

Mermaids

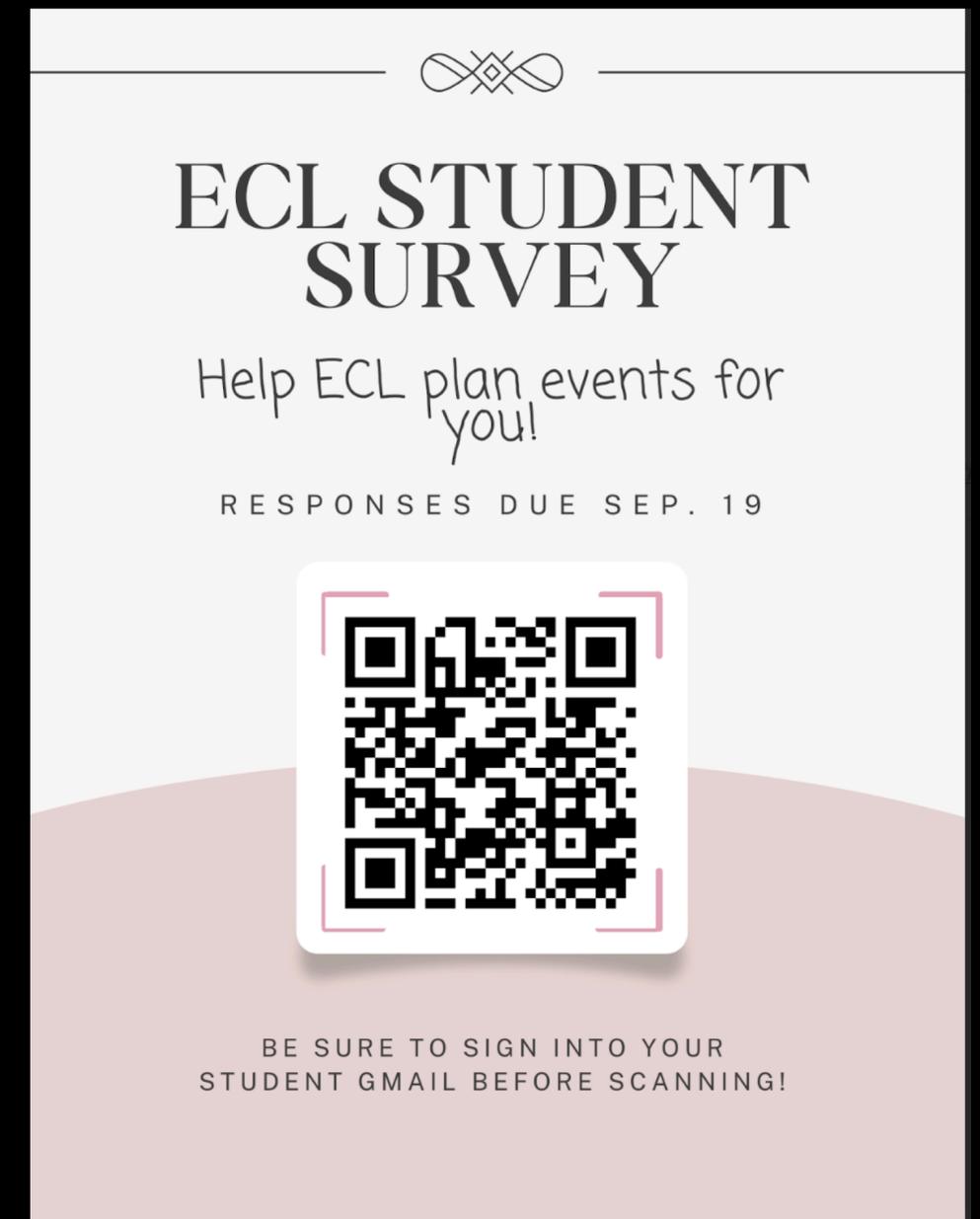
ECL 305: Literature and the Environment

Spring 2025. Professor Pressman

Day 7: The Sirens

ADMIN

- **BLOGS**— some of you only have 2!
- **More Extra credit: Living Writers series**
- **REMINDER: no class on Tuesday**
- **Office hours.... Email me to set up additional times.**



The poster features a decorative infinity symbol at the top center. Below it, the title "ECL STUDENT SURVEY" is written in a large, bold, serif font. Underneath the title, the text "Help ECL plan events for you!" is written in a smaller, handwritten-style font. Below this, the text "RESPONSES DUE SEP. 19" is written in a small, all-caps, sans-serif font. In the center of the poster is a large QR code with a white border and a pinkish-red shadow. At the bottom of the poster, the text "BE SURE TO SIGN INTO YOUR STUDENT GMAIL BEFORE SCANNING!" is written in a small, all-caps, sans-serif font. The background of the poster is white with a light pinkish-red curved shape at the bottom.

ECL STUDENT SURVEY

Help ECL plan events for you!

RESPONSES DUE SEP. 19



BE SURE TO SIGN INTO YOUR STUDENT GMAIL BEFORE SCANNING!

Discussion

- Take-aways from Steve Mentz visit

From your blogs — Mentz

- ANNIE: We are so focused on our disconnection from each other because of imaginary lines that we forget that this planet is 70% ocean, with scientists sometimes calling it the interconnected global ocean. **Interconnected.** And maybe, as Steve Mentz suggests in his “Deterritorializing Preface,” if we deterritorialize ourselves with terrestrial language, we can become interconnected as well, just like the oceans.
- ...I note how Mentz writes, “shared cultural history,” as if every person on this earth shares cultural history with each other. Which, he’s not wrong—there is one thing that connects us all, no matter what imaginary lines we draw: the ocean. So perhaps, if we take a cue from Mentz, we might finally begin to find a sense of harmony between each other.

From your blogs — Mentz

- BOMIN: In both “A Poetics of Planetary Water” and “Deterritorializing Preface”, Steve Mentz mentions that water is not just a background detail. Instead, it is something active that shapes human life and the way we think....This makes me think differently about learning, and it also makes me less afraid of uncertainty.

The Odyssey (800 BCE)

- one of the oldest extant works of literature still widely read by modern audiences.
- Attributed to Homer, along with *the Iliad*
- oral poetry

- “Sirens” section is from Book 12
- Circe’s instructions to avoid Siren’s song, precede this section



Discussion

- What stood out at you in the reading? (Passage/page number)
- What do you want to discuss today?

From your blogs—ignorance or knowledge?

- JESMOND: The siren attempts to lure Odysseus, a knowledgeable man, by promising “new wisdom.”What can we make from this? A desire to exploit a man’s strength and render them vulnerable by promising what they seek? To feast on knowledge like how vampires are to blood? Since we are given the information that “sirens and mermaids are both symbols of dangerous femininity,” (9) we can see masculinity being reinforced through methods of resisting temptation: Odysseus’ crew stuffed wax into their ears to prevent themselves from hearing the siren’s song.
- JANETTE: I immediately thought about knowledge as temptation and how this has been used throughout time, somehow it seems it’s always been linked to women (ex: Eve). I began to wonder what this says about how we view the two and why they are always intertwined.....Reading it from this lens, curiosity then becomes disguised as something negative.



www.theoi.com

Odysseus and the Sirens, Athenian red-figure stamnos C5th B.C., [British Museum](https://www.theoi.com/Pontios/Seirenes.html)



www.theoi.com

Siren suicide, Athenian red-figure stamnos C5th B.C., [British Museum](https://www.theoi.com/Pontios/Seirenes.html)

<https://www.theoi.com/Pontios/Seirenes.html>

From your blogs—ignorance or knowledge?

- ALYSSA: Overall, the passages' reading dramatizes the precarious balance that lies between curiosity and survival. By escaping, Odysseus affirms his self-control, but the scene that is depicted reminds us of that fine line between knowledge that empowers and the knowledge that destroys.



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DETAILS

Museum Collection

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



- Minjie Su, “The Sirens: From Sage to Cannibal, From Goddess to Prostitute” in *The Medievalist* 2020 [online]
<https://www.medievalists.net/2020/01/the-sirens-from-sage-to-cannibal-from-goddess-to-prostitute/>



A Siren, portrayed with a fish's tail like a mermaid, lulls sailors to sleep with her song. One sailor stops his ears with his fingers to avoid hearing her. – British Library MS Harley 4751, f.47v

Transformation of sirens into mermaids

In Homer, the Sirens sing from dry land, not water or sky; they are not female.

Sirens become part female in Heraclitus and Virgil

In Ovid, women are metamorphized into many beasts

In medieval, mermaids are definitely half-women (see Vaughn Scribner)



Sirens: Symbols of Seduction

Meri Lao

Trans. From Italian by John Oliphant

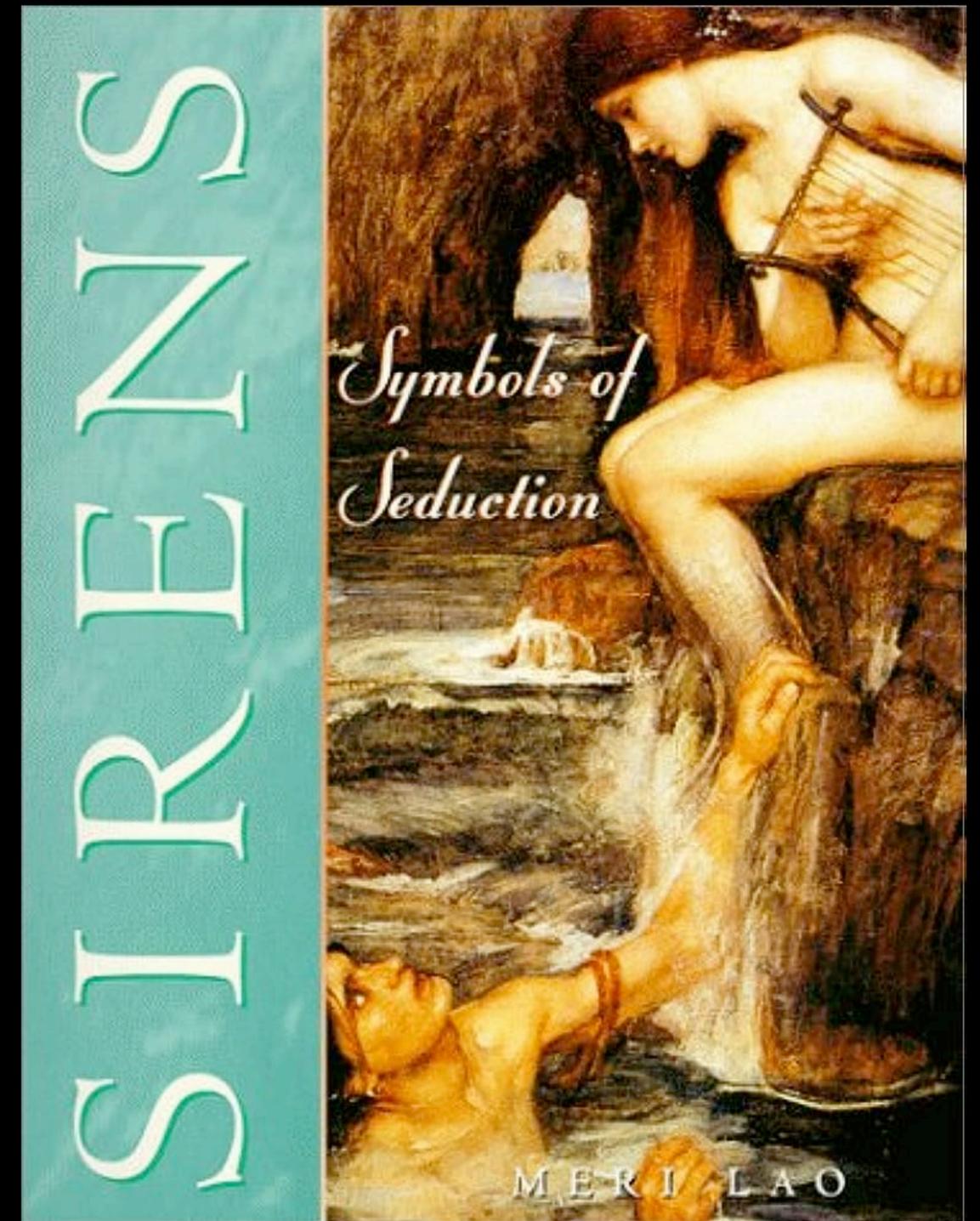
Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 1998

“Above all, the Sirens are a hybrid: half woman, half animal—or better still, feminine divinities who are also part of the animal order. Two identities coexist, a double nature. They are halved beings with the prerogatives of both their components; irrational entities; perpetually provocative and disturbing” (11)

Sirens “offer men memory, meaning, knowledge of the world, glory, and fame” (19)

“They render men happy and fulfilled by making him knowledgeable” (19)

“The music of the Sirens lies in another dimension entirely. It is the music of the cosmos, ordered and harmonic by definition” (43)



Sirens: Symbols of Seduction

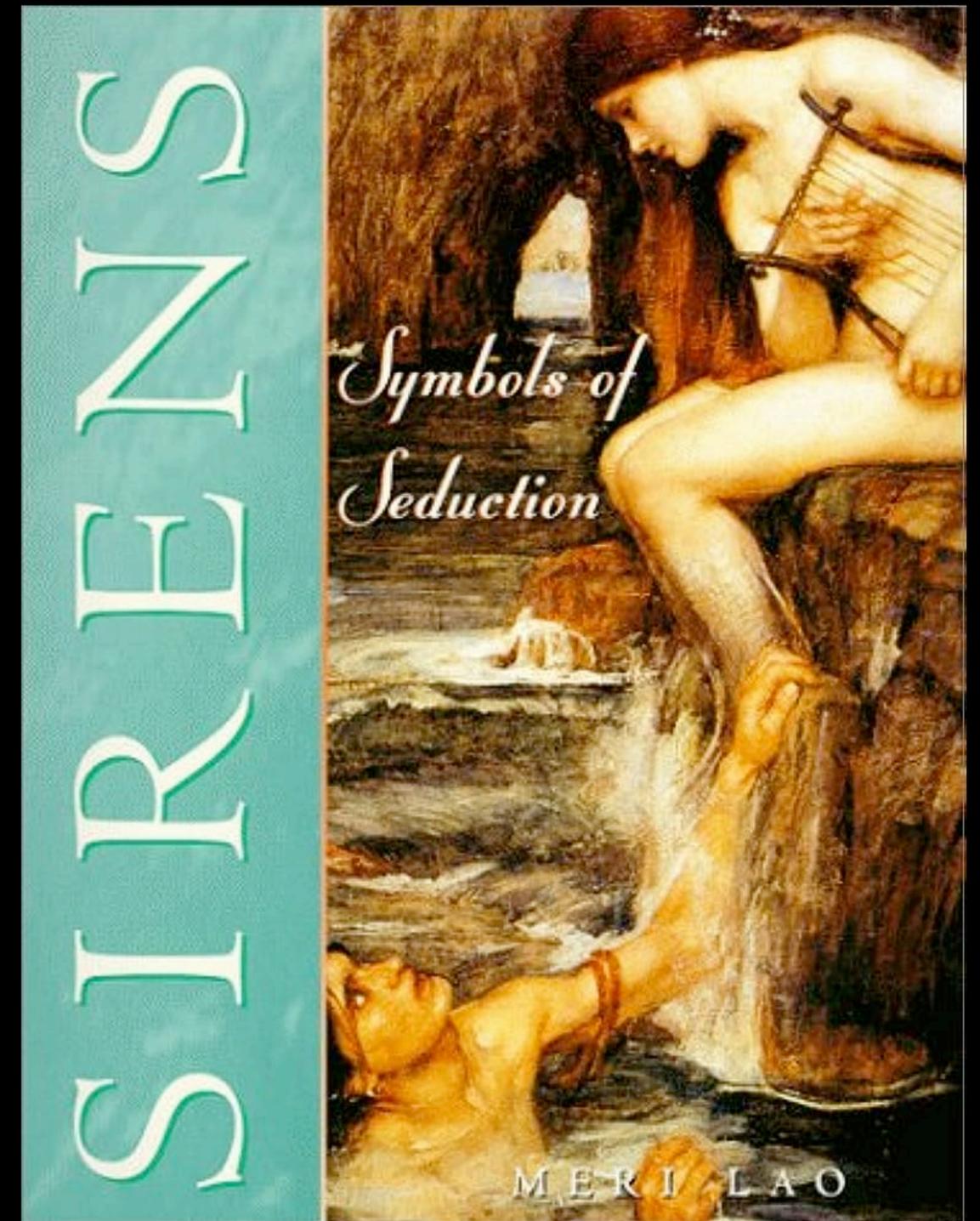
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****The etymology of Sirens is unknown (47)—** does it come from seraphin, to burn? Sanskrit surya, sun or burning? (48)-Greek seria: snare, rope, belt. Seirazein: to bind

Wing and fin, in Greek, are both designated by the same word, pterughion; in Latin, only a vowel separates pennis and pinnis ████████



Ovid's *Metamorphosis* 5

“He indeed can be seen to have deserved his punishment, because of his disclosure and his words. But why have you, Sirens, skilled in song, daughters of Achelouis, the feathers and claws of birds, while still bearing human faces? Is it because you were numbered among the companions, when Proserpine gathered the flowers of Spring? When you had searched in vain for her on land, you wanted, then, to cross the waves on beating wings, so that the waters would also know of your trouble. The gods were willing, and suddenly you saw your limbs covered with golden plumage. But, so that your song, born, sweetly, in our ears, and your rich vocal gift, might not be lost with your tongues, each virgin face and human voice remained.”

-sirens were human companions of Persephone



Ulysses and the Sirens by John William Waterhouse (1891)

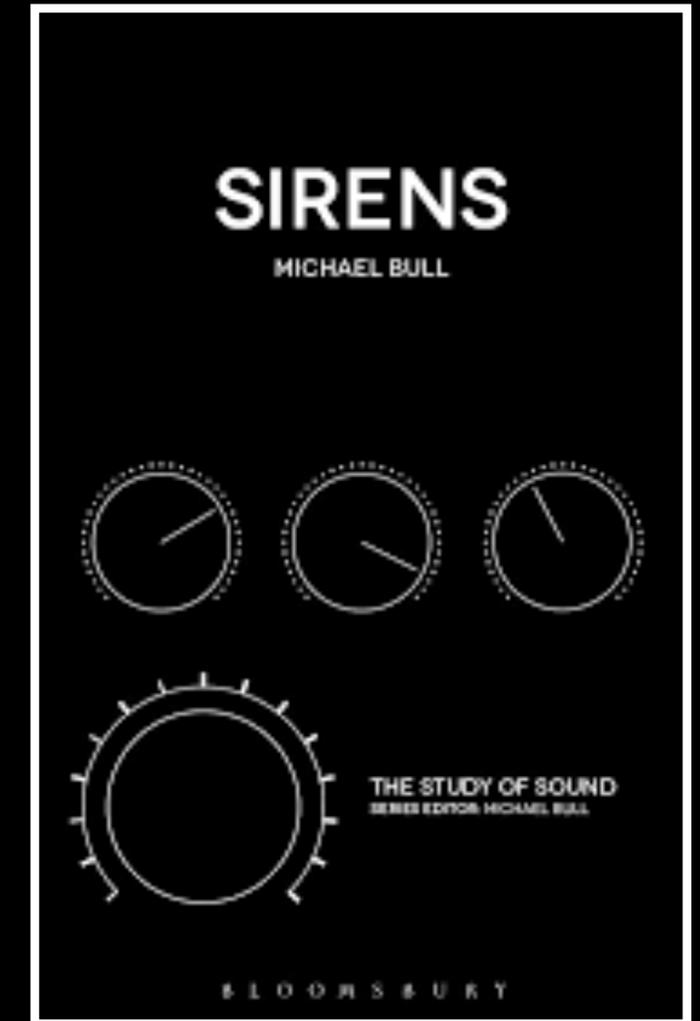
Sirens= sound

“Odysseus in the telling of the tale—the tale is a tale of the acousmatic—the sonic. The history of the Sirens is one in which they become progressively embodied suggesting, that in Western culture, historically, ‘sound’ is never enough” (12)

“the Siren myth extended beyond the literary imagination of Homer to be embedded in the core values of a Western culture from which the myth itself derived—these are the values of domination and instrumental rationality through which knowledge, gender, class and ‘nature’ are articulated, pursued and controlled” (17)

Sirens of war, as with Sirens of myth, are not to be understood in isolation. Air-raid-sirens are best understood as a response to the structural, political and technological abolition and transformation of space resulting in the negation of notions of safety zones associated with more traditional theatres of war” (38)

—Michael Bull, *Sirens: Sound Studies* (Bloomsbury, 2020)



Friedrich Kittler's search for the sirens

2004 Kittler had taken a team of researchers from Humboldt University to investigate the sonic archaeology of the Li Galli islands, Bay of Salerno.

“The aims of the project appeared to be twofold—to scientifically test the soundscape for evidence of their potential material ground for the provenance of the Siren myth” (Bull, 98)





- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePhURhj8FZ8>
- Summer Davis "Siren Song"



Take Aways?