

Rebecca Barr with Roger Macfarlane

The Starbucks Siren seduces customers worldwide. The coffee dynasty's marketing team purposefully developed the logo believing that "there was something about her — a seductive mystery mixed with a nautical theme that was exactly what the founders were looking for."¹ Yet, technically, the twin-tailed figure departs iconographically from classical representations of the Sirens.

The Starbucks marketers equate the "16th-century Norse woodcut of a twin-tailed mermaid" to a Siren. The earliest account from Homer, Circe advises Odysseus that Sirens "bewitch any mortal who approaches them. If a man in ignorance draws too close and catches their music, he will never return." (*Od.* 12.40-64) The song of the Sirens is famously seductive. "Come hither, renowned Odysseus, hither, you pride and glory of all Achaea!" Perhaps each man may insert his own name here. And his own proclivity here: "Pause with your ship; listen to our song. Never has any man passed this way ... and left unheard the honey-sweet music from our lips; first he has taken his delight, then gone on his way a wiser man." (12.184-91) The several dozen Homeric usages of this verb *τέρπειν* ("take delight" in Shewring's translation) do not suggest any specifically sexual overtone. For the Sirens' destructive threat is no respecter of inclination. They do not admit openly their song's ruinous effects, even if they claim its universal appeal.

Beyond their veiled threat to a man's homecoming (*nostos*), Homer provides no information about their physical appearance. In classical depictions they were avian creatures with women's heads.² Their habitation of rocky Mediterranean coastline was the essence of their threat. For the Sirens lure mariners onto their shoals and reefs, but they are not technically marine creatures themselves.³ Although similarly respected for their powers of seduction, Sirens are not mermaids.

The Greeks had the conception of lovely marine girls who attract and sometimes cavort with sailors. The most famous of the nereid sea-nymphs is Galataea. (*Theocrit.* *Id.* 11) Homer identifies the benign Leucothea, who rescues the shipwrecked Odysseus. (*Od.* 5.333ff.) And Peleus the Argonaut fell for the lovely Thetis while she and her sisters bobbed seductively in the ship's wake. (*Cat.* 64.12-21) He pursued and eventually wrestled with the prodigious girl until he overcame her wily shapechanging. (*Ov. Met.* 11.217-65) Thetis and her nereid peers might certainly stand as forebears of what we would recognize as mermaids. But mermaids are not Sirens, and nereids are not Sirens.⁴

Greek mariners thought enough about the Sirens that they identified them by name: Ligeia, Leucosia, and Parthenope. This last lived on the rocky outcropping within the Bay of Naples, where the stood city once named Parthenope after her. Legend has it that when she failed to waylay Odysseus, she flung herself despondent into the sea and — unaccustomed to the water, presumably, for she was not a marine creature — she drowned and washed up on the reef at Margellina beneath Posillipo.

¹ Steve M., "So, Who is the Siren?" posted 5 January 2011 at <http://www.starbucks.com/blog/so-who-is-the-siren> (accessed 25 November 2013).

² M. Morford et al., *Classical Mythology*, 9th ed. (OUP, 2011), 530

³ *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, s.v. "Odysseus" [O. Touchefeu-Meynier].

⁴ *OGCMA*, s.v. "Nymphs: Nereids and Oceanids" clarifies; cf. Morford & Lenardon, 166.

Irony characterizes Starbucks' application of its Siren's destructive seductress. "She is at the heart of Starbucks." (Steve M.) For, overtly admitting seduction in their marketing, the company achieved an icon that depicts an attractive force that pulls customers (against their better judgment?) into their stores. Aware of potential disaster, Odysseus bade his men to bind him "with galling ropes as [he stood] upright against the mast-stay", as the Sirens enticed him to ruin by their lovely voices. Lest they themselves succumb, Odysseus had his crew deafen themselves with waxen ear-plugs. The Seattle dynasty links its success to its having seduced global society into real or perceived addiction. Whether the societal impact wrought by these caffeine peddlars wrangles as physical or environmental or merely fiscal exploitation, the marketing that literally leads every customer under the seductive image on the shingle outside is brazen. "She is urging all of us forward to the next thing. Who can resist her?" asks the company's website. Each customer is invited to consider the seduction and danger of the transaction beyond the lovely young temptress who beckons.

Starbucks' search for the classical mythological figure for ruinous seduction is remarkable. The only complication is that mermaids sing a different tune.