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From Enchantresses to Exemplars: The Changing Roles of Sirens in Greek and Medieval Artistic and Literary Traditions

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Abstract

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By Laney Castle

Through a comparative analysis of artworks and literature, including pottery, sculptures, poetry, and illuminated manuscripts, this study traces the evolution of Sirens from their complex roots in Greek art and literature to becoming moralizing symbols in Medieval art. By investigating the iconography, context, and symbolism of these depictions, this thesis illuminates the shifting perceptions and cultural attitudes towards Sirens and the broader implications of these changes. By situating these artistic representations within their historical and cultural contexts, this thesis contributes to our understanding of how mythical creatures like Sirens have been adapted and reinterpreted across time. It highlights the role of art in reflecting and shaping societal values, beliefs, and fears, offering a multivalent perspective on the enduring fascination with Sirens and their place in the history of art and mythology.

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Introduction

Nestled in the pages of the *Queen Mary Psalter*, two Sirens hover over a ship, their presence both mesmerizing and unsettling (Fig. 1). The delicate lines and soft hues of the picture belie the deadly nature of these mythical beings, whose song lulls the unsuspecting sailors into a fatal slumber. The Sirens' forms are a haunting amalgamation of human and creature, each one unique in its composition. The Siren on the left possesses the sinuous tail of a fish, its iridescent fin disappearing into the undulating waves below. Her companion on the right boasts a pair of wings, poised in mid-flight, as if ready to carry away her unconscious prey at any moment. As the Sirens lean in close to the sleeping sailors, one can almost hear the whispered strains of their celestial melody. The soft, muted tones of the *bas-de-page* scene creates an atmosphere of eerie tranquility, as if the very air itself is suffused with the sedative power of the Siren's song. The sailors, lost in the depths of their enchanted slumber, appear utterly at peace, blissfully unaware of the danger that surrounds them. Their relaxed postures and serene expressions contradict the terrible fate that awaits them, as the Siren's call draws them inexorably toward their doom.

Throughout the literary and artistic works of ancient Greek and medieval European cultures, Sirens have appeared, portrayed as the ultimate *femme fatale*, evolving through time and different cultural milieus from gatekeepers of forbidden knowledge to protectors of the deceased to literal objects of temptation.[1] The Siren's tale serves as a cautionary story about the seductive nature of beauty and the importance of resisting temptation, themes that have resonated with audiences across time and cultures. Moreover, the Siren's ambiguous nature and her association with the boundary between life and death, knowledge and ignorance, and the real and

[1] For more on Sirens as sexual figures and objects of temptation, see Strickland 1999: 79-82; For more on the liminality of the Sirens and their song, see Nugent 2008.

the imaginary have made them a rich source of artistic and philosophical exploration, inviting writers, artists, and thinkers to grapple with fundamental questions about the human condition and the role of art in shaping our understanding of the world. Although Odysseus escaped the fate of the Siren's song, the human imagination remains enchanted.

With some discussion of Roman and Near Eastern Sirens, in this study I focus on the representation, reception, and symbolism of the Siren across two distinct periods: Archaic and Classical Greece (600-480 BCE; 480-336 BCE), and the Medieval period in Europe (500-1400 CE). I aim to demonstrate that these periods are of particular interest due to the significant developments and transformations that the Siren underwent during these times, both in terms of their physical appearance as well as their symbolic meaning. The change in appearance between the Classical and Archaic periods in Greece and the Medieval period was accompanied by a shift in their symbolic associations, as they became increasingly linked with the temptations of the flesh and the dangers of worldly pleasures.[2] By focusing on these two periods, I aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Siren's development and reception, tracing their journey from their Greek origins to their Medieval reinvention. While the Siren has remained a popular figure in literature and art throughout history, including during the Renaissance and beyond,[3] the scope of this study is limited to the Archaic, Classical, and Medieval periods to allow for a more in-depth examination of, what I deem, are the most significant transformations in their representation and symbolism. Through this focused approach, I hope to shed light on the enduring fascination with the Siren and the ways in which different cultures and time periods have interpreted and adapted this figure.

[2] Strickland 2013: 79-80.
[3] For more on the Siren in the Renaissance, particularly in Dutch Renaissance drama, see Veldhorst 2002: 253-268.

The study of the Siren in Greek and Medieval contexts has attracted the attention of several notable scholars across various disciplines. In the field of Greek art and archaeology, Ann Clyburn Gunter[4] has explored the influence of Near Eastern art on Greek depictions of fantastic creatures, while Bilsen Özdemir and Havva Karademir[5] have investigated the role of Sirens as soul-bearers on Lycian grave reliefs and Seth Estrin[6] has analyzed the placement of Sirens on Classical Attic funerary monuments. Regarding Greek culture, Margaret Alexiou[7] and Gail Holst-Warhaft[8] have studied the role of women's laments and female voices in Greek tradition, while Jan M. Bremmer[9] has explored Greek concepts of the soul and the phenomenon of Maenadism. In the realm of Medieval studies, Debra Hassig [Strickland][10] has edited a foundational volume on the medieval bestiary in art, life, and literature, along with other scholars Ron Baxter,[11] Michael J. Curley,[12] and Jeanette Beer.[13] Anne Rudloff Stanton[14] has provided invaluable insights into the Queen Mary Psalter and the role of marginal narratives in Gothic prayer books, in which Sirens appear. These scholars have collectively enhanced my understanding of the Siren's evolution and significance across various artistic, literary, and cultural contexts.

In Chapter 1, I explore the evolving symbolism and reception of the Siren in ancient Greek art, focusing on their presence on various ceramic vessels such as amphorae, hydriai, loutrophoroi, and lekythoi, as well as funerary monuments. By examining the Siren's depictions

[4] Gunter 2009.
[5] Özdemir and Karademir 2013.
[6] Estrin 2021.
[7] Alexiou 1974.
[8] Holst-Warhaft 1992.
[9] Bremmer 1984; 1993.
[10] Strickland 1999.
[11] Baxter 1998.
[12] Curley 1979.
[13] Beer 1986.
[14] Stanton 2001; 2011.

across different contexts, including domestic spaces, symposia, and funerary rituals, I argue that the Siren's role extended beyond the monstrous creatures portrayed in Homer's *Odyssey.* Drawing on the influence of the ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern beliefs, particularly the Egyptian *Ba*, I propose that the Siren came to be associated with the transition between life and death, serving as a guardian and guide for souls in the afterlife. I suggest that the Siren's presence on funerary vessels and monuments may have served as a symbolic substitute for the mourning women whose roles were diminished by sumptuary laws in ancient Greece. Finally, I discuss how the Siren's iconography was adapted and integrated into Etruscan funerary practices through the exchange of goods and ideas facilitated by trade networks between Greece and Etruria.

In Chapter 2, I turn to the *Odyssey,* facilitating a close-reading of the Siren passage in Book 12. I analyze the Sirens' portrayals in the *Odyssey*, noting that Homer emphasizes their enchanting voices and the quality of their song rather than providing a detailed description of their physical appearance. Drawing on David Schur and Emily Wilson's work, I explore the complex dynamics surrounding the Siren's song and the absence of a promised narrative recital, suggesting that this disjunction reflects the *Odyssey*'s own anxieties about the threats of silence, forgetting and poetic mortality in the oral epic tradition. Finally, I discuss how various translations of the *Odyssey* have shaped contemporary perceptions of the Sirens and how, during the Medieval period, the Sirens acquired a new symbolic meaning as cautionary figures within the context of widespread Christianization in Europe.

In the final chapter, I explore the transformation of the Siren's symbolism and its physical appearance during the Medieval period, tracing its evolution from the Greek bird-woman hybrid to a fish-woman form. I argue that the shift in representation allowed the Siren to

serve as a moral and spiritual symbol in Medieval art and literature, and used as a didactic tool. By examining the Siren's portrayal in various Medieval texts, such as the *Physiologus*, the *Bodleian Bestiary*, and the *Bestiary of Love*, I demonstrate how her symbolism was adapted to convey Christian morals and warnings against worldly temptations. Throughout the chapter, I highlight how the Siren's ambiguity and adaptability allowed for its reinterpretation and appropriation to suit the ideological purposes of the Medieval period, reinforcing Christian values and cautioning against straying from faith.

By examining the reception and transformation of the Siren across various contexts, this study illuminates the ways in which different cultures and time periods have appropriated her to suit their own ideological purposes. Moreover, this analysis highlights the importance of studying the reception and transformation of the Siren, as it reveals the complex interplay between art, literature, religion, and society and sheds light on the ways in which cultural values and beliefs are being transmitted, adapted, and reinvented over time.

Chapter 1
Sirens in Greek Art

The Siren, a captivating figure in ancient Greek art, has a rich history that intertwines with the funerary practices and beliefs of their contemporary culture. The Siren's popularity in Greek art is evident from its frequent appearances on vessels used in the domestic, banqueting, and funerary spheres, as well as on grave stelae, beginning in the Archaic Period (600-480 BCE) and continuing, with notable evolutions to the iconography, into the Classical Period (480-336 BCE). Typically depicted as a hybrid creature with the head and upper body of a woman and the wings, tail, and feet of a bird, the earliest known representations in Greek art date back to the Orientalizing Period, a time when Greek visual culture was greatly influenced by ancient Near Eastern culture.[15]

In ancient Greek culture, Sirens were understood not only as the monstrous adversaries described in Homer's *Odyssey* but also as supernatural beings guiding souls through transitional states and rites of passage, such as marriage or death. These depictions, found on various ceramic vessels such as amphorae, lekythoi, loutrophoroi, and hydriai, as well as on Classical Athenian grave stelae, reveal a concurrent and contrasting understanding of the Siren's role in Greek mythology. This transformation in the Siren's symbolism can be traced back to the influence of the Egyptian *Ba,* a human-bird hybrid creature that symbolizes the human soul and its journey after death. By examining the parallels between the Siren and the Egyptian *Ba,* this chapter will shed light on how the iconography of the Siren in Greek art evolved, reflecting a fusion of Greek and Ancient Near Eastern beliefs about death and the afterlife and its connection to transitional

[15] Karademir and Özdemir 2013: 96; Boardman 1999: 77-78.

states of being. Additionally, the presence of these creatures on vessels used during symposia and in domestic settings raises questions about the resonance of this iconography in other contexts, and the flexibility of the Siren to signify transformation more generally. Through this exploration, we will gain a deeper understanding of how the presence of the Siren on Greek vessels transformed these objects into powerful conduits connecting the world of the living with the realm of the dead.

Anthropological approaches have investigated how in ancient Greece and Rome, mythical monsters played a significant role in asserting male dominance over the natural world and validating the established social and political orders. Through images and stories of creatures like the Sirens, society asserted its authority over the environment, often associated with femininity, and the chaos it symbolized.[16] Mythological narratives were effective tools to grapple with forces outside of the community, whether natural surroundings or human adversaries. Debbie Felton has been a leading scholar in recent years, her analysis beginning with a consideration of the significance of the habitats of these mythological monsters. She contends that the monsters' dwellings in untamed wilderness serve to symbolize their association with disorder and chaos, in stark contrast to the structured urban settings of ancient Greece and Rome.[17] This geographic separation highlights the cultural divide between the monstrous and the civil, effectively relegating the monstrous to the wilderness as a powerful symbol of its inherent wildness and unruliness. Furthermore, Felton's argument extends to the gendered aspect of monsters in Greek mythology. She notes that a substantial number of Greek monsters are female, attributing this trend to the ancient Greeks tendency to associate women with the untamed and

[16] Felton 2016: 105; Blundell 1995: 17-19.
[17] Ibid.

unpredictable aspects of nature.[18] This association between women and the wild, uncivilized aspects of nature played a significant role in the prevalence of female monsters in Greek mythology. Monsters like Medusa, Scylla and Charybdis, the Harpies, and the Furies embody men's fear of women's destructive potential, emphasizing the patriarchal notions of control and order prevailing over the perception of feminine chaos.[19]

Felton's argument is substantiated by her exploration of numerous Greek myths involving a male character's victory over monsters and the natural world. The myth of Zeus defeating Cronos is emblematic of the broader theme of civilization triumphing over savagery, symbolizing the transition from a world characterized by chaos to one marked by order and civility. Zeus, in his role as a "culture hero," personifies this transformation toward a more structured society. His human-like appearance and his ability to assert control over nature, "particularly by subordinating the female," highlights the Greek's cultural desire to dominate not only the natural world but also the social order.[20] Beyond the Zeus and Cronos myth, Felton delves into the significance of the Heracles myth and his twelve labors. Here, similar themes emerge, where the younger male generation overthrows representatives of the older female generation, often embodied by monstrous and barbaric creatures inhabiting distant lands. In line with French cultural anthropologists like Claude Levi-Strauss and Walter Burkert, Felton posits that this repetition of themes exposes the deep-seated cultural motifs in which the struggle between generations, genders, and the taming of the monstrous is recurrent.[21] These narratives serve as powerful tools for Greek society to express its cultural values, its quest for domination over the untamed, and the perpetuation of established order.

[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid, 109.
[21] Ibid, 131.

Felton then turns to look at the *Odyssey* and Homer's representations of monsters. She draws attention to the transformation of mythical creatures over time, particularly in the case of the Sirens. While Homer's text does not provide a physical description of the Siren, post-Homeric tradition has added elements such as giving them a genealogy and physical attributes such as claws and wings, transforming them into monstrous, dangerous hybrid female creatures that dwell on rocky crags over the ocean.[22] Felton states that this transformation underscores the cultural tendency to depict alluring but ultimately perilous aspects of femininity as monstrous, further emphasizing the theme of the need to control these aspects.

While the Siren first appears in the Greek cultural traditions with the *Odyssey,* its iconographies and subsequent symbolisms seem to owe little debt to Homer's epic. Introduced in the *Odyssey* as monstrous figures intended to be avoided at all costs, the role of the Siren is dramatically different when it appears in the visual record - largely in the funerary context. As the Siren in the *Odyssey* was never described physically, Greek artists portraying this enigmatic figure had to pull inspiration from other sources and cultures that they were in contact with, such as the Near East.[23] The iconography of the Siren in Greek art, particularly in the context of funerary practices and the afterlife, appears to have been significantly influenced by ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian beliefs about death.[24] The striking visual and symbolic resemblance between the *Ba*-bird of ancient Egypt and the Siren depicted in Greek art suggests that the concept of the Siren as a soul-bearer or guide to the underworld may have its roots in Egyptian tradition (Fig. 2).[25] Egyptian funerary art as early as the 15th century BCE depicts the ba-bird as

[22] Ibid, 120.
[23] Sparkes 1996: 122.
[24] Karademir and Özdemir 2013: 96; For more on the transmission of figures iconographically similar to the Sirens, see Gunter 2009.
[25] This connection is further reinforced by the presence of human-headed birds in Mesopotamian art and legends, such as the god Zu who was associated with the underworld, and the Epic of Gilgamesh, which describes a bird-like

a small human-headed bird, often holding a small human figure, or hovering above the tomb of the deceased[26]. In ancient Egyptian belief, the *Ba* was an integral part of an individual's soul or spirit, which took on a distinct form as a human headed-bird upon the person's death.[27] The *Ba*'s survival was crucial for the mobility and well-being of the deceased in the afterlife.[28] Although the *Ba* did not necessarily serve as a protective entity, ancient Greeks who encountered Egyptian art featuring the *Ba* symbol may have interpreted it as having such a role given its iconography.[29]

Scholar John Cooney proposes that for an ancient Greek unfamiliar with the Egyptian language and religious practices, the imagery of the *Ba* hovering over or embracing the deceased would likely imply that the *Ba* was a guardian deity.[30] This perception aligns with one of the primary functions of the Siren in Greek funerary art – to watch over and lament the dead. Sirens are frequently depicted on Greek funerary monuments, fulfilling this role as guardians and mourners.[31] The visual similarity between the *Ba* and the Siren, both represented as human-headed birds, coupled with the Greek's potential misinterpretation of the *Ba*'s function, may have contributed to the adaptation of the Siren's iconography and its association with death and the afterlife in Greek art.[32] The Siren's role as a protector and mourner of the deceased on Greek

creature bringing Enkidu to the underworld in his dream. For more on human-headed birds in different belief systems, see Karademir and Özdemir 2013.

[26] Tonks 1907: 337; Cooney 1968: 266-267.

[27] Jan M. Bremmer 1983 provides a comprehensive analysis of the connection between birds and souls in ancient Greek culture, providing valuable insights into the symbolic significance between avian imagery in the context of the afterlife.

[28] Cooney 1968: 266.

[29] The Arcesilas Cup, a 6th-century Laconian kylix, is an example of how ancient Greeks drew inspiration from forms, compositions, and iconographies in ancient Egypt. The similarity of designs between the Arcesilas Cup and a composition found in Egyptian funerary art substantiates the argument that ancient Greeks visited Egypt, saw Egyptian art, and integrated their iconographies in Greek art. For more on the Arcesilas Cup and the transmission of these designs between Egyptian and Laconian artists, see Skuse 2018: 221–49.

[30] Ibid.

[31] The presence of Sirens on Greek funerary monuments will be discussed in-depth later in the chapter. See Estrin 2021: 261.

[32] Ibid, 267.

funerary monuments can be seen as a parallel to the perceived function of the *Ba* in Egyptian art, even if the original Egyptian beliefs differed from the Greek understanding.

However, the presence of Sirens on vessels used in domestic spaces and symposia raises questions about just how restricted to the funerary sphere the Siren in fact was. As discussed, Sirens are typically associated with protecting and watching over the deceased, yet their iconography appears on pottery utilized in everyday life. This seemingly paradoxical usage of Siren imagery on functional vessels, such as the hydria for holding water and the amphora for storing wine or grains, invites further exploration into the potential meanings and purposes behind this artistic choice.

The amphora was a key vessel for storing, serving, and transporting staples such as wine, grain, and olive oil in ancient Greece, and played different roles in the male-dominated space of the symposium versus the female-associated domestic sphere. Up until the second half of the fifth century BCE, the amphora was the primary vessel used for new iconographies and arguably paved the way for the narrative conventions established on later Greek pottery.[33] The presence of amphorae in both elite symposiums and humble households demonstrates the vessel's versatility, as the same form found utility regardless of social status. In symposia, amphorae were used to transport and store the wine that fueled these drinking parties. The jar's large storage capacity enabled symposiasts to consume considerable quantities, as the occasion aimed to facilitate discourse and entertainment among Greek elites.[34] In the household, amphorae stored goods for domestic use rather than for public consumption and display. Female household members used transport amphorae to store staples like oil and grains that were essential for domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, and other household tasks that were considered the domain of women

[33] Moignard 2006: 31.
[34] Lynch 2011: 77.

in ancient Greece.[35] Unlike the symposium's atmosphere of indulgence, the home depended on prudent dispensing from the contents of the amphora. In the symposium, the amphora legitimized activities exclusive to men, while in the home, it enabled and restricted women according to social norms. This vessel, much like the other three vessel types discussed later in this chapter, bore different meanings across the gender divides between public and private realms.

The appearance of Sirens on amphorae in ancient Greece, like the function of the amphora, took on different meanings depending on the context in which a particular vessel would be likely used. In the male dominated space of the symposium, the Siren may have provided a synesthetic connection to the activities that took place during these gatherings. As Sirens were known for their enchanting songs, the visual representation of Sirens on the amphorae could have evoked the auditory experience of music and singing that was an integral part of these events. Symposiums often featured musical performances, poetry recitation, and intellectual discussions, all of which were enhanced by the consumption of wine.[36] The sight of Sirens on amphorae, combined with the actual sounds of music and conversation in the room, could have created a synesthetic experience that heightened the sensory pleasure and intellectual stimulation of the symposium. Furthermore, the presence of Sirens on amphorae in the symposium could have also served as a *memento mori*, reminding symposiasts of the dangers of overindulgence and the fleeting nature of life's pleasures. As symposiasts indulged in the pleasures of wine, music, and intellectual discourse, the sight of the Sirens on the amphorae may have prompted them to reflect on the transience of these enjoyments and the inevitability of death. The synesthetic connection between the visual representation of Sirens and the auditory

[35] Ibid, 158, 165.
[36] Ibid, 77.

experience of music in the symposium could have heightened this memento mori effect. This sensory interplay could have prompted symposiasts to reflect on the importance of living life to the fullest while also exercising moderation and wisdom in the face of temptation.

In contrast, the domestic sphere was a female-associated space where amphorae were used by women to store essential goods.[37] Here, the presence of the Siren on household amphorae could have taken on a more protective role, with these mythical creatures serving as guardians of the household's vital supplies. The Siren's association with the afterlife and their ability to navigate the boundaries between life and death, as well as their association with the Egyptian *Ba* could have imbued them with a sense of power and protection. Just as Sirens were believed to watch over the souls of the deceased, their presence on domestic amphorae might have symbolized the safeguarding of the family's sustenance and the management of resources by women of the house. By depicting Sirens on amphorae in the domestic sphere, the inhabitants might have believed that these creatures would watch over the contents of the vessels and, by extension, maintain the welfare of the household.

On an Attic amphora dated around 600 BCE from the Louvre Museum (E816) (Fig. 3), the decorative scheme features two friezes containing various animals and mythical creatures. The bottom frieze depicts three Sirens alongside swans and a panther, while the top frieze showcases griffins, goats, a panther, and a bird. Although some scholars suggest that the inclusion of Sirens within a decorative frieze alongside other animals is due to their being "imports" into Greek culture, implying that their presence may not have any significant meaning, this interpretation may not fully capture the complexity of the Siren's symbolism.[38] Even if the presence of Sirens on these vessels was intended to be purely decorative, we cannot rule out the

[37] Ibid, 165.
[38] Karademir and Özdemir 2013: 96.

possibility that individuals encountering them in the symposium or the domestic space may have applied their own meanings or interpretations to the depicted figures. The amphora's production shortly after the Orientalizing period in Greece, during which Greek art and culture were heavily influenced by ancient Near Eastern civilizations, suggests that the image of the Siren on this vessel could have been influenced by the associations between birds and death found in these cultures.

In Jonas Grethlein's chapter on ornamental and formulaic patterns, he argues that ornaments can be semantically charged and contribute to the meaning of the overall meaning of the work. He draws a parallel between the repetition of ornamental patterns in vase painting and the use of formulaic diction in Homeric poetry, suggesting that just as the repetition of pictorial patterns can invite comparisons between different scenes and generate new meanings, the repetition of formulaic phrases in epic poetry can establish links between individual books and enrich their significance.[39] It is possible that viewers of this amphora, being familiar with formulaic diction in Homeric epic, may have related the repetition of the Siren figure on the vase to their experience of reading the *Odyssey.* As they turned the vase, viewers could have assigned their own meanings to the patterns and images in the decorative friezes, recalling Homer's epic and associating the Sirens on the vase with the Sirens in the legend. This interpretation suggests that the Siren's presence on the amphora could have evoked a complex set of associations and meanings for ancient Greek viewers, extending beyond a merely decorative function.

Like the amphora, the hydria played a significant role in both the domestic sphere and the symposium of ancient Greece. The hydria's primary function was to fetch and transport water for household needs, and it was commonly depicted in iconography on the hydria showing women

[39] Grethein 2018: 86.

carrying filled hydria from public fountains (Fig. 4).[40] This association with water-carrying and the female role in maintaining the household firmly connected the hydria to femininity and the domestic sphere. However, the hydria's function extended beyond the domestic realm and into the masculine ritual domain of the symposium. In this context, the hydria served as a vessel for mixing water and wine, playing a crucial role in the consumption of alcohol during these male-dominated gatherings.[41] The hydria's transition from the female-associated domestic sphere to the masculine space of the symposium highlights its versatility and ability to inhabit both gendered worlds, paralleling the dual functionality of the amphora.

A hydria from the Martin von Wagner Museum (L303) (Fig. 5), dated around 550 BCE, features a single frontal image depicting Dionysus, the god of wine, holding a drinking horn and surrounded by grape vines. As this particular amphora is decorated, it is likely that it was produced for the formal symposium setting as opposed to the domestic sphere.[42] Dionysus is positioned between Maenads and Satyrs who are interacting with the vine and facing toward him, creating a composition that evokes the setting of a divine symposium. Above this central scene, a frieze depicts running warriors and a fleeing horseman. The warriors and horsemen are flanked on either side by two Sirens turned inward facing the middle figures of the frieze, creating a sense of symmetry and drawing the viewer's attention to the central action. The iconography of this hydria presents a juxtaposition of two distinct scenes: the Dionysian scene, which alludes to the pleasures and revelry associated with the symposium, and the warrior frieze, which introduces a sense of action, movement, and potential danger. In the context of a divine symposium setting, the presence of Maenads, Satyrs, and Dionysus depicted alongside Sirens

[40] Moignard 2006: 59.
[41] Ibid; Lissarrague 1990: 6.
[42] Moignard 2006: 59.

creates a fascinating interplay of mythological figures associated with enchantment, sensory pleasure, and potential danger.

Maenads, the female followers of Dionysus, were known for their ecstatic rituals and frenzied dancing, and were often depicted possessed by divine madness.[43] Satyrs, on the other hand, were the male companions of Dionysus, characterized by their half-human, half-goat appearance and their association with hedonistic pursuits such as drinking, dancing, and chasing nymphs.[44] Together, the Maenads and Satyrs represented the wild, uninhibited aspects of Dionysian worship and the liberation from social norms. Sirens share some common traits with the Maenads and Satyrs. Like the Maenads, Sirens were associated with a form of enchantment that could overpower mortal men.[45] The seductive song of the Siren could be seen as a parallel to the intoxicating effects of wine and the dancing of the Maenads. Similarly, the Siren's ability to draw men towards them and lead them astray echoes the Satyr's pursuit of sensual pleasures and their potential to lead individuals astray from the path of reason and moderation. In a symposium setting, the presence of Dionysus further heightens the atmosphere of sensory indulgence and intoxication. Dionysus, as the presiding deity over the symposium, embodies the spirit of liberation and his influence can be seen in the actions of his followers, the Maenads and Satyrs. The inclusion of Sirens on this amphora adds an element of danger and temptation, serving as a reminder that even during divine revelry, there are forces that can lead one astray.

The loutrophoros, like the hydria, played a crucial role in the transportation of water for significant rituals in ancient Greek society. While the hydria was used for everyday household needs and the symposium, the loutrophoros was specifically designed for use during rites of

[43] Bremmer 1984: 268.
[44] Lissarrague 1990: 14.
[45] Bremmer 1984: 267.

passage, such as premarital cleansing or for the washing of a corpse during burial rites[46]. Furthermore, there is evidence that loutrophoroi were placed in the graves of those who had died unmarried, symbolically connecting the experiences of death and marriage as rites of passage.[47] In ancient Greece, marriage and death were symbolically linked as parallel thresholds representing the end of maidenhood and youth, marking the journey toward new identities and states of being.[48] Brides underwent ritual bathing with loutrophoros vessels prior to leaving their families to join their husbands' households.[49] This usage of the loutrophoros during prenuptial bathing signaled the symbolic "death" of a maiden's former self, as she transitioned into her new role as a married woman.[50] The dual implementation of the loutrophoros in marital preparations and within funerary contexts emphasizes ancient conceptions of both wedlock and death as final passages from youth to the inevitable events of adulthood. This symbolic connection between marriage and death is further reinforced by the presence of Sirens on loutrophoros vessels. Sirens on these vessels may have acted as a symbolic reminder of the transformative nature of marriage and death, serving as guardians and guides for individuals embarking on these significant life transitions.

The placement of the Siren underneath the handle of a loutrophoros from around 500 BCE in the Ashmolean Museum (AN 1928.574) establishes a significant connection between funerary rites and wedding rituals in ancient Greece (Fig. 6). Although the other handle and its accompanying reliefs are missing from this vessel, it is plausible to assume that the Siren was symmetrically placed on both sides. The Siren's presence on the bottom relief, alongside

[46] Moignard 2006: 59-60.
[47] Sparkes 1996: 71-72; Oakley and Sinos 1993: 5.
[48] Alexiou 2002: 58.
[49] Oakley and Sinos 1993: 14-15.
[50] Ibid.

depictions of panthers and deer, creates a contrast to the upper two registers, which feature men and women engaging in separate mourning processions. The strategic placement of the Siren on the funerary loutrophoros creates a powerful visual parallel with the lebetes gamikoi, vessels specifically used in wedding ceremonies.[51] On *lebetes gamikoi*, these winged figures were often portrayed bearing gifts as a sign of divine honor.[52] While this Siren on the funerary loutrophoros is not depicted carrying an object, her location on the vessel establishes a clear connection between the funerary rite and the marriage ceremony. On one hand, the Siren's presence on the loutrophoros can be interpreted as a representation of mourning and lamentation, echoing the grief of the male and female mourners on the upper two reliefs. Alternatively, the Siren's association with divine honor and celebration, as seen in the parallel winged figures on the *lebetes gamikoi*, suggests that her presence on the funerary vessel may also serve to commemorate and honor the deceased's life. I propose that this intentional positioning of the Siren, as well as the functionality of the loutrophoros itself, highlights the ancient Greek belief in the interconnectedness between marriage and death as crucial transitional moments in an individual's life. The Siren's iconography, with its complex and fluctuating symbolism, further reinforces this connection.

The lekythos and the loutrophoros, both vessels closely tied to ancient Greek funerary rituals, share a symbolic connection in their roles of marking significant passages in an individual's life journey. While the loutrophoros was primarily associated with prenuptial bathing rituals and the passage from maidenhood to marriage, the lekythos was more commonly used during burial rites, symbolizing the transition from life to death.[53] However, it is worth

[51] Ibid, 20; Sparkes 1996: 69.
[52] Oakley and Sinos 1993: 20.
[53] Lynch 2011: 138.

noting that a few lekythoi were also made as wedding presents, further emphasizing the interconnectedness of marriage and death in Greek culture.[54] Lekythoi were functional vessels containing olive oil of various types and scent, which played a crucial role in Greek funerary rituals. The oil was used to anoint the corpse during the *prosthesis*, or as an offering among other grave goods.[55] The decoration on lekythoi varied, indicating their use in a wide range of contexts, such as providing oil for the home, wedding rituals, and burial ceremonies.[56] The presence of the Siren iconography on many lekythoi underscores the transformative nature of death and the role of divine entities guiding and protecting the deceased through this transition. One distinctive feature of the lekythoi vessel type is the white-ground technique, which was most popular on vessels intended for use as grave goods.[57] The painting technique was particularly fragile, making it well-suited for lekythoi that would be deposited in graves and not subjected to frequent use.

Oil was an essential aspect of Greek funerary rituals, serving both as an anointing agent for the corpse and as an offering among other grave goods.[58] Given the importance of oil in these sacred rites, the presence of the Siren on funerary lekythoi might have been intended to protect this precious substance. The Siren's depiction on these vessels could be interpreted as a symbolic guardian, ensuring that the oil remained undisturbed for its intended purpose in the burial process. Furthermore, the Siren's presence on lekythoi could serve as a warning to the living, deterring them from interfering with the grave goods or the deceased's resting place. The Siren's mythological reputation as dangerous creatures capable of luring sailors to their deaths might

[54] Sparkes 1996: 74.
[55] Moignard 2006: 58.
[56] Ibid; Garland 1985: 23-24.
[57] Moignard 2006: 59; Oakley and Sinos 1993: 6.
[58] Sparkes 1996: 68-69; Arrington 2021: 134.

have been employed as a visual metaphor, discouraging grave robbers or those who might seek to desecrate the burial site. By placing Sirens on white-ground lekythoi buried with the dead or on red and black-figure lekythoi used as grave markers, the ancient Greeks may have sought to invoke the Siren's protective powers and their ability to ward off potential threats to the deceased's peaceful long rest.

The red-figure and black-figure lekythoi like the ones from the Philadelphia market attributed to the Bowdoin painter and the Allard Pierson Museum (8977), respectively (Figs. 7 and 8), both dated around 475 BCE, present an alternative interpretation of the Siren's role in ancient Greek funerary contexts. In these depictions, the Sirens are perched atop columns, suggesting that they might serve as permanent mourners or lamenters at the deceased's resting place, further emphasizing their constant presence in the cemetery. This portrayal of Siren's dwelling in a cemetery-like setting can be related to the description of their habitat in the Odyssey, where they are said to reside in a meadow surrounded by decaying corpses and bones.[59] The lyre held by the Siren on the lekythos from the Allard Pierson Museum might also allude to the musical aspect of ritual mourning, as music played a significant role in ancient Greek funerary rites.[60] By depicting the Sirens with musical instruments and situating them atop columns, these lekythoi underscore the Siren's role as eternal mourners, forever lamenting the deceased. Lekythoi depicted visitors coming to visit the dead, or preparation for the visit.[61] In this context, the imagery of the Siren on lekythoi could be interpreted as serving a protective or overseer role, watching over the dead when visitors were not present. The Siren's placement on

[59] I owe this observation to Arielle Hardy's 2015 thesis, "Singing Sorrow in Stone: The Mourning Siren in Greek Art,"; Homer, *The Odyssey*. Trans. Emily Wilson. XII.50-52.
[60] Garland 1985: 34; Holst-Warhaft 1992: 2.
[61] Arrington 2015: 246.

columns in these two lekythoi reinforces their function as guardians, as the elevated position allows them to survey the surrounding area and keep a watchful eye on the burial site.

Within the funerary sphere Sirens appeared not only on lekythoi, but also on funerary stelae and statuary throughout the Classical period, particularly in Athens, solidifying their significance in ancient Greek funerary art and their role as eternal guardians and mourners for the deceased. A recent survey by Seth Estrin has examined the Siren's appearance on the top of a 4th century BCE Attic funerary stelae as a bird-women hybrid.[62] The Siren is depicted in a lamenting posture, tearing at her hair and beating her chest in a powerful display of grief.[63] Although positioned outside of the main relief panel depicting the deceased, the Siren on this stelae appears to echo the postures of the human mourners below, creating a visual and emotional analogy between the Siren and the bereaved.[64] Estrin argues that the Siren's role goes beyond decoration; instead, it serves as a catalyst for the viewer's own emotional and somatic experience of grief and remembrance at the graveside.[65] The representation of the Siren, renowned for her song, encourages a synesthetic response in the viewer much like the presence of the Siren in the symposium space, except in this context she evokes the sounds of mourning with her song and posture. The lamenting form of the Siren on this grave stelae, Estrin contends, guides the viewer to access their own embodied memories of grief and mourning.[66] In this manner, the Siren enables the funerary monument to extend its emotive power, transforming the individual viewer's subjective experience into part of a communal, ritualized performance of lamentation for the deceased.

[62] Estrin 2021: 261.
[63] Ibid, 264.
[64] Ibid, 272.
[65] Ibid, 280.
[66] Ibid.

Moreover, the role of the Siren on funerary monuments and assuming the role of a protective figure may have been in response to contemporary societal issues that limited the woman's role in funerary rites and rituals.[67] In the 6th century BCE, the Athenian statesman Solon passed a number of sumptuary laws that limited women's autonomy by restricting their ability to lament, reducing the number of women allowed to participate in ritual mourning or funerary rites, and requiring women to walk behind men in funerary processions.[68] These sumptuary laws strongly affected the woman's traditional and enormous role in the funeral. As a result, women's traditional and significant roles in funerals were diminished. Prior to these laws, women were involved in key rituals such as washing and preparing the body in a process known as *prosthesis* and engaging in public ritual lamentation and crying.[69] By curtailing women's involvement in these essential aspects of the funeral, the sumptuary laws effectively banned women from public displays of mourning, rendering their roles obsolete. In response to these societal changes, the Siren's role on funerary monuments as a protective figure may have emerged as a symbolic substitute for the mourning and lamenting woman. By depicting Sirens on funerary vessels and stone monuments, the Greeks could subvert the sumptuary laws and provide the deceased with a symbolic figure of perpetual mourning and lamentation. The Siren's presence in these funerary contexts may have served as a means to maintain the important and emotional and ritualistic elements of the funeral that were traditionally performed by women, ensuring that the deceased received the proper respects and mourning despite the limitations imposed on women's participation in these rites.

[67] I also owe this observation to Hardy's 2015 thesis. For more on Solon's sumptuary laws and their effects on women, and ritual funerary practices in Ancient Greece, see Hardy 2015: 18-27.
[68] Killerby 2002: 11; While Solon passed these laws in Athens, other funerary legislation was passed around the same time in many other Greek city-states, such as Delphi, Sparta, and Syracuse, among others. Garland 1985: 21.
[69] Garland 1985: 30.

The so-called "Harpy Monument," a Lycian pillar tomb dating back to the early 5th century BCE, shows how this now-Greek iconography came to be adapted into the funerary imagery of neighboring Anatolian cultures (Fig. 9). The reliefs on this monument depict Sirens carrying small human figures believed to be the souls of the deceased, much like the prevailing iconography of the *Ba.*[70] Lycians may have adapted the Greek concept of the Siren, pulling from the iconography of the Egyptian *Ba*, to align with their own beliefs about death and the afterlife. Furthermore, the soul-bearer role of the Sirens on the Harpy monument may reflect the influence of ancient Near Eastern religious beliefs, particularly those of Mesopotamia and Anatolia, which also associated birds with the underworld and the transportation of souls.[71] The Harpy Monument serves as a testament to the fusion of these beliefs, reinforcing the idea that the image of the Greek Siren emerged, at least in part, from the Egyptian *Ba* and other Near Eastern figures associated with the soul and the underworld.

How can we rectify this clear importance of the Siren in the funerary sphere with the iconography's appearance in the household and symposium? An answer can perhaps be found not in Greece, but rather in ancient Etruria in what is today northern Italy. The extensive trade networks between Greece, and Athens in particular, and Etruria facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, and artistic motifs, significantly influencing the cultural and religious practices of both civilizations. Greek pottery, in particular, was highly prized by the Etruscans, who imported and adapted these vessels to suit their own needs and preferences.[72] While these vessels maintained some of their original purposes, such as storing liquids or serving as grave offerings, the Etruscans also adapted them to suit their own ritualistic and funerary needs. One notable shift

[70] Karademir and Özdemir 2013: 99.
[71] Beyond Zu in Mesopotamia, the Hittites had a unique relationship to birds and their associations with death and the afterlife. See Karademir and Özdemir 2013: 93-95.
[72] Bundrick 2019: 3; Bundrick 2015: 295.

in function can be observed in the use of Greek vases, particularly amphorae as cinerary urns in Etruscan tombs.[73] Other vessel types discussed in this chapter, such as the hydria, loutrophoros, and lekythos, were also frequently included in Etruscan tomb assemblages.[74] The presence of these Attic vessels in Etruscan funerary contexts may be attributed to the "semi-luxurious" esteem in which Greek pottery was held within Etruscan society, as the possession and display of these imported wares likely served as a mark of prestige and status.[75] The image of the Siren, present on many of these imported Greek vases– both the amphora from the Louvre and the hydria from the Martin von Wagner Museum were discovered in Etruria– may have played a significant role in their new function within Etruscan funerary contexts. As discussed, Sirens were associated with death, mourning, and the protection of souls, which may have resonated with Etruscan beliefs about the afterlife. The liminal nature of the Siren, embodied in her monstrous and feminine qualities, allows for her assimilation into the Etruscan funerary context. As a hybrid creature, the Siren straddles boundaries between the human and the divine, the natural and the supernatural, making her an ideal symbol for the transition between life and death. Her feminine attributes, such as beauty and allure, evoke the seductive power of the afterlife, while her monstrous aspects, like her avian features, represent the otherworldly and the unknown. This duality of the Siren made her a fitting protective guardian and guide for the deceased in their passage to the afterlife.

[73] Bundrick 2019: 168.
[74] Ibid, 10.
[75] Ibid, 9.

Chapter 2
Sirens in Homer's *Odyssey*

Few other mythical creatures have captured later imaginations as vividly as the Sirens. Despite the varying ways in which the Siren appeared, and was employed, in ancient visual culture, it was their appearance in the epic tradition that proved to be the most influential in later periods. As far as can be determined from the surviving literary record, these enigmatic beings made their poetic debut in Homer's dactylic hexameter poem, *The Odyssey,* composed orally circa 750 BCE, and written down under the reign of the Athenian tyrant Peisistratus in the mid-sixth century BCE.[76] Despite their relatively brief appearance in the Odyssey's narrative, the Sirens have left an indelible mark on later cultures, their influence compared to the Siren's appearance in other ancient media far outweighing the number of lines devoted to them in Homer's tale.

The Sirens appear in a story within a story. Having arrived by Book 8 in the court of the Phaeacians, Odysseus recounts over the following four books his journey, the Sirens appearing only in Book 12. The enchantress Circe forewarns Odysseus of the Siren's deadly allure:

> First, you will reach the Sirens, who bewitch all passersby. If anyone goes near them in ignorance, and listens to their voices, that man will never travel to his home, and never make his wife and children happy to have him back with them again. The Sirens who sit there in their meadow will seduce him with piercing songs.[77]

Odysseus takes precautions to protect himself and his crew - to a point. He orders his men to plug their ears with wax, rendering them deaf to the Siren's song. However, driven by his curiosity, Odysseus cannot resist the temptation to hear their voices. He instructs his crew to bind

[76] There is controversy surrounding the dating of Homer's epics. Some scholars date the Odyssey as early as 725 BCE and as late as 675 BCE.
[77] Homer, *The Odyssey*. Trans. Emily Wilson. XII. 38-45.

him tightly to the ship's mast, ensuring that he can listen without succumbing to the urge to fling himself into the sea. As Odysseus' ship approaches the Siren's island, their melody fills the air.

Within this story within a story, Odysseus recounts how the Sirens promise to regale Odysseus with tales of his successes in the Trojan War and the otherworldly knowledge they possess, luring him with the prospect of unparalleled wisdom.[78] Enchanted by their song, Odysseus strains against his bonds, desperate to join the Sirens. He threatens his crew and demands to be released, yet his loyal men, their ears blocked with wax, remain steadfast in their resolve. They continue to sail, ignoring their captain's pleas until the Siren's voices fade into the distance, and the danger has passed:

> We traveled fast, and when we were in earshot of the Sirens, they knew our ship was near, and started singing: 'Odysseus! Come here! You are well-known from many stories! Glory of the Greeks! Now stop your ship and listen to our voices. All those who pass this way hear honeyed songs, poured from our mouths. The music brings them joy, and they go on their way with greater knowledge, since we know everything the Greeks and Trojans suffered in Troy, by gods' will; and we know whatever happens anywhere on earth.'
>
> Their song was so melodious, I longed to listen more. I told my men to free me. I scowled at them, but they kept rowing on. Eurylochus and Perimedes stood and tied me even tighter, with more knots. But when we were well past them and I could no longer hear the singing of the Sirens, I nodded to my men and they removed the wax that I had used to plug their ears and untied me. When we had left that island, I saw a mighty wave and smoke, and heard a roar.[79]

Homer never provides a detailed description of the Sirens' appearance, unlike his vivid portrayals of other female monsters, such as Scylla and Charybdis. In Book 12, after Circe warns Odysseus about the Sirens, she proceeds to introduce Scylla and Charybdis, offering a comprehensive description of Scylla:

[78] "In other words, the Sirens promise to emulate the BBC World Service of the 21st century," See Nugent, 2008 for a linguistic breakdown of the original Greek text of *The Odyssey* Book 12.
[79] Ibid, XII.180-203

> [Scylla] has twelve dangling legs and six long necks with a gruesome head on each, and in each face, three rows of crowded teeth, pregnant with death. Her belly slumps inside the hollow cave; she keeps her heads above the yawning chasm and scopes around the rock, and hunts for fish.[80]

as well as portraying Charybdis as "shining" and seething.[81] In contrast, These the Sirens are primarily described by the quality of their song, which is characterized as "melodious," "beautiful," or "honeyed."[82] Their voices are further described as "penetrating" and "sweet."[83] In some translations of the Odyssey, such as Stanley Lombardo's version from 2000, the Siren's lips are the only physical attribute mentioned as they sing:

> Come hither, Odysseus, glory of the Achaeans, stop your ship so you can hear our voices. No one has ever sailed his black ship past here without listening to the honeyed sound from our lips.[84]

And again, in a translation by George Herbert Palmer from 1929, the Sirens say that "none has ever passed us in a black-hulled ship till from our lips he heard ecstatic song."[85] These (invariably male) translators, which predate Emily Wilson's translation, place an emphasis on the Siren's lips in an effort to make them more sexualized and feminine. However, in Emily Wilson's translation, she identifies that "lips" has been mistranslated from "mouths," which is still their only physical attribute but is far less sexually suggestive than "lips." Regardless of the translation, the true allure of the Sirens lies in their music's ability to transport the listener beyond ordinary reality into the realm of the divine, connecting with a profound human longing for fulfillment and union with the divine.

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[80] Ibid, XII.88-91.
[81] Ibid. XII.235-237.
[82] Ibid. XII. 192; Homer, *The Odyssey.* Trans. Stanley Lombardo. XII.200; Homer, *The Odyssey.* Trans. George Herbert Palmer. XII.
[83] Homer, *The Odyssey.* Trans. George Herbert Palmer. XII; Homer, *The Odyssey.* Trans. Arthur S. Way. XII.189.
[84] Homer, *The Odyssey.* Trans. Stanley Lombardo. XII.191-194.
[85] Homer, *The Odyssey.* Trans. George Herbert Palmer. XII.

What is most significant about the Sirens in the *Odyssey* is not their physical appearance, but rather the complex dynamics surrounding their song and the conspicuous absence of their promised narrative recital. David Schur argues that while the Sirens' brief "overture" sung to Odysseus contains an alluring offer to relate a comprehensive story about the Trojan War and all earthly happenings, this narrative recital never actually materializes.[86] The Sirens describe and promote their song, but do not deliver the epic tale they claim to know.[87] This creates a disconnect between the sensory impact of their voices and the unfulfilled, imagined content of the knowledge and pleasure their song is supposed to convey. Schur postulates that this disjunction between the Sirens' deadly vocal medium and their unrealized epic message reflects the Odyssey's own anxieties about the threats of silence, forgetting and poetic mortality that constantly haunts the oral epic tradition.[88] By having Odysseus survive the Siren's song, the *Odyssey* metaphorically triumphs over narrative oblivion, even as it acknowledges the fragility of memory and transmission that enables its own survival. The Siren episode gains its power and resonance not from any actual description of the Sirens themselves, but from the way it evokes the dangers and seductions of song through a "heard" overture that simultaneously points to an "unheard" epic recital.[89] This interplay between sound and silence, presence and absence, represents the *Odyssey*'s self-conscious reckoning with the poetic tradition's fear of being lost and forgotten.[90] The Siren's significance lies in this haunting, introspective engagement with the fragile conditions of Homeric epic's own survival and transmission.

[86] Schur 2014: 4.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid, 6.
[89] Ibid, 8.
[90] Ibid, 11.

In a passage from Apollodorus' *Epitome*, we can see the influence of the visual tradition on the poetic tradition in the description of the Sirens.[91] Unlike Homer's *Odyssey,* which focuses solely on the Sirens' vocal abilities, Apollodorus provides a more detailed account of their physical appearance.[92] He specifically mentions that the Sirens "from the thighs they had the forms of birds," clearly depicting them as hybrid creatures.[93] This description aligns with the visual representations of Sirens found in Greek art, where they are frequently portrayed as bird-women hybrids. Apollodorus' inclusion of the Sirens' physical form in his retelling of the *Odyssey* myth demonstrates how the visual tradition of representing Sirens as hybrid creatures had become firmly established in the Greek artistic and literary imagination. By incorporating this visual element into his narrative, Apollodoros bridges the gap between the Homeric tradition, which relied on the power of the Sirens' voices, and the artistic tradition, which emphasized their hybrid nature. This passage highlights the interconnectedness of visual and literary traditions in ancient Greece, and shows how the representation and reception of mythological figures, such as the Sirens, evolved over time as poets and artists drew inspiration from each other.

Over the centuries, numerous translations of Homer's *Odyssey* have emerged, each offering a unique interpretation of the Sirens and their significance. These translations have played a critical role in shaping our contemporary understanding and perception of these mythical creatures. As a result of these diverse translations and their subsequent interpretations,

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[91] Apollodorus was an Athenian scholar and historian alive around 120 BCE. For more on Apollodorus, see Hornblower 1996.

[92] Apollodoros: Book E, chapter 7; Similarly, other ancient authors such as Apollonius Rhodius, Aelian, Ovid, Hyginus, Eustathius, and Pausanias describe the Sirens as having a hybrid form, with the upper body of a women and the lower body, wings, or feet of a bird. See: Ap Rhod., Argon. iv898ff.; Ael., Nat. Anim. xvii.23; Ov. Met. 5.552-562; Hyginus, Fab. 125, 141; Eustathius on Hom. Od. 12.47, p, 1709; Paus. 9.34.3.

[93] Ibid, 20.

the Sirens have become a multifaceted symbol in contemporary culture. They are seen as the embodiments of temptation, the dangerous allure of forbidden knowledge, and the consequences of succumbing to desire. The Sirens also serve as a reminder of the importance of self-control, as Odysseus must resist their song to continue his journey home. During the Medieval Period, as Europe underwent wide-spread Christianization, the Sirens from Homer's *Odyssey* took on a new symbolic meaning. They became cautionary figures, serving as a warning to those who deviated from the path of righteousness and strayed from the word of God. In this context, the reader of the Odyssey was often encouraged to identify with Odysseus, seeing themselves as the hero who must resist temptation and remain steadfast in their faith. This interpretation of the Sirens as symbols of moral peril and the reader's identification with Odysseus' struggle will be further explored in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3
The Medieval Siren

It is the literary Siren as it is described in Homer's *Odyssey*, rather than her appearance in later classical poetry or visual media, that would go on to have a profound impact on later uses of the creatures in art and literature over centuries. That said, recent scholarship by Emily Wilson has illustrated that much of the seductive and physical imagery associated with the Siren stems not from the *Odyssey* itself, but layers of interpretation added well after Homer.[94] Understanding this reception, particularly in the Medieval era, sheds light on how the archetype of the Siren remains as both a reflection and assertion of social control even as the creature's appearance changes.

As discussed in Chapter 2, most translators have ascribed overtly feminine wiles to the Siren for centuries, but the original Greek text does not describe them as physical temptresses.[95] Instead, their power lies purely in their enchanting voices promising otherworldly knowledge. In Homeric tradition, the Siren represented the danger of curiosity, not carnality itself. This new portrayal of Sirens began to emerge in various contexts in the Middle Ages, often used to illustrate didactic or religious themes, serving as moral and spiritual symbols in Medieval art and literature. Initially representing the dangers of temptation, the Siren became conflated with sin and adopted by religious polemics to illustrate the risk of straying from the word of God. While the Siren can represent lust and the devil, she can also represent temptation, making her an assimilable character into any context, religious or not.

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[94] Wilson 2020: 156.

[95] Dr. Wilson was the first American woman to ever translate the *Odyssey* in its classical form, publishing her groundbreaking work in 2020. Through her translation, Dr. Wilson discovered that her predecessors had inaccurately ascribed physical and sexually suggestive attributes to the Sirens in Book 12, such as mistranslating the word "mouths", to "lips" in various Odyssey translations. Dr. Wilson argues that this mistranslation was to make the Siren seem more sexually alluring.

The Romans had a unique perspective on the integration of the monstrous into their daily lives, which set them apart from the Greeks. They exhibited a keen interest in what they considered “freaks of nature,” encompassing not only monstrous animals but also deformed or unusual humans, such as dwarfs and hunchbacks.[96] This fascination with the unusual may be attributed to the Romans’ expansionist mentality, which was influenced by the ever-expanding boundaries of their vast empire.[97] The influence of Pliny the Elder on medieval monster lore is noteworthy. Pliny’s extensive work, *Natural History,* was a catalog of various creatures and oddities, reflecting the encyclopedic mindset that was gaining popularity during his time. His desire to categorize and document monsters was driven by the Roman’s curiosity about the unusual and strange, a curiosity that was fostered by the Roman military and economic expansion. As the Romans encountered new lands and cultures, they sought to understand the world around them, and Pliny’s work became a source of knowledge for their inquisitive minds.

During the Medieval period, Western European bestiaries became the primary source of information about the natural world, featuring images and descriptions of both real and fantastical animals that were known to people at the time. While the bestiary's origins trace back to the Greek philosophers who laid the groundwork for our modern scientific concepts, scholars such as Richard Barber contend that it diverges from conventional scientific understanding.[98] Bestiary texts offer a diverse array of creatures, ranging from the familiar to the fantastical, yet their descriptions seldom rely on empirical observation or everyday experiences. Instead, bestiaries draw upon the authority of "auctores," or monks who were recognized experts in the field.[99] The central premise of the bestiary lies in its interpretation of God's design for animals,

[96] Felton 2012: 127.
[97] Ibid, 109.
[98] Barber 1992: 7.
[99] Ibid.

birds, and fishes, endowing them with distinct natures and behaviors.[100] These creatures serve as moral entities, offering profound lessons for human readers, thus establishing a bridge between the humans and nature and guiding sinners towards redemption.[101] Prior to the creation of bestiaries, there was already a variation in the way Sirens were portrayed, providing bestiary illustrators with a wealth of information to draw from, including pre-existing depictions of Sirens in ancient Greek art and literature, as well as the text of the bestiaries themselves. As established, it was during the Middle Ages that the image of the Siren began to shift from a bird-woman hybrid to a mermaid-like creature. This transition was first described in the seventh-century text, the *Liber Monstrorum*, which describes Sirens as "sea-girls [. . .] with the body of a maiden, but have scaly fishes' tails."[102] The author of the *Liber Monstrorum* emphasizes the Siren's incredible beauty and the deceptive nature of their songs. Furthermore, the use of the term "maiden" implies that the Sirens appear virginal, highlighting their deceptively youthful and innocent attributes. Although the *Liber Monstrorum* was the first to describe Sirens with fish-like features, it did not mark the end of the bird-woman hybrid depiction. Numerous bestiaries continued to portray Sirens as hideous and fearful avian creatures, suggesting a multifaceted interpretation of these creatures. This diversity in representation reflects the complex and evolving symbolism associated with Sirens throughout the Medieval Period.

The *Physiologus*, composed in the second century CE, was held in high regard as the ultimate authority for bestiaries and serves as the common ancestor of the bestiaries, representing a Christian interpretation of the collective knowledge of ancient natural historians.[103] The *Physiologus* emerged in Alexandria, where pagan and Christian learning intersected, reflecting

[100] Ibid; Strickland 2013: 71.
[101] Baxter 1998: 27.
[102] Orchard 1995: 263.
[103] Curley 1979: x.

the coexistence of both traditions. This Christian reinterpretation aimed to redefine the natural world through a religious lens, drawing extensively from the works of Greek philosophers and their Latin successors like Aristotle and Pliny.[104] In his introductory chapter to his translation of the *Physiologus*, Michael J. Curley presents a compelling argument regarding the significance of this text. He underscores that the popularity of animal legends is rooted in their remarkable adaptability to a wide array of cultural contexts, spanning both religious and secular domains.[105] The transmission of these legends continued through the works of ancient scientific writers like Pliny and Aelian, who introduced them to the early Christian world.[106] However, the unknown author of the *Physiologus* took a significant step in infusing these pagan tales with Christian moral and mystical teachings. This transformation of these stories began to occupy a distinct and vital role in the symbolism of the Christian world. The *Physiologus* emerged as a crucial source of sacred iconography and didactic poetry during the Medieval period, making its way into preaching manuals and religious textbooks of the later Middle Ages. The text is versatile, as the animal legends at times circulated independently of the allegorical or biblical interpretations they were associated with.[107] While the *Physiologus* imparts moral lessons from the natural world, its primary objective is to reveal the nature of God himself by unveiling the Creator's vestiges in the creation.

The entry on the Siren in the *Physiologus* is coupled with that of the Centaur, suggesting a thematic connection between these two creatures. The Siren and Centaur are depicted as pairings in a multitude of bestiary texts, and serve as a warning against being deceived by the

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[104] Ibid.

[105] These animal legends, originating in diverse cultures such as Indian, Hebrew, and Egyptian, found their way into Greek and Roman folklore, poetry, and art. Ultimately, they became incorporated into Alexandrian handbooks of paradoxology and medical-magical treatises. Ibid.

[106] Ibid.

[107] For further reading on the organization of bestiary texts, see Baxter 1998.

allurements of the world.[108] The text reiterates a familiar narrative regarding the Siren, highlighting their ability to deceive men who are unfamiliar with the allure of their voices, ultimately leading to their demise. The Siren and Centaur are portrayed as beautiful yet deceitful, like the devil, indicating a cautionary stance against the seductive nature of certain forms of art or entertainment that may lead individuals astray from their Christian faith.[109] This alignment of song and deception underscores the moral and spiritual dimensions of the *Physiologus*, where the text seeks to caution readers against worldly distractions and encourage a more devout and spiritually focused life. The Siren, in this context, serves as a symbol of the allure of the secular world, enticing individuals away from a more righteous path.

Composed in the late twelfth century, the *Bodleian Bestiary*'s connection to the *Physiologus* emphasizes the bestiary's role as a bridge between classical and Christian teachings. The recorded habits of creatures were upheld as enduring traditions, while the commentaries evolved to convey moral and spiritual significance within a Christian context.[110] The placement of the Siren entry among the birds in the *Bodleian Bestiary* indicates that the author likely categorized the Siren within the classical representation of bird-like creatures. The moral lesson associated with the Siren in the *Bodleian Bestiary* centers around the "lure of their voices" and how it can "lead ignorant and imprudent men" to their demise, emphasizing their avian qualities by focusing on their song.[111] However, the accompanying image of the Siren shows them as

[108] Baxter 1998: 32.
[109] Baxter argues that these pairings demonstrate that animals in the *Physiologus* were grouped based on the lessons they conveyed rather than any zoological considerations, reinforcing the moral and theological nature of the text. While this argument is certainly intriguing, Baxter makes little mention of the fact that a few of these groupings are male and female, perhaps gendering the morals. Especially in the case of the Siren and Centaur pairing, Baxter acknowledges that "centaurs are men made like senseless animals," but does not discuss the frequency to which male-female pairings are present in the *Physiologus B* text. Perhaps the presence of gender in the *Physiologus* was meant to make the morals resonate with different contemporary readers, since these texts were used as teaching material. See Baxter 1998: 35.
[110] Barber 1992: 8.
[111] Barber 1992: 150.

mermaid-like creatures, with their exposed breasts visible above the water's surface and their fishtails concealed beneath the waves (Fig. 10). Debra Hassig (Strickland) claims that the depiction of Sirens as nude figures emphasizes their status as lustful women by exposing their modesty.[112] The monks producing the *Bodleian Bestiary* may have intentionally used immodest or exhibitionist figures, such as the nude Siren, to implicate the viewer in the sin that the text criticizes. By doing so, they might have aimed to inspire a resolve within the viewer to rid themselves of the sin. Alternatively, the viewer could have been meant to symbolically "become" Odysseus, avoiding the temptation presented by the nude figures on the page and instead dedicating themselves to persevering with their spiritual growth. Over time, the depiction of the Siren may have shifted from an avian to a piscine form because the mermaid-like version served as a more effective didactic tool for emphasizing the Siren's deceptive nature. By portraying the Siren with exposed breasts and concealing her fish tail– the essence of her hybridity– medieval artists could better convey the idea that temptation often appears attractive on the surface but hides perilous consequences. This visual representation reinforced the notion that one should be cautious of alluring appearances, as they may mask hidden dangers.

Like the *Physiologus*, the Bodleian Bestiary emphasizes the dangers of being beguiled by the charms of the world, including games and the pleasures of the theater. The reference to theater and music in both texts raises many questions. Perhaps in the context of the *Physiologus*, engaging in theater or similar activities may have been viewed as indulgent, worldly, or even heretical, as they could divert one's attention away from spiritual matters.[113] The Siren's captivating songs, much like the alluring qualities of the world, are depicted as a trap that can distract people from their spiritual path. The discrepancy between the description of the Siren

[112] Strickland 2013: 80.
[113] Leach 2006: 193.

and the image in the Bodleian Bestiary, featuring fish-tails rather than bird-like lower extremities, raises questions about the reason for this portrayal. It's possible that their association with song and deception connects the Siren with the other avian creatures that the Siren is situated between, such as the screech-owl and the partridge, both of which are characterized by their vocalizations.[114] This juxtaposition of the Siren with birds that have deceptive songs underscores the Bodleian Bestiary's thematic emphasis on the moral lessons conveyed by these creatures, using their unique qualities to impart spiritual and ethical guidance to the reader.

The disconnect between the image and text of the Siren in traditional bestiaries may have yet another explanation. Many bestiaries feature Sirens with both piscine and avian features, suggesting that bestiary illustrators had creative freedom when creating the images to accompany the Siren's depiction. The Bodleian Bestiary, as previously discussed, features images of the Siren as part-fish, yet the text describes them as avian. Similarly, the Northumberland Bestiary includes fish tails in its illustration, while the text describes them as having distinct bird-like features, stating that their "lower extremities, all the way down to their feet, are of a bird," (Fig. 11).[115] The Worksop Bestiary, which predates the Northumberland Bestiary by nearly a century, features a near-identical image of the hybridized Sirens, suggesting that the artist of the former may have been inspired by the work of the latter (Fig. 12). In both the Northumberland and the Worksop bestiaries, three nude Sirens are depicted, with the Siren on the left holding a comb and the other two holding fish. Their lower halves consist of fish tails coupled with bird wings. However, one key difference is that the Worksop Bestiary shows the Sirens with bird-like talons, while the Northumberland Bestiary shows them with webbed, aquatic-looking feet. Despite these

[114] The screech-owl's cry is said to reveal its inner thoughts, while the partridge's call is associated with a biblical reference to Christ. Barber 1992: 149-151.
[115] White 2009: Ms. 100, fol. 14.

variations in imagery, the moral of the Sirens remains consistent across all three bestiary texts: those who incautiously indulge in the vanity and delights of the world will eventually fall victim to them. Thus, the choice of depicting Sirens with avian features to instill fear in the viewer, or with piscine features to emphasize their deceptiveness, was entirely up to the artist. Depending on the bestiary, the artist had plenty of sources to utilize but only one moral code to follow, allowing them to choose the image of the Siren they personally believed best conveyed the Christian moral.

Furthermore, the decision to render Sirens as either avian or piscine may have had to do with contemporary conceptions around female beauty and its connection to religiosity. In late antiquity, Saint Jerome described Sirens as the female counterpart to demons, reflecting views similar to those of Leander of Seville, who famously argued that all women were either nuns or Sirens.[116] These statements, which predate the *Liber Monstrorum,* position Sirens in direct contrast to the most devout and religious women, implying that Sirens lack any kind of religious conviction. The portrayal of Sirens as bird-women hybrids likely mirrors these sentiments, as depicting Sirens as grotesque creatures would probably evoke disgust in the viewer. The choice to represent Sirens as ugly creatures indicates that during this period, early European Christian society grappled with a fear of both female ugliness and female beauty. In this context, women were viewed as morally inferior to men, facing a double-edged sword: if they were beautiful, they were seen as deceptive temptresses who would lead men to their doom; conversely, if they were considered aesthetically unattractive, they were regarded as the embodiment of sin. This dichotomy reflects the prevailing contemporary attitudes, which placed women in a no-win situation, judging them harshly based on their appearance and perceived moral character.

[116] Travis 2002: 39

Much like the traditional bestiary, the *Bestiary of Love* uses its animal images prescriptively. However, unlike other bestaries, the didacticism is not spiritual in nature, and there is no consistent pattern in the preservation of good-bad symbolism. Written in the mid-thirteenth century, Master Richard de Fournival's *Bestiary of Love* weaves centuries-old bestiary traditions into an exploration of the sexual dynamics of love, departing from the spiritual didacticism of traditional bestiaries to delve into the complexities of human emotions and relationships. Master Richard's bestiary was very popular, and many manuscript copies still exist. In a few of the manuscripts the *Bestiary of Love* is followed by a response, supposedly from the woman that Master Richard was writing to. The *Bestiary of Love* begins with images of various animals, including the rooster, ass, wolf, and cricket, which serve as similes for the author's personal feelings of futility, impotence, and rejection.[117] Master Richard then shifts the allegory toward a woman's love, exploring themes like the intensity of a woman's emotions, her inconsistency, and her self-imposed punishments.[118]

In the entry on the Siren in the *Bestiary of Love*, the siren is described in three different forms, each having a seductive power through their music—trumpets, harps, and voices. Their melodies are irresistibly pleasing, compelling men to approach, but once near, they fall asleep and are ultimately killed by the Siren.[119] The Siren narrative emphasizes dual culpability in the love dynamic between men and women. The Siren carries guilt for her treacherous actions by luring men to their doom, but the men are also at fault for trusting themselves to her and allowing themselves to be entrapped. The speaker in this passage acknowledges that both parties share blame in this cycle of seduction and betrayal, and he takes full responsibility, ultimately

[117] Beer 1986: xvii.
[118] Master Richard employs both unfavorable devil imagery and positive symbols like the panther, which is a symbol of Christ, and the ostrich, who neglects earthly concerns, when analyzing a woman's love.
[119] Beer 1986: 11.

stating that he has killed himself through such love. The man's trust and vulnerability, as well as the woman's allure and potential treachery, are central themes that mirror the complexities of love and the power dynamics associated with it.

The author of the response appended to the *Bestiary of Love* text utilizes the love imagery in a new way, redirecting it to convey a female perspective.[120] Whereas the *Bestiary of Love* characterizes women as vulnerable and men as tyrannical, deceitful, and aggressive, the female author of the response reshapes these suggestions to portray women more positively. She implies that Master Richard himself resembles the dangerous Siren through his superficially fair words that deceive. Therefore, the meaning applied to the image of the Siren shifts significantly depending on the context: the same metaphor used to reinforce misogyny is transformed to represent women's resistance against such oppression. The contrast reveals how interpretations of mythological symbols like the Siren can vary drastically between texts based on the authors' ideological aims.

Outside of the medieval manuscript, the Siren can be found on 12th century CE St-Michel-de-Cuxa cloister capitals, providing a non-literary case study for how the meaning and purpose of the Siren archetype shifts based on the context in which they are situated. Figures like the Siren were a source of contention between ascetic monastic orders emphasizing sober reflection and more traditional Benedictines embracing elaborate decoration.[121] The Siren visualized the dangers of temptation and seduction found outside of the monastery, reminding monks to protect themselves against carnal desires that threatened their vows of celibacy.[122] In this monastic setting, the same hybrid creature used to elevate tales of heroic encounters with the

[120] Strickland 2013: 71.
[121] The Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux harshly critiqued such ornamentation as distracting monks from their inner contemplation. See Dale 2001: 402.
[122] Ibid, 419.

divine in the *Odyssey* took on similar moralizing religious dimensions as the bestiary texts.[123] The Siren's mythical songs shifted from forbidden wisdom to temptation, the cultural context transforming their meaning from alluring revelation to alluring sin. Their ambiguity leaves them perpetually available for reinterpretation and appropriation toward current ideological ends, whether affirming male dominance or spiritual ideals.

So far, our analysis confirms the capacity of the Siren's imagery to appear in diverse contexts yet maintain her moralized significance in post-Homeric tradition. Turning to the *Queen Mary Psalter*, the presence of the Siren in this context may primarily function to captivate and motivate lay readers and children learning the Psalter text. The Siren could play a cautionary role, like her role in the *Bodleian Bestiary* and the *Physiologus,* warning readers of the intellectual and spiritual perils of inattention to the text's ethical directives. Sirens in didactic literature, such as the bestiary, could also reference classical tales to leverage the appeal and relatability of their mythic trope in establishing connections between Christian morals. Like the *Bestiary of Love*, the *Queen Mary Psalter* may also utilize the familiar Siren archetype to entice those with less experience with contemporary literature into engaging with Christian values. Thus, the Siren in the *Queen Mary Psalter* may be the perfect example for demonstrating the Siren's dual capabilities within the same text, by leveraging a ubiquitous myth while simultaneously reifying traditional Christian moral symbolism.

Featuring a variety of bestiary images along the margins at the bottom of each page, the *Queen Mary Psalter*, produced in the fourteenth century, appears to have been commissioned by Queen Isabella of England for the young prince to assist in his theological education. The inclusion of the Siren in the bas-de-page offered a dual message in the Psalter: warning against

[123] Ibid.

yielding to temptation and encouraging continued learning, paralleling Odysseus's perseverance. In this context, the bas-de-page Siren acts as a cautionary figure, warning readers of the repercussions of straying from Christian teachings while referencing a popular story, encouraging perseverance in education. The *Queen Mary Psalter* adopts a more episodic approach in its bas-de-page scenes, resembling an anthology of short stories, fostering a more intimate reading experience.[124] Positioned at the bottom of the page, where readers might look after reading through the psalm, the Siren's appearance serves as a moral commentary on temptation, education, and the reader's decision to engage further or succumb (Fig. 13). The familiarity of the bestiary stories at the time suggests that their moral lessons need not be explicitly reiterated, as viewers could understand their meaningful relationships within the Psalter.[125] The use of animal imagery, similar to bestiaries, likely served prescriptive purposes in the Psalter, reinforcing spiritual education. The subtle tinting of the bestiary imagery implies a necessity for physical closeness to the manuscript, enhancing the didactic purpose of the text.[126]

In the *Queen Mary Psalter*, the sequence of illuminations mirrors narrative biblical ordering– first the Baptism of Christ, then the Temptation, positioned opposite one another on folios 190v and 191r.[127]Below both scenes lies the text of psalms 80 and 81 which summarize Israel's history including reference to the Exodus.[128] The psalm cautions against straying from faith, encouraging allegiance to the one true God. This links the psalm text thematically to the facing Temptation illumination in which Jesus is tempted by the Devil to abandon his faith. The historiated initial that introduces psalms 80 and 81 depicts King David playing bells, a customary

[124] Stanton 2011: 85.
[125] Strickland 1997: 187-188.
[126] Stanton 2011: 102.
[127] At the time of submission, the British Library's online database was down, causing me to not have access to an image of the manuscript openining.
[128] Stanton 2001: 258.

reference signaling both his presumed authorship and the broader role of music in worship.[129] Therefore, a Siren positioned below the Temptation narrative may impart spiritual warning through drawing a didactic parallel about the perils of seduction. Her presence contrasts the beautiful facade of the Siren's song against her lethal intent. This juxtaposition renders the Siren as the antithesis to the message of the psalm text and King David's musical praise– salvation through music rather than destruction.

Preceding the Temptation folio featuring the Siren is folio 190v containing the Baptism of Christ illumination. Below this scene, a unicorn battles a lion in a different bestiary vignette. As described in the *Physiologus,* popular legend held that the unicorn could only be tamed by a virgin maiden, becoming docile in her presence.[130] Christian readings perceived rich allegorical potential in this tale, drawing parallels between the unicorn's submission to the virgin and Christ's humility before the Virgin Mary. Expanding upon this symbolic link, Master Richard de Fournival employed the unicorn in courtly romance as a metaphor for pure love in his *Bestiary of Love.*[131] The placement of this bestiary reference likely carries intentional theological messaging. The juxtaposition contrasts the virtue lent to the unicorn by its connection with the Virgin with the vice signified by the Temptation scene's Siren and her link to Satan and deception. By referencing popular legends underneath opposing illuminations, the author of the *Queen Mary Psalter* visually associates the unicorn and Christ's humility with salvation, whereas succumbing to the Siren risks a fall into heresy and death. This pairing of emblematic bestiary figures underneath Biblical events infuses additional layers of moral commentary through illiterate audiences' familiarity with the symbolic bestial lore and classical myths. The strategic interplay

[129] *Temptation and Salvation: The Psalms of King David.* 9 Jun.– 16 Aug. 2009, The Getty Center, Los Angeles.
[130] Curley 1979: 51.
[131] Beer 1986: 15.

implies that continuing with one's theological education leads Christians toward heavenly purity and rebirth or baptism like the unicorn, while abandoning the text risks a hellish demise akin to those lured by the Siren's song.

Given the Siren's traditional symbolism of temptation, as observed in various bestiary texts, a dual meaning emerges from her inclusion in the Psalter. Upon completing the day's theological study, the Siren may caution the reader about the dangerous enticements of the Devil like Christ in the Temptation narrative. Simultaneously, recalling Odysseus persevering past the Sirens offers encouragement to continue pursuing the reader's Christian education. At the bottom margin by where a tired reader may conclude, the Siren provides the impetus to proceed, both through religious thread and popular interest. As an adaptable monster representing varied forms of temptation, the Siren in the *Queen Mary Psalter* illustrates the themes of the Temptation narrative while underscoring the moral crux of her tale. Like the *Bestiary of Love's* innovative reworking, the *Queen Mary Psalter*'s Siren points to the reader's accountability in ceding to external impulses, even as the text acknowledges the deceptive allure. The Siren's linkage to music also echoes her *Physiologus* and *Bodleian Bestiary* portrayals, contrasting her ethical and dishonest applications. The bas-de-page Siren in the *Queen Mary Psalter* effectively warns against abandoning Christian education while beckoning continued engagement through compelling references.

Just as Odysseus faced the alluring and dangerous Sirens, medieval readers and viewers, particularly the elite who had access to these manuscripts, were confronted with the temptations and moral challenges of the world around them. Given that these manuscripts were reserved for the privileged class, it becomes increasingly likely that the Siren served as a potent reminder to remain faithful and diligent in their religious studies. The implied message was that succumbing

to temptation could jeopardize one's status, power, and possessions. By presenting the Siren to those who had the most to lose, her moral becomes all the more relevant. Moreover, the fact that these manuscripts were primarily used by the elite and monks underscores the idea that the image of the Siren was exclusive to those immersed in the study of theology. The aristocracy in Europe may have perceived these figures as direct threats to their power and influence, much in the same way that the Sirens threatened Odysseus' safe passage home. This parallel between Homer's legend and the real-world concerns of the ruling class further reinforces the didactic purpose of the Siren's image in medieval manuscripts, serving as a constant reminder of the dangers of temptation and the importance of remaining steadfast in one's faith and moral convictions.

Conclusion

The reception and meaning of the Siren in Ancient Greek and Medieval art reflect the complex and often contradictory attitudes towards women throughout history. In ancient Greece, Sirens were portrayed as both monstrous hybrid theriomorphic figures and benign protectors of the dead, highlighting their dual nature in Greek thought and their indebtedness to avian figures in other traditions of the ancient Mediterranean world. Their depictions as beautiful but deceptive seductresses and guardians of the deceased on everything from portable vases to monumental sculpture showcases a conceptual ambivalence surrounding their role in everyday mortal society separate from the mythic tradition. The avian form of the Sirens in antiquity symbolized their divine qualities, while simultaneously concealing their true nature as monsters and murderers.

The Sirens in Homer's *Odyssey* stand apart from the visual representations of these creatures in ancient Greek and Medieval art. In the epic poem, Sirens are identified solely by the alluring and dangerous power of their voices. The emphasis on their vocal abilities, rather than their visual form, highlights the Siren's role as a metaphorical embodiment of temptation. The physical representation of the Sirens in art allows for a more complex exploration of the tension within their dual nature as both dangerous monsters and benevolent guardians.

As Christianity spread during the Medieval era, monks adapted the Homeric Siren, without much regard for her other roles in classical society, their moral teachings. The Sirens came to represent the fear of female knowledge and seductive power, with their portrayals in didactic literature such as the Bodleian, Northumberland, and Worksop bestiaries as both birds and fish reflecting the dichotomy between lust and knowledge. Beautiful depictions of Sirens as fish symbolized the temptation of the flesh, while the monstrous depictions of the Siren as avian

served as warnings against the dangers of female intellect. This shift in the Siren's representation highlights the changing societal norms and the increasing desire to control and suppress women's sexuality and knowledge.

The vilification of the Siren throughout history, regardless of her physical appearance, has served as a tool to maintain women's subordination and silence their voices. The Siren embodies the hypocrisy of societal standards set by men for women, as they are expected to possess conflicting traits: intelligence without being threatening, beauty without being seductive, and charm without being manipulative. The tale of the Sirens reflects the complicated and often contradictory code of conduct imposed upon women across different eras. The representation of Siren has adapted to the changing societal perceptions of women, with their image transforming to reflect fears and anxieties surrounding female intelligence and sexuality. When society deemed women as becoming too educated or sexually liberated, the Siren's portrayal shifted to reinforce the desired norms and behaviors. Despite these changes, the Siren's cultural significance has endured, serving as a reminder of the ongoing struggles and double standards faced by women throughout history.

In a world where women continue to fight for equality and the right to express themselves freely, the Siren stands as a powerful symbol of resistance and resilience. Her complex and multifaceted nature reflects the diverse experiences and challenges faced by women across time and cultures. By examining the reception of the Siren's image and meaning through the Homeric lens in Ancient Greek and Medieval art, we gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which society has sought to control and define women's roles. As we move forward, it is crucial to recognize and challenge the ongoing attempts to silence and suppress women, drawing

inspiration from the Siren's enduring legacy of strength and defiance in the face of male adversity.

Figures

Figure 1: Bas-de-page Sirens, 1310-1320. *Queen Mary Psalter*. London: British Library. Ms. 2 B VII, fol. 97r

Figure 2. *Ba*-bird hovering over a mummy, 19th Dynasty. *Book of the Dead of Ani;* frame 17. London: British Museum. EA10470, 17.

Figure 3: Amphora with Siren, panthers, swan, and griffins, 600-575 BCE. Paris: Louvre Museum. E 816.

Figure 4: Hydria with women filling up water jugs, 520 BCE. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts. 153445.

Figure 5: Hydria with Dionysus, Satyrs, and Maenads. Sirens and Warriors on upper register, 550-500 BCE. Würzburg: Martin von Wagner Museum. L303. Image courtesy of the Beazley Archive: https://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/record/D6B69B37-BA5D-401F-B3C6-D30CC2CE3589.

Figure 6: Loutrophoros with female and male mourning procession. Siren located underneath the handle, 525-475 BCE. Oxford: Ashmolean Museum. 1928.574. Image courtesy of the Beazley Archive: https://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/record/95A3E9E4-FC11-46FF-A178-DBE47B4EA68A

Figure 7: Lekythoi with Siren atop a column, 475-425 BCE. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Market. 275328. Image courtesy of the Beazley Archive: https://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/record/7648841C-F18A-42E5-BD20-B7FD35B1D566

Figure 8: Lekythoi with Siren playing a lyre, 525-475 BCE. Amsterdam: Allard Pierson Museum. 8977. Image courtesy of the Beazley Archive: https://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/record/128AD019-21B4-4813-9C31-03BC6668EEEF

Figure 9: "Harpy" tomb relief south side. Lycian, 480-470 BCE. London: British Museum. 1848, 1020.1.

Figure 10: Siren entry, 1225-1250. *Bodleian Bestiary*. Oxford: Bodleian Library. MS. Bodl. 764, fol. 074r.

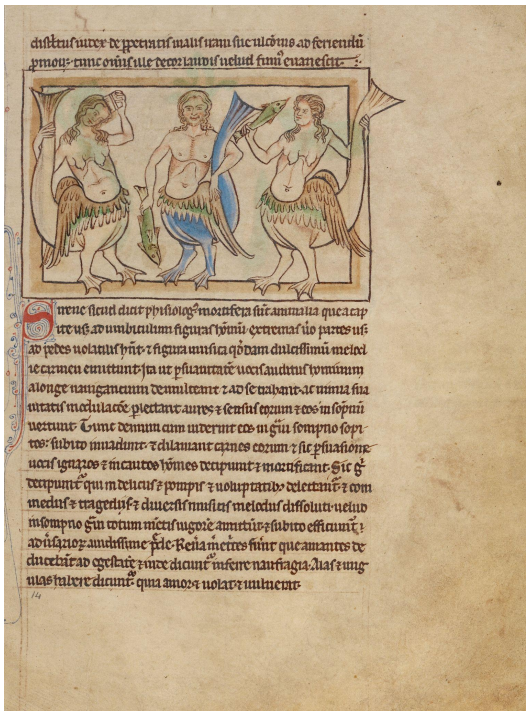

Figure 11: Siren entry, 1250-1260. *Northumberland Bestiary*. Los Angeles: Getty Museum. MS. 100 (2007.16), fol. 14.

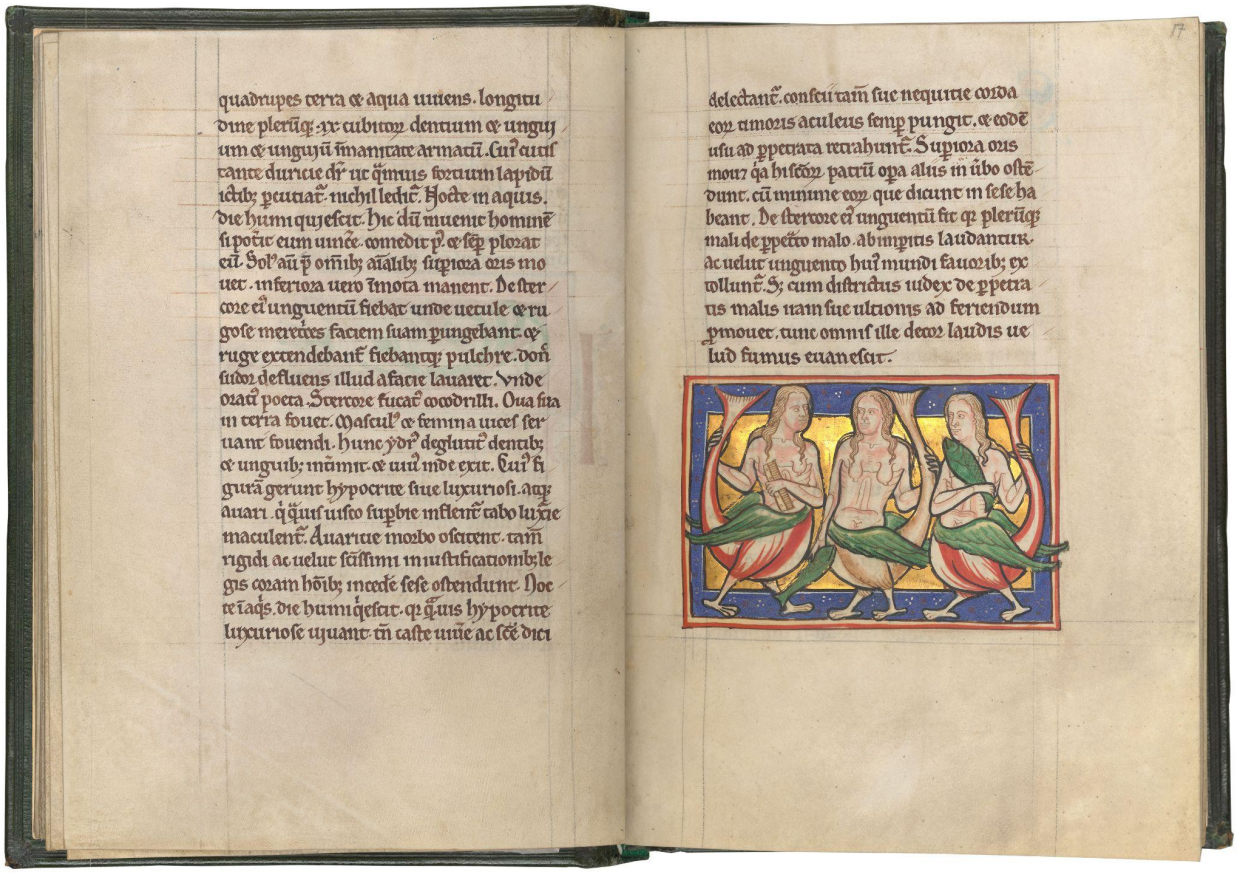

Figure 12: Siren opening, 1185. *Worksop Bestiary*. New York: Morgan Library and Museum. MS M.81, fols. 16v–17r.

Figure 13: Bas-de-page Sirens, 1310-1320. *Queen Mary Psalter*. London: British Library, Ms. 2 B VII, fol. 191r (detail).

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