motif is similarly described by the scholar Nancy Cassell Mcentire, who presents the same standard summary of a selkie story, and also argues that these stories hinge on three beliefs about seals, namely that "1) seals may have special powers; 2) they can move in and out of society, interacting with people who do not know of their powers; 3) in these interactions, selkies are capable of both compassion and revenge."[14] Another crucial detail included in all of these selkie stories is the duality of life that exists within the seal-woman. As Mcentire puts it, the woman has two distinct states of being: (1) "free and at ease in the world of nature" and (2) the "dutiful wife and mother."[15] Also notable in these texts is that while "free and at ease," the selkie may choose to shed her seal skin or cloak to relax or rejoice on the shoreline, though once a human man is involved, she is forced to confine herself to one mode of being or the other. This motif suggests that the issue of agency is especially connected to gender roles, since when the female selkie exerts agency over herself, she is liminal and able to control her shape, though when the man is in control of the selkie, she is literally forced to exist in a binary as half of herself. This seems to suggest that femininity, in the context of Irish folklore, is connected to concepts of fluidity and liminality, while masculinity is connected deeply to a rigid binary system.

Related to this idea is the work of Helene Cixous, who comments on the fluidity of "woman" in her 1976 article "The Laugh of the Medusa." Though Cixous' piece largely focuses

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[14] Nancy Cassell McEntire, "Supernatural Beings in the Far North: Folklore, Folk Belief, and the Selkie," *Scottish Studies* 35 (2010): p. 120, https://doi.org/10.2218/ss.v35.2692, 134.
[15] Ibid., 127.

on the relationships between language and gender, she also articulates several thoughts about the position of women themselves in society. "On the one hand she has constituted herself necessarily as that 'person' capable of losing a part of herself without losing her integrity," Cixous remarks— commenting on all that has been taken from women by men throughout time, but also astutely, and indirectly, commenting on the selkie motif.[16] "Unlike man… woman couldn't care less about the fear of decapitation (or castration), adventuring, without masculine temerity, into anonymity, which she can merge with without annihilating herself," Cixous furthers, expressing women's association with flux and change.[17] For Cixous, the female association with change is a product of her treatment by male society, and though she stops short of characterizing her idea of masculinity, because, as she puts it, "woman must write woman. And man, man. So only an oblique consideration will be found here of man," the implication is that where women are fluid, men are rigid.[18] Though her work is only marginally related to the discussion here of the selkie motif, her assertions about gender and fluidity further the idea of the selkie woman as a liminal character, and connect her femininity to her status as a shapeshifter.

Dating back even further, to 1866, the tale of "The Silkie Wife," anthologized in the text *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts*, collected by Patrick Kennedy, retains many of the same plot points and motifs. In this iteration of the tale, a fisherman finds two seal skins on the shoreline near his home, and hastily snaches one up knowing it belongs to a selkie. While one selkie was able to plunge back into the sea, "the other wrung her hands, cried, and begged the fisher to restore her property; but he wanted a wife, and would not throw away the chance."[19] Just as in the previous two versions, the man eventually convinces the selkie to join him in his

[16] Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 888.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., 877.
[19] "The Silkie Wife," in *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts*, ed. Patrick Kennedy (London: Macmilland and Company, 1866), 123.

home and bear his children, and the pair live on as a human couple for several years. However unlike the previous two versions, in this text the selkie finds her sealskin and returns to the sea with the help of a male selkie— who finds her skin through some unspecified manner. While this version does vary from the last two in its details, the resolution is the same: the selkie wife abandons her family to return to the sea, while the human husband "was obliged to return sadly to his motherless children and desolate home."[20]

Those remarks about the motherless children and desolate home are the final words printed in this version of "The Silkie Wife," which highlights Mcentire's third point about selkies being capable of "both compassion and revenge."[21] Though the marriage of the selkie and the fisherman is fraught with tension from the start, as he has captured her and kept her against her will, just as in the previous two tales there are descriptions of relative marital happiness in the period between leaving and returning to the sea. These moments highlight the ability of the selkie to adapt to her surroundings, and remind the audience that she is indeed part human woman. However in all of these stories there is no hesitation on the part of the selkie to regain possession of her sealskin, regain agency over her liminal form, and return to the sea without a second thought for her family. This is how Mcentire describes the revenge of the selkie— her decision to leave and not look back.

The motif can be further explored in yet another short story, this one anthologized in Jeremia Curtin's *Tales of the Faeries and of the Ghost World*, which was originally published in 1895. Just like the last three, this story is "collected" from oral traditions, and like "The Kerry Mermaid," and "The Shannon Mermaid," this tale originates from Munster County, in the south of Ireland. Curtin calls this short tale "Tom Moore and the Seal Woman," and just as the previous tales, it conforms to the standard plot points that establish the relationship between the man and

[20] Ibid., 124.
[21] Mcentire., "Supernatural Beings in the Far North," 134.

selkie, though the road to the resolution has marked differences from other tales. Similarly to the men in the previous stories, Tom Moore finds himself in need of a wife, and fortunate enough to come across a selkie maiden basking in her human form. Unlike the other men, Tom first tries to persuade the selkie to join him as his human wife, though when she ignores his advances he snatches her skin and announces "'I'll have this!'"[22] much to the selkie's dismay. Unlike the other texts that gloss over the details of the marriage, Tom Moore's story injects an added element of the human world into the domestication of the selkie: religion. "'Now,' said Tom, 'in the name of God you and I'll go to the priest and get married,'"[23] he announces, not only stripping the selkie of her agency to shapeshift, but also imposing his Christian belief system on her— a creature of the pagan otherworld. Just as with "The Shannon Mermaid," and "The Kerry Mermaid," femininity and masculinity are important to "Tom Moore and the Seal Woman." Like the other men, Tom Moore is responsible for keeping the selkie against her will and imposing his own conceptions of gender relations on her— though the masculinity of Tom Moore not only forces her into a gender binary, but also a religious binary.

Since this is just a short tale collected orally, the text does not delve into the details of the marriage ceremony, nor further explore the relationship between the "Moore's" and their faith, but the inclusion of the Christian ceremony is certainly a break from the standard motif. When exploring this addition through a critical gender lens, it seems that Tom Moore is not only stripping the female selkie of her ability to shapeshift, but also from her very roots as a pagan creature. Since the selkie is a creature of the otherworld, which is inherently magical and ritualistic, the adherence to Christian traditions is at odds with her very existence. This suggests that the masculinity of Tom Moore is prescriptive and imposing on more than one level that will

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[22] "Tom Moore and the Seal Woman," in *Tales of the Faeries and of the Ghost World*, ed. Jerimia Curtin (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1895), 152.
[23] Ibid., 152.

later be discussed in relation to the work of Sherry B. Ortner. Additionally, this version of the story includes a portion in which the selkie wife sees other men from the village hunting seals, which disturbs her to her very core. As much as the selkie is human, she is also seal, and all of the other seals in the ocean are her kin.

While the selkie motif is certainly established in the early nineteenth and twentieth century canon of Irish folklore, she is also still very much alive in modern Irish storytelling. In a more recent iteration of the selkie tale, Irish animation studio Cartoon Saloon presents the traditional selkie tale to modern audiences through animation, and is able to retain the spirit of the folklore while providing a modern twist. The Oscar nominated film, *Song of the Sea*, was released in 2015, and follows the adventures of a young boy named Ben and his mute younger sister named Saoirse, who is revealed to be a selkie herself.[24] While the selkie imagery is heavy from the very opening of the film, unlike earlier tales that focus on the relationship between the selkie and husband, *Song of the Sea* explores the behavior of the children left behind. Interestingly enough, rather than set up the film with the traditional tension between husband and shapeshifter wife, storyteller Tomm Moore presents the tension as being between nature and civilization. The selkie wife and mother, Bronach, is the personification of nature and rural Ireland, while her husband and his world is firmly planted in culture and civilization. This theme continues to run throughout the film, which critics have described as a "tension between progress and the past," and we will argue is a stand-in for the traditional tension between masculinity and femininity.[25]

While the film, which is notably geared towards an audience of children, can certainly stand alone as a masterful work of storytelling and animation— it can also be looked at as the

[24] Mark O'Connell, "Story Time," *The New Yorker Magazine*, December 21, 2020, 29.
[25] Liam Burke "Swan Song: Lamenting Ireland's Traditional Past in 'Song of the Sea,'" *Estudios Ireland*, no. 11 (2016), https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A458549976/LitRC?u=viva_roanoke&sid=LitRC&xid=a773bf77.

natural progression of the selkie motif into the twenty-first century. Just as in the earlier iterations of the tale the selkie is forced to commit to just one side of a binary: human or seal, terrestrial or aquatic, nature or culture. In this film however, the selkie at the heart of the plot is Saoirse, Bronach's child. Just as in the traditional tellings, Saoirse's coat has been locked away by a man, though this time it is her father, fearing she may leave him for the sea just like his wife. Further, Saoirse is sent away to the city, causing her to become sicker and sicker being away from both the sea and her skin. As the film progresses, it becomes clear that Saoirse is not able to survive without a connection to her selkie half, prompting her family to reunite her with her lost coat. Upon this reunion however, Saoirse is presented with a choice: she can either join her mother as a seal, or relinquish her coat and shapeshifting abilities to live in the human world with the rest of her family. Ultimately, Saoirse decides for herself to remain human, while Bronach returns to the otherworld with her seal kin.

Such a choice reflects a more nuanced view of the relationship between the selkie and the human, while also succeeding in retaining the binary tension that dominates the selkie-marriage motif. Just as Mcentire described, the selkie woman must occupy one of two roles, though in this case, she has the agency to choose for herself. While beautifully expressed in this film, the association between femininity and nature, versus masculinity and culture, is nothing new, and can be dated back to the scholarly work of Sherry B. Ortner in the 1970s.

In her 1974 piece "Is Female to Male to Female as Nature is to Culture?," Ortner argues that every civilization is:

> engaged in the process of generating and sustaining systems of meaningful forms (symbols, artifacts, etc.) by means of which humanity transcends the givens of a natural existence, bends them to its purposes, controls them in its interest. We may thus broadly

> equate culture with the notion of human consciousness, or with the products of human consciousness… by means of which humanity attempts to assert control over nature.[26]

In this way she both constructs a relationship between masculinity/ culture and femininity/nature, and then identifies a cross cultural desire for civilization to control nature, just as masculinity seeks to control femininity. The motif of the selkie, in which the civilized male captures and domesticates the otherworldly woman is especially ripe for analysis through this lens. The male character acts as a civilizing force, seeking to "bend" the woman to his purpose and "control" her in his interest— namely to bear his children and keep his home. Conversely the selkie is the epitome of the natural world— at home in the sea, she is beautiful and unconstrained by the developing world around her.

To further drive this point, Ortner asserts that it is women who are "identified or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men, who are identified with culture" and then further argues that "since it is always culture's project to subsume and transcend nature, if women are considered part of nature, then culture would find it 'natural' to subordinate, not to say, oppress them."[27] While this astutely characterizes much of the tension central to the selkie marriage motif, there are aspects of the selkie story specifically that further enhance this assertion. The most obvious being that the selkie, while female, is also distinctly a part of the animal, and Irish otherworld— designating her as not only being associated with nature, but being an actual part of nature as well. The fact that the selkie, except in the case of the contemporary *Song of the Sea* version, remains nameless, despite the human male often being given a name, suggests that she is not truly or purely human, but partly remains in the wordless realm of nature. The next is that the male in these stories, is often a fisherman— as in the case of

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[26] Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in *Women, Culture, and Society*, ed. M.Z. Rozaldo and L. Lamphere, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 72.
[27] Ortner,"Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?," 73.

"The Kerry Mermaid," "The Silkie Wife," "Tom Moore and the Seal Woman," and *Song of the Sea*— adding another layer to the imagery of civilization domesticating and controlling nature. The fishermen literally attempt to dominate the sea by using their man-made tools and resources to take what they need from the sea and leave destruction in their wake. In this way, the relationship between masculinity and femininity in the context of selkie stories becomes more polarized, as the male characters are further connected to culture through their names and professions in addition to their actions and behaviors. Gregory Darwin describes these two characters as "opposite poles of a number of dichotomies: male and female, human and animal, civilized and wild, terrestrial and aquatic, natural and supernatural," and in the following paragraphs we will exemplify how those dichotomies can be observed in the aforementioned stories, and why they boil down to one essential tension: masculinity vs femininity.[28]

Human and Animal

Beginning with the tension between human and animal, we return to the original four texts and the film, *Song of the Sea*— as each one features a male husband and a female semi-zoomorphic shapeshifter. Despite the proposed binary, it is important to note that the selkie herself is not fully an animal, and when she shapeshifts it is her entire being that changes. Unlike traditional "mermaids," the selkie is *either* in fully human form or fully in seal form, never both, and the male characters are already aware of this. In "The Shannon Mermaid," this understanding is made clear by the narrator who recollects "they were forever seeing a woman on the point, and they knew it was the mermaid that was ever living in the river."[29] Once the man captures the selkie and takes her home, he hides her cloak, since "he has been told to keep it

[28] Gregory Darwin, "On Mermaids, Meroveus, and Mélusine: Reading the Irish Seal Woman and Mélusine as Origin Legend," *Folklore* 126, no. 2 (April 2015): pp. 123-141, https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587x.2015.1024998, 125.
[29] "The Shannon Mermaid," 478.

from her and put it away."[30]Again, this makes it clear that the humans in the area possessed the knowledge not just of the selkies, but also of how to domesticate them. Donal, in "The Kerry Mermaid," has similar knowledge, seizing a selkie skin as a young woman disappears and announcing "'[t]hat was the mermaid, or sea-nymph, about which we have heard so much.'"[31] Just as in "The Shannon Mermaid," once Donal takes the cloak "he folded it carefully and secured it inside his overcoat."[32] Despite not having interacted with these mythical women before, the men in the stories are aware of their existence, and possess the knowledge needed to force them into the human half of the binary. In this way, the human/animal binary not only refers to the marital relationship between the human and the selkie, but also the unitary form imposed on the selkie, who otherwise could move between forms.

What is particularly interesting about the rigidity of this binary is its method of enforcement. On her own, the selkie is freely able to shift back and forth through her two distinct forms, so long as she remains in possession of her skin. What is particularly frustrating in these texts is that there seems to be no obvious reason why the selkie wife, if she chose to, would be unable to continue to do so while married to a human. This understanding highlights the inherent problem in their marriage: she is both an unwilling wife, and an unwilling human. It is solely because of the actions of the human husband that the selkie is trapped in her human form. Unmolested, the selkie is not burdened by the human/seal binary she exists within, and it is not until her capture that she becomes controlled by the binaries her husband forces upon her.

This tension is directly created from the desire of the husband to completely control and isolate the wife, something that can be likened to Ortner's "notion that the domestic unit— the biological family charged with reproducing and socializing new members of the society— is

[30] Ibid.
[31] O'Reilly, "The Kerry Mermaid," 480.
[32] Ibid.

opposed to the public entity," which she asserts has been developed by a culture of masculinity.[33] While Ortner is discussing real, human marriages, her assertion can also be applied to these examples of fictional human/selkie marriages, in which "the domestic unit," is the same, but "the public entity" refers to the selkie's other life in the ocean. Just as she argues human marriages render a woman incompatible with larger society, selkie marriages, due to the human husband, remove the selkie from her interactions with her pre-marriage life. Looking at the human/animal binary present in these stories in this way creates a deeper connection between it and the male/female binary, as it seems that without the introduction of the human male, there would be no tension between animal/human— or that tension would be greatly diminished. In the end of this motif, "the selkie woman does not even feel torn about leaving her human family, so clear and paramount is it that she does not belong in the human world."[34]

Civilization and Wildness

Moving on to the tension between civilization and wildness, we return again to the texts, beginning with the film *Song of the Sea*. As mentioned earlier, *Song of the Sea* is significant because of its rich imagery of traditional Irish folklore, and the plot's focus on the children left behind by the selkie wife. The central plot in this film is the journey of the two children, Ben and Saoirse, who are being sent away from their rural, seaside home to Dublin to live with their grandmother. Notably, the older child Ben is completely human, while it is revealed that the younger Saoirse is a selkie like her mother, and the further Saoirse gets from the ocean, the less healthy she becomes. This move is intrinsically connected to the tension between civilization and wilderness, first mentioned by Darwin, that seems to exist in all of the selkie myths. Scholar Liam Burke argues that director Tomm Moore:

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[33] Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?," 78.

[34] Jessica Campbell, "Real Women Have Skins: The Enchanted Bride Tale in *Her Body and Other Parties*," *Marvels & Tales* 33, no. 2 (2019): 308.

> using the structure of the road movie… illustrates this theme through an urban/rural divide with Dublin depicted as a Dickensian slum replete with impenetrable fog and burnt out cars while the closer the protagonists get to their coastal destination the more lush and magical their adventures become.[35]

In this way, by largely removing Bronah, the mother selkie, from the narrative, *Song of the Sea* illustrates how a nature/culture divide can substitute for a maculine/feminine tension because of their inherent likenesses to begin with. While Conor is certainly upset about the loss of his wife, the details of their marriage are not provided, and the prepubescent youth of the two protagonist children similarly dulls the gender tension. Notably, the film breaks with selkie convention at the end when Saoirse is presented with the choice to become either fully human or fully seal— and that choice is constructed as a choice between civilization and wildness rather than masculinity and femininity. In being able to make that choice, the film offers agency to the feminine characters in a way that does not happen in the early tellings of the folklore. Despite this, the film adheres to many of the traditional selkie, and more so otherworldly conventions discussed at the beginning of this paper, solidly cementing itself as a "selkie story."

Similarly in the textual examples of the selkie stories, the connection between the civilized/wild tension and the maculine/feminine tension can be observed through the aforementioned naming habits in these texts. While these are fictional accounts of Irish folklore, the significance of naming/ being unnamed is important to understand in the context of both male/female and civilized/wild tensions. In all four textual examples of traditional Irish selkie stories, the female selkie is left unnamed, and presumably is referred to by her husband's surname after marriage. Scholars Rachel D. Robnett, Marielle Wertheimer, and Harriet R. Tennebaum, in their research on marriage traditions and naming, cite "the connection between

[35] Burke, "Swan Song: Lamenting Ireland's Traditional Past in Song of the Sea."

names and identity" as one of the primary reasons women favor keeping their maiden name over their husbands upon marriage.[36] Again, while their research pertained to naming practices among contemporary women, the connection between name and identity can solidly be applied to the characters in the selkie myths. While the human husband is often named, the decision to deny a name to the selkie, deeply connected with the longstanding tradition of women adopting their husband's surname in Ireland and other parts of the world, furthers her association with the wilderness rather than civilization. The role of the human husband, who asserts his masculinity and mark of civilization through his name, then connects the tension between civilization and wildness to the tension between masculinity and femininity.

A final area for analysis of the relationship between civilization and wildness develops out of understanding the human husband as "the fisherman," and the selkie as a "product" of the sea. While all of the men in the five selkie stories addressed in this text are fishermen, it's relevant to note that in her piece "The Irish Mermaid," Muller notes that "the man is a farmer and/or fisherman," which suggests that the man is not always a fisherman. However, even as a farmer the man can be looked at as someone who is "exploiting" or profiting from nature.[37]

Ortner characterizes this exploitation in the following way, specifically connecting it to masculinity: "the distinctiveness of culture rests precisely on the fact that it can under most circumstances transcend natural conditions and turn them into its purposes."[38] She continues on, asserting that "culture… [associated with masculinity] asserts itself to be not only distinct from but superior to nature, and that sense of distinctiveness and superiority rests precisely on the

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[36] Rachael D. Robnett, Marielle Wertheimer, and Harriet R. Tenenbaum, "Does a Woman's Marital Surname Choice Influence Perceptions of Her Husband? An Analysis Focusing on Gender-Typed Traits and Relationship Power Dynamics," *Sex Roles* 79, no. 1-2 (2017): pp. 59-71, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0856-6.
[37] Slyvie Muller, "The Irish Mermaid," in *Irish Ethnologies*, ed. Diarmuid O Giollain (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 183.
[38] Ortner,"Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?," 73.

ability to transform— to "socialize" and "culturalize" nature."[39] From Ortner's analysis, we can observe how the human husband, specifically in his role as fisherman, can be construed as transcending the natural condition of the selkie, by stealing or "harvesting" her cloak, and using her for his purpose— the purpose being his wife. Further, by forcing the selkie into the human half of her binary, the husband undoubtedly "socializes" and "culturalizes" the otherworldly female. In light of this final analysis, it becomes clear that the tension between civilization and wildness within these selkie texts cannot be divorced from the essential tension between masculinity and femininity.

Natural and Supernatural

Another tension that Darwin mentions within these stories is the relationship between the natural and supernatural, or the world and the *otherworld*. In order to delve into the analysis of this tension, it is first important to establish the selkie as both an otherworldly and a liminal creature. In defining liminality, scholar Victor Turner asserts that "the attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* ('threshhold people') are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space."[40] The selkie, as a liminal personae, is both within and without, simultaneously existing as both a human and a seal, slipping her seal skin on and off to change form— and it is for these reasons that Jessica Campbell describes the selkie as "alluring but ultimately incomprehensible."[41] Similarly, the Irish *otherworld* as a whole is inherently liminal, exemplified by its existence alongside the physical, human world, and the ability of its inhabitant to slip and and out between realms. The selkie then, is solidly planted on the "supernatural" side of this dichotomy, while the human husband is squarely natural.

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[39] Ibid., 73.
[40] 25. Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969), 359.
[41] Campbell, "Real Women Have Skins," 309.

The tension thus arises between the man and the selkie not only because of her otherworldly status, but by the associated divisions between the two worlds. In "Tom Moore and the Seal Woman," this division is best exemplified by Moore's decision to marry the selkie in a specifically religious ceremony. After capturing his bride, Moore proclaims "'In the name of God you and I will go to the priest and get married,'" signaling an even larger break between the selkie and her home in the *otherworld*.[42] Tom Moore is then not only asserting his dominance over the selkie through capture, but also by forcing her to adopt the customs of his natural world. Further, before Tom Moore succeeds in capturing the selkie, the audience is told that he believes "God sent her to him," which highlights the ideological divide between the "natural world" and "otherworld." Christianity, in this sense, is a product of the masculine, natural world, and this is furthered by the patriarchal tendencies imposed on wives by traditional, and certainly nineteenth century Irish marriage. While the selkie is a character from the traditional Irish otherworld, the "natural" Tom Moore rationalizes her as something, not someone, sent from his Christian god, justifying his decision to force her into Christian marriage.

Campbell describes this aspect of the motif as positioning "the man's control over the seal woman as the kind of control some men would like to have over women," a point that is supported by the fact that in all four of the early texts, even without discussions of the marriage ceremony, the selkie is specifically described as a proper wife.[43] In "The Shannon Mermaid," she is described as "doing all the work that a woman might do,"[44] while "The Kerry Mermaid" is noted for being "a dutiful wife and exemplary mother."[45] In "The Silkie Wife," the audience is told that the selkie "put on some woman's clothing, which he brought her from his cottage, followed him home, and became his wife," before continuing to perform her womanly duty by

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[42] "Tom Moore and the Seal Woman," 152.
[43] Campbell, "Real Women Have Skins," 309.
[44] "The Shannon Mermaid," 478.
[45] O'Reilly, "The Kerry Mermaid," 481.

bearing two children to her husband. In Tom Moore's story, the selkie is described as "good a woman as ever went into a man's house," and she bears him five children, "three sons and two daughters."[46] In describing this pattern, Campbell notes "the man seems to take it as a matter of course that the selkie woman should follow him home and act as his wife simply because he insists."[47]

Through these descriptions, the stories suggest that it's possible to, at least for many years, remove the selkie from her supernatural habits and behaviors through imposing the norms of the natural world. As it is the man that is the one imposing *his* customs on her, this too can be understood as a tension between masculinity and femininity within the texts. An important distinction, though, is the fact that even after years of domestication the selkie never stops belonging to the supernatural world, and as soon as she is able to regain her skin, and her agency, she immediately returns to the water. This aspect of the story seems to suggest that while the natural world may be able to intermittently control the supernatural, there are clear limitations to achieving this goal through coercion and force alone.

Terrestrial and Aquatic

The final area of analysis touched on by Darwin involves the terrestrial vs aquatic binary, which is related to the other tensions previously discussed in these texts. Drawing on Ortner's research associating female to nature and male to culture, scholar Slyvie Muller touches on the association between women and water creatures in her piece "The Irish Mermaid Man's Alliance to Woman, Nature, and Death." In this piece, Muller traces the origins of the Irish mermaid/ selkie to mermaids in other cultures, including the Greek sirens, and Middle Eastern goddesses.[48] In her treatment of the Greek sirens, she notes their association with "Aphrodite, goddess of

[46] "Tom Moore and the Seal Woman," 153.
[47] Campbell, "Real Women Have Skins," 309.
[48] Muller, "The Irish Mermaid," 181.

vegetation, fertility, and love," and also "with water and flowers."[49] Diving deeper into this association, Muller also explains the connection between these feminine creatures and the sea, explaining that "these goddesses sponsored forms of 'sacred marriage' and sacred prostitution that were supposed to stimulate fertility: by *imaginative magic*, in engorging the sexual organs with *water.*"[50]

Though the selkies in these texts are not described as prostitutes or even overtly sexual creatures, most include comments about the impossible beauty of the woman. "The Shannon Mermaid" is described as "the beautifullest woman ever you'd see'd, with the golden hair and fair skin of her,"[51] while the two silkies in "The Silkie Wife," are described simply as "beautiful."[52] In "Tom Moore and the Seal Woman," the moment Tom sees the selkie he thinks "he saw the finest woman ever seen in that part of the kingdom," pointing to the almost impossible beauty of the selkie, and later he reflects on how she looked "passing her shapely fingers through her bewitching ringlets".[53] So, while Mueller is discussing the Greek "mermaids" specifically as being the ones associated with sexual fertility through water, her research points to a cross-cultural and lasting association between beautiful female creatures and water.

Jessica Campbell too touches on the significance of supernatural women being associated with water, though she expands her scope to also comment on female creatures associated with the sky. In commenting on both, she attributes "the prevalence of sea creatures and birds in animal bride tales to the fact that those species are representatives of the sea and sky—realms crucial to human survival but unsuitable for human dwelling and resistant to human manipulation," and further she goes on to add that "[t]o possess a creature of the sea or sky,

[49] Ibid., 180-1.
[50] Ibid., 181.
[51] "The Shannon Mermaid," 478.
[52] "The Silkie Wife," 123.
[53] "Tom Moore and the Seal Woman," 151.

however briefly, is to taste an otherwise inaccessible sovereignty."[54] In this way, the connections between the realms of the creatures and the gender of their inhabitants is heightened, as the male character, dependent on the terrestrial plane, is even further removed from the female selkie who belongs on the aquatic plane.

This point too is exemplified by "Tom Moore and the Seal Woman," specifically the moment he first sees the selkie. While Tom watches the sleeping selkie from the land, he worries about what will happen to her when the tide comes in, and he shouts "Wake up!... if the tide comes 'twill drown you."[55] Ignorant to her position as a creature of the aquatic plane, Tom's concerns are unfounded, prompting the selkie to raise her head and laugh at his suggestion. It is only the next day, after "Tom spent the day cursing himself for not taking the woman from the rock when it was God that sent her to him," that he returns to take her from the water.[56] What is important about this fact, that he waited a full day, is that when Tom sees her in the same spot the next day, he already knows the tide will not drown her. Though the aquatic plane is hostile to him, for the selkie it will do no harm— despite this, he snatches her seal skin and forces her onto the terrestrial plane. The male character, by possessing a "creature of the sea or sky," has succeeded in dominating a realm that should be inaccessible to him, just how he does so by forcing the selkie into any and all of these binaries.

In "The Kerry Mermaid" too, the tale makes it clear that the ocean is hostile to the human characters, who belong on land. The path that the fishermen take home at dawn, where Donal meets his selkie, is described as "a short, narrow, rocky path between a tall cliff, and at high water this path was impassable," further, the audience is told "many a life was sacrificed in crossing this short but dangerous path."[57] It is on this path, which has been described as being so

[54]Campbell, "Real Women Have Skins," 308.
[55] "Tom Moore and the Seal Woman," 151.
[56] Ibid., 152.
[57]O'Reilly, "The Kerry Mermaid," 479.

treacherous, that Donal and his men encounter the selkie, who appears unbothered by any sort of danger, as she is "seated on a rock… adjusting her tresses." As soon as Donal sees the woman in this place with such a demeanor, he is cued into the fact that she is a selkie, and snatches her cloak right up. Despite the selkie's threats to "send a mighty wave against the cliff that would overwhelm them and sweep them into the depths of the ocean," "this threat did not in the least alarm Donal, for he had often heard that a mermaid had no more power than any other woman after having parted with her mysterious mantle."[58]By taking possession of a sea creature here, Donal has not only succeeded in domesticating the selkie, but also the threat of the ocean (at least for the time being); to use Campbell's language, he has "taste[d] an otherwise inaccessible sovereignty."[59] On her own, the selkie is able to exist in both the female aquatic realm and the male terrestrial realm, but when the man imposes his masculinity and customs on her, she loses that agency.

We argue that the association between these feminine creatures and the aquatic is further developed by the associations between femininity and liminality too. As discussed in the previous section, liminality is associated with states of transition and flux— no better exemplified than by the ocean and shoreline. As the selkies are almost always first spotted and captured on the shoreline, there is a clear connection between the selkies, the shoreline, and liminality.

In *The Kerry Mermaid*, this sense of liminality is heighted as the setting is described as "dark, but not too dark for the men to discern that the tide was receding," and the selkie is spotted "seated on a rock" at the edge of said receding shoreline.[60] Not only is the selkie situated in a liminal position on the shoreline, she is also occupying that position as the sun comes up at

[58] Ibid., 480.
[59] Campbell, "Real Women Have Skins," 308.
[60] O'Reilly, "The Kerry Mermaid," 480-1.

the break of day— as “a tinge of gray faintly illuminating the mottled clouds in the eastern sky was heralding the approach of dawn.”[61]The sky is neither light nor dark, the time is neither morning nor night, and this imagery furthers the liminality of the setting. Later in the tale, as Donal reflects back on his fascination with the selkie, it is mentioned that “Donal first became enamoured of her when he saw her seated on that rock beneath the cliffs at early dawn,” continuing to draw on those themes of liminality even after the marriage.[62] Even after she has been forced onto the terrestrial plane, Donal remembers her as a liminal creature. Similarly in “The Silkie Wife,” the fisherman spots the selkie similarly at “a ridge of rock… sheltered by rocks on the landward side.”[63] Here too, the selkie is on a rocky shoreline abutting the ocean. Finally in “Tom Moore and the Seal Woman,” “he saw the finest woman ever seen in that part of the kingdom, sitting on a rock, fast asleep.”[64] In “Tom Moore,” the selkie is in such a liminal position that the tide eventually sweeps her away the first time she is noticed by Tom Moore.

In all of these three early texts, the selkie is situated as a liminal creature occupying a liminal space: the shoreline, which Brady Hammond asserts “has long been associated with tropes of liminality with land a stable foundation and the ocean a fluid unknown.”[65] This brings us back to our discussion of masculinity and femininity. Taking Hammond’s assertion that the shoreline is associated with liminality, while the land has been associated with stability, we can observe how femininity is associated with the shoreline, and masculinity is associated with the earth, or to use Darwin’s language, the aquatic and terrestrial. The selkie is a shapeshifter who is ill-suited to binaries and stability, while the human husband is a fisherman who depends on the stability of solid land. Her liminality is connected to all of her other attributes, including her

[61] Ibid., 479.
[62] Ibid., 181.
[63] “The Silkie Wife,” 123.
[64] “Tom Moore and the Seal Woman,”151.
[65] Brady Hammond, ““The Shoreline in the Sea: Liminal Spaces in the Films of James Cameron,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies 27*, no. 5 (2013): accessed March 29, 2021, doi:10.1080/10304312.2013.824864, 690.

femininity, while the human husband is solidly and unwaveringly a creature of land. As Hammond puts it, "the shoreline is this a place where the unknown ocean meets well-defined land to create a liminal space which is constant, yet at the same time ephemeral," or in this case, where the otherworldly selkie woman meets the earthly human man.[66]

Additional Analysis: Transfer of Possession of the Sealskin

Other points of interest within these texts that are not addressed by Darwin may look at the transfer of possession of the selkie's cloak, and how that is connected to the gender of the possessor. In these early texts, the story begins with the selkie squarely in possession of her skin. If the selkie has taken off her skin, it is with the idea in mind that it is wholly and completely a piece of her being, and she is "free and at ease in the world of nature."[67] When the skin is taken from her by the male characters, the language used is aggressive. In "The Shannon Mermaid," the fisherman "crept up behind her when she was not knowing it, and caught her by her two shoulders."[68] Here, the selkie is "caught," the same language one may use to discuss catching a fish or other animal. The action is deliberate, and it is carried out by a man. In "The Kerry Mermaid," the selkie scrambles to get away, allowing Donal to "seize" her cloak and hold it "firmly in his grasp."[69] Again, the language is combative, as Donal has deliberately taken something from her, and done so with force. Tom Moore, too, takes the cloak by force, taking it from her head and announcing his intention to trap her with it. In "The Silkie Wife," the initial seizure of the cloak is slightly different than in the other three, as the fisherman begins by taking the sealskin to "examine it."[70] However, though the fisherman may not have instantly picked it up for himself to have, the audience is told "the women, catching sight of him, screamed out, and

[66]Hammond,"The Shoreline in the Sea," 690.
[67]McEntire, "Supernatural Beings in the Far North," 134.
[68]"The Shannon Mermaid," 478.
[69]O'Reilly, "The Kerry Mermaid," 480.
[70]"The Silkie Wife," 123.

ran to get possession of the skins."[71] Despite the fact that the selkie "begged the fisher to restore her property," "he wanted a wife, and would not throw away the chance."[72] Here too, the transfer of possession from the selkie to the human man becomes forceful and deliberate.

Alternatively, when the possession of the sealskin transfers back to the selkie, the tone and language of the situation is very different. In none of these four early texts are the selkies ever described as actively looking for their cloaks, rather they eventually regain their skins through a mixture of chance and carelessness on the parts of their husbands. While the exact way in which the selkie finds her sealskin differs in each account, none of these four involve force. Especially when compared to how aggressively the selkie skins are taken from the women, the coincidental tone that dominates the moment they regain them further highlights the tension between masculinity and femininity: while the men take what they want with violence, the women bide their time, knowing they will eventually find the skin again.

In "The Shannon Mermaid," the selkie finds her cloak "when the man came in looking for the net, and he began to throw things about on the shelf looking for it."[73] In his frenzy to find his fishing net, the man is distracted, and does not exercise care to keep the sealskin hidden. "Well," the narrator says, "he threw down an old sack out of the way of him, and with it sure the covering fell down," which allows the selkie to quickly capitalize on this moment of carelessness and regain control over her life.[74] Unlike when the skin is first taken by the man, there is no struggle between the pair. Also, despite years of marriage and parenting, seven years in the case of "The Shannon Mermaid," the selkie's departure is as abrupt as her capture: "She put the child to stand with the chair, went and took the covering and out of the door with it before the man had

[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.
[73] "The Shannon Mermaid," 479.
[74] Ibid.

time to get down and stop her… with a laugh as never you heard."[75] Unlike when her skin is taken from her, the selkie does not need to use force to take her skin back. Instead, the skin is presented to her by the carelessness of the human man, and she is able to reclaim what is hers without struggle.

Similarly, in "The Kerry Mermaid," the selkie finds her skin too through carelessness on the part of her husband. The audience is told that after thirty years of marriage, Donal and the selkie's family has grown very wealthy, and thus decided to move to the city. It is during this move that the selkie finds her skin. This moment is notable for several reasons, one of which being the specific proposed change in location for the family. The family is meant to move from the coastal fishing town, which, just as in *Song of the Sea*, exemplifies rural Ireland, to a "fine residence in the capital city of the province," which exemplifies the industrial, "civilized" Ireland.[76] This move would be further removing the selkie from her connection to the "wildness" side of the "civilization vs wildness" dichotomy. Secondly, moving family homes is a transition in and of itself, which can be looked at as a liminal time, as the family is moving from one place to another. When the selkie finds her skin, "the heavy-laden wagons were ready to proceed to the city," and "the family were seated in their coaches ready for the journey."[77] This imagery sets a liminal tone, as the family is literally in the process of transitioning from one home to another.

Right before the family leaves however, the narrator mentions that "the mother alighted from her coach and returned to the house presumably for something she had forgotten, or perhaps to take another look at the interior of the home."[78] What the narrator does not do, is directly say that the selkie returns inside to look for her skin. Nevertheless, the selkie returns to the old home, which is described as "empty of everything worth removing" and finds an old

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[75] Ibid.
[76] O'Reilly, "The Kerry Mermaid," 482.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.

broken trunk, with its "contents… scattered broadcast on the floor," including "an old dust-covered, well-worn garment."[79] Just as with "The Shannon Mermaid," due to a mixture of coincidence and carelessness on the part of the man, the selkie finds her skin, and "no sooner did she grasp it than she laughed so loudly her laugh was heard all over the village… and swifter than the velocity of the March winds she returned to her beloved Tirnanog on the blue rim of the western ocean."[80]

These examples from both "The Shannon Mermaid" and "The Kerry Mermaid" exemplify a sharp contrast between the behaviors of the selkie and the behaviors of the husband with respect to possession. Again, while the men use force to steal the skins, the female selkies do not. Rather, as women stripped of agency, they are resigned to wait for a moment in which the man lets his guard down, and through carelessness allows her to retake what is hers. By tossing the selkie's skin down right in front of her, the man in "The Shannon Mermaid," demonstrates this carelessness, while Donal leaving the skin in a pile of rubbish at the old house is possibly even more careless. The narrator of "The Kerry Mermaid" hints at this point too, noting "if Donal had forgotten the magic mantle, not so had the mermaid," which is a fitting description of the end of this motif. As the human men in these texts spend more and more time with the selkie brides, and continue to impose their masculine tendencies on them, they begin to see the selkie as far too human, civilized, natural and terrestrial than she really is. The selkie however, always painfully aware of her position as only half of herself, never stops longing to regain agency over her form, even if she does not actively seek out the sealskin. This seems to remind the audience of Campbell's point about the allure of "possessing" a creature of the sea, that it is to briefly

[79] Ibid.

[80] Ibid.

Note: "Tirnanog" is one of the Celtic names for the "otherworld."

"taste an otherwise inaccessible sovereignty," as the selkie always must return to the sea.[81] Just as nature will overtake civilization when civilization is not maintained, the feminine side of the selkie is able to overtake the masculine imposition of the husband when he does not remain vigilant.

A.A: The Children Left Behind

Another way of looking at the moment when these selkies regain their skin is to look at what happens with the selkie children afterwards. To do so, we look back to McIntire's third assertion about selkies, namely that they are "capable of both compassion and revenge." Though the selkie brides are described as dutiful wives and mothers during their time in captivity, they have no qualms about returning to the sea once they regain the sealskin. The "revenge" of the selkie, as discussed previously, is then understood as this decision to abandon her family after years of marriage, however this paper seeks to challenge that characterization.

Award-winning author Sofia Samatar's 2013 short story *Selkie Stories are For Losers*, has a particular emphasis on the idea of selkie revenge, as it follows the experience of a selkie's daughter who has been left behind. The story jumps between descriptions of the narrator's life and work in a restaurant with her friend Mona, and her memories of her mother, in an episodic style. Unlike the traditional selkie stories, which take place in Ireland and focus on the relationship between husband and selkie, this tale takes place somewhere in the United States, with little mention of the relationship between the narrator's parents. What is made clear in this text is the narrator's dislike for selkie stories, not only by the bold title "Selkie Stories are for Losers," but also by the first line of the story, which reads "I hate selkie stories. They're always about how you went up to the attic to look for a book, and you found a disgusting old coat and

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[81] Campbell, "Real Women Have Skins," 308.

brought it downstairs between finger and thumb and said 'What's this?', and you never saw your mom again."[82]

While we can certainly appreciate the idea of reducing a selkie story down to its essential points, this story seems to identify that essential point as the selkie's abrupt departure, rather than her violent capture. Samatar's narrator seems to cling to the idea that selkies leave their families as an act of selfish revenge, and continues to insert stories about heartbroken men and missing selkies throughout the narrative, while simultaneously condemning the stories themselves. When her friend Mona makes a comment about "her" selkie stories, she contrasts her disdain for those myths with her appreciation of another folktale, *Beauty and the Beast*, "which," as the narrator explains, "is a really decent story about an animal who gets turned into a human and stays that way, the way it's supposed to be."[83] What is interesting here is that the selkie's daughter seems to gloss over the specifics of being "turned into a human," in order to vilify the selkie wife for choosing to leave. In the traditional tales, the selkie mother is not turned into a human, so much as she is trapped in the human half of her binary.

Later in the story the narrator recalls another selkie story, in which a selkie's daughter points out the skin to her mother. The narrator does not share this story with Mona, though her internal commentary on the story make her opinions on the selkie clear: "She doesn't think about how the little girl is going to miss her, or how if she's been breathing air all this time she can surely keep it up a little longer. She just throws on the skin and jumps into the sea."[84] In another section the narrator remembers a story in which a selkie finds her skin after the husband drops it. The husband runs to the selkie to stop her from leaving, and "even kissed her even though she was already a seal," but according to the narrator "[i]n selkie stories, kissing never solves

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[82] Sofia Samatar, "Selkie Stories are for Losers," *Strange Horizons*, 7 January 2013, http://strangehorizons.com/fiction/selkie-stories-are-for-losers/.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.

anything. No transformation happens because of a kiss. No one loves you just because you love them. What kind of fairy tale is that?”[85]Again, Samatar’s narrator is reducing the plight of the selkie to a singular event, and thus ignoring the very nature of the selkie herself. In selkie tales, the narrator is right, “no transformation happens because of a kiss,” instead, the transformations happen due to the violent and careless actions of men.

In addition to the short selkie stories nestled into the narrative, the narrator also recalls memories of her mother, and how she left. Though the memories are disjointed, the narrator describes her mother squarely within the selkie motif, “you might suspect my dad picked my mom up in Norway, where they have seals,” she muses, “[h]e didn’t though. He met her at the pool.”[86] When thinking about her mother’s family, the narrator too remembers “I asked her once if she had any, and she said they were ‘no kind of people.’ At the time I thought she meant they were druggies or murderers, maybe in prison somewhere. Now I wish that was true.”[87] Further, the narrator recalls her mother used to swim each morning at the pool, she described her bathing suit as “a thin gray rag,” clearly drawing on traditional imagery of the gray sealskin possessed by the selkies.[88] Even down to the selkie’s departure, the narrator continues to work in the confines of the motif, as she describes accidentally finding her mother’s coat in the attic herself. Just as in the traditional selkie tales, once the selkie regains her coat, the departure is abrupt, and while the selkie in this story does not plunge into the sea, the narrator recalls her mother donning the coat and walking out the kitchen door. In closing, the narrator again reflects on her mother’s decision to leave with disparagement: “My dad says Mom was an elemental, a sort of stranger, not of our

[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.

kind. It wasn't my fault she left, it was because she couldn't learn to breathe on land. That's the worst story I've ever heard."[89]

While this story is interesting for its exploration of the experience of the child left behind by the selkie, it seems to essentialize the story in a misguided way. Rather than explore the anguish of being abandoned by a selkie through the narrator's feelings towards her father, who presumably was responsible for the selkie's inability to exist on land, the story chooses to vilify the selkie herself, while seemingly admitting to the inherent unsustainability of her time on land. While a reading of this story suggests the selkie truly is a vengeful creature, and expresses that vengeance by leaving her family, that interpretation largely ignores the tensions central to the selkie motif. Namely, that the selkie is never fully human, civilized, natural or terrestrial, rather she is forced into those binaries by the masculine impositions of her captor-husband.

Just as in the early selkie texts, the narrator in Samatar's story never mentions her mother actively searching for her "coat." Instead, in keeping with the selkie motif, the coat is revealed by chance, which certainly mitigates criticism of the selkie mother. It is unclear why the selkie's in these tales do not actively seek out their skins, though a potential reason could be their love for the children, whom they have to leave upon finding the sealskin. In her analysis of the selkie motif, McIntire suggests that "the reunion of the selkie with her skin marks the moment of departure for marital life and conforms her inherent 'otherness,'" and argues that "once a selkie reclaims her individuality, she will, and indeed *must* return to the sea and to her previous state of freedom and uncertainty."[90] This idea stands in stark contrast to the quote from Samatar's piece, in which the narrator suggests that "if she's been breathing air all this time, she can surely keep it up a little longer."[91] In the traditional selkie motif, which Samatar draws from extensively, the

[89] Ibid.
[90] McIntire, "Supernatural Beings in the Far North," 136.
[91] Samatar, "Selkie Stories are for Losers."

selkie absolutely cannot "keep it up" any longer after she has found her cloak, as she is no longer able to live in the human half of her binary. On top of that, even though the selkie longs for her agency, freedom, and family, she does not actively attempt to leave her family, and it is only through chance and accident that she is able to leave.

Again, while the perspective is interesting in Samatar's work, the anguish felt by the daughter left behind is frustrating, as it seems that the villain in these stories should be the human man, and not the selkie wife. From analysis of the early selkie texts, the selkie's eventual return to the ocean is an integral part of the motif itself, and to return to Campbell's language, by "possessing" a creature from a realm so intangible to humans, a selkie story "dramatizes both the desire for such sovereignty and the impossibility of maintaining it."[92] Where Samatar's story focuses on the selkie's role in abandoning her family, the traditional motif constructs the marriage as unsustainable from the beginning— if anything faulting the human men with hubris enough to think their marriage will be different.

Conclusions

Through an examination of the selkie motif and these specific selkie tales, we observe a litany of binaries central to the selkie story that all seem to boil down to the tension between masculinity and femininity. While these stories are part of an extensive canon of folklore and belief that includes elements of fantasy, magic, and imagination, the tension between masculinity and femininity is certainly a product of reality. What becomes especially interesting in these stories then, is their ability to express such a real and deep-rooted gender tension in relatively short, whimsical tales. While the selkie stories are interesting and delightful on their own, by identifying and commenting on this tension, we are able to use these stories not only to gain an understanding of gender relations in Ireland in the mid to late nineteenth century (during which

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[92] Campbell, "Real Women Have Skins," 307.

these early stories were recorded), but we can also see how these tales exemplify Ortner's assertions about masculinity/femininity and nature/culture decades before her 1974 journal article.

While Ortner's article "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" was first published in 1974, her work has been at the bedrock of this analysis. Using Ortner's framework, we are able to read into many of the tensions in these texts through a gendered lens, specifically the tension between human and animal, civilization and wildness, natural and supernatural, and terrestrial and aquatic. While the tensions in these tales have been associated with masculinity and femininity for as long as they have been told, using her language and framework allows the reader to see this connection more clearly, and thus these texts heighten our understanding of Ortner while Ortner heightens our understanding of these texts. This is significant because it affirms the value of gender studies and scholarship as a discipline, and demonstrates how that scholarship can be used to further our understanding of other disciplines, such as folklore, literature, and media studies.

Further, the four early stories discussed in this paper all come from anthologies or other collections of Irish folklore and stories, suggesting in their initial publication they were intended to be read for pleasure, rather than as commentary on Irish gender relations. Regardless of the intent of their anthologizers though, they can be looked at for their insights on gender relations. Notably, all four of the early texts have been attributed to and/or anthologized by men, despite originating from storytelling traditions with no known author. Knowing that these stories were recorded by men raises questions about the descriptions of gender relations immediately, and the audience is left wondering whether or not these ideas are *prescriptive*, in that they are expressing what the writer thought gender relations *should* look like, or *descriptive*, expressing what the writer thought gender relations *did* look like. Bo Almqvist tangentially touches on this point in

his article *Of Mermaids and Marriage*, published by the *Folklore of Ireland Society*, in which he asserts that the stories are "simultaneously realistic and romantic."[93]In this sense, the realism refers to the very real possibility of living in a loveless or abusive marriage for women of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Ireland, while the romance refers to a reaction from an idealized (and likely male) reader to the unlikely marriage. Almqvist argues that part of the appeal of the selkie story is that very tension within the tone, "that it stands so close to every-day life and its problems, but at the same time it appeals to the taste for magical and mysterious experiences."[94] By reading these stories as both works of magical fiction and commentaries on real experiences, we heighten our understanding of the folklore genre.

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[93] Bo Alqvist, "Of Mermaids and Marriages. Seamus Heaney;s 'Maighdean Mara' and Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill's 'an Mhaighdean Mara' in the Light of Folk Tradition," *Bealoideas* 58 (1990): accessed September 3, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/20522356, 8.
[94] Ibid.

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