Anna Mik, "Entry on: King Neptune by Burt Gillett", peer-reviewed by Elżbieta Olechowska and Elizabeth Hale. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/310. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Burt Gillett

King Neptune

United States (1932)

TAGS: Neptune Poseidon Sirens





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	King Neptune
Studio/Production Company	Walt Disney Productions
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1932
First Edition Details	Distributor: United Artists, music by Leigh Harline, September 10, 1932.
Running time	7:12 min
Format	VHS, DVD
Date of the First DVD or VHS	VHS: Walt Disney's Fables Volume Four DVD: Walt Disney Treasures: More Silly Symphonies Volume Two, 2006; Walt Disney's Fables Volume Four
Genre	Animated films, Mythological fiction, Short films
Target Audience	Crossover (In the 30s many shorts by Walt Disney Productions were just technical experiments. Usually they were presented before the main feature movie, often for adults. Later, it was issued along with other animations from the "Silly Symphony" series, so it is hard)
Author of the Entry	Anna Mik, University of Warsaw, anna.m.mik@gmail.com

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Creators



Burt Gillett , 1891 - 1971
(Animator, Director)

Mostly known for his work in Walt Disney Productions in the 1930s. (He directed the famous *Flowers and Trees* in 1932 and the short *Three Little Pigs* in 1933, among others, for both of which he won Academy Awards for Short Animation). He started to work for Disney in 1929 as the second professional animator from New York City. Throughout his career he struggled with many problems with different production companies and got famous for his eccentrics (he changed his name with last name several times). After his Oscar success, he transferred to the Van Beuren Studios, where he directed (inter alia) shorts with Molly Moo-Cow and Felix the Cat.

Source:

Smith, Dave, ed., “Burt Gillett” (entry) in *Disney A to Z: The Official Encyclopedia*, 4th ed., Glendale: Disney Books, 2015.

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Additional information

Summary

The animation starts with the introduction of King Neptune sitting on his throne in his underwater kingdom. He sings:

"I'm Neptune,

The king of the sea,

And a jolly old king am I,

I rule the sea with an iron hand,

They obey my will or die,

The sailors are my loyal friends,

And friends of theirs am I,

I'm Neptune,

The king of the sea,

And a jolly old king."

As he sings, the orchestra consisting of various sea creatures (octopuses, sea horses, etc.) accompany him. They are actually an opening parade for mermaids, who visit King Neptune, and gracefully swim around him, pinching him as he tries to catch them causing general laughter. This jolly scene however is about to be interrupted. On the surface, a ship full of drunk pirates approaches the settlement of King Neptune. One of the pirates spots mermaids relaxing on the rocks. Loathsome men kidnap an unsuspecting mermaid. She tries to free herself, but the delicate creature does not stand a chance. Pirates surround her and try to touch her, which clearly suggests an attempt of sexual abuse. Fortunately, the rest of the mermaids immediately raise an alarm. The whole sea (waters and sea creatures combined) arm themselves and gather all their forces to free the kidnapped girl. Men cannot prevail faced with (among others) octopuses flying as helicopters and whales firing fishes. Pirates are defeated and punished. King Neptune temporarily trapped by the anchor and chains of the pirates' ship, is now free and deals the final blow. He sinks the ship and sits on it as previously on his throne. The abused mermaid is rewarded with diamonds from pirates' treasure, and the rest of the

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girls help themselves from the treasure as well. Final song of King Neptune reaffirms once and for all that he is the definite master of the sea, and all gets back to the status quo.

Analysis

Probably the most interesting thing in this animation is the approach to the topic of women and womanhood. In Greek and Roman mythology sirens* were depicted as dangerous creatures that harmed lost sailors. They were absolutely unforgiving and cruel, and barely showed any human traits. Here roles are reversed: innocent girls are abused by vicious men who just want to use and hurt them. In *King Neptune* mermaids are delicate, gentle, and not dangerous at all (which is not an original concept, as for example *Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen has already softened the classical depiction of sirens). Men took on the role of the mythical siren, however instead of devouring women, they attempt to rape them (which symbolically might carry the same meaning). Of course Disney's mermaids belong to various depictions of those creatures drawn from wide "mythology of the sea," so not only classical tradition, but also folklore of sailors, etc.

As far as Disney animation is concerned, here mermaids are not covering their breasts which are tastefully but distinctly drawn and shown. This strategy of drawing will slowly decline in next animations, however it is interesting that even in times of censorship, Disney seemed to be less conservative than now.

But the feminine seems to be something more than only the depiction of women's bare chests. After the 'rape scene', when all the sea finds out about the kidnapping, we deal with a very interesting realization of the cultural construct: nature (importantly: waters, often connected to the feminine) is reacting aggressively to the threat created by men. It shows not only solidarity between women (here – mermaids), but also between women and nature. Sea creatures do not hesitate or ask any questions: they simply attack the ship, the embodiment of evil and danger. Their determination shows the great power and potential of cooperation between women and animals, even if it is only a symbolic depiction of an utopian matriarchal dream. After all, King Neptune is the one who definitively deals with pirates and keeps his position in the underwater hierarchy. At the end of the day, as he sings himself, he is a good friend with sailors.

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* Later, in some cases in popular culture, the terms sirens and mermaids mean the same creature.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Neptune Poseidon Sirens
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Femininity Gender Gender, female Hierarchy Masculinity Nature Violence

Further Reading

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Cohen, Karl F., *Forbidden Animation. Censored Cartoons and Blacklisted Animators in America,* Jefferson, London: McFarland, 1997.

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Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, *IX. 4 (5)*, John Bostock, H.T. Riley, eds., London: Taylor and Francis, 1855. (accessed: December 15, 2021).

Smith, Dave, ed., "Burt Gillett" (entry); "Playful Pan" (entry) in *Disney A to Z: The Official Encyclopedia*, 4th ed., Glendale: Disney Books, 2015.

Addenda

Dubbed in many languages.

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