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Melusine and the Fear of Disorder in Medieval European Society

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Melusine's secret discovered, from *Le Roman de Mélusine* by Jean d'Arras, ca 1450-1500. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Abstract

Man and woman, natural and unnatural, holy and sinful, human and monster. These dualities pervade the work of Jean d'Arras' *Melusine; Or, The Noble History of Lusignan*. Written in France in the 14th century, this novel tells the story of how the Lusignan fortress and noble house were founded by Melusine, a woman who was both human and fairy. The conflict between these various dualities shape the rise and fall of the magical, hybrid, female Melusine and her husband - the human, male Raymondin. They each have journeys which begin and end as a consequence of their acts of sin, not unlike the sins committed by Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis. Their downfall also results from the chaos and destruction brought about by the influence of the feminine, the monstrous, and the unnatural. According to medieval society, these were the antithesis of and posed a threat to the masculine, the human, and the natural, which, in contrast, embodied order. By examining how these dualities interact within the novel and within the context of medieval European society, one can come to understand how this text illustrates the values of a deeply religious society - a society which desired order originating from an adherence to God's word and which feared the threat that the magical and sinful posed to that order.

Previous Research

What have others said regarding this topic?

- Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner discussed the similarities between the biblical story of the fall of Adam and Eve and the fall of Melusine and Raymondin in "Natural and Unnatural Woman: Melusine Inside and Out" from *Founding Feminisms in Medieval Studies: Essays in Honor of E. Jane Burns*
- Bettine Menke discussed the implications of depictions of literary monsters with regards to gender in "The Figure of Melusine in Fontane's Texts: Images, Digressions, and Lacunae"
- Joanna Ludwikowska discussed medieval views of women in "Uncovering the Secret: Medieval Women, Magic and the Other"
- Dana M. Oswald discussed the connection between gender, monstrosity, and disorder in "Sex and the Single Monster"

I intend to synthesize the concepts described in previous research with my analysis of *Melusine* in order to create a unified argument of how these various texts illustrate medieval European society's fear of disorder, what this society believed brought about disorder, and what this society believed was the key to maintaining order.



"IMG_3100EB Hugo Van der Goes. 1440-1482. Gand. Diptyque avec la Chute de Adam et Ève" by jean louis mazieres is licensed with CC BY-NC-SA 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/>

Methodology

- close reading of *Melusine; Or, The Noble History of Lusignan* by Jean d'Arras
- examination of secondary sources regarding the views of medieval society concerning women, magic, sin, the monstrous, and the interactions between these concepts

Analysis

Melusine, Raymondin, and the Garden of Eden

- They each commit one sinful act that changes the course of their lives, mimicking the original sin of Adam and Eve
 - **Melusine:** trapping her father King Elinas in a cave, causing her mother Presine to curse her to become half-serpent every Saturday and only be able to live out her life as a natural woman if her husband never looks at her on Saturday (Jean d'Arras 25)
 - **Raymondin:** killing his uncle by accident during a hunt, causing him to eventually meet Melusine, (Jean d'Arras 31) who he later weds, thus leading to the founding of Lusignan and the events of the story
- Raymondin falling for the temptation to look at Melusine on Saturday, echoes Adam falling for the temptation to eat the forbidden fruit.
 - "[Raymondin's] ability to obey or transgress the taboo imposed (like God's prohibition in the Garden of Eden) puts [him] in the same place as... Adam," (Bruckner 28).
- Melusine is doomed to be a dragon forever and to never be seen "again in the form of a woman" on account of [Raymondin's] one misdeed," (Jean d'Arras 192-193) just as how "all humans after Adam are stained by original sin," (Bruckner 28).
- Evil manifests in Melusine after Raymondin's betrayal, representing the consequences of original sin in its allowance of sin to reign supreme
 - **Serpent:** Melusine is half-serpent, and in "Genesis and elsewhere in the Bible...the serpent [is] a symbol and archetype of evil," (Bruckner 29).
- Melusine can only be transformed back into a human and be able to stay with Raymondin by the power of God (Jean d'Arras 193), just as how humanity can "only be redeemed [from original sin] by Christian penance and God's grace," (Bruckner 28).
- Melusine and Raymondin being so beloved and seen as such a lovely couple by their people - seen in how they "all fell to sorrowful weeping," (Jean d'Arras 192) upon Melusine leaving and turning into a dragon - illustrates the tragedy of the victory of sin in that it seemingly has the power to destroy good things.

The Magic of Femininity in Conflict with Nature

- Early on, the novel establishes a connection between females, the unnatural, and the magical
 - When Melusine's mother, Presine, meets her father, King Elinas, diction connoting magic and power is used to describe her effect on him, illustrating how profoundly Elinas was affected by Presine's magical influence. He became disoriented and unable to think coherently, illustrating the danger of the feminine in its ability to bring about the magical and, therefore, disrupt order.
 - she sang "more sweetly than any siren, fairy, or nymph. [Elinas was] overwhelmed" and "so absorbed...by her music and her loveliness that he knew not whether it was day or night, or whether he was awake or sleeping." He was "enchanted," (Jean d'Arras 22).
 - Similarly, Raymondin's meeting with Melusine also illustrates the seemingly magical, profound influence she had on him
 - He met her at "the Enchanted Fountain" and "[marvelled] at [her] beauty the likes of which he had never beheld before," (Jean d'Arras 31-32).
 - When Presine curses Melusine, she explains that "the power of [her] father's seed...[will draw her] toward his human nature, and [she] would soon have left behind the ways of nymphs and fairies forever," (Jean d'Arras 25). Considering that Presine is a magical being while Elinas is a human man, this statement very clearly draws a connection between females and magic and juxtaposes it with men and nature.
- This aligns with medieval views concerning the seemingly "unnatural" nature of the female form and the connection between females and magic
 - "Sirens, water-nymphs, and Melusines are produced as part of the construction of femininity as the other...The gender politics of the nineteenth century fused femininity and nature...This notion is characterized by demonic powers in the natural feminine element," (Menke 42).

- This clearly illustrates how by drawing a connection between women and magic, the novel is depicting medieval society's perceptions of women and their seemingly unnatural, magical, and sinful nature which serves as the "other" to and a threat to men.
- Women were also considered "physically weaker, emotionally less stable, less intelligent, and less rational than men...[making them] more susceptible to demonic influences (magic) or temptation (sin)." Because of this, there was "a deeply rooted medieval conviction that women needed to deny their uncanny nature before they could become members of an ordered society," (Ludwikowska 84-85).
 - This is seen in the novel in how Melusine needed to hide her half-serpent form - and thus her magical, uncanny nature - if she were to ever live out a normal life, as Presine explains when she curses her (Jean d'Arras 25). Raymondin seeing her in her serpent form - and, thus, her magical, uncanny nature coming to light - is what causes her curse to come to fruition, making it so she can no longer live as a normal member of society and is cursed to be a dragon forever (Jean d'Arras 192).
- When Melusine transforms into a dragon, she wreaks havoc so "violent" and fearsome it may as well be "lightning and thunder...about to split the sky," (Jean d'Arras 195).

The Threat of Monstrosity

- Melusine is a hybrid monster who transforms into a "serpent from the navel down," (Jean d'Arras 25) every Saturday. In this way, she embodies a paradoxical duality:
 - **Good, holy, human being** who believes "one should invoke God's aid in everything," (Jean d'Arras 33) and who is considered "the greatest lady who ever governed a land, the wisest, the most humble, most charitable, [and] best loved," (Jean d'Arras 192) by her people.
 - **Evil, sinful, monster** whose presence is an omen of death (Jean d'Arras 215) and who strikes people with "terror" and "profound melancholy," (Jean d'Arras 195)
- Her hybridity is significant in that "the monsters of hybridity...show the permeability of the human body: the very lack of integrity that permits it to be taken over by parts of other creatures...[thereby showing] the instability of the categories and organizational principles that drive human societies," (Oswald 6).

Conclusions

By drawing connections between the Garden of Eden story and the stories of Melusine and Raymondin, the novel illustrates medieval European society's religious sentiments, their fear of the devastating consequences of sin, and their belief that adherence to God's will is necessary to maintain order in society and prevent the chaos and destruction caused by sin. Melusine transforming into a dragon - a magical, serpent-like and therefore satanic being - represents medieval society's fear of the consequences of being unable to contain the seemingly magical, sinful nature of women and this nature, then, rearing its full face, violently bringing about chaos, and destroying the order within society. Melusine's hybridity, and the trepidation and conflicting emotions this causes - as seen in the juxtaposition of the aforementioned positive diction and negative diction used in describing her - demonstrates medieval society's desire for order. Melusine is frightening because by being a hybrid, she defies categorization and thus threatens the organizational structures of medieval European society. These ideas work together to illustrate how the dualities depicted throughout *Melusine* indicate how medieval society valued the order perceived in the holy, the natural, the masculine, and the human and, therefore, feared the disorder and the threat perceived in the sinful, the magical, the feminine, and the monstrous. Perhaps further research could explore some of the real-world consequences of these perceptions in medieval society. Outside of literature, how were women and those perceived as sinful, monstrous, or magical treated in medieval Europe? What norms existed in an attempt to maintain holiness and order? These could be interesting topics to explore in furthering my research.

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