Mermaids and the Production of Knowledge in Early Modern England by Tara E. Pedersen, Ashgate, Farnham and Burlington, 2015, 155 pages. ISBN 978-1-4724-4001-3, Hardback, £60

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Tara E. Pedersen argues that mermaids are 'superb figures to think with'; this punchy dissertation proves that fact beyond all doubt. Beginning with some provocative and fascinating questions ('What is the sex of a mermaid? What is the gender?'), Pedersen takes her reader through a whirlwind tour of early modern drama, showing at each stage that the definition-defying and boundary-crossing mermaid offers a fascinating window into the malleability of early modern concepts such as sex and gender, genre, agency, selfhood, and mystery.

Each chapter of *Mermaids and the Production of Knowledge* is based upon specific pieces of early modern drama, working through Dekker and Middleton, to Cavendish, via Spenser, and finally to Shakespeare. However, Pedersen's work is at its most insightful when looking beyond the script and stage and informing our understanding of how ideas about mermaids were used and distributed in early modern society more generally. There are, for example, some beautiful and fascinating examples of a mermaid tureen, an image of a mermaid on a dish, and most interestingly of all, carvings and figures of mermaids in English churches. All images are black and white, but they add a surprising and visually-pleasing element to a book which is otherwise immersed in intricate textual details and interpretations of early modern metaphor.

Pedersen herself has attempted to avoid being limited by theatrical sources. In fact this self-conscious act of avoiding categorisation as a historian makes for an interesting question about whether or not Pedersen is creating a mermaid persona for herself in this book. This question occurs to Pedersen in her afterword, and she is forced to conclude with the comment: 'I am not ready to say that I am not a mermaid'. Because this work is at its most inventive when it crosses disciplinary boundaries, this reviewer found the relatively lengthy introduction a particularly rewarding segment. *Mermaids and the Production of Knowledge* engages with an impressively diverse range of theoretical and methodological frameworks, all of which are helpfully described in the introduction with frequent lengthy quotation from relevant secondary literature. For this reason, the introduction will be valuable particularly to university students of early modern theatre and literature who are seeking to develop an understanding of the theoretical landscape available to them.

Following the introduction Pedersen explores *The Roaring Girl*, in order to demonstrate the power of the mermaid to reshape the simplicity of the viewer/object relationship. Chapter 1 paints the picture of early seventeenth-century London as a cabinet of curiosity in which cultures of display and market exchange are challenged by ambiguous figures like the mermaid, thus calling into question the perspective of the viewer.

Chapter two, which uses Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure* to explore the potential for creating self-generated marginal identities which impact on simple binaries of man and women, is a modest reworking of what appeared in 'Early Modern Women: An

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Interdisciplinary Journal' in 2010. As far as the evidence goes in this chapter it is convincing and thought provoking. However, this reviewer was left wanting even more. At only 155 pages including bibliography and index this is a short work and quick read which occasionally leaves the reader hungry for further examples and even more variety in the types of sources used. For example, the argument about the gender-defying nature of Cavendish's mermaid would surely have been informed and perhaps nuanced by analysis of another of the Duchess of Newcastle's works: her utopian *The Description of a New World Called the Blazing-World*. In that work, the inquisitive Empress (who is a doppelgänger of Cavendish's own identity in her imagined world) asks her servants - the 'fish-men' - if they have 'ever observed Animal Creatures that are neither flesh, nor Fish, but of an intermediate degree between both?'. Moreover, these hybrid creatures who serve the Empress themselves defy definition, the author being unsure whether to label them 'Fish- or Mear-men, otherwise called Syrens'.[1] This evidence of ideas about mermen, and their position of subjugation to the female Empress does not put any of Pedersen's conclusions into doubt, but would provide an extra level of detail about the potential for the fish-human hybrid to cross gender boundaries.

Chapter three uses Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* to engage in the anti-theatre debates of the 1590s. Again Pedersen shows a compelling ability to cast original interpretations and surprising twists upon seemingly comfortable ideas. If the reader will come away wanting anything more from this chapter it will be a clearer argument about what precisely the mermaid - as a hybrid idea existing simultaneously at the fringes of our understanding and in the centre of our imagination - offers as a concept which is distinct from other hybrid creatures, such as the centaur. Chapter 4 and the Afterword (which takes the place of a typical conclusion) focus upon *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Hamlet*. It is clear that Pedersen is well at home in her analysis of sub-surface meanings in Shakespeare, but her novel ideas will no doubt provoke debate amongst students of early modern reading and writing practices in general, as well as those with an interest in Shakespeare studies.

Very much like the figure of the mermaid, which Pedersen analyses with such accomplishment, this book is both alluring and combats any attempt to define or categorise it. As a result, the reader searching for firm conclusions about what the idea of the mermaid really meant to early modern authors may find the answers here too slippery. On the other hand, the imaginative and innovative interpretations of familiar texts presented by Pedersen make for a very persuasive argument that when assessing the figure of the early modern mermaid we are handling an ambiguous but powerful conceptual tool that raises important questions about the definitions and dichotomies that we, as historians, artificially impose upon the early modern period.

[1] Margaret Cavendish, *The description of a new world, called the blazing-world written by the thrice noble, illustrious, and excellent princesse, the Duchess of Newcastle*, 1668, pp. 15, 35