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P. T. Barnum and the Feejee Mermaid

Steven C. Levi

For centuries legends of mermaids have tantalized sailors and landlubbers alike. Although their existence has been denied, this has not deterred maritime travelers from keeping an eager eye on the seas in hopes of catching a glimpse of these mythical creatures.

Mermaids have not been confined by folklore to any specific geographic area. The Greeks believed that mermaids (sirens) lived off the rocky coast of Sicily where they lured luckless sailors to their watery grave. Irish folklore recorded tales of fishermen who captured and married mermaids who had come out to frolic on dry land. In Denmark, Hans Christian Andersen's *Little Mermaid* is immortalized by a small bronze statue overlooking Copenhagen's harbor. Even the Eskimos have a mermaid legend. Though it is less well known, America also has a mermaid—the Feejee Mermaid displayed by P. T. Barnum.

The Feejee Mermaid was displayed in Barnum's American Museum in New York in 1842 and then disappeared. It was generally assumed that it had been destroyed in one of the many fires that gutted Barnum's collections. But recently some staff members of the Peabody Museum of Anthropology at Harvard University found what very well might be the Feejee Mermaid of Barnum notoriety (see Plate 1).¹

Was it a real mermaid? No, of course not. Its origin is obscure but it was probably created in the early nineteenth century by a Japanese fisherman with a pecuniary astuteness as well as an exquisite sense of humor. He paraded the curiosity in his native village, saying that he had captured it that day in his net, and claimed that the mermaid had made a prophecy that a great epidemic of sterility would sweep the islands. The only preventative measure was the possession of a picture of the creature. There was immediately a brisk market for the mermaid's picture.²

Later the mermaid was sold to a Japanese sailor who in turn sold it

1. Peabody Museum of Anthropology, Harvard University, *Buried Treasures of the Peabody Museum* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), 1–4.

2. Raymund Fitzsimons, *Barnum in London* (London, 1969), 27.

to an American sea captain, Samuel Barret Edes, for \$6,000. Captain Edes did not have enough money to complete the transaction so he "borrowed" the necessary capital from the ship's expense account. He expected to repay the embezzled funds after he had exhibited the mermaid in various ports. For several years he was able to avoid detection, but in 1822 while the mermaid was on exhibit in London, the firm for which he worked—Perkins & Company—brought suit against him for the embezzled funds and the ownership of the specimen. Litigation was complicated, but it was resolved with Captain Edes retaining possession of the mermaid and Perkins and Company being guaranteed repayment of their money. It was further agreed that Captain Edes would work without wages until the remainder of the debt was repaid. This was undoubtedly the only case on record of a court of law deciding the fate of a mermaid.³

When Captain Edes died he willed the mermaid to his son as the sole item of inheritance. The son, at a loss as to what to do with the specimen, sold it to Moses Kimball of the Boston Museum in 1842. Kimball showed it to P. T. Barnum, owner of the profitable American Museum in New York, who insisted on exhibiting the mermaid. Barnum, whose interest was far more financial than scientific, had a naturalist examine the specimen. The academician denounced the creature a fake based primarily on his own disbelief in mermaids. But if it would draw the public to his museum, Barnum would display it.⁴

Barnum had to be cautious. If the mermaid were to be received as genuine by the public, it would be better if Barnum's somewhat disreputable name were not associated with it. The ensuing arrangements were simple.

Barnum had several letters sent to the various New York newspapers from Alabama, South Carolina, and Washington D. C. Each of these letters commented on the weather in general and alluded to the "mermaid" in the possession of "Dr. Griffin" who had just returned from Pernambuco in South America. This Dr. Griffin "of the Lyceum of Natural History in London" was none other than Levi Lyman, the lawyer who had helped Barnum produce the Joice Heth hoax of 1835.⁵ The bogus doctor checked into a Philadelphia hotel and "allowed" the landlord to see the specimen. And, as Barnum had anticipated, the landlord passed the news on to his friends and the local sensationalist press. When public interest had been sufficiently whetted, Dr. Griffin left for New York.

3. Fitzsimons, 27-8; M. R. Werner, *Barnum* (New York, 1926), 56, 60-1.

4. *Ibid.*

5. In 1835, Levi Lyman and P. T. Barnum attempted to pass an aged black woman as the 160 year old nurse of George Washington. An autopsy revealed that she could have been no older than 80.

In the meantime Barnum was preparing for his arrival. Following the Barnum *modus operandi*, he began an advertising campaign by distributing 10,000 illustrated pamphlets which described mermaids in general and the Feejee Mermaid in particular. The pictures in the pamphlet were of the bare-breasted, seductive creatures that one normally associates with mermaids. No mention was made of Barnum in the pamphlets.

Barnum also had several engravings of mermaids similar to those in the pamphlets made ostensibly for his own use. But when Dr. Griffin stated that he did not intend to display the specimen (to lend the affair credibility), Barnum nobly gave the plates to several New York newspapers—since they were “worthless” to him. The plates were accepted and printed immediately. By the time Dr. Griffin arrived in New York, public interest had been stirred. In his room at the Pacific Hotel, Dr. Griffin displayed the mermaid to a limited audience consisting mostly of newspaper reporters. After much badgering, Dr. Griffin finally “relented” and agreed to display the mermaid for a week at the New York Concert Hall which Barnum had clandestinely rented through an agent. New York was ripe for fleecing.⁶

For five days the mermaid was displayed in the Concert Hall, and then moved to the American Museum. While it was on exhibit, Dr. Griffin gave lengthy, erudite lectures on mermaids in general and the Feejee mermaid in particular. At the same time the crowds came to view the small, black, dessicated specimen. To have called the mermaid hideous would have been a compliment. From all of the pictures in the newspapers, pamphlets, and the huge eighteen-foot banner which flew over the entrance to the museum, the public expected far more than they received. In frustration one viewer was supposed to have remarked that he had spent three years in the Fiji Islands and had never seen anything even remotely similar to the specimen. Dr. Griffin was quick to retort that there was absolutely no accounting for the ignorance of some men. But despite the disappointment of the viewers, lines were long and Barnum’s monthly profits more than doubled the first month that the mermaid was on exhibit. After its debut in the American Museum, the Feejee Mermaid dropped from sight.⁷

According to Barnum’s 1855 autobiography, the mermaid was made of a monkey’s body with a shark’s tail. Fish scales with animal hair superimposed covered the monkey’s body and pendulous breasts hung from the chest. The mouth was wide open and the teeth bared as if the creature had been snarling in its death rattle. The right hand was pressed against the right cheek and the left hand tucked under the

6. Fitzsimons, 28–31.

7. *Ibid.*; Werner, 62–3.

lower jaw on the left (see Plate 2). Estimates of the total length varied from eighteen inches to three feet.⁸

The specimen found by accident in 1969 by staff members of the Peabody Museum was examined in January, 1973, by Dr. Tyson Roberts (Associate Curator of Fishes) and Dr. Farish Jenkins (Associate Professor of Biology), both of the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology. They concluded that there were no mammalian parts on the specimen, and with the exception of the posterior portion, arms, fingers, jaws, and teeth, the entire specimen had been constructed of papier-mâché or some similar material. There were no scales and little, if any, hair on the body. An X-ray revealed three nails: one in the chest, one in the cranial cavity, and one holding the shoulder girdle to the spine. A bamboo splint held the two halves of the specimen together. The fingers were supported by wire. The posterior portion of the mermaid probably came from an acanthopterygian or spiny-rayed fish whose fins had been relocated.⁹

In April, 1973, Dr. P. H. Greenwood of the British Museum of Natural History in London examined the X-ray of the specimen. It was his conclusion that the arms of the mermaid were supported by bird wing bones and that the upper arms were possibly the humerus of a duck or some other domestic fowl. Although the fingers were obviously supported by wire, Dr. Greenwood thought the claws were bird claws. His careful examination of the dentition led him to conclude that the jaws were actually two lower jaws, probably of a small Wolf-fish of the genus *Anarchichas*.¹⁰

With these contradictory facts in mind, one might wonder whether the Peabody mermaid is actually the Feejee Mermaid displayed by P. T. Barnum. Most descriptions of the Feejee Mermaid appear to match the picture in Barnum's autobiography. The picture, originally published in the New York *Sunday Herald* in 1842, was reportedly a good likeness of the specimen. But it is not known if the artist for the *Sunday Herald* actually saw the mermaid or drew it from a description. There is even the possibility that Barnum might have donated the picture to the newspaper as he had done with other engravings of mermaids.¹¹

At a glance it is obvious from the photographs of the Peabody specimen that it is substantially different from the engraving in Barnum's autobiography. But it is difficult to take Barnum, the established "Prince of Humbug," seriously. Among the many dubious exhibits

8. P. T. Barnum, *Life of P. T. Barnum* (Buffalo, 1888), 20-21, 62; Peabody Museum, 1.

9. Consultation between the author and Dr. Tyson Roberts and Dr. Farish Jenkins at the Harvard University Museum of Comparative Zoology; Winter, 1972.

10. Personal communication from Dr. Greenwood, 25 April 1973.

11. Werner, 60.

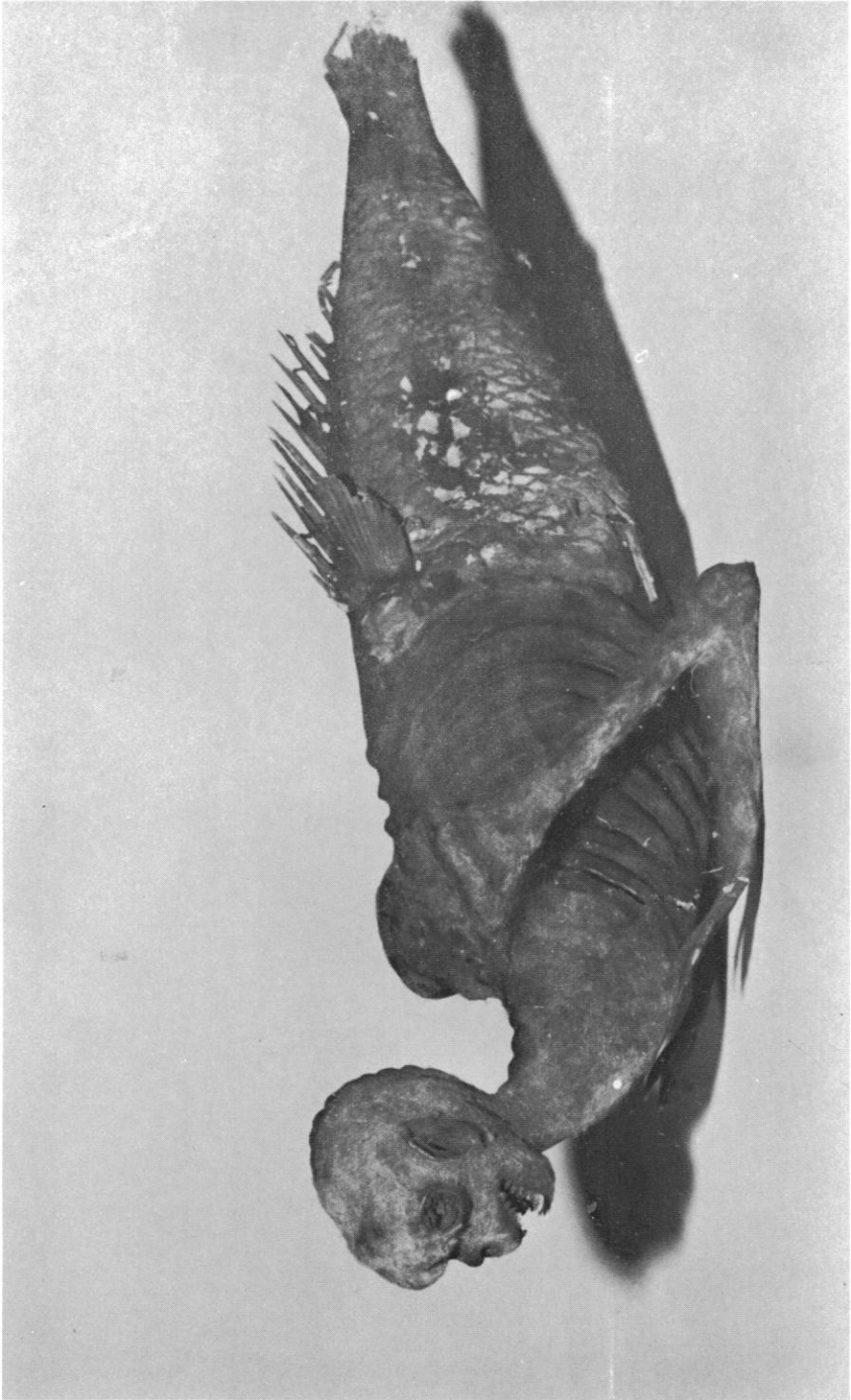


Plate 1: Is this the legendary *Feejee Mermaid* displayed by P. T. Barnum?

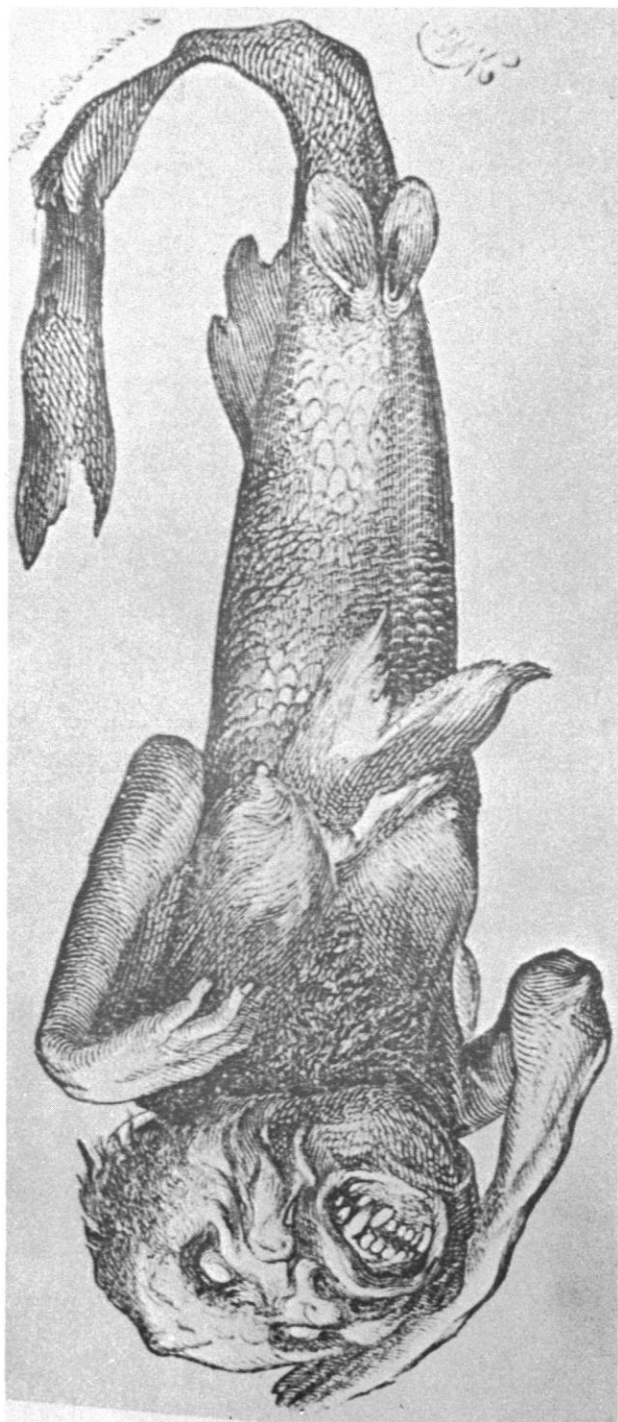


Plate 2: According to P. T. Barnum's autobiography, this was what the original Feejee Mermaid looked like.

with which Barnum hoodwinked the public were such antics as printing pictures of a violinist upside down to give the impression that he played on his head; exhibiting a horse with abnormally coarse, curly hair as part deer, sheep, buffalo, elephant, horse and camel, which had supposedly been captured by Colonel John C. Fremont near the Gila River. Colonel Fremont had no comment as he was lost in the Sierra Nevadas at the time of Barnum's exhibition. Later in life Barnum became deeply religious and repented for his deceptions, but it must be remembered that in 1855 he was middle-aged and was still presenting highly questionable exhibits to the public.¹²

On the other hand, it can be documented that the Feejee Mermaid was actually owned by Moses Kimball, not by P. T. Barnum. When Kimball died, his heirs donated his collections, which included the mermaid, to the Peabody Museum at Harvard University between 1897 and 1899. According to the Peabody cataloguing information on the specimen (#97-39-70/72853), the mermaid was listed as the Feejee Mermaid and substantial portions of the included data had been paraphrased from Barnum's autobiography. Also enclosed was a short letter from E. H. Bradford, grandson of Captain Samuel Edes, dated January 20, 1916, in which he gave a short personal history of the mermaid and stated that he remembered his mother commenting on the mermaid and vaguely recalled seeing it in the Boston Museum. These are the grounds for considering the Peabody mermaid the original Feejee Mermaid.¹³

There is a possible resolution to the differing appearances of the mermaids. Three fires gutted Barnum's museum and circus in 1856, 1868, and 1872, and it is quite possible that the mermaid was damaged. There was also a fire in the Boston Museum after which the Peabody mermaid had been rescued from a "pile of debris." In any one of these fires the Feejee Mermaid could have been altered or even reconstructed with parts from another specimen. And, if the original had been made of papier-mâché, there is little doubt that a fire would radically alter the appearance of the specimen. The pendulous breasts might have fallen off, the hair could have singed away, and the scales might have flaked off. The Peabody Museum affirmed that the tail had been burned short. It is noticeable that both specimens have a well defined sagittal crest, though it is more visible in the Peabody mermaid because of the angle of the picture. Both have a flat nose and bared teeth. With the exception of the bend in the tail of the mermaid pictured in Barnum's autobiography, both posterior sections do have similarities. Depending

12. Werner, 56-60, 98-103.

13. Peabody File #97-39-70/72853; Fitzsimons, 27; F. W. Putnam, *33rd Annual Report of the Peabody Museum of American Archeology and Ethnology, Harvard University 1898-1899* (Cambridge, Mass., 1899), 276.

on the source it could be stated that both mermaids were about the same length (the Peabody mermaid is sixteen inches long if one allows for the burnt tail fin). All factors considered, there are grounds to support the contention that the Peabody Museum specimen is indeed the original Feejee Mermaid.¹⁴

Perhaps this question will never be resolved. It is possible that the Feejee Mermaid is still gathering dust in a musty display case in a university or has long since found its way to an ignominious end in a trash can. But this uncertainty only heightens the mystery surrounding the Feejee Mermaid.

Polliwogs and Shellbacks: An Analysis of the Equator Crossing Ritual

Keith P. Richardson

The equator crossing ritual known as the "Order of Neptune" has been performed by sailors of the Western world for over four hundred years. Basically, this ritual consists of the initiation of the landlubbers or polliwogs (those who have never crossed the equator) by the seafarers or shellbacks (those who have previously crossed the line). This includes an ordeal in which the landlubber-neophytes are subjected to a ritual death and rebirth in order to gain their new status of seafarer or shellback.

The following paper discusses the equator crossing rituals which I viewed while crossing the equator in 1969 and 1970. The "Order of Neptune" ritual, as it occurs today, is written-off by such folklorists as Horace Beck as little more than "horse play."¹ It is my belief, however, that this ritual may be quite functional in that it helps to resolve a basic paradox of naval shipboard life.

Scholarly speculation as to the origins of the "Order of Neptune" ritual fall into one of two general categories. The first being a rite of passage from landlubber to seafarer, the second being a means of appeasing natural forces upon entrance to new domains. Regarding the first explanation, Harry M. Lydenberg speculates that since men first went to sea it has been quite natural for seafarers to call upon the landlubbers aboard ship to prove themselves not only capable of standing the terrors, stresses and strains of naval life, but also to prove that they have the courage and strength of character to gracefully accept the rowdy humor encountered in daily shipboard life.²

14. Werner, pps. 56-60; Peabody Museum, *Buried Treasure*, 1-4.

1. Horace Beck, *Folklore and the Sea* (Middletown, Connecticut; 1973), 119.

2. Harry Lydenberg, *Crossing the Line* (New York, 1957), 3.