

MONSTROUS WOMEN IN MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCE

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This study uses the literary metaphor of the monstrous woman to trace the construction of a particular gender ideology in English narratives of the fourteenth through early sixteenth centuries. Drawing on recent scholarship on monster theory, the rhetorical uses of medieval misogyny, and the reception of the Middle English romance, this study argues that the character of the monstrous woman functions as a self-conscious literary tool that allows authors, and audiences, to reflect on the accepted conventions of misogyny, patriarchal authority, and the romance formula itself. I analyze Middle English narratives including the early sixteenth-century translation of the prose *Melusine*, the Constance tale as adapted by Chaucer and Gower, and appearances of Medea in the works of Chaucer, Gower, and Caxton's translation of the *History of Jason* to discover the ways these narratives use female monstrosity—in literal and figurative form—to dramatize the anxieties arising in a patriarchal society that defines the female as a slightly aberrant category of human, yet depends on her for maintenance and reproduction of the social order. In offering a close reading of these stories that draws on literary, visual, ecclesiastical, and didactic contexts, I explore the new possibilities in fiction offered by the Middle English romance and demonstrate how the monstrous women act as a powerful and multivalent literary trope: they offer their narratives a means to interrogate the prevailing gender ideology; expose the constructedness of and agenda behind existing ideological, political, social, familial, and physical spheres; challenge the currents of medieval misogyny; and fully dramatize the demands of a social order that, in Othering and ordering its female elements, makes women into monsters.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Misty Urban was not raised an orphan, was never set adrift in a rudderless boat, has so far not suffered the curse of a witch, and nothing in her talents or disposition led anyone, at any time, to suspect she was switched with a princess or a fairy child at birth. She had an ordinary education and an ordinary career as a management consultant before entering Florida State University to pursue a master's degree in creative writing. There, a wise wizard introduced her to Old English poetry and several sage counselors said approving things about her fiction. After the English department at Cornell University graciously accepted her into the joint degree program, she spent five years writing stories and wandering through the wilderness of Olin Library, making friends and fantastical discoveries along the way. Her quest takes her next to Lewis-Clark State College, where she has been invited to continue her romance with medieval literature and creative writing combined. She fully expects she will encounter no dragons, will never stumble into Maydenland or Amazonia, will not ever witness the Grail procession, and she doubts that either her face or her literary talents shall ever launch ships or inspire wars for kingdoms. But she did find her path through the wilderness of graduate school, and along the way she discovered true love; and that, for her and many, is adventure enough.

To all my knights,
and my ladies,
who have been stout of heart,
and true

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To my wonderful MFA cohorts, who continue to inspire me, and my medieval Ph.D. conspirators, who kept me alive with regular doses of company and food: to sing your praises would make for too long a romance. I dedicate this to you instead.

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INTRODUCTION

MONSTERS, WOMEN, AND THE WORK OF ROMANCE

. . . me venoyent auderant moult grant foyson de autteurs
ad ce propos que je ramentevoye en moy meismes l'un
après l'autre, comme se fust une fontaine resourdant. Et
en conclusion de tout, je determinoye que ville chose fist
Dieux quant il fourma femme, en m'esmerveillant
comment si digne ourri[e]r daigna oncques faire tant
abominable ouvrage qui est vaissel, au dit d'iceulx, si
comme le retrait et herberge de tous maulx et de tous
vices. Adonc moy estant en ceste penssee, me sourdi une
grant desplaisance et tristesse de couraige en desprisant
moy meismes et tout le sexe feminin, si comme ce ce fust
monstre en nature. . .

[Like a gushing fountain, a series of authorities, whom I
recalled one after another, came to mind, along with their
opinions on this topic. And I finally decided that God
formed a vile creature when He made woman, and I
wondered how such a worthy artisan could have deigned
to make such an abominable work which, from what they
say, is the vessel as well as the refuge and abode of every
evil and vice. As I was thinking this, a great unhappiness
and sadness welled up in my heart, for I detested myself
and the entire feminine sex, as though we were
monstrosities in nature.]

--Christine de Pisan
*The Book of the City of Ladies*¹

Christine's philosophical reflections at the beginning of her famed book in
defense of women suggest two worthy points: that the distance between
"femme" and "monstre," woman and monster, is not so great in the authoritative
literary tradition that proclaims woman already a "ville chose;" but the
connection, she also implies, is largely a rhetorical one. Christine as narrator

¹ Ed. Maureen Cheney Curnow 619-20. Trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards 4-5.

speaks “*si comme,*” as *if* women are monstrosities of nature—not quite ready to believe that they really *are*. These observations, printed around 1405, raise the question of what one is to do with the monstrous women who surface in imaginative literature before and after her time of writing. If women are already thought to be in some fashion monstrous, then what might the overt monstrousness of women in narrative—whether it takes the form of inter-species hybridity, supernatural powers, spectacular displays of violence, or the slurs of gossip—actually mean?

This study proposes that monstrous women, especially those found in instances of Middle English romance, offer a productive lens for examining further the sources of the fictionalized Christine’s unhappiness: the close associations of women and monstrosity in the rhetoric of medieval literature, and what purposes, especially in the imaginative literature, this rhetoric serves. In this introduction I will attempt to supply definitions for the notoriously slippery terms of monstrosity, women, and romance and suggest connections among all three that make the monstrous women of romance a particularly useful and lively means of inquiry. I limit the field of study to instances of Middle English narratives from the fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries because I am interested in what these monstrous women figure in the context of English literary history, though a glance at the French and Latin sources will be necessary to gain a fuller understanding of the individual author’s project. I have chosen the field of romance because, as I hope to show, romance narratives participate in creating and perpetuating a distinct gender ideology that, especially in its representations of women, have a complex and sometimes contrary relationship to the standard tenets of medieval misogyny, as discussed below. The ability of the monstrous woman to perform a sort of narrative “thinking through women,” while at the same time representing the contradictions of misogynistic discourse,

arises from the work of medieval romance to offer new possibilities for and opportunities in medieval fiction. Ultimately, what this study hopes to show is that monstrous women in Middle English romance act as a powerful literary tool for reflecting not just on the rhetoric surrounding women but on the gender ideology and other constitutive elements of the romance pattern itself.

Monstrous Women in Medieval Literary Traditions

It would be tempting to simply read the monstrous women of Middle English romance as illustrations of the medieval misogyny which, as Christine suggests, characterizes the works of a large number of medieval authorities. While studies such as Katherine Rogers's *The Troublesome Helptest* and David Gilmore's *Misogyny* tend to position medieval misogyny within an ongoing project to villainize women that typifies Western civilization from its recorded beginnings, the bodies of hybrid, malevolent women in medieval English literary traditions pose a more complicated range of meanings. They threaten established borders and institutions, a primary function of monsters, but they also wield an impressive power that challenges the sure suppositions of female inferiority which have underlined the foundations of Western thought from a very early date.²

For example, in the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*, Grendel's mother provides an example of a monstrous woman whose demonic strength is linked to her

² Rogers asserts that "[t]he view that women are inferior to men and therefore should be subordinated to them is not in itself misogynistic, because it was almost universally held until modern times" (xiii). She defines misogyny as any degrading opinion or accusation. Gilmore suggests that tales of monstrous women express a psychological confusion of male terrors: "Fear of the unknown in nature and peripheral places blends with fear of the unknown sex, to create hybrid images of doom and monsters of the imagination" (60). Gilmore and Rogers agree with the psychoanalytic legacy dating back to Freud that the deep-seated fear of female domination stems from infantile recognition of the all-powerful mother and anxieties over possible maternal rejection, abandonment, or insufficiency (Gilmore 60; Rogers x-xi).

maternal impulses.³ Her function in the poem as a second, and presumably more challenging, test of the hero's prowess suggests that Grendel's malicious or jealous motives are somehow less horrifying than the vindictive rage of a maternal creature, a reading which reinforces the closeness of the semantic categories of woman and animal. Such a blurring of boundaries plays out metaphorically in the monstrous women found in Latin story collections such as Walter Map's *De nugis curialium* and Gervase of Tilbury's *Otia Imperialia*, which feature a variety of feminine shape-shifters, most of whom serve in some way to represent a particularly female threat to the safety, sanctity, or bloodline of the rational male. In some cases, the metaphor of monstrosity is a very thin veil, as in Walter Map's "A Dissuasion of Valerius to Rufinus the Philosopher, that he should not take a wife," wherein the fictional Valerius addresses his friend:

Desiderio tu totus inflammaris, et speciosi nobilitate capitis seductus,
chimeram miser nescis esse quod petis; sed scire deuoues quod triforme
monstrum illud insignis uenustetur facie leonis, olentis maculetur uentre
capri, virulente armetur cauda vipere . . .

[You are all on fire with your passion, and, led astray by the beauty of a comely head, you fail to see, poor man, that what you are wooing is a chimaera: yes, you refuse to learn that the three-formed monster is adorned with the face of a noble lion, polluted with the body of a stinking goat, armed with the tail of a rank viper.]⁴

What these monstrous females express is not a simple evocation of the misogynistic worldview that Rogers and Gilmore identify. These monstrous women are characterized by their power to disrupt, tempt, mislead, or inflict personal and public damage, a potentiality that calls for answering moves to

³ Christine Alfano, in "The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity," suggests that translators have over-emphasized the monstrosity of Grendel's mother, who is described in clearly human terms in the original Old English. More recently, Paul Acker in "Horror and the Maternal in *Beowulf*" uses psychoanalytic theory, including Kristeva's reading of the abject, to link Grendel's mother's horrifying aspects to her child-bearing abilities.

⁴ Map in *De nugis curialium*, trans. M.R. James, rev. Brooke and Mynors, 290-291. Qtd. Rogers x.

avoid, exile, confront or destroy. Map's treatise stands among a long line of authorities who have several examples at their disposal to illuminate the destructiveness of women, beginning with Eve in the Judeo-Christian tradition and Pandora in the Greek, and continuing through the women in Homer and Virgil as well as legends of "barbarian" women from Semiramis to Cleopatra, Medea to Olympias, mother of Alexander the Great. The wide circulation of Map's "Dissuasion," and its subsequent enshrinement in the canon of misogynic literature, also hints that the device of the woman-as-monster is rhetorically very useful.⁵ The examples of Grendel's mother, Gervase's lamia, and Map's tripartite chimaera speak of a dangerous power attributed to women; it is female power, and not female weakness, which the trope of the monstrous woman is invoked to address.

I will offer an example of the emblematic and explanatory power of the monstrous female that is particular to one later medieval English literary tradition. This tradition begins with Geoffrey of Monmouth's mid-twelfth century *Historia regum Britanniae*, which marks a turning point in the development of the romance mode in England. The text's invented life of Arthur single-handedly spawns an entire romance subgenre; beyond that, Geoffrey's enforcement of what Francis Ingeldew calls a "new historical consciousness," one invested with imperial genealogy, aristocratic values, and "the entry of eros into medieval narrative,"⁶ sets a precedent for the attitudes towards and subjects of history used by later romancers, who drew on the work's wide circulation

⁵ Useful studies in the medieval misogynic tradition include Warren S. Smith, ed., *Satiric Advice on Women and Marriage: From Plautus to Chaucer* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005), Katharina M. Wilson and Elizabeth M. Makowski, *Wykked Wyves and the Woes of Marriage: Misogamous Literature from Juvenal to Chaucer* (Albany, NY: SUNY P, 1990), and Ralph Hanna and Traugott Lawler, eds., *Jankyn's Book of Wykked Wyves* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1997), the latter of which reviews the sources inflecting the Prologue to Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale."

⁶ Ingeldew 688-695.

through several copies and translations. Geoffrey's narrative imagines monstrous beginnings for the fabled empire of England: the island of Albion, a land of Edenic plenty, is originally inhabited by chthonic giants who roam the land. Brutus, great-grandson of Aeneas, defeats a few of these monsters in combat, drives the remainder into the mountains, and establishes civilization in the form of farms and a New Troy.⁷ This conquest casts Brutus as a hero in the Biblical type, a David vanquishing Goliath.⁸

Two centuries later, two English translations and adaptations of the *Historia* feature a different account of the first conquest of Albion. In a new story inserted into the Ryming Chronicle of the Auchinleck manuscript and the beginnings of the French and English prose *Brut*, the first seafarers to arrive on the island are the exiled daughters of the King of Greece. The eldest, Albina, hatched a plan for her and her sisters to murder their unsatisfactory, inferior husbands, in consequence of which rebellion her father cast them all into a boat at sea. Their initial sins of pride and arrogance lead to further transgressions; finding their appetites increased after feeding on the fruits and vegetation of their island, "þei tokyn flessh of diuers beestys, and bycomen wondir fatte, and so þei desirid mannes cumpanye and mannys kynde þat hem faylled."⁹ The Devil, conveniently at hand, takes advantage of their desires "and lay by þe wymmen, and schad tho natures vpon hem, & they conceiued, and after þei broughten forth Geauntes."¹⁰ These are the giants whom Brutus vanquishes, but now, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen describes it, a "monstrous, feminine origin has been provided for Geoffrey's orderly masculine one."¹¹ This version makes

⁷ Geoffrey of Monmouth 54-74.

⁸ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen also observes this parallel in *Of Giants* 31-32.

⁹ From *The Brut*, ed. Friedrich Brie 4.

¹⁰ Brie 4.

¹¹ Cohen, *Of Giants*, 50.

Brutus's conquest not merely one of heroic valor but an explicitly patriarchal project; the empire he imprints on this formless, disordered land is now a male-authorized corrective to the unnatural, unlicensed aberrations of a society ruled by female whim and excess. The encroachment of Albina and her sisters into the foundations of English empire—and her temerity in naming the island after herself, an act Brutus later imitates—make female behavior, or misbehavior, the overt antithesis of the male imperial rule modeled by Brutus. The Albina myth, as Cohen points out, naturalizes male dominance and female submission by showing them as a historical necessity for the establishment of proper familial and imperial relationships.¹² While this version of England's history invokes the monstrous woman to dramatize its narrative of conquest and illustrate the correct social order and cultural mores, it deeply embeds the monstrous woman at the point of imagined origin, showing how she makes the order both necessary and possible.

In the examples given above, the narrative response to the monstrous woman is a move of rejection. Grendel's mother and Albina's horrendous spawn are defeated by the hero, the representative and enforcer of a just social order. Map urges his Rufinus to abjure contact with women; Gervase's serpent-women are spontaneously exiled from their geographical settings, usually in aerial shape.¹³ However, in the examples from Middle English romance which this study will examine, the impulse is quite the opposite: these narratives seek ways to contain and integrate their monstrous women, either through deception, in the case of Melusine, rehabilitation, in the case of Medea, or displacement of violence in the tales of Constance. Monstrous women in the romance work against the literary tradition of treating monsters as that which must be evicted, conquered,

¹² Cohen, *Of Giants*, 55.

¹³ See more on Gervase's lamia figures in Chapter 1.

or expelled. As suggested by the infusion of the Albina myth into the founding history of Britain, the romance story pattern envisions the monstrous woman as original, productive, and necessary for an operative social order.

Monster as Signifier

Part of the monstrous woman's utility as a literary trope draws from the medieval aesthetic tradition that uses monsters as a system of signification.

David Williams establishes in his 1996 study *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediæval Thought and Literature* that monsters function as a mode of inquiry, offering what he calls a "symbolic language" that adapts itself to several interrogative functions: creating meaning through contradiction, navigating paradox, questioning the representation of being, and critiquing philosophical or theological discourse through its imaginative appropriations.¹⁴

Likewise, Cohen claims in "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" that monsters provide an interpretative text; as markers of culture and cultural boundaries, he suggests, monsters "exist only to be read."¹⁵ Such theories represent the maturation of a postulation made by J.R.R. Tolkien in his much-cited 1936 lecture on *Beowulf* that the monsters are neither a stylistic excrescence nor evidence of a lost literary sensibility but are rather, as he puts it, "fundamentally allied to the underlying ideas of the poem."¹⁶ The belief that monsters are meaning-laden drives such recent scholarship as Bildhauser and Mills's *The Monstrous Middle Ages* and is shared by Jones and Sprunger in *Marvels, Monsters and Miracles*, in which they agree that monstrous figures in medieval art, literature, and thought

¹⁴ Williams 3-15.

¹⁵ Cohen goes on to suggest that reading what the monster's body incorporates not only reveals "the boundaries that constitute culture" and but also betrays what that culture has "constructed to be received as natural, as human" (viii-4).

¹⁶ Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," 5.

“represent ideas, individually or commonly held, about order and difference and, hence, the creator's definition of self and Other.”¹⁷ Bildhauser and Mills conclude that monsters are “constitutive of the social order” insofar as their excesses define the outlines of appropriate conduct, the right ethical choice, and the proper observance of social and cultural mores.¹⁸

One key element of the literary monster's power is its ability both to attract and repel. Cohen attributes the cultural fascination with the monster to the “twin desire to name that which is difficult to apprehend and to domesticate (and therefore disempower) that which threatens.”¹⁹ The monstrous figure, in Cohen's terms, offers a “temporary egress from restraint” by providing a limited arena for expressing fantasies of aggression, domination, or inversion.²⁰ Simultaneously with its function as a licensed alter ego, the monster repulses through its egregious quality of difference, which betrays its function as the repository for a particular fear, anxiety, or unacknowledged desire. The *unheimlich* or uncanny described in Freud's seminal essay operates in much the same fashion, combining both the familiar and the strange, and instilling discomfort because of the way the familiar or “homely” is repressed and thus alienated from the consciousness.²¹ The monster incorporates the abject, which, as Julia Kristeva defines it in *Powers of Horror*, upsets identity and order, disrespects boundaries and their rules, and functions as the “in-between, the

¹⁷ In their introduction, Bildhauser and Mills argue that in the literature and art of the European Middle Ages, monsters are informative of a cultural ethos and appear “in the service of agendas that were not simply vain or frivolous or fanciful, but culturally and symbolically useful” (2). See Jones and Sprunger xiv.

¹⁸ Bildhauser and Mills 11.

¹⁹ Cohen, “Monster Culture,” viii.

²⁰ Cohen 17.

²¹ In *The Uncanny*, Freud uses as his example the life-sized mechanical doll that resembles a human in form and shape but has no organic human functions. At once life-like and yet not living, this doll portrayed in E.T.A. Hoffman's short story “The Sandman” provokes a *frisson* because it questions the precise nature of being human.

ambiguous, the composite.”²² Thus the modern interpretation of the monstrous is synonymous with the maladaptive or pathological because it incorporates the desired and at the same time the abhorred, harnessing the familiar and abject, figuring the collision of differences in a “form that threatens to smash distinctions.”²³ The ambiguous, the composite, and the semantic threat to order figured by the monster’s body give it the powerful ability to express contradiction while exerting a pull on the reader’s imagination.

In the medieval period, a literal definition of the monstrous referred to any deviation from the norm. The author of *De Secretis Mulierum* suggests that “monsters or errors of nature are those individuals of a certain species which in a certain part of their body are outside the bounds of the common course of the nature of the species.”²⁴ Notably, this treatise does not impose any moral association with this error but offers the practical, biological explanation that such anomalies are caused by a deficiency or overabundance of matter in the womb. This act of definition, however, makes monstrosity translatable on a variety of levels, by providing a term for distinguishing between the normative and its variations. As Robert Olsen and Karin Olsen point out in the introduction to their collection on monsters of northwest Europe, monsters reiterate the importance of boundaries by the fact that they transgress them. Their findings build on Cohen’s thesis in “Monster Culture” that monsters mark difference, in terms most often political, religious, racial, sexual, or economic.²⁵ The Olsens argue that for medieval audiences, the physical differences manifested by monstrous creatures carried an explicit moral valence; the

²² Kristeva 4.

²³ Cohen, “Monster Culture,” 6.

²⁴ Lemay 112. Lemay shares with many translators of this text the suspicion that its traditional attribution to Albertus Magnus is probably spurious.

²⁵ Cohen, “Monster Culture,” 7-11.

components of monstrosity were thus physical and aesthetic as well as ethical, and varieties of difference carried strong value measurements.²⁶ The force of the threat lies in the value of what is at risk, not just in the risk itself, and the norm at risk often held the status of being taken for what was true, natural, divinely ordained, or right. Thus, the ability of the monster to modify if not totally disrupt the world order, “to negate the very order of which the monster is a part, and to critique the philosophical principles that sustain the order itself,”²⁷ carries a cataclysmic connotation. While in Pliny’s *Natural History* unusual races or singular births signal the endless variety of the natural imagination, in the medieval mindset, monstrous deviations acquire a moral, usually demonic significance.²⁸ The monster holds the ability to signify threat, to exaggerate difference through gross combinations, and thus pose a danger to the boundaries that order and protect the rational world—but it also provides a running commentary on the ways in which those boundaries are constructed, and what values they encode.

In response to the monster’s threatening power to blur boundaries and smash distinctions, some philosophers attempted to theorize a place for monsters inside the divine order, not *contra naturam* but rather *a natura per deo*, part of a natural world ordered by God.²⁹ No less an authority than St. Augustine of Hippo, reasoning in *Civitas Dei* that any entity that can be called rational, mortal,

²⁶ Olsen and Olsen 8-9.

²⁷ Williams 14. See also Olsen and Olsen 20-21.

²⁸ Mary Douglas observes in *Purity and Danger* that at the most primitive level, as both a practical and a symbolic matter, the effort to sanitize categories and resist pollution is “a creative movement, an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity of experience” (3). Dyan Elliott’s *Fallen Bodies* extends these arguments into the medieval period to suggest that the idea of boundary-crossing or external invasion predicated the Christian construction of the demonic or non-human world: “The distance between the pure ideal and the inevitability of an impure reality—the pure being constantly impugned by transgressions in both deed and thought—was the space within which the symbolic terrain of the demonic world was constituted” (2).

²⁹ Cohen explores this argument in “The Order of Monsters,” 48-49.

and therefore human must be descended from the first man, accounts for the occasional monstrous birth or the existence of the so-called monstrous races as a mark of God's all-knowingness, and the distinctions a proof of man's deficient understanding:

Deus enim creator est omnium, qui ubi et quando creari quid oporteat vel oportuerit, ipse novit, sciens universitatis pulchritudinem quarum partium vel similitudine vel diversitate contextat. Sed qui totum inspicere non potest tamquam deformitate partis offenditur, quoniam cui congruat et quo referatur ignorat.

[For God is the creator of all things, and he himself knows at what place and time a given creature should be created, or have been created, selecting in his wisdom the various elements from whose likenesses and diversities he contrives the beautiful fabric of the universe. But one who cannot see the whole clearly is offended by the apparent deformity of a single part, since he does not know with what it conforms or how to classify it.]³⁰

Augustine moves to defuse the threatening power of physical difference among human subjects (he includes hermaphrodites and conjoined twins in his observation) by reaffirming a shared human ancestor. Isidore of Seville enumerates a collection of animal-like or hybrid beings in his enormous taxonomy, the *Etymologiae*, but links creatures such as cyclops, giants, and cynocephali inside a larger order of created beings that includes humans and angels.³¹ Collections such as the anonymous *Physiologus*, first compiled in Greek in the third or fourth century A.D., and the eighth century Anglo-Latin *Liber monstrorum* took a step further in their taxonomic projects and attached a traditional moral interpretation to unique and unusual creatures. Whether of the human variety, the animal variety, or a shocking blend thereof, medieval

³⁰ Sanford and Green xvi.8 (44-45). See Olsen and Olsen, who interpret Augustine as saying that monsters "manifest the splendour of a varied yet harmonious creation" and "engage our reason to appreciate the universal beauty of the creation to which such beings belong" (9). Bildhauser and Mills agree that "monsters had the potential . . . to demonstrate God's almighty power" (14).

³¹ See Liber XI, "De homine et portentis." Ed. W.M. Lindsay (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991).

monsters always carried a meaning that could be decoded, and that usually pointed back to the omnipotent power of the Christian deity. Still, as Cohen suggests, such efforts by Augustine and Isidore failed to affix an unambiguous interpretation to any form of monstrosity.³² Because the monster's resistance allows the system to function, the monster must always in some way lie outside the standard, binary determinations of difference. The synthesis is always incomplete.³³

Bildhauser and Mills offer a further exploration of the ways monsters serve by their very existence to demarcate and thus define order. Building on Jacques Derrida's theory that "language constructs meaning solely through difference"—that, for instance, the category of "normal" is defined by opposition to the abnormal, strange or deviant—they suggest that the abnormal is "already a mixed category and the undoing of 'normal'."³⁴ The work of monsters, then, is to collapse distinctions and confuse meaning by fusing semantic fields, combining a thing and its opposite in one body. Williams suggests that, through this synthesizing function, medieval monsters propose a new system of literary signification; they essentially offer a different philosophical avenue for approaching the traditionally rational modes of medieval thought. Cohen suggests that the monster "notoriously appears at times of crisis as a kind of third term that problematizes the clash of extremes."³⁵ He reads the monster as lying outside the "hermeneutic circle," proposing not just a new angle for perceiving the issue but an entirely new type of logic.³⁶ In this way the monster, itself a paradox, is a productive lens for examining paradoxes in social, political,

³² Cohen, "The Order of Monsters," 49.

³³ Cohen 43.

³⁴ Bildhauser and Mills 13.

³⁵ Cohen, "Monster Culture," 6.

³⁶ Cohen 7.

philosophical, or cultural discourse, and a useful metaphorical tool for imagining ways to navigate through or around a seeming terminological impasse, for instance that which characterizes medieval discussions about women.

Women and Medieval Misogyny

Part of the threat—and fascination—of the monstrous woman is the way she signals the already-tenuous distinctions between monster and woman, as observed by Christine de Pisan above. Monsters challenged categorizations, endangered borders, and posed a threat to systems of order, but also provided a signifying system that helped to qualify distinctions. Woman, too, operated as a medieval system of signification. As R. Howard Bloch observes in *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*, the Yahwist version of creation offered in Genesis, in which Eve is created from the unconscious Adam's rib, created a powerful framework for understanding all sorts of natural relationships: "the creation of woman is synonymous with the creation of metaphor," and "the relation between Adam and Eve is the relation of the proper to the figural," which in the case of Eve is a position that suggests both subordination and "a tropological turning away."³⁷ Woman could stand in for any ontological concept understood in terms of hierarchy, ornamentation and excess, or degradation from an original ideal. Gender was not necessarily linked to a biological implication of sex; it could be used as a term to organize all sorts of structures, from being a grammatical concept that classified nouns to indicating the "natural" or ordained relationship between any number of philosophical principles. But the biological applications of gender and its corresponding levels of value always seemed to linger, somehow, in these

³⁷ Bloch 38.

hierarchies. Bloch traces how, building on the Platonic differentiation between the rational intelligence and the bodily senses, in Judeo-Christian tradition “man is associated . . . with spirit or soul formed directly by God, partaking of his divinity, while woman is assumed to partake of the body, fleshly incarnation being by definition the sign of humanity's fallen condition.”³⁸ Thus woman came to signify “all that is inferior, debased, scandalous, and perverse.”³⁹

Woman's associations with the corruptibility of the body through its sensual aspects and thus its ungovernable carnality sealed an authoritative tradition that confidently treated women as inferior beings on a social and political scale. John Knox, in *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558), firmly declares:

Nature . . . doth paynt them furthe to be weake, fraile, impacient, feble, and foolish: and experience hath declared them to be unconstant, variable, cruell and lacking the spirit of counsel and regiment. And these notable faultes have men of all ages espied in that kind, for the whiche . . . they have removed women from rule and authoritie.⁴⁰

Knox's assertion is simply one step in a tradition dating back to Saint Paul that woman should take a subordinate position in matters relating to both the domestic and public spheres, as their presumably less rational natures called for rational, i.e. male, control.⁴¹

³⁸ Bloch 27.

³⁹ Bloch 25.

⁴⁰ Knox's tract is solely designed to substantiate his opinion that England should not have a female head of state, as an “empire” led by a woman is a crime against nature and God (10).

⁴¹ John Knox aside, it is difficult to determine how the theoretical and literary misogyny described above impacted the daily, material lives of women in medieval England. Evidence suggests that while, categorically speaking, women shared a great deal in common with monsters in terms of philosophical frameworks, individual women were not universally treated with the abhorrence that the modern adjective “monstrous” suggests. As a social category, women's status as a variation or deviation from the normative is reflected in the legal practices of a society properly called patriarchal in the sense that it privileged the male subject in all issues of authority. My interest in medieval misogyny here is not in determining its effect on the ordinary lives of women—a relationship that must be taken as highly relative in any case—but for its

Woman, like monster, was thus a hazardous, potentially polluting term. Dyan Elliott's book *Fallen Bodies* traces how the biological reality of the female menstruating body was widely regarded as a symbol of contamination and metaphorical contagion. "[E]ven when biological women were not explicitly evoked," she observes, "the potent metaphors of female pollution were used to feminize and discredit those perceived as spiritually suspect."⁴² Certain scientific treatises, such as the reproductively-obsessed *De Secretis Mulierum*, could be matter-of-fact rather than value-judgment laden about the difference between males and females;⁴³ nevertheless, legal and scientific evidence confirm a mode of thought which defined the female, or that which belonged to the biological woman, through difference from, and subordination to, the "normal," that is to say the male. Thus women threatened the stability of boundaries, and stood ever poised to cloud the pure and rational with an inferior stain. By function and by definition of being—in Aristotelian terms, a mal-formed male,⁴⁴ and in Plato's

status as a literary theme with its own internal tradition and purpose. For a historian's perspective on medieval English women, the reader might consult Mavis Mate's *Women in Medieval English Society* for a quick overview and, for a more substantial analysis, the works of P.J.P. Goldberg, including *Woman is a Worthy Wigh: Women in English Society c. 1200-1500* (Wolfeboro Falls, NH: A. Sutton, 1992), *Women in England, c. 1275-1525: Documentary Sources* (New York: Manchester UP, 1995), and *Medieval England: A Social History, 1250-1550* (New York: Oxford UP, 2004).

⁴² Elliott 6.

⁴³ *De Secretis Mulierum*, for instance, observes that males had a hot and dry constitution, females cold and moist, which explained certain evidence such as why women pregnant with a male child should appear more reddish of face and light of movement, while women carrying a female child should appear heavy and pale (Lemay 123-125).

⁴⁴ In *Generation of Animals*, 728a, Aristotle writes: "a boy actually resembles a woman in physique; and a woman is as it were an infertile male," because she does not "concoct semen" due to her coldness of nature (103). He goes on to offer the theory, highly influential in the medieval period through several adaptations, that the male predominates in conception: the heat-filled semen "sets" the residual menstrual matter "produced by the female and imparts to it the same movement with which it is itself endowed" (173). In 737a he makes another oft-quoted assertion: "Just as it sometimes happens that deformed offspring are produced by deformed parents, and sometimes not, so the offspring produced by a female are sometimes female, sometimes not, but male. The reason is that the female is as it were a deformed male" (175). The semen particles contain the activating principle of Soul; the female menstrual discharge does not.

Timaeus, the punishment for a male who failed to live a properly respectable life⁴⁵—medieval women were monstrous. Rational but not-male, their bodies made porous by biological imperative, women too flexed natural boundaries and imperiled categories, offering a system of meaning and at the same time challenging it.

To speak of medieval misogyny, however, is to discuss only one strand of an inherently contradictory attitude toward women of which medieval authors, as well as later critics, were well aware. Even while the oft-confirmed inferiority of women validated social structures that subordinated women's authority to men's, the misogyny served other purposes. As suggested above in the example of Map's "Dissuasion to Rufinus," and the catalogues of misogynic literature of which it formed a part, some of the appeal for authors in rehearsing the conventional points of accusation is a sheer delight in rhetorical play. Learned pieces of work identified themselves by proving their acquaintance with the authorities of old; thus certain points, such as Eve's status as temptress and destroyer, were often recited by rote, not given any new interpretation or meaning.⁴⁶ In addition, much of the most virulently misogynistic work was composed by clerics who were called upon to prove their spiritual dedication through physical abstinence; thus a firm conviction as to the disgustingness of

⁴⁵ The full passage is this: "And he who should live well for his due span of time should journey back to the habitation of his consort star and there live a happy and congenial life; but failing of this, he should shift at his second birth into a woman; and if in this condition he still did not cease from wickedness, then according to the character of his depravation, he should constantly be changed into some beast . . . until letting the Same and uniform within himself draw into its train all that turmoil or fire and water and air and earth that had later grown about it, he should control its irrational turbulence by discourse of reason and return once more to the form of his first and best condition" (Cornford 37-38).

⁴⁶ This rehearsal creates what Bloch calls a "repetitive monotony" in the discourse of medieval misogyny, which he argues not only seems to lack an internal history but also is often received, through its consistency, as being universal (2-6).

the female body and being would surely help those of a heterosexual inclination to resist temptation, and ensure a sense of spiritual superiority in general.

At the same time that misogynistic attitudes formed the dominant strand of medieval writings, as least in terms of volume, the rhetorical nature of the exercise provoked its own counterargument. Collections such as Alcuin Blamires's *Woman Defamed, Woman Defended* make visible the ways in which the misogynistic rhetoric functioned as part of a debate. Answering the case-against tradition, a case-for-woman tradition developed under the *aegis* of the Virgin Mary, who exemplified every redeeming quality and provided a corrective for the sins of Eve. In the clerical tradition, a general approval for heroic virginity—which allowed a woman to overcome her inferior biology and, in becoming more spiritual, become thereby more rational (and more like a male)—inspired a hugely popular vein of imaginative literature featuring virgin saints and female martyrs, whose power to inspire rested on the paradox of their second-rate status as women. In more secular literatures, the cultic exaltation of the Virgin Mary found parallel expression in a cult of love, which elevated the pursuit of woman (for sexual conquest veiled as romantic love) to a seriousness approaching religion.⁴⁷ However, the moves of the defense most often mirrored the moves of the persecutors, resulting in a distillation of Woman to a category, or the creation of a counter-type, which functions in its generalizing and essentializing along the same dynamic as the case-against literature, as Bloch observes.⁴⁸ This debate

⁴⁷ Interestingly enough, the rise of courtly love as celebrated in the poetry of the Provençal troubadours, and its ties to the rise of the cult of the Virgin Mary, are often attributed to the late eleventh and early twelfth century, and thus evolve at the same time as the medieval romance. For more on the elevation of women see Newman's *God and the Goddesses* or Jaeger's *Ennobling Love*; for courtly love as misogyny, see Blumstein, *Misogyny and Idealization in the Courtly Romance*.

⁴⁸ Bloch defines misogyny as *any* speech act that categorizes, generalizes, or essentializes women, whether this is an antifeminist attack or a courtly elevation (1-4). The redress for misogyny, as he sees it, is to cease referring to Woman as a category and instead refer to women as individuals, in the particular.

created a dichotomous pit-and-pedestal way of thinking which either classified women as Marys or as Eves, a strategy that left no safe middle ground.⁴⁹ It is precisely this sort of dualistic thinking that the romance story pattern turns into a dialectic and attempts to synthesize or transcend through its creation of a gender ideology apparently distinct from the traditional assumptions of both the woman-defamed and the woman-defended camps.

For our purposes here, it serves to keep in mind that the inability to find a coherence to definitions of women might itself attest to the changeability, or rather instability, which was thought to be the fundamental aspect of womanhood itself, as summed up by Mercury's assertion in Virgil's *Aeneid*: "varium et mutabile semper / femina [Woman's a thing / Forever fitful and forever changing]."⁵⁰ However, the real concern with defining women's unstable nature stems, as the above discussion on monstrous women suggests, from a need to linguistically, semantically, and socially control the power women held to disrupt the stable order through their bodies and their choices. Fear of women's influence, and not simply repugnance at an inferior being, looms behind the more vehemently misogynistic accusations, for instance that of the Christian ascetic Tertullian, who addresses all women with the reminder "et Euam te esse nescis? [Do you not know that you are Eve?]"⁵¹ Tertullian's infamous indictment that woman is, literally, the root of all evil charges all females with Eve's ruinous manipulations: "You are the devil's gateway . . . you are the first deserter of the divine law; you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert—that is, death—even the Son of God had to

⁴⁹ See Williams and Echols's *Between Pit and Pedestal*, especially the introduction.

⁵⁰ Ed. Mackail IV.569-570 (157). Trans. Robert Fitzgerald IV.791-792 (116).

⁵¹ *De cultu feminarum* I.i in *Opera* (343). Trans. C.W. Marx in Blamires, *Woman Defamed*, 51.

die.”⁵² This oft-quoted assertion appears in Tertullian’s treatise against feminine ornamentation, *De cultu feminarum*, the point of which is to persuade women to remain modest, silent, and chaste, not just to preserve their own souls but more importantly to avoid inflaming desire in onlooking men. Tertullian’s outrage, and that of later authors who quoted him as an authority, seems due Eve not just for condemning all humankind to mortality but for subverting the natural order of things; in Isidore of Seville’s definition, *mulier* (called so for her softness or *mollitie*) exists as such to be subsidiary to the more forceful *vir*, man.⁵³ But elsewhere in the *Etymologiae*, Isidore explains Eve’s name as indicating both *vita*, for her life-giving status as the first mother, and also *vae*, for being the source of man’s first woe, for “woman is often the cause of man’s welfare, and often the cause of his disaster and death.”⁵⁴

This paradoxical thinking, along with the ironic contradictions embedded in the rhetoric of medieval misogyny, lend themselves to the symbolic language of monstrosity, which figures combinations of categories and collisions of terms. Just as women—historical materiality aside—provided the frame for ongoing philosophical debates, monsters too—historical materiality aside⁵⁵—provided a

⁵² The full passage reads: “Viuit sententia dei super sexum istum in hoc saeculo: uiuat et reatus necesse est. Tu es diaboli ianua, tu es arboris illius resignatrix, tu es diuinae legis prima desertrix; tu es quae eum suasisti; quem diabolus aggredi non ualuit; tu imaginem dei, hominem Adam, facile elisisti; propter tuum meritum, id est mortem, etiam filius dei mori habuit” (343). Trans C.W. Marx in Blamires, *Woman Defended*, 51. Qtd. Rogers 15.

⁵³ In *Etymologiae* XI.ii.17-19 Isidore writes: “Vir nuncupatus, quia maior in eo vis est quam in feminis: unde et virtus nomen accepit; sive quod ui agat feminam. Mulier vero a mollitie, tamquam mollier . . . Vtrique enim fortitudine et inbecillitate corporum separantur, sed ideo virtus maxima viri, mulieris minor, ut patiens viri esset” (42).

⁵⁴ From VII.vi.5-6: “Eva interpretatus vita sive calamitas sive vae. Vita, quia origo fuit nascendi: calamitas et vae, quia praevaricatione causa extitit moriendi. A cadendo enim nomen sumpsit calamitas. Alii autem dicunt: ob hoc Eva vita et calamitas appellata, quia saepe mulier viro causa salutis est, saepe calamitatis et mortis, quod est vae” (652). Trans. Blamires, *Woman Defended*, 45.

⁵⁵ That monsters had a valid historical materiality for audiences and thinkers of the European Middle Ages has been well established by John Block Friedman in *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, though he also points out that the monsters held a persuasive metaphorical

lively and enduringly flexible literary concept or trope. Monstrous women in the imaginative literature already illustrate the paradoxical thinking of medieval rhetoric about women, figuring their Otherness as well as their power, fascinating for its ability to be either nourishing or destructive, and sometimes both at the same time. Following the claims of both Williams and Cohen that what monsters point to is a way out of the hermeneutic circle,⁵⁶ I argue that monstrous women, when given full imaginary play in the fictional thirdspace of the romance, provide a third term through which the dualism might be addressed and the dialectic transcended. I hope to show, in the full course of this study, just how monstrous women in the romances expose the paradox at the core of medieval literary traditions concerning women: that the reviled is essential for the construction of the ideal, not simply in terms of definition but, more importantly, the way it brings that ideal—social, philosophical, literary—into being. First, however, it is necessary to arrive at an understanding of the romance as a narrative category and the particular way in which its constructed gender ideology attempts to navigate the wide gap between the pit and the pedestal.

Romance in England and its Relationship to Women

From its beginnings, the medieval romance was viewed as a narrative category of special relationship to women.⁵⁷ This relationship is one complicated by

power as well. Distant marvels such as those found in Mandeville's *Travels* or *The Wars of Alexander* aside, more mundane and local events of "strange births" are recounted in Ranulf Hidgen's *Polychronicon* and John Trevisa's late fourteenth-century translation into Middle English, suggesting that monsters were not only distant or imagined creatures but instead always-possible irruptions of the non-normative into practical, day-to-day existence.

⁵⁶ The typical medieval definition of monsters as "signs" or "portents" rests on the presumed derivation of *monstrum* from the verb *demonstrare*, to point out or to show.

⁵⁷ The assumption that romance is a woman's genre is an earmark to English readers of the twentieth century and later—as suggested by studies such as Janice Radway's *Reading the*

debates over the definition of romance as a term of generic distinction, its constitutive qualities as a story type, and the function it served for its audiences.⁵⁸ Part of the romance's work as a fictional mode rests on its ability to create a thirdspace in the form of an artificially historicized, idealized, or marvelous other-world wherein the events of the story are used to interrogate contemporary conventions of behavior. This thirdspace allows a narrative

Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature—but not necessarily true of the genre at large, which has its roots in classical Greek prose narratives and has continually evolved. Studies that address the romance as a broader fictional mode include Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1953), Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) and *Secular Scripture* (1976), Gillian Beer's *The Romance* (1970), Hubert McDermott's *Novel and Romance* (1989), Barbara Fuchs's *Romance* (2004), and Blackwell's *Companion to Romance*, ed. Corinne Saunders (2004). Studies devoted to the genre of the medieval romance often take up the question of the relationship between women and romance in some fashion; see W.P. Ker's seminal *Epic and Romance* (1896), A.B. Taylor's *An Introduction to Medieval Romance* (1930), Laura Hibbard's *Medieval Romance in England* (1965), A.C. Gibbs's *Middle English Romances* (1966), Dieter Mehl's *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (1968), Eugène Vinaver's *The Rise of Romance* (1971), John Stevens's *Medieval Romance* (1973), Lee Ramsey's *Chivalric Romances* (1983), W.R.J. Barron's *English Medieval Romance* (1987), and Helen Cooper's *The English Romance in Time* (2004).

⁵⁸ The quest to find a suitable definition for the romance as either a genre or mode can be traced through Nathaniel Griffin's 1923 article "The Definition of Romance," John Finlayson in "Definitions of Middle English Romance" (1980), Robert Burlin in "Middle English Romance: The Structure of Genre" (1995), and most recently Yin Liu in "Middle English Romance as Prototype Genre" (2006). The definition of romance as a story pattern chiefly involving the educative adventures of a young and idealized knight and a heterosexual love affair, with the addition of strange or marvelous events, is one perpetuated by the English and German Romantics, who read the romance conventions as characterizing the entire Middle Ages. The function of the romance for its audience is more complex, and the claims for it vary. While Frye has it that the romance grows out of a fundamental impulse for story-telling, critics vary in their determinations of what this impulse answers: the need for an escape from the waking world, as suggested by W.T.H. Jackson in *The Challenge of the Medieval Text* (172-182); a reflection of the psychological move to displace fears and desires onto archetypal subjects, as suggested by Anne Wilson in *Traditional Romance and Tale*; or the wish to make sense of one's social world through the fictional exploration of its values and beliefs. Fredric Jameson in "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre" noted that discussions of romance genre tend to unconsciously adopt one of two approaches, either to take what he called a semantic view—the search for an essential or universal meaning, "apprehended in terms of what we will call a *mode*"—or a syntactic approach, which follows a structural model (137). Often, definitions of romance tend to be so sweeping as to blur the boundaries of romance with the entire project of imaginative storytelling. "Romance is the structural core of all fiction," Frye asserts in *Secular Scripture* (15), and Beer agrees: "All fiction has a way of looking like romance" (5).

reflexivity that can usefully engage with questions such as the representation of women, the relationship of women within society, and the uses of monstrosity to figure or explore this relationship. While critics of the Middle English romance often find that women are either marginalized or placed in a secondary or supportive role,⁵⁹ the monstrous women discussed in the following chapters actually occupy central positions in their tales. The monstrous woman's function as a literary trope in the romance takes advantage both of the fictive possibilities offered by the story structure and the particular valence for women which the romance is presumed to have.

The origins of the Old French term *romanz* hint at the slipperiness of meaning which the current critical interpretation observes.⁶⁰ Twelfth-century works that advertise themselves as romances, including the *Roman de Thèbes* (c.1152), *Roman d'Eneas* (c.1155), and *Roman de Troie* (c.1160), use the term to designate a historical narrative in the vernacular. Through their example, the association of *romanz* with a narrative of heroic adventure, erotic love, and supernatural or mystical elements was so quickly established that a contemporary narrative which also appears in the vernacular and deals with antique, historical matters—Wace's translation into Anglo-Norman of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*—is never later classified as a romance even though the author refers to it as “cest romanz.”⁶¹

Chrétien de Troyes, writing between 1174 and 1191, is responsible for the critical shift in meaning that broadens *romanz* from a term designating the language of composition to that of generic classification, and one that

⁵⁹ See Fisher's chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, Felicity Riddy's discussion in the same volume, and Salter 43.

⁶⁰ Rita Copeland traces a connection to the Latin *romanus*, “of or belonging to Rome” (215), while Simon Gaunt finds its origin in the Old French expression “mettre en roman,” to translate into the vernacular (45).

⁶¹ See for instance the concluding line of Weiss's text; see also Strohm 2-3.

particularly implicates women as audience. In Chrétien's *Le Chevalier au Lion*, the hero Yvain enters a castle where he finds the lord and lady reclining in a garden while a maiden, their daughter, reads to them "en un romans."⁶² Additionally, Chrétien's declaration in the opening of *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* that he composed the romance at the request of "ma dame de Champagne" is often assumed to indicate that the romance was of particular interest to female audiences.⁶³ Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* reinforces this assumption when Pandarus finds his niece and two other ladies in her parlor, while a maiden "reden hem the geste / of the siege of Thebes."⁶⁴ From this point on—perhaps because Chrétien's compositions long commanded regard as both the origin and highest stylistic achievement of medieval romance writing—the genre was assumed to have a distinct feminine provenance, despite evidence proving that men participated in the composition, circulation, and reception of romances, and despite the fact that most medieval romances, especially those in Middle English, were centrally concerned with the exploits of a male protagonist.⁶⁵

⁶² Chrétien, *Yvain*, ll. 5362-72 (Nelson and Carroll 215). Trans. Comfort 250.

⁶³ Chrétien, *Lancelot*, ll. 1-30 (Méla 46-48).

⁶⁴ ll.83-4 (Benson 490).

⁶⁵ Salter 42-43. Robert Thornton (fl.1440) is responsible for copying and compiling a number of Middle English romances, and the author of *Sir Launfal* identifies himself Thomas of Chester, to name only two examples of male participation in romance reception. The romantic notion that love belongs to the ladies persists in the critical tradition. Ezra Pound in *The Spirit of Romance* broadly characterizes what Ker and others see as a shift from heroic to romantic subjects in the popular secular literature as an attempt to please a female readership: "There were ladies to be entertained; ladies, bored somewhat by constant and lengthy descriptions of combats not greatly differing one from another" (79). "As tales of adventure," Gerald Bordman suggests, "[the romances] provided excitement through often dreary winter months for the ladies of the court and those men who were not away . . . for the ladies, they frequently provided an attractive love theme" (1). In terms of modern scholarship, the assumption that Chrétien both introduces and defines romance begins with Ker, whose discussion of romance concerns only the courtly examples. More recently, scholars have ventured further afield for the roots of medieval French romance. Some, like D.H. Green and Francis Ingeldew, place its origins in twelfth-century historiography; G.T. Shepherd traces the impulse for story-telling to monastic collections of the late eleventh and early twelfth century; Taylor, Mehl, and Barron all follow Ker in agreeing that romance grows out of the Old French *chansons de geste*. Tony Davenport in *Medieval Narrative*

It remains to be satisfactorily investigated whether the romance's special associations with female readers had any correspondence with the general lack of sophistication, intellectual matter, or social respect with which the Middle English romances were evaluated during their own time and after. While Roberta Krueger persuasively argues in *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance* that French romances engaged in sophisticated moves of female displacement that invited both recognition and possible resistance on the part of female auditors, no such corresponding claim has been made of the Middle English romances. Indeed this body of work has only recently, and still not thoroughly, been reclaimed from a long tradition of critical contempt or neglect. Derek Pearsall's 1965 article "The Development of Middle English Romance" states the majority view when he characterizes these works as "overwhelmingly popular and non-courtly" and designed primarily for "a lower or lower-middle-class audience, a class of social aspirants who wish to be entertained with what they consider to be the same fare, but in English, of their social betters."⁶⁶ Pearsall's distinction is one of class, not gender, but a

gives credit to a woman, Marie de France, for single-handedly inventing the genre with her *Lais*. The development of Middle English romances is somewhat easier to locate; almost all the extant narratives have French originals (see Pearsall).

⁶⁶ Pearsall 91-92. Scholars remain divided on the question of romance audiences, as Ad Putter acknowledges his introduction to *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, where he observes that critics have either supposed that (a) popular romances were composed and recited orally by minstrels (for which they draw on internal evidence, such as the address to a listening audience that opens narratives such as *Havelok the Dane* or *Kyng Alisaunder*, or the mention of entertaining minstrels in *Emaré*) or (b) popular romances were composed and copied for the amusement of newly literate classes, specifically the gentry and middle class, which records of manuscript commission, ownership, and circulation seem to support (2-3). Recent discussions of the possible composition of romance audiences can be found in Jordi S  nchez-Mart  , "Reconstructing the Audiences of the Middle English Versions of *Ipomedon*," *Studies in Philology* 103.2 (2006):153-77; Dana Margaret Symons, "Literary Pleasure, Popular Audiences, and Middle English Romance," diss., U of Rochester, 2004; Meale's chapter on romance audiences in *Readings in Medieval English Romance* (1994: 209-225); and Pearsall further in "Middle English Romance and its Audience," *Historical and Editorial Studies in Medieval and Early Modern English for Johan*

contemporary medieval reference does connect a presumed gender-based preference with a sly jab at literary merit. Chaucer's Nun's Priest, when narrating his tale to the pilgrims underway to Canterbury, declares as he opens his animal fable concerning Chanticleer and Pertelote that "[t]his storie is also trewe, I undertake, / As is the book of Launcelot de Lake, / That wommen holde in ful greet reverence."⁶⁷ Whether the story's popularity among female readers redeems it from accusations of falsehood, the Nun's Priest leaves it to his audience to judge.

The correspondence of language and class which regards "popular" as equivalent with "illiterate" — whatever its intersection with the semantic constructions that regard "feminine" as "inferior" — has characterized the critical reception of Middle English romance from its very beginnings, but with contradictions that echo the paradoxes found within the discussions of monstrosity and womanhood above. One seeming puzzle is why a genre presumably pitched to females should be, by definition, a narrative of knightly prowess and adventures.⁶⁸ Catalogues of romance topics found in Middle English works including *Richard Coer de Lyon*, the *Laud Troy Book*, and Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas* refer to the narratives by the identity of their heroes, signaling that the two cannot be distinguished. Chaucer (here one of the pilgrims on the way to Canterbury) ranks his hero among a list of names he expects his audience to recognize, including "Horn child and of Ypotys, / Of Beves and sir Gy, / Of sir Lybeux and Pleyndamour — / But sir Thopas, he bereth the flour!"⁶⁹

Gerritsen, eds. Mary-Jo Arn, Hanneke Wirtjes, and Hans Jensen (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1985) 37-47.

⁶⁷ Benson VII.3211-13 (258).

⁶⁸ Newstead in Severs 11; Finlayson, "Definitions," 55.

⁶⁹ Benson VII.897-901 (216). The narrator of *Richard Coer de Lyon* declares that "men maken [romaunses] . . . / Off goode knyȝtes, stronge and trewe," and reels off a list of examples in both

A narrative type more widely enjoyed by women would, one presumes, bear a particular significance for women, perhaps a greater attention to erotic love, which was thought by many to be of special interest to women (in the tradition of Eleanor of Aquitaine's famous courts of love). However, only one attempt to define the romance, occurring in the introduction to the Middle English *Speculum Vitae*, groups "dedes of armes" with "amours,"⁷⁰ where the inclusion of a love affair with the knighly heroics is clearly secondary. Contemporary references that classify romances as inferior literature ground their claims on content, not audience. "Men ȝernen iestes for to here / And romaunce rede in dyuerse manere," the *Cursor Mundi* begins, going on to list romance heroes including Alexander, Julius Caesar, Arthur, Charlemagne, Tristram, Isumbras, and other "[s]toryes of dyuerse þinges, Of princes prelatis & of kynges."⁷¹ But "þe wise mon wol of wisdom here / þe fool him draweþ to foly nere."⁷² The generic distinction between the "folly" of romance subjects and worthy listening material, here the Christian religious and mythical version of the history of the world, is purely one of subject, for the *Cursor Mundi* employs the same verse form as early French and Middle English romances—the octosyllabic couplet—to deliver its message.⁷³

English and French traditions, including Roland, Oliver, Alexander, Charlemagne, Arthur, Gawain, Hector, and Achilles (Brunner ll.7-28).

⁷⁰ Strohm 11.

⁷¹ Ed. Morris Vol I ll.1-22 (9). This version is transcribed from Trinity College MS R.3.8.

⁷² Morris ll.23-28 (11).

⁷³ It must be observed that while frequently rehearsed by the intellectual elite, such literary evaluations never at any point succeeded in eradicating interest in the romance entirely. Building on the success of poets such as Chaucer, Gower, and the Langland of *Piers Plowman* fame who made it respectable once more to compose in English, some romances announced their English treatment of English subjects as a point of national pride. The introduction to *Richard Coer de Lyon* serves as an example; see lines 21-28 in Brunner. The sixteenth and seventeenth-century return of interest in the forms of Greek and Roman classical poetry, along with the sense perpetuated by such later fifteenth-century works as the *Morte D'Arthur* of Sir Thomas Malory that medieval romance was the "literary repository of archaism, idealism, and fantasy"

If the influence of women in the romance audience cannot be firmly established, the influence of women within the narratives themselves is of even greater curiosity. Of the English tradition of romance, critics have noted that, compared to their French sources, they give women rather less to do.⁷⁴ In the “bourgeois-gentry” ideology that dominates the Middle English romance, women’s roles contribute mainly to the construction of the hero’s chivalric identity, while the heroine serves as heiress and “conveyor of the gentle blood.”⁷⁵ Observing the focus on domestic spheres in later Middle English romance especially, Felicity Riddy notes that their purpose seems bent on indoctrinating young men “in the ideology of the family and household,” while female characters do little more than move from daughterhood to wifhood.⁷⁶ This domestication of women in the romance parallels a similar household ideology

(Copeland 220), explains the embarrassment voiced by Thomas Percy in publishing his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* in 1765 and, subsequently, his Folio of recovered medieval works. Yet despite his efforts to establish his intellectual distance and superiority from the “gross and ignorant,” “barbarous productions” of this distant age, both the character of their Englishness and their status as curiosities helped make Percy’s volumes enormously popular among his eighteenth-century readers (McDonald 5-8). Sir Walter Scott’s recovery of medieval romance under the imprint of a Romantic aesthetic long influenced modern romance critics, starting with Ker. The last two decades of romance scholarship take several approaches to their topic of study, including theme, style, structure, and, most recently, the relationships among texts. See Kathryn Hume’s “The Formal Nature of Middle English Romance” (1974), Susan Wittig’s *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in the Middle English Romances* (1978), Carol Fewster’s *Traditionality and Genre in Middle English Romance* (1987), Andrea Hopkins’s *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance* (1990), Mills, Fellows, and Meale’s *Romance in Medieval England* (1991), Meale’s *Readings in Medieval English Romance* (1994), Rosalind Field’s *Tradition and Transformation in Medieval Romance* (1999), Putter and Gilbert’s *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance* (2000), Phillipa Hardman’s *The Matter of Identity in Medieval Romance* (2002), Nicola McDonald’s *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England* (2004), Corinne Saunders’s *Cultural Encounters in the Romance of Medieval England* (2005), and Louise Sylvester’s *Medieval Romance and the Construction of Heterosexuality* (2008).

⁷⁴ Fisher, “Women and Men,” 151.

⁷⁵ See Riddy for her discussion of the “bourgeois-gentry” ethos of the romances (238-240), Fisher for the contribution of women to chivalric identity (150-164), and Hudson, “Construction of Class, Family, and Gender” for the function of the heroine (88).

⁷⁶ Riddy 240.

adhered to by conduct literature. However, this ideology acknowledges the paramount influence of women within this sphere, especially as it contributes to domestic felicity and the proper education of children. Middle English courtesy handbooks such as the *Book of the Knight of La-Tour Landry* (copied from the French original addressed to the knight's daughters, and composed c.1371-2) and poems styled as parental instruction such as *The Good Wife Taught her Daughter* (c.1350) advocate a model of behavior to which the heroines of the Middle English romance uniformly adhere. Its major principles include chastity, modesty, decorum of speech and manner, propriety in dress, attention to domestic tasks such as needlework, and the sensible management of household economies and other affairs. As historical evidence shows, aristocratic women often had impressive households which it fell to them to govern in the absence of husbands or sons.⁷⁷ Thus it might be thought that the values governing the heroines of the Middle English romances reflect those endorsed by their audience, at least the bourgeois-gentry elements of it.

Riddy's observations on the limitations of female roles are in fact contradicted by those examples featuring monstrous women, for, as later chapters will show, the heroines in these narratives have active lives outside the home: they manage estates and oversee construction projects, sail to new countries, convert empires, and single-handedly destroy royal houses. Yet these powerful women still adhere to the standards for feminine conduct formulated by the conduct literature and endorsed by didactic religious literature.⁷⁸ Thus

⁷⁷ The Paston letters are often held up as an example of the influence and capability of aristocratic English women. See Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 2004-2005).

⁷⁸ See Mustanoja for correspondences between the poetry of parental instruction and what the editor refers to as "sermon fare" (87-90). Collette observes how the good wife's support of domestic harmony leads to a greater social good, demonstrating in effect "the power of women to stabilize and destabilize elements of society through virtue and uncontrolled will" (167).

what I am calling the gender ideology of the Middle English romance is such that it hardly belongs to a fantasy world, one with no foundation in reality, nor does it uniformly replicate the claims of misogynistic literature. While this ideology borrows heavily from the Christian ethos, especially in the qualities it defines as essential to the “good wife,”⁷⁹ and engages with many of standard misogynistic claims in its insistence on obedience to husbands, modesty of dress and speech, and limited contact with other men, it does not address woman as the devil’s gateway or a three-formed beast. Inside the romance world, this gender ideology awards its heroines agency, rewards female action in service of the ideology, and acknowledges woman’s fundamental role in the creation of a proper social order. The gender ideology of the Middle English romance deems women not marginal but rather constitutive; they are acknowledged as, and honored for, being preservers of legitimate bloodlines and family estates, educators of children and wards in proper modes of conduct, managers of the household, in short linchpins of that most primary unit of the patriarchy, the family.

It remains only to address the irony that in the examples of romance narrative treated in this study, the monstrous women do not exist to serve as counter-examples to the paragon constructed by this gender ideology. They do not simply function as the evil stepmother-witch of the fairy tales or even the accusing mother-in-law of the folklore motif. The accusing mother must be dealt with, and will be in Chapter 4, but the monstrous women of the romances to which I will turn—Melusine, Medea, and the much-maligned Constance—are *examples* of the good wife. They are all the offspring of royal houses and

⁷⁹ The formative input for the model of the “good wife” can be found in the apocryphal Ecclesiasticus, particularly chapter 25 (which laments wicked women) and chapter 26 (which praises good wives). See Coogan, *Apocrypha*, 135-138.

properly educated in courtly behavior; they are all models for conduct; they all enter marriages with husbands to whom they are sincerely and mutually attached. The monstrous women are not the villains of their tales; they are the heroines. This paradox, I argue, is what makes the monstrous women useful as a critical lens for interrogating the kinds of rhetoric by which they are constructed. The reflexivity of this figure is made possible in part by the ways in which monstrosity can be used to embody contradictions, especially the contradictions of medieval misogyny, for the monster, as established above, functions as a thirdspace with the ability to transcend the terminological impasse. But the reflexive ability of this figure finds its fullest play within the story pattern of the romance, which itself engages in the creation of a thirdspace by its very function as fiction, and thus awards the monstrous woman her full scope as both a powerful narrative feature and a self-conscious critical tool.

The Fictional Possibilities of the Medieval Romance

Corinne Saunders, in the introduction to the *Companion to Romance*, defines romance not just by its fictional approach but its constitutive elements:

Romance is often self-conscious, reflecting some degree of choice against realism, and demonstrating over the course of literary history the enduring power and relevance—social, intellectual, emotional—of a mode of writing underpinned by the imaginative use of the symbolic and the fantastic, by idealism, and by universal motifs such as quest and adventure.⁸⁰

She thus sums up a discussion, begun in Frye's *Secular Scripture* and continued in Barron's *English Medieval Romance*, that regards the romance as a fictional mode with the unique ability to use imaginative spaces to depart from, but in turn reflect on, very real concerns for the audience. Transcending the argument over

⁸⁰ Saunders 4.

whether the romance should be regarded as either a fictional genre or a mode, Barbara Fuchs suggests thinking of the romance as “a literary and textual *strategy*.”⁸¹ This strategy, I would add, involves using a vaguely historicized setting and pseudo-historical characters to create an imagined, often idealized narrative space in which events, conflicts, actions, and consequences present a reading that offers relevance for the situation of the contemporary audience. This is what I call the thirdspace of the narrative.

Previous scholars have examined the ways in which romance creates this fictional thirdspace, though in different terms. Frye thinks of this construction as a sort of wish fulfillment, predicated on the romance’s ability to navigate the reader through a struggle between “upper” and “lower” worlds.⁸² Pamela Gradon in *Form and Style in Early English Literature* sees these two levels as employing different levels of recognition and response in the audience; she describes the romance mode as a way of writing which “depends upon a contrast between different levels of comprehension,” while Finlayson views “*romance* as essentially a way of presenting . . . an attitude to experience.”⁸³ Stephen Knight argues that the social function of the Middle English romance is to preserve and articulate an ideological core reflecting the values and interests of a dominant, land-owning, feudal class, and thus the romance operates as a form of hegemonic persuasion, securing support for a social system that operates in the interests of landlords, their families, and those others who control the means of production.⁸⁴ Together these discoveries present a convincing argument for how the Middle English romance works: it operates in the register of an imagined world at once distant and accessible, idealized yet possible; it invokes a symbolic

⁸¹ Fuchs 9.

⁸² Frye, *Secular Scripture*, 49-53.

⁸³ Gradon 215; Finlayson, “Definitions of Middle English Romance,” 170.

⁸⁴ Knight 99-102.

method of reading that satisfies a demand for felt experience; and it offers relevance by cohering with a cultural ideology perceived as dominant, authoritative, and therefore valid.

But at the same time as it meets these functions, the romance offers an opportunity for a kind of reading that places a heavy demand on its audience to supply interpretation and meaning. This is a demand placed as equally on contemporary medieval auditors of the romance as on modern romance critics. D.H. Green, in *The Beginnings of Medieval Romance*, argues that the romance introduces a new mode of fiction to medieval audiences. He revisits the classical rhetorical terms of *argumentum*, *fabula*, and *historia* to argue that *argumentum*, with its claim to a verisimilitude with moral implications, made possible “pockets of fictionality” that arose first in historical chronicles but offered room for expansion and elaboration in the courtly romances of Gottfried von Strassburg and Chrétien de Troyes.⁸⁵ Green’s thesis develops Vinaver’s suggestion in *The Rise of the Romance* that the twelfth-century emphasis in the expanding cathedral schools on rhetoric, exegesis, and reading for the correct interpretation granted a new imaginative license to vernacular poetry, which adopted some of these aims. This type of reading is taken up by authors such as Marie de France, who offers a theory of literary interpretation in her *Lais*:

Custume fu as anciëns,
Ceo testimonie Preciëns,
Es livres que jadis faiseient
Assez oscurement diseient
Pur cels ki a venir esteient
E ki aprendre les deveient,
Que peüssent gloser la letre
E de lur sen le surplus metre.

⁸⁵ Green 15-54. He postulates that these rhetorical terms would have been broadly known to medieval authors through study of Isidore of Seville’s *Eytmologie*.

[The custom among the ancients —
as Priscian testifies —
was to speak quite obscurely
in the books they wrote,
so that those who were to come after
and study them
might gloss the letter
and supply its significance from their own wisdom.]⁸⁶

To facilitate such study and encourage in her reader a subtle mind, Marie goes on, she began to think about composing some good stories and translating them from Latin to “Romanz.”⁸⁷ Vinaver argues that this invitation to reader effort spurred a new kind of narrative poetry, and subsequently the kinds of stories transcribed by Marie and their evolution into full-blown romance cultivated in audiences a “habit of seeing in a story an expression of a meaning or theme,” one played out through “the creation of personified meanings and themes which may behave as characters,” which accounts for the personalities of Tristan, Percival, and Lancelot.⁸⁸ From its beginnings, romance offered readers not meaning dressed up as story—as in the case of medieval *exempla* and other didactic works—but a story in which it was the work of the reader to navigate and determine meaning.

Part of the meaning of the romance tale for medieval audiences depended not just on its coherency with authoritative structures but with the moral values by which such structures were validated. Velma Bourgeois Richmond bases the popularity of the medieval English romance on its “illustration of moral truths by way of an exemplary story.”⁸⁹ Following Frye’s suggestion that the action of

⁸⁶ Marie de France ll.9-16 (22). Trans. Hanning and Ferrante 28.

⁸⁷ Marie ll. 28-30 (24).

⁸⁸ Vinaver 23-30. Päivi Mehtonen in *Old Concepts and New Poetics* also argues for an enlargement in the classical terms of *historia*, *argumentum*, and *fabula*, speculating on the growth in usage of terms such as *fictio* and *narratio*, due in part to increased circulation of Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

⁸⁹ Richmond 20.

the romance takes place in the struggle between two worlds, offering a vertical axis of action which the realistic novel does not, Barron too characterizes the romance function as “incorporating the perennial tension between ideal and reality.”⁹⁰ At its core, as Helen Cooper defines it, this tension results from the opposition of secular ideals with “human perfectibility within a social context.”⁹¹ Thus the romance always holds the possibility of reflecting, in a changed and heightened manner, on the immediate situation of the audience. The world of the story, designed initially to transport the audience from a sorry reality, always returns its listener to the world, preferably imbued with new realizations that carry a moral resonance as well as a personal import.

This reprieve-like feature of the romance has customarily led critics to dismiss the literature and its popularity as demonstrating the simple need for fantasy.⁹² Flo Keyes draws a parallel between medieval romance and contemporary science fiction and fantasy genres as providing a means of reflection on the reader’s world through its investment in a utopian ideal.⁹³ These assessments inflect the medieval genre with what Janice Radway has defined as the controlling feature of the modern genre of the romance: the escape it offers readers into the imaginary fulfillment of a personal fantasy. But the reflexivity sometimes dismissed as wish-fulfillment is, in fact, the most powerful element of this type of fiction, as shown in the *Lais* of Marie de France, whom Tony Davenport credits as “showing not only how to create intense feeling in narrative but also a sophisticated literary self-awareness in the framing of the

⁹⁰ Barron 9. Frye also refers to these as the “idyllic” and the “night” worlds, and thus gives a vertical element to the plot of romance, as well as the horizontal, linear (and very often, circular) movement of plot development. He regards it as the particular function of the romance pattern that “the action takes place on two levels of experience” (48-53).

⁹¹ Cooper, *English Romance in Time*, 10.

⁹² See Richmond, who traces the critical history of this claim on 23.

⁹³ See her full-length study, *Literature of Hope in the Middle Ages and Today*.

effect within the idea.”⁹⁴ The medieval romance is a mode capable of self-conscious literary reflection as well as the construction of a complex literary effect, one that depends for its success on the imaginative contribution of the listening audience. The mode works not only on the assumption that traditional formulae or motifs draw on a communally shared and equally legible body of knowledge, which the audience will individually supply, but also that the larger effort of the textual performance is to involve the reader in “a process of self-creation and self-identity.”⁹⁵ Rather than creating a means of passive escapism, the romance invites interpretation, interrogation, and reflection on the behaviors, values, ethical structures, and social practices which its characters model.

Given this, it is not a stretch to suggest that the romance might equally invite reflection on philosophical constructs such as the nature, place, role, and contribution of women within medieval society. Engaging as it does presumably historical elements—and through them the notion that historical narratives are meant to instruct—but also combining history with the imaginative but still morally valent possibilities of the *fabula*, the romances stand poised to address what Davenport calls “*kinds of truth*, whether or not they are reporting true history” (emphasis mine).⁹⁶

One kind of truth that the medieval romance in particular addresses, I would like to propose, is the social status of women. Along with property, the possession, control, and productivity of women plays a key part in the ideology promulgated by the romance. Knight notes that the specific gender ideology of the Middle English romance serves to justify the larger cultural imaginary; to him “it appears that love-service of women actually functions either as a specific

⁹⁴ Davenport 132.

⁹⁵ Frye, *Secular Scripture*, 186. Robert Kellogg makes this claim for the communal element of traditional art in “Varieties of Tradition in Medieval Narrative.”

⁹⁶ Davenport 150.

rationale for gaining their property or as part of a more general sophistication, part of the chivalry that concealed the brutal reality of cavalry."⁹⁷ In those romances engaged with questions of family structure and the values that govern them, he points out that the wife's virtues, while instrumental, are harmonious with patriarchal interests, though some female characters "operate with genuine power and impact, provided that the limits of patriarchy are not breached."⁹⁸ Harriet Hudson has also observed that where the romances directly take up questions of class, gender, and family structure, the most popular English romances tend to affirm rather than oppose patriarchal authority. Far from providing an alternative, liberating narrative, or even an idealization of class and gender relationships, Hudson concludes that through their "constructions of gender and class, the romances validate the very structures they seem to threaten, and conveniently obscure, in the careers of their characters, the fundamental contradictions shaping the lives and self-concepts of their audiences."⁹⁹ The romances, in this view, generally reinforce the structures and values of secular authority by duplicating them in the fictional world in a way that naturalizes and validates their purpose of upholding social order.

Thus, while the tension and drama of the romance narratives stem from a direct challenge to the social order in terms of a threat to inheritance, military power, or the stability of the family, these critics view the romance as a project to re-knit the social order, safely containing contradictions and dismissing incongruities. As Nicola McDonald observes about the medieval romance as a fictional form, the pleasure of the story derives from the disruption, threat, or violation of the carefully-observed conventions, but the form itself demands

⁹⁷ Knight 107.

⁹⁸ Knight 111.

⁹⁹ Hudson, "Construction," 90.

closure; the desire that pushes the narrative forward is a desire gratified by the specific ways in which expectations about the story are raised, challenged, and then satisfied.¹⁰⁰ Thus the function of the romance *as a work of fiction* supports its work in constructing a cultural imaginary and contributing to the ideological hegemony that both Knight and Hudson have observed.

At the same time, as McDonald points out, the resolution of the narrative does not entirely efface the transgression which imperiled it, nor does the return to a certain social order repress all memory of the violation.¹⁰¹ The site of transgression, while it exists in the space-time of the narrative, may function as a site of possibility. Roberta Krueger in her survey of medieval French romances suggests that in their scrupulous creation of the female subject, and in their moves to mask the displacement of female subjectivity, these stories also offered a site of possible critical resistance for the female reader.¹⁰² She views the rising concern with the sexual and reproductive control of women's bodies in the social sphere as corresponding to a concern in both didactic and imaginative literature with women's public and domestic roles and points to the attempt to create an "ideology of femininity" to which the romance subscribes.¹⁰³ Concerned as they are with the perpetuation of the ideals and standards of an increasingly embattled baronial class, as both Hudson and Susan Crane maintain,¹⁰⁴ the Middle English romances feature women who are upper class, usually in control of land or inheritance, and well-educated in certain aspects of courteous deportment. Even so, the representation of women is invoked, as Sheila Fisher points out of the later Middle English romances in particular, to interrogate the

¹⁰⁰ See her introduction to *Pulp Fictions*, esp. 14-17.

¹⁰¹ McDonald 17.

¹⁰² Krueger, *Women Readers*, xi-16.

¹⁰³ Krueger 23.

¹⁰⁴ Hudson, *Four Middle English Romances*, and Crane, *Insular Romance*.

construction or destruction of men's chivalric identities, threaten "bonds between and among men," and "register an anxiety about masculinity and masculine identity" that reflects a deep uneasiness "about women's potential to be *hominis confusio*."¹⁰⁵ The romance narrative's real concern with women, then—much like other writings within the tradition of medieval misogyny—focuses on women's relationship to the broader, unarguably male-privileging social structure, especially in their abilities to impact that structure through action or influence.

What the Middle English romance stands particularly ready to reveal, then, is the way in which women can impact or reflect upon the male-authored society which forms the ideological core of the story and thus is its central concern. With its characteristic balance between the real and the imagined, its ability to invoke traditional elements in revolutionary ways, its potential to briefly endanger, within the careful confines of a narrative, an entire system of cultural values and sociopolitical beliefs, and its dramatic insurance of closure and satisfaction, the romance affords a unique opportunity for both author and audience to engage in reflection on the workings of a social system portrayed within a narrative through examining the ways this system and its beliefs impact the personal, internal, deeply felt lives of its characters. The romance, which I distinguish here as a story type that employs a distinct and productive kind of fictionality, has the unique ability to show the seams of how the imaginary gets constructed and the hegemony secured. How the romance addresses the particular ideology constructed around gender, more broadly, and the function of aristocratic women in particular—the "ideology of femininity" to which Krueger refers—is best illustrated through examining how the literary strategy of

¹⁰⁵ Fisher, "Women and Men," 151-152.

the romance regards its monstrous women, not only in how the stories use their heroines' monstrous bodies and abilities to entertain questions of female power and influence but also in the narrative strategy of response, whether through exile (as with Melusine), rehabilitation (Medea), or displacement (Constance).

Methodology

Despite its oft-repeated rhetoric, medieval misogyny is never univocal nor consistent, and contains its own contradictions in the way it slides easily from a condemnation of female inferiority and corruptibility to a fear of female influence. In the same manner, the ability of the monstrous woman of romance to figure paradox and difference, to signify a collision of forms and a contradiction of terms, makes this image a ready subject for analysis. The monstrous woman is as yet understudied in the field of medieval scholarship in general, and hardly at all pursued as a key trope of the medieval romance. While certain scholars have taken up a comprehensive study of a single romance or single figure, or analyzed the uses of monstrosity inside select narratives,¹⁰⁶ I

¹⁰⁶ Robert Nolan's unpublished full-length study on the English *Melusine* spends some time discussing her monstrosity, as seen in Chapter 2; Joel Feimer's unpublished dissertation and Ruth Morse's published study both analyze the medieval appearances of Medea and the treatment she receives in different tales, though they do not read Medea, as I do, as a medieval monster. Samantha Jones's study on the loathly lady begins to suggest that the loathly lady works from a monstrous position; she locates her in a "transitional literary space, a site used to work out anxiety about social connections, gender expectations and knowledge in a world stratified by humans and answerable to God" (4-5). Jane Gilbert's chapter "The Lump-Child and its Parents in the *King of Tars*" in Nicola McDonald's *Pulp Fictions* provides an excellent analysis of the uses to which monstrosity is put in this tale, but in treating the single narrative it does not attempt to extend its conclusions to a broader romance pattern. The trope of woman-as-monster has been acknowledged and used as a critical lens for several studies surveying fiction, other media, and popular culture, especially those that incorporate a gender studies perspective—examples include Laila Abdalla's "Man, Woman or Monster: Some Themes of Female Masculinity and Transvestism in the Middle Ages and Renaissance" (Diss. McGill U, 1997), Magdalena Zschokke's "The Other Woman, from Monster to Vampire: The Figure of the Lesbian in Fiction" (Diss. UC-Santa Cruz, 1995), and Jane Caputi's *Goddesses and Monsters: Women, Myth, Power, and*

have found no work that usefully theorizes how the monstrous woman may be working as her own mode of signification within the Middle English romance. It is that which the present study will attempt.

The figurative trope of monstrous men, and the cultural work of monsters in general, has come increasingly under study in excellent works such as John Block Friedman's *The Monstrous Race in Medieval Art and Thought*, David Williams's *Deformed Discourse*, and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Of Giants*. Works like Cohen's *Hybridity, Identity, and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain* and Caroline Walker Bynum's *Metamorphosis and Identity* engage further with the question of how hybridity can perform a type of symbolic thinking. While it seems assumed that female monsters likewise operate as a mode of inquiry, at least in Williams, these studies do not directly address, or find a special meaning in, instances of monstrous women. Cohen's glance at monstrous women in "The Order of Monsters" reads them as being largely animated by traditional misogyny, while Williams's detailed taxonomy acknowledges the popularity, or rather frequency, of monstrous women in medieval literature and art, but finds no particular or separate strand of signification there.¹⁰⁷ For Friedman and Cohen, the monstrous races produce and monitor cultural knowledge and police categories both literal and symbolic, providing markers of difference and, in their Otherness, suggesting a broader cultural coherence. As I will show, however, the monstrous woman holds a slightly different and paradoxical position: she is both Other and *within*. As with other monsters, she presents a reminder of the system's fragility,¹⁰⁸ but this vulnerability is not at the margins; it is at the core.

Popular Culture (Madison, WI: Popular, 2004)—but my study focused on female monstrosity in medieval English romance narrative is, to my knowledge, the first of its kind.

¹⁰⁷ Cohen 44; see chapters 3 and 4 of Williams (107-215).

¹⁰⁸ Cohen, "Order of Monsters," 37.

This vulnerability is shown to best advantage in the medieval romance, which uses its fictional thirdspace both to construct and simultaneously interrogate a specific cultural and gender ideology. Some of the stories taken up in this study, while not belonging to works conventionally assigned to the category of the romance, show themselves through this capability to have a romance pattern at their core. I intend that my focus on instances of the Middle English from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries will reveal an operative mode that persuasively characterizes the use of monstrous women within the selected works. The three major characters to whom I will turn, as both women and monsters—whether through the assimilation of human and non-human bodies or the wielding of suprahuman abilities or power—provide a critical lens for usefully examining the formative terms of the ideology within which they are constructed as well as the profound contradictions and paradoxes at its core. The fictional work of romance and the symbolic work of monsters unite in the figure of the monstrous woman to grapple with the conventionally misogynistic terms of medieval thinking about women and dramatize the anxieties about, hatred for, or fear of women directly encoded at the heart of male-authored systems of authority and justice—anxieties which directly relate to the ways in which these systems rely for perpetuation and nurture on their women. The gender ideology of the romance, and the possibilities of the fictional mode, allow the unique opportunity for monstrous woman to be at once destructive and formative, challenging and exemplary, resistant and restrained. Reading the bodies of these monstrous females not only yields a better understanding of how deeply the existing rhetoric regarding women was seen to be problematic but also provides, in however limited a fashion, a brief opportunity for considering a third term, a thirdspace, or an alternate possibility to the clash of dualistic thinking which characterizes the artistic representations of women outside the

romance. The bodies of the women investigated here, and their monstrous abilities, act as signs—portents, *monstra* in the classical sense—pointing to a fundamental paradox in the thinking structuring the social world of the romance, and possibly a way to think beyond it.

I begin in Chapter 1 with examining the potential interpretations for a specific type of monstrous woman, the half-woman, half-serpent figure of Melusine. I address the question of what this monstrous figure might have been used to signify by tracing Melusine's origins in myth and legend and her analogues in medieval art and other literatures. More than the other women who subsequently come under analysis, I suggest that Melusine held dangerous, even demonic associations because of the moral valence with which this figure was invested in medieval English literature. Her moral relevance, as well as the other ambiguities invoked by her composite form, are the reasons, I argue, that this romance, hugely popular in France, lived a short and obscure life in its English translation.

In Chapter 2, I turn in depth to an examination of Melusine's story and her function as both character and metaphor inside the early sixteenth-century prose translation of the French romance. As a character, I look at the ways that her painful transformations, and the emotional impact of her story, are tied to her role as an exemplary wife, mother, and dynastic patronness, which are themselves symptoms of the particular gender ideology of the Middle English romance. I study the ways in which Melusine's polycorporeal body acts as a metaphor for dangerous feminine power and embodies the paradoxes and contradictions of medieval misogyny, while the ruptures of this uncontainable body hint at the anxieties and vulnerabilities specific to the kind of patriarchal social order that prevailed in late medieval England. I suggest that the final expulsion of Melusine from the human realm contains an authorial reflection on

the conflicting demands imposed upon women, especially the attempts to contain them while simultaneously defining them as Other, as outside.

In Chapter 3, I examine a different narrative move in response to the monstrous woman: that of rehabilitation. The monstrous woman under discussion here is the medieval Medea, who inherits the murderous history of her classical forebear but is also recast, in late medieval England, as a martyr for love, a model wife, and the ultimate romance heroine. I trace Medea's rehabilitation through three different medieval English narratives by Chaucer, Gower, and William Caxton to argue that her character brings into focus the way the gender ideology of the romance, in limiting women's agency to the selection and pursuit of a love partner and maintenance of the sexual relationship, establishes a very narrow mode of representation for women, one which quickly makes women monstrous. In these three narratives, the moves to defuse or excuse Medea's monstrosity reveal the disturbing impact of the monstrous woman, not just because she figures female influence but because she critiques the ways in which the social order demands and relies upon a limited arena of women's agency. The fascination with Medea in later medieval English writings lies in the way that her monstrosity so succinctly expresses—to an even greater extent than in *Melusine*—how women's attempts at self-representation are subverted or controlled.

In Chapter 4, I examine a type of woman who is neither part-animal nor parricide but who still, in my definition, has a monstrous impact on those around her. Constance, in the tales of Chaucer and Gower, is constantly attended by the specter of monstrosity, both in the violence that is displaced onto those who threaten her and in the accusations of monstrous progeny with which she is affixed. Constance, one further step in the sanitization of Medea, illustrates the ways in which female influence is, or is taken to be, monstrous, and yet

Constance, more effectively than the previous monstrous matriarchs of the discussion, is fully integrated into domestic and dynastic life. While Melusine's monstrosity provides a lens for examining anxious thinking about women's power in dynastic and reproductive terms, and Medea's monstrosity becomes a lens for expounding on the consequences, and deeply misogynistic bent, of so-called courtly love and its requirements for female conduct, Constance's monstrosity not only amplifies the problem of women in both dynastic and private love-relations but also addresses the larger problem of female virtue, its strict requirements, and its consequences. I conclude the chapter with a look at an alternative version of the exiled queen, the mother in *Sir Degaré*, to show how her monstrous behavior provides the avenue for Degaré's discovery of identity and repatriation into the social order: a final proof of the way the monstrous woman is the constitutive Other.

What these examples show, altogether, is that late medieval English authors use the trope of the monstrous woman in several complex and interesting ways. She serves as a self-conscious literary device for interrogating existing rhetoric about women and the problems connected to women's influence inside a society dependent on patriarchal authority. She offers a dramatic paradox for illustrating how the cultural values and social demands of such a society respond, in often anxious ways, to female power, which contradicts claims to female inferiority by revealing both the destructive and essentially creative aspects of womanhood, especially the reproductive function on which legitimate inheritance depends. But the monster-woman serves, finally, as an argument for the ways that rhetoric about women—woman's place, woman's nature, woman's roles—effectively *makes* them monstrous. She dramatizes the final contradiction which is itself expressed in the emergence of the Albina myth into Britain's founding history: the monstrous woman makes

the order possible. The supreme revelation of this trope of the monstrous woman in the Middle English romance is that it demonstrates—as Christine’s contemplations suggest—that the monstrous woman is in fact the norm.

CHAPTER 1

THE FATE OF MELUSINE IN ENGLAND

While the introduction to this study established the symbolic use of monsters as a way of reading culture, and especially cultural boundaries, this chapter will pursue in more detail the possible meanings invested in a particular type of monstrous woman, the female-serpent hybrid, to discover what the appearances of this image in art and other medieval literature might contribute to reading the Middle English translation of *Melusine*. The appropriation of the serpent-woman as a romance subject can reveal more about the goals and workings of the romance as a type of literary formula, as the particularly moral or misogynistic interpretations of the Melusine figure in didactic literature and visual art that form a cultural background for the narrative are responded to and reworked inside the romance. Readings of the serpent woman in other sources and analogues can not only inflect on the purported meaning of this monstrous woman inside the romance but can also help explain a larger reception—or lack thereof—of monstrous femininity among English audiences.

Admittedly, the half-serpent, half-fairy figure of Melusine stands out as an anomaly in the corpus of medieval English romance. The two versions of her story translated in the early sixteenth century appear in isolation from the rest of the Middle English romance canon, if a canon exists; Melusine spawns no imitations or adaptations of her story as do the legends of Arthur and Charlemagne, Jason and Alexander. She does not make a guest appearance in other stories, as does Morgan le Fay, nor does she acquire an intertextual life as a parable or literary icon as do other mythical women like Dido or Iseult. In fact no lamia, mermaid, or siren-like women appear in Middle English romance before Melusine's introduction around 1500, and not until the books-and-papers-

spewing Errour appears in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* do readers of English romance meet another woman "[h]alfe like a serpent horribly displaide."¹ Despite the wide popularity and border-crossing capabilities of her story on the Continent, as evidenced by its several printings, Melusine never seems to secure the same hold on the English imagination as she does elsewhere in Europe.

One might be tempted to attribute this lack of interest to a fading literary fashion, but romance matter found a healthy reception among sixteenth-century English readers, if the record of early printed books can be taken as any indication. The romance *Ponthus*, for example, was reprinted three times in three years;² Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, first issued by Caxton in 1485, came out twice more under Wynkyn de Worde. *Bevis of Hampton* underwent five printings between 1500 and 1533; *Guy of Warwick* had nearly that many, and *Capystranus: A Metrical Romance* also appears in three different versions. Tales of wonder enjoyed great popularity among medieval English audiences. *Mandeville's Travels* came out four times in 15 years; the *Gesta Romanorum* appeared thrice in the same time span, and de Worde issued the prophecies of Merlin in 1510 and again in 1529. The *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine proved a consistent bestseller; four different printers took turns with eleven different print runs between 1483 and 1527. Yet after de Worde printed his prose edition of *Melusine* in 1510, no other printer tackled the text until A.K. Donald published an edition through the Early English Text Society in 1895.³ English audiences seemed less

¹ Spenser's treatment of this half-serpent woman is clearly unfavorable: "But th'other halfe did womans shape retaine, / Most lothsom, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdaine" (I.i.14; Maclean and Prescott 10). Errour possesses a "huge long taile" tied with "knots and many boughtes" and "[p]ointed with mortal sting" (I.i.15; Maclean and Prescott 10).

² The printing history for these works is drawn from Pollard and Redgrave's *Short-Title Catalogue* (1976), which records the year in which the license to print was issued.

³ See below for the fate of the rhymed version, *Romans of Partenay*, ed. Skeat.

enthused over stories about shape-shifting heroes; *Huon of Bordeaux* and *William of Palermo* had equally singular careers.⁴ The print record suggests that Melusine's subject matter—not its status as a romance—inhibited its reception.

In fact, two other sixteenth century writers invoke Melusine as a cautionary tale. Wilfrid Holme mentions Melusine in his allegorical treatise *The Fall and Evill Successe of Rebellion*, written in 1537, where he ranks her among a list of legendary women either famous for their virtue or for their destructive impact. Holme's passing reference to Melusine as a "mystical nymph" assumes she needs no more introduction than the other women of his list, which includes Eglantine, Guinevere, Tamora, Bathsheba, Dido, Rosamund, Florence, Penelope, Lucrece, Polixene, and the muse Erato.⁵ Richard Hyrd's translation of Juan Luis Vives's *De institutione foeminae christianae*, issued around 1529, devotes its fifth chapter to "What bokes to be redde, and what nat," and therein lists *Melusine* among a dismissive enumeration of popular French romances that are "made but for idel men and women to redde."⁶ Vives' chief argument, in Hyrd's phrase, is that these books concern themselves with love and not good precepts, and thus are fit only for those "in whom there is no good mynde all redy."⁷ Other romances which the text mentions specifically as being "wantonnes" that serves no purpose other than to "corrupt the manners of yonge folkes" and "infect the common welles with poyson": *Amadis* and *Tirant* of Spain; in France, *Lancelot du Laik*, *Paris and Vienna*, and *Ponthus and Sidonia*; in Flanders, *Foris and Whitflowre*,

⁴ *Huon of Bordeaux*, which features the folklore cycle of the swan children, first appeared in 1515, and was not again licensed for print until 1601. *William of Palermo*, which features a werewolf character, appeared only once, in 1515. Pollard and Redgrave's study ends at 1640.

⁵ The segment appears on sig. L.iv of the printed edition, verso and recto pages, in a section aimed at praising the allegorical lady of the narrative's invention, a mournful princess named Anglia. Anglia interacts with the work's narrator, who identifies himself as Holme, in a pattern modeled after Lady Philosophy's dialogues with Boethius in *De consolacione philosophiae*.

⁶ Hyrd E.iii.

⁷ Hyrd E.iv.

Leonel and Canamour, and *Pyramus and Thysbe*; and in England, *Parthenope*, *Generides*, *Ipomedon*, *William and Melyour*, *Libius and Arthur*, *Guye*, *Beves*, and “many other.”⁸ Vives thus classes *Melusine* with some of the most well-known romances favored by Western European audiences of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Noticeably, Hyrd in his translation does not update his list of popular English romances to include *Melusine*. The Flemings aside, Hyrd’s catalogue suggests that French, Spanish, and English audiences most embrace romance heroes with whom they share a country of origin.

Melusine took a century to migrate to England—a century marked by systematic losses of English territory in France during the Hundred Years’ War (1337-1453). The earliest known version of the prose romance named *Mélusine* was composed between 1387 and 1393 by Jean d’Arras, secretary to Jean, Duc de Berry.⁹ The Duc, who had recently come into control of the castle of Lusignan, commissioned the story for his sister Marie, the Duchesse de Bar.¹⁰ Eleven

⁸ Vives also includes in his attack works “translated out of latine into vulgare speches” and names the “unsavory” stories of Poggius (?), Aeneas Silvius, Eurialis (?), and Lucretia: “which bokes but idell men wrote unlerned,” according to him (E.iv-F.i of Hyrd’s 1529 translation). It would seem that Vives has not read *Melusine* closely (it is full of good precepts which Melusine teaches her sons) and holds an antipathy toward story in general, as he derides such instructive examples as the *Roman d’Eneas* and the story of Lucretia.

⁹ Certain evidence alludes to a written version of the romance predating Jean d’Arras’s *Mélusine*. Donald notes an entry in a catalogue of the Duc de Berry’s library describing “Vn liure de l’Histoire de Lezignem, escrit en Latin” (373). An entry in a catalogue of MSS from Gaul, Switzerland, compiled by D.G. Hänel, cites a “Roman de Melusine; traduction en vers du latin de Jean d’Arras.” Skeat reads this as corroborating the mention of Latin verse sources made in a copy of Coudrette’s French verse “Romance of Melusine” appearing in Cambridge Library Ll.2.5 (Skeat vi-vii). Leo Hoffrichter and Louis Stouff each suggested that d’Arras and Coudrette worked from an single earlier version, now lost. Stouff thought d’Arras worked directly from Latin histories in the Duc de Berry’s library, while Hoffrichter posited an early French verse version, possibly composed c.1375 by Guillaume de Machaut (Nolan, “Evidence for an Early Missing Version,” 53-4).

¹⁰ Bernard du Guesclin, Constable of France, won the fortress of Lusignan from English control in 1373-4 and it thereafter came into the possession of Jean, Duke of Berry, Count of Poitou and brother to Charles V of France. Skeat says: “The famous deeds of the fairy Melusine had been long before this recorded in some documents that had been carefully preserved in the castle of Lusignan. To these Jean trusted for the main portion of his work, but added much of his own”

surviving manuscripts, most of them complete, testify to the romance's wide reception in French;¹¹ one of these, a vellum copy made around 1450 at Amiens for Jean de Créquy, eventually made its way into the collection of the Oxford Earls Robert and Edward Harley, and from there into the British Museum library as Harley 4418.¹² Despite much copying and circulation the story remained remarkably intact; according to Ward and Herbert's catalogue of romances owned by the British Museum, the Harley 4418 MS "substantially agrees" with the earliest printed version of the French prose romance, produced at Geneva under the supervision of Adam Steinschaber in 1478.¹³ The prose *Mélusine* proved just as popular in print, with six printings of the French version issued between 1478 and 1544.¹⁴ A German version, translated by Thüring von Ringoltingen, went through seven printings between 1456 and 1547. The Spanish *Historia de la linda Melosina* appeared in 1489 and Dutch and English translations were both made around 1500—a circulation that suggests the romance's appeal was in no way limited to the land or language of the story's origins.

In contrast to the eleven French manuscripts, the English prose *Melusine* exists in a single paper manuscript in the British Museum, Royal Library 18 B.ii.¹⁵ Unlike the Harley MS, which has 17 miniatures in what Susie Nash calls an

(v). Ward and Herbert also think Jean wrote to please one Jodocus, the Duke of Berry's cousin and the Margrave of Moravia, third son of John of Luxembourg, King of Bohemia (687). Though the Lusignan family had no formal claim either to the throne of Bohemia or the dukedom of Luxembourg (Donald 375), the dukes of Luxembourg later incorporated Melusine into their own family history and adopted Lusignan-like heraldic arms (Ostioia 23).

¹¹ Vincensini discusses the manuscript tradition in his introduction, 41-95. A current bibliography including manuscripts, editions, and studies on *Mélusine* is available through Arlima, Archives de littérature du Moyen Age, online.

¹² Nash 242.

¹³ Ward and Herbert 689.

¹⁴ Nolan, *Introduction to the English Version of Melusine*, 15.

¹⁵ This manuscript is the basis of Donald's editions for the Early English Text Society in 1895. This study relies on his edition, which was reprinted in 1981 and is also available online through the Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse, maintained by the University of Michigan.

“accomplished” and “very convincing” hand,¹⁶ the illuminations for Royal 18 B.ii never materialized in the places left available, and small ink letters occupy the space left for colored capitals.¹⁷ The Royal MS offers a close translation of the French text printed at Geneva in 1478. The four-page fragment of de Worde’s 1510 edition of *Melusine*, preserved in the Bodleian Library, suggests that the printer also worked from a translation of the Geneva 1478 edition of the French prose romance, perhaps using what is now Royal 18 B.ii as his source.¹⁸ Other than that it belonged to a John, Lord Lumley, before making its way into the founding collection of the British Library, no documentation exists concerning the history of this manuscript or its readership.¹⁹

The contemporary verse translation in English fared no better than the prose. A Middle English rhyme royal version of the Melusine story, the *Romans of Partenay*, likewise appeared in the early sixteenth century, based closely on the French poem composed by Coudrette around 1403. Yet the unique manuscript preserved in the Trinity College library at Cambridge appears not to have been printed until Skeat’s edition of 1876.²⁰ As the rhymed version of the romance is both abridged from and, given the manuscript evidence, less well-known than the prose version of the story, the Middle English poem well might be expected to stand in the shadow of the prose version, especially since prose romances had continued the gains in patronage and popularity begun in the fourteenth century. Yet the four fragmented pages that remain of de Worde’s prose edition

¹⁶ Nash 243.

¹⁷ So say Ward and Herbert 690. The projected part II of Donald’s study, which was intend to offer a detailed contextual study of the English *Melusine*, never found its way into print.

¹⁸ Nolan assumes that the English translation in Royal 18 B.ii was done specifically for the purposes of printing and thus may have been commissioned by de Worde (*Introduction* 39). He further discusses Melusine’s print history in 15-19.

¹⁹ The manuscript’s history and appearance are briefly described in its entry in the British Library Manuscripts Catalogue, available online.

²⁰ Skeat based his EETS edition (o.s. 22, 1876, rev. ed. 1899) on the Trinity College MS R.3.17.

attest not to the over-consumption of a popular tale but the neglect of a less-than-beloved one.

Also curious is the choice of both translators to remain anonymous. Precedent for declaring ownership of translations certainly existed; Caxton gave himself credit for his translations of *The History of Troy*, *The History of Jason*, *Paris and Vienne*, and others. The *Romans of Partenay*'s translator offers an independent prologue in the first 75 lines, making the conventional homiletic comments regarding his own humble skill and his dependence on God to execute his project. The poem appends an original epilogue which again professes the difficulty of the French meter, begs an apology for any lack of coherency, and excuses the lack of illuminations. While highly traditional in its rhetorical postures—and absent of a name—this framework to *Partenay* attests to some small sense of ownership and pride on the part of the translator. No such sense frames the Middle English prose translation *Melusine*, which begins and ends with the prologue and final prayer written by the French author, Jean d'Arras. Though the effort of translation fills 219 folio pages, the scribe takes no credit for the work. Any sense of a second authorial identity emerges only from the small editorial changes the translator makes here and there to d'Arras's text.

From this evidence, we might indeed conclude that something in the subject matter made the story uncongenial for English audiences. Yet the English *Melusine* contains several themes otherwise popular in the medieval romance canon. It is a Crusader romance, advocating the protection of Christian lands through the vigor of chivalric princes and portraying the founding of religiously-correct dynasties through the love affair of an imperiled princess and her champion. It is also a romance of love and adventure, in which dispossessed nobles reclaim their patrimony and enlarge their fortunes by means of a well-

endowed heiress.²¹ In addition, the story gives its hero Raymondin's life a penitential arc, resembling that of the hugely popular Guy of Warwick.²² But the heart of the story, which all the other threads serve to amplify, is Melusine's transformation from half-fairy princess to half-serpent matriarch to cursed mythical creature who appears in flight around the towers of Lusignan castle, crying out in a woman's voice, whenever one of its lords is about to die.

Although there are several chapters in the story and long episodes devoted to the chivalric crusades of Melusine's sons, the process of Melusine's transformation holds the romance narrative together. The curse laid upon her by her mother, Pressyne—that she shall spend one day a week turned into a serpent, can only die a human woman if her husband agrees never to see her on the fateful day, and further shall turn into a prognosticative dragon if and when the taboo is broken—makes Melusine a *monstrum* in the fullest sense of the term, both monster and portent.²³ In Jean's narrative, the curse functions as the event that explains, initializes, and in a way guarantees the decline of Lusignan fortunes on the Continent, an event which had already taken place by the time of his writing.²⁴ It might be argued that the story's Potevin provenance made it less

²¹ The categorical description is Laura Hibbard's, from *Medieval Romance in England*.

²² Richmond discusses this motif in *The Popularity of Middle English Romance* 62-74.

²³ The development of the legend of Lusignan's fairy foundress is hard to date, and the critics have historically disagreed on whether Jean d'Arras invented the legend or whether the association of Melusine with the Lusignan family predates the prose romance. Hugh Carus, son of the dynasty's founder Hugh Venator, built the castle of Lusignan in the tenth century, according to the *Chronicle of Saint-Maixent* (Painter 27), and as the tendency to attribute supernatural origins to powerful human figures is about as old as recorded history (Morris 30), the connection may have been made at any time since then.

²⁴ When the last direct male heir died in 1308, the family's French holdings including Lusignan, La Marche, and Angoulême reverted to the control of Philip IV of France (Nolan, *Introduction*, 92). Another branch of the Lusignan family ended when Leon V, the deposed King of Armenia, died in exile in Paris in 1393, though Lusignans continued to rule as king of Cyprus and Jerusalem (Ghazarian 163). Jean's narrative records that Melusine appeared to Serville, the English steward of the castle, warning him that he would have to surrender to the Duc de Berry (Vincensini 810-12; Donald 369).

interesting for early sixteenth-century English audiences, especially those for whom losses in France still existed as a living memory. But I suspect that what offends about Melusine is her core function as a shape-shifter, a half-serpent woman of the type Spenser found so repellant. She is a monster and, as such, unsettles that which is received as natural, normative, human.²⁵

Melusine's hybrid body, as this and the succeeding chapter will show, becomes fearsome because it figures a type of feminine power—a protean ability viewed as particularly female, and specifically tied to a world at once natural and supernatural—that is creative, primal, regenerative, enormously persistent, and potentially destructive. This chapter will investigate Melusine's sources, analogues, and self-positioning to show how her form embeds a quite common concern about feminine sexual influence and reproductive power. Chapter 2 will examine the English text to demonstrate how the story uses Melusine's hybridity to dramatize the colliding claims of medieval misogyny and the gender ideology of the romance, which celebrates, even demands, a certain agency and fertility of its women. Through this reading of the story's context and the prose romance together, I suggest that the tragic import of the Melusine story lies not just in her curse of a suprahuman form but also in the inability of her fictional world to contain or support her. This failure of integration on a narrative level is used by the English translator as a metaphor for the intolerance of his contemporary audience to accept or sanction the modes of female power and dimensions of being that Melusine suggests.

This ability for social commentary, granted by the romance mode, gives the translator the freedom to imaginatively reflect on the roles of aristocratic English women through a fictional distance of time, family, lineage, and

²⁵ See Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's preface to *Monster Theory* ix.

historical situation. The English translator of Melusine seems both aware of and trying to respond to a narrowing and increasingly intolerant view of female power, agency, and influence in an early sixteenth-century England on the brink of Reformation. He offers the monstrous model of Melusine as a suggestion for how the exemplary female is at once threatening and necessary to the social order, and he uses her expulsion from the human realm to illustrate the fundamentally incoherent and unassimilable view of women imposed by patriarchal systems of thought. Furthermore, the English translator suggests that this non-belonging of women, represented by Melusine, is closely tied to failures on the part of her male protectors. While in France she became an enduring myth and a figure of local pride,²⁶ Melusine's hybrid body and unstable physicality mark her to English readers as that which the culture must create and then reject in order for the culture to define itself—in short, a veritable monster.²⁷

²⁶ Melusine's popularity in France cannot be solely explained by the medieval prominence of the Lusignans. The rule of the European dynasty ended in Cyprus in 1474 upon the death of the infant king James III, at which point control of Cyprus passed to his Venetian mother and regent, Caterina Cornaro (Ghazarian 158). The English scribe may well have been aware of this event and its final seal of doom for the fortunes of the Lusignan family. Branches of the Lusignans persisted in England after Hugh X married Isabella of Angoulême, queen of John I, in 1220, and their issue married into the English nobility. Sir Algernon Tudor-Craig published a genealogy in 1932 connecting the English Lukyn (Lovekyn, Luckyn, Lukin) family to the Lusignans, an effort he prefaced with a much abbreviated "Romance of Melusine." The existence of Lusignan descendants in England begs the question of how well the English author knew the genealogy and whether, in fact, there was any familial patronage involved in the translation, or in the ownership of the Royal MS by John, Lord Lumley, 1534-1609 (see Nolan, *Introduction*, 19). Even at the time of this writing, popular knowledge of Melusine in English is almost non-existent, or at least was so before the appearance of the Melusine story in A.S. Byatt's bestselling novel *Possession*. Critical scholarship on Melusine in English literature is equally scarce, with the notable exception being Gillian M.E. Alban's study, which again involves the Byatt novel. In France, however, Melusine has reached the stature of tourist attraction; the Mélusine and the People of Lusignan Association considers her an entrenched feature of the town's past, and the Mélusine Trail takes hikers through 9 km following the footsteps of the legend.

²⁷ "The monster is the abjected fragment that enables the formation of all kinds of identities—personal, national, cultural, economic, sexual, psychological, universal, particular" (Cohen, "Monster Culture," 19).

Melusine's Origins

An investigation into Melusine's meanings must begin with asking why this story needs a heroine who is a shape-shifting, part-fairy princess. At its simplest, the *Melusine* romance explains the rise and fall of the medieval Lusignan dynasty by linking its ancestry to a mythical half-serpent woman whose fairy power and personal cleverness account for the growth of the family fortunes and whose curse of non-humanness likewise accounts for the house and castle's eventual decline. In the story told by Jean d'Arras, Melusine is the daughter of the fairy Pressyne and the quite human King of Albany (Fr. *Albanie*, presumably Scotland), Elynas. After Elynas breaks the taboo not to see his wife in childbed, Pressyne takes her triplet daughters away and raises them on the isle of Avalon. Melusine's curse is the consequence of an act of adolescent rebellion; growing up witness to her mother's distress over this separation from her husband, Melusine convinces her sisters to help her imprison their father, along with extensive treasure, inside a mountain in Northumbria. An aggrieved Pressyne pronounces a sentence on each of her three daughters, and to Melusine she gives "the gyfte that thou shalt be euery satirday tourned vnto a serpent fro the nauyll downward."²⁸ The curse can only be broken, Pressyne says, "yf thou fynd ony man þat wil take te to hys wyf / and that he wil promytte to the that neuer on the Satirday he shall see the;" then, and only then, "thou shalt lyue thy cours naturell, and shall dey as a naturel & humayn woman." And, she adds, "out of thy body shall yssue a fayre lynce, whiche shalbe gret & of highe proesse."²⁹ The

²⁸ Donald 15.

²⁹ Donald 15. The grammatical construction of the English translation makes it possible to read this addendum about a great lineage as either an independent clause enlarging on Pressyne's prophetic vision or as an aspect of Melusine's fate that is also dependent on her husband's keeping the Saturday taboo so she might live out her life as a natural woman. If the latter is true, this makes Pressyne's curse—begun by Melusine's rebellion, and activated by Raymondin's later betrayal—the real instrument for the family's decline.

consequences of a broken promise, as Pressyne gives them, are quite dire: “yf by hap or some auenture / thou shuldest be seen & deceyued of thyn husband / knowe thou for certayn that thou shuldest retourne to the tourment & peyne wher as thou were in afore / and euer thou shalt abyde therinne vnto the tyme that the right highe Iugge shal hold his jugement.”³⁰

The curse functions both as impetus for what is presumably Melusine’s quest to live a normal human life and the reason her marriage dissolves. When Melusine encounters Raymondin near the enchanted Fountain of Soif, he, third son of the Earl of Forestz and nephew to the Earl of Poitiers, promptly falls in love with her. She secures his promise that he will wed her but never inquire after her on Saturdays. Over several hundred pages, Jean’s “history” goes on to chronicle the founding of Raymondin and Melusine’s empire, beginning with the construction of the castle of Lusignan and continuing with the establishment of other castles, fortresses, and abbeys as well as the birth of ten sons, all who have adventures and several of whom go on to win kingdoms and provinces all over Europe. Eventually, as the reader is led to expect, Raymondin breaks his vow and peeks into Melusine’s private chamber on a Saturday, where he views her in her half-serpent form. In due course he exposes her secret and Melusine turns into something like a dragon, in which form her appearance flying about the towers of Lusignan indicates some trial is about to befall the family.

Many scholars over the years have hunted for parallels between the events and people in *Méluſine* and the documented history of Poitou and the Lusignan family, as if the historical record could explain why a mythical, half-serpent fairy-woman should come to be associated with a fairly prominent and powerful medieval family.³¹ The history of the Lusignans already reads like a romance,

³⁰ Donald 15.

³¹ See, in particular, Baudot’s historical study concerning *Méluſine*, published in 1900.

full of dramatic events and colorful characters. In fact, the sons of Melusine much resemble the adventurous progeny of Hugh VIII (c. 1125-1171), of whom it was popularly said that he married a Saracen princess (though in reality he married a Christian noblewoman).³² Hugh IX enlarged the family holdings by marrying an heiress of La Marche; his brothers Guy and Amaury served as kings of Jerusalem and Cyprus, while Geoffrey fought in the Second Crusade and participated in a series of revolts against the Plantagenet king Henry II of England and Henry's heir, Richard I.³³ The only character in the Melusine story who actually appears in the historical record is the notorious son of the crusading Geoffrey de Lusignan, Geoffrey the Great Tooth, whose depredations against the monastery at Maillezais are a matter of recorded fact.³⁴

Certain readers have been keen to base the function of the Melusine story on the kernel of this event. Robert Nolan proposes that "a lamia story was attached to the family at some point" to specifically explain why Geoffroy au Grant Dent, who looms large throughout the romance, burns down the monastery while his brother Fromont is inside; this act is both, in Nolan's theory, the central event of the story and the spur for its creation. Says Nolan, "nearly a legend himself by the fourteenth century, Geoffroy is the logical figure for the inception of any myth linked to the Lusignan dynasty. The myth need not have

³² Ostoya mentions this legendary Saracen princess in "The Mirror of Lusignan" 22. The replacement of Hugh's Christian wife with a Saracen princess in the folklore surrounding him resembles the process of Othering that eventually leads to the effacement of a real Lusignan matron in the literary history by the powerful and potentially destructive lamia Melusine. The supernatural mother also elevates Geoffrey to a romance figure like Bevis of Hampton or a real-life legend like Richard I, who was said to encourage the gossip that he had a demon woman in his heritage. Banks and Binns, the modern editors of Gervase, call this story a "family legend of the Plantagenets," alluded to in Gerald of Wales's *De Principis instructione* iii.27 (Gervase 664). Warren, in *King John*, names this Angevin ancestress as Melusine, who, in a story much like those in Map and Gervase as discussed below, married an early count of Anjou (2-3).

³³ Nolan, *Introduction*, 89; Painter 41-2. John I further angered the Lusignans when he married Isabella of Angoulême, who had been betrothed to Hugh X.

³⁴ Nolan, *Introduction*, 151.

been embodied in a narrative at its very beginning, but was simply an attempt to come to terms with an inexplicable act of violence."³⁵

Alternatively, the Lusignan claim of ancestry from a supernatural creature reads, according to Matthew Morris, as an overt social and political move to gain prestige and enhance the family's reputation, expressing "a desire on the part of the rulers of Lusignan to valorize their secular power through a link with the supernatural."³⁶ The myth of a supernatural ancestor puts the Lusignans in the literary company of other powerful figures such as Godfrey de Bouillon, Richard the Lion-Hearted, and Alexander the Great, whose medieval narratives all perpetuated the long-standing tradition in which, as Morris says, "myths of supernatural birth have served to explain the superiority of heroic and illustrious men."³⁷ Though seemingly in agreement, Nolan's theory that the Melusine connection explains an act of evil offers a quite different approach to the romance than does Morris's assumption that a supernatural ancestor enhances a family's prestige by explaining the achievements of its remarkable offspring. Neither critic proceeds to the observation that in both cases the powers of the son are attributed not to a prestigious father but rather to a supernatural mother.

³⁵ Nolan, "Origin," 200. De La Mure, in his *Histoire des ducs de Bourbon et des comtes de Forez* (1675), says Geoffrey burned down the monastery in 1232, though Skeat objects to this date and would place the event earlier (243). According to Jeremie Babinet, Geoffrey had been harrasing the monastery from 1225 to 1232 (*Mélsuine, Geoffroy à la Grand Dent, légendes poitevines* [Paris, 1847], 83-86; cited in Nolan, "Origin of the Romance of Melusine," 200). Painter observes a long history of "quarrels between the lords of Lusignan and their ecclesiastical neighbors," including a period between 1178-182 when "the castellany of Lusignan was under interdict because of its lord's offences," though Painter doesn't know what those offenses were and thinks Hugh IX was the likely culprit (38, 42). Donald's notes contain a translation of a letter from Geoffrey the Great Tooth, dated 1232, in which he declares he has satisfied the Abbot of Absie's claims for damages and affirms his intent to travel to Rome; the letter promises restitution for the "losses and injuries that I and my father have caused to the Abbey of Absie" (385; taken from Antoine-René-Hyacinthe Thibaudau's *Abrégé de l'histoire su Poitou*, [France, 1889]). Donald says Geoffrey met Pope Gregory XI in 1233.

³⁶ Morris 32.

³⁷ Morris 30; Nolan, "Origin," 199.

The origins of Melusine herself are more obscure and much debated. Almost every scholar who approaches the story has an independent theory explaining Melusine's genesis, especially the etymology of her unusual name. Most of the theories identify her as a figure already known through local oral traditions at the time of, if not long before, Jean d'Arras's writing. Fairies surface throughout Celtic and Germanic folklore, and the Celtic *fée*—beautiful, powerful, amoral, and usually connected with some taboo or *geis*—gradually acquired the prophetic and destiny-controlling aspects of the Latin Parcae or Fates when she appeared in popular romances in and after the twelfth-century, following the fashion set by Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France.³⁸ Some researchers give Melusine a pedigree with her roots not in literature but in folklore or “ancient pagan myths” regarding a Potevin naiad who belongs to the fountain where she resides and whose benevolence is typical of her kind.³⁹ As Jakob Grimm noted, Melusine's half-serpent form shares attributes with the sirens and mermaids of several continental mythologies, while the motif of the inflexible taboo—as well as her banshee aspect, the howling female voice whose appearance marks a death—is popular in Celtic lore.⁴⁰ Likewise, Melusine's generosity and fertility have suggested links with a pre-Christian Gallo-Roman goddess native to the Lusignan area, *la mère Lusine*.⁴¹ Some see her shape-shifting powers, like those of

³⁸ Laurence Harf-Lancner makes this connection in Fenster 133-151.

³⁹ Hartland joins the tradition of critics who think that the popular legend came to Jean d'Arras's hand as he was writing, drawn from “Celtic or pre-Celtic” material originating in Northumberland or Scotland, where the opening scene of the story is set (190-192). Hartland suggests Jean might have learned the story through the Earl of Salisbury, whom he mentions in his prologue as providing him with material (Vincensini 110-112; Donald 1; Hartland 190).

⁴⁰ Grimm referenced in Nolan, *Introduction*, 58, and Baring-Gould 488; Baring-Gould elaborates on the banshee connection in 488-493. He poses the interesting theory that the name Melusine derived from the Melissae, female priestesses devoted to Demeter, whose practices might have been brought to Gaul by Greek colonists at Marseilles (499).

⁴¹ Léo Desaivre offers the theory that a native water-spirit acquired the name of *Mater Lucinia* or *la mère Lusine* in honor of a Roman general who conquered or founded a nearby town.

the swan-maiden and other tales featuring a return to an animal figure, as a persistence of totemistic beliefs in metempsychosis or the transmigration of souls.⁴² Such efforts to explain Melusine in mythical terms usually limit her interpretations to that of a folklore motif or recurring archetype. The romance becomes in this view simply another iteration of an overarching myth or story pattern. Like the historical-parallel hunting, such an approach easily condenses the specific detail of her tale and her implications as an individual character, just as the character of Melusine herself replaces a real, historical woman in the genealogy of the Lusignan family.⁴³

Nolan argues that the literary version of the Melusine story took shape around 1350, when an enterprising author combined local lore naming the legendary fairy Melusine as a mythic ancestor of the Lusignan family with the time-honored folkloric motif of the mortal man and the supernatural lover who enforces a mysterious condition or taboo on their union.⁴⁴ Stories where the supernatural mistress takes on a serpentine form had already appeared in such

⁴² Josef Kohler makes the latter claim in *Der ursprung der Melusinensage*.

⁴³ It is worth mentioning the other theories that have been posed concerning the provenance of the Melusine story. Jeremie Babinent suggests the story was borrowed from the Near East, when the Roman army imported Scythian soldiers into Gaul to fight the Visigoths (see n.35). August Coynault finds the Second Crusade a more likely era for the myth's origin, since Hugh VIII of Lusignan and his redoubtable sons played a part in the wars (Nolan, *Introduction*, 53-62). Karl Heisig suggests that the story came wholesale from Cyprus following the visit of Peter I, a member of the Lusignan clan and then king of Cyprus, who made a tour of Europe between 1361 and 1364; the story originated, in his theory, among Syrians living on Cyprus and was conveyed to a court poet in Poitou by one of Peter's vassals (180). Nolan offers a summary of Heisig's argument in "Evidence for an Early Missing Version," 58. If one agrees with Heisig's theory, then the unique name of this fairy ancestress might give credit to real members of the genealogy. Two royal women of the Lusignan family bore the name Mélisende: one was the queen of Jerusalem from 1131 to 1153 and another was the daughter of Almaric II of Cyprus and wife of Bohemund IV of Antioch. The real, historical mother of Geoffrey au Grant Dent, as it happens, was named Eustaches Chabot (Nolan, *Introduction*, 94). Léopold Favre, in his introduction to F. Nodot's edition of Jean d'Arras, *Histoire de Melusine, princesse de Lusignan* (France, 1876), suggests the name Mélusine pays tribute to a particularly capable chatelaine of Lusignan Castle.

⁴⁴ Nolan's argument takes its fullest form in "Origin," 199-201.

authoritative works as Gervase of Tilbury's *Otia Imperialia*, Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum Naturale*, and Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialium*.⁴⁵ Rejecting the *mère + Lusignan* etymology, Nolan thinks Melusine's name derives from the Breton word *mellysowen*, meaning half-snake, which highlights her serpentine qualities rather than her fairy nature.⁴⁶ Nolan is invested in reading Melusine as having an obvious demonic aspect, in line with the inimical aspect of other half-serpent fairy women appearing in twelfth-century Latin story collections.

These multiple theories of Melusine's origins as character and story suggest that Melusine is a powerful figure because she represents an earlier goddess-type figure, mythologizes a historical woman, or is simply invented to explain the careers of her powerful sons. Any of these reasons would provide for an entertaining story of the type which English audiences, given the print record, enjoyed, perhaps without knowing or caring about the origins of either the story or its central character. Yet none of these theories satisfactorily explain why Nolan should find Melusine a demonic figure, or what Holme intends by classifying Melusine as a "mystical nymph" in the company of Tamora, Guinevere, and Bathsheba, women who in the broader literary tradition are attributed with an influence less than benign. The demonic associations certainly might explain why English audiences did not make a favorite of the romance. To further understand the associations which Melusine might have figured for early modern English audiences, it is necessary to examine the imagery of other hybrid, shape-shifting women in art and literature to find what they suggest about how contemporary readers encountered Melusine.

⁴⁵ The *Otia Imperialia* abounds with lamia figures, and several are cited in Jean d'Arras's introduction; Gervase specifically recounts the tale of Raimundus and his serpentine fairy mistress (of more below). A similar fate befalls Herreno cum Dentibus in Map's *De Nugis Curialium*, where the hero is encouraged to spy on his mysterious wife by his jealous mother.

⁴⁶ "Origin" 201; *Introduction* 67.

Melusine's Analogues in Art and Myth

The serpent woman has at least as ancient a pedigree in mythology and folklore as does the fairy, and a growing strand of Melusine criticism dwells less on her fairy lineage and more on her serpent associations. In particular, Gillian Alban and others identify Melusine as an avatar of a primitive "serpent goddess," the archetypal figure of a half-snake, all-powerful female deity who appears in the religious pantheons of Vedic India, Mesopotamia, the Near East, and early Mediterranean civilizations including the Minoans and Greeks.⁴⁷ Melusine's water-loving form might as equally be associated with the imagery of a fish; as Sabine Baring-Gould noted in his research on the myth of Melusine, semi-piscine figures appear in the mythologies of the Sumerian, Semitic, and ancient Greek peoples as well as in mythologies belonging to Mexican, Peruvian, and North American Indian cultures. Critics from Jacques le Goff to Jean Markale agree that Melusine's serpent form marks her as a revenant of a primitive goddess,⁴⁸ with the attendant powers of immortality, fertility, enormous creativity, and dangerous temptation. Bettina Knapp argues that Melusine's hold on the imagination stems from this figure's status as a Jungian archetype embedded in a cultural collective unconscious.⁴⁹

The half-serpent female form, it has been argued, functions as a symbol of female disempowerment. Building on the research conducted by Marija Gimbutas on the worship of a Great Goddess in prehistoric Europe who was often depicted with ophidian imagery, later writers like Alban have used her

⁴⁷ See Alban, *Melusine the Serpent Goddess*, chapter 1.

⁴⁸ Le Goff notes this provenance in his preface to the modern French translation of d'Arras's *Mélusine*, by Michèle Perret; he places Melusine within a trajectory of ancient Celtic and Indo-European folklore concerned with fertility goddesses and fecund mothers who often are adopted as the patronesses of noble families (see 7 and 9). Markale takes up the idea in his *Mélusine*; see also Lecouteux's *Mélusine* and Clier-Colombani, *La Fée Mélusine*.

⁴⁹ Knapp 2-21.

evidence to argue that the vilification of serpents in so many religious traditions reflects a patriarchal agenda to discredit the female goddess and, in her place, authorize the rule of a father-god.⁵⁰ In these readings, Melusine's story is not simply an imagined medieval history designed to legitimize and enhance the political power of a socially prominent family but the medieval version of a prehistoric story that recounts the subjugation of female autonomy to systems of authority that privilege the male.⁵¹

Medieval iconographers, who frequently depicted the serpent-woman in manuscript illuminations and ecclesiastical architecture, collaborate in the effort to use animal imagery to metaphorize female power and influence. Medieval artists often interchange the serpent-woman or mermaid and her close cousin the bird-woman or siren, sometimes even combining the two as in the relief of the "transitional mermaid, with fish-tail, claws, and feathers" which Sir Arthur Waugh observed on a misericord in Carlisle Cathedral.⁵² Whether or not their audiences read them as icons of female power subjugated by patriarchal tyranny, half-animal women in medieval art and iconography unambiguously signaled danger, a danger best explicated in medieval bestiaries, whose *raison d'être* is to seek out the moral readings of natural phenomena. For example, Guillaume le Clerc, compiling his *Bestiary* around 1210, describes the Siren, whose lower half

⁵⁰ Linda Foubister's *Goddess in the Grass* presents a catalogue of serpentine mythology that embraces a range of global and historical cultures so broad as to become almost meaningless. She argues that the continued association of women and snakes are the vestiges of a prehistoric, seemingly universal Serpent Goddess. Miriam Dexter's edition of *The Living Goddess* (University of California Press, 1999) usefully distills Gimbutas's work on goddess worship in Old Europe. The argument, central to Foubister's book, that patriarchal societies valorized their project of subjugating women by creating myths about the heroic slaying of a female serpent-monster builds on the larger patriarchal agenda outlined in works such as Merlin Stone's *When God was a Woman* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978) and Riane Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

⁵¹ Robert Graves also makes this argument in *The White Goddess* (1948).

⁵² Waugh 77.

is either fish or bird, as an allegory for the glammers and vices of the world, which the devil uses to entice and entangle unsuspecting mortals just as the siren brings unwary mariners to ruin with her song.⁵³ Such an association suggests that, in the clerical media at least, the human-animal hybrid body vilified both powerful women and erotic love by portraying them as temptations to evil.

The Bodleian *Bestiary*, dating to the middle of the thirteenth century, curiously complicates what otherwise might be taken as a conventional connection between alluring women and moral danger. This work describes Sirens as *men* to the navel, and birds in “their lower parts down to their feet.” As soon as they lull mariners to sleep with their song:

the sirens attack them and devour their flesh, and so the lure of their voices brings ignorant and imprudent men to their death. In the same way all those who delight in the pomp and vanity and delights of this world, and lose the vigour of their minds by listening to comedies, tragedies, and various musical melodies, will suddenly become the prey of their enemies.⁵⁴

T.H. White, discussing the siren in his own *Book of Beasts*, suggests a very non-gendered origin for this metaphor; he thinks the sirens of Homer’s *Odyssey* represents the danger that sailors “who hear the magic music of the nightingale along the shores of the Mediterranean are liable to approach the rocks too closely and to get wrecked.”⁵⁵ Homer’s anthropomorphizing of a natural threat aligns with the allegorical tendencies of the medieval mind which, according to White, “believed that everything meant something.”⁵⁶

⁵³ Cited in Waugh 77-78, who consults *The Bestiary of Guillaume le Clerc* translated by George C. Druce (Ashford: Invicta Press, 1936). Guillaume’s interpretation builds on a long history of classifying sirens as maliciously tempting creatures, beginning with Homer’s sirens in the *Odyssey* and continuing with the Greek *Physiologus* of the second or third century, translated into Latin ca. 400. The sixth-century *Liber Monstrorum* adds the detail of their fish-like tails, an idea which quickly found its way into artistic representations (Nolan, “Origin,” 194).

⁵⁴ Barber 150-151, based on the Latin manuscript Oxford Bodleian Library MS 764.

⁵⁵ White 134-5 for his entry on sirens and 244ff for his explication.

⁵⁶ White 244.

The Bodleian bestiary also abounds in the dangerous implications of the ophidian. One entry depicts the jaculus, “a flying serpent, mentioned by Lucan [Pharsalia ix.720]. They perch in trees and when their prey approaches, they throw themselves down on it and kill it; so they are called *iaculi*, or ‘throwing-snakes’.”⁵⁷ The MS likewise describes the dragon as the largest of all serpents and indeed all animals, which lives in caves, kills with its tail, and favors warm climates such as Ethiopia and India.⁵⁸ This bestiary also spends time discussing the idrus or hydra, a many-headed water-snake and the enemy of Christ. The sheer variety suggests that serpents offered a range of allegorical interpretations useful for purposes of moral edification. While providing a range of visual images that may provide a background for narrative depictions of Melusine, the serpents in these texts almost always have malicious connotations, as do sirens. Given this vivid narrative and iconographic tradition, Melusine’s half-serpent or sirenic forms can hardly be taken as morally neutral by readers of the romance.

Yet the medieval bestiaries also suggest something about the purpose of medieval story and the ways it encoded meaning. The point of the imagery, in the description of a hyena or snake, is the moral significance which the image represents. Spiritual dangers derive from and are signified in these aspects of the natural world. Markers between the natural and fantastic are not an issue; a dragon is different from a donkey or cow only in its habitat and behaviors, and what these signal for the moral allegory of Christian life and belief. A conjoined human-animal body like that of the Siren is monstrous not in itself—so the matter-of-fact descriptions suggest—but is made so by its habits and qualities.

In a similar fashion, mermaids seem threatening not solely because they are a dangerous admixture of woman and fish but because, when not lethal, they

⁵⁷ Barber 192.

⁵⁸ Barber 183.

are vain of their persons and callous of human life.⁵⁹ Though not a conventional subject of the bestiaries, mermaids appear frequently in manuscript illuminations and other medieval art. As with the devaluation of the serpent-woman form observed earlier, John S. Miletich notes a changing valence of the semi-piscine female in the history of literature and mermaid myth. He argues that the mermaid uses the image of the fish—a creature with magical, protective properties in several early mythologies—and the life-giving properties of water to signify woman's reproductive abilities, though he argues that, over time, the fertility connection gained less emphasis in mermaid stories than did a moral weight emphasizing "the dangers of courtship, mating, and erotic love."⁶⁰ Richard Kohl identifies the medieval association of serpent-women and danger in what he names the "Melusinenmotiv," the half-serpent woman in medieval visual art who holds her two tails in either hand, a clear parallel to the religious images of Luxuria or Lust holding a snake in each hand.⁶¹ Likewise the mermaid holding a fish presents what Waugh calls "an Awful Warning to the Laity,"⁶² as the fish represents the Christian soul trapped in the coils of temptation.

According to this evidence, mermaids, sirens, and indeed all things serpentine hold unpleasant associations for the Christian believer. Whether or not this recurring motif cooperates with a conscious clerical project to undermine feminine authority or allure, the work of Alban, Miletich, Waugh, and others rests on the assumption that these visual images of half-human women, in art or narrative, would have called up an explicit set of moral dangers for the medieval audience. But we might note the mobility of the image itself—its ability to

⁵⁹ Waugh notes the vanity of mermaids on 77, but the interpretation is ubiquitous, especially since many illuminations show her holding a comb or mirror.

⁶⁰ Miletich 158.

⁶¹ Discussed in Nolan, "Origin," 194.

⁶² Kohl, "Das Melusinenmotiv," *Niederdeutsche Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* (11: 185-200), cited in Nolan, "Origin," 194. For Waugh see "Merfolk" 77.

transfer from myth to visual icon, and to morph from piscine to ophidian figure—which suggests a fluidity rather than rigidity of interpretations, much like the “inherently slippery” nature attributed to the medieval romance.⁶³ Even while her sources in history and myth joined the female body with the serpent form to represent the dangers of feminine influence, and her analogues in visual art and clerical literature suggested a more overt danger of temptation, it may yet be that Melusine’s hybrid and shape-shifting body resisted efforts to impose any single or coherent meaning. This ability to function as signifier and defy enclosure marks the monster, and Melusine’s resultant moral indeterminacy might be one reason English readers showed little interest in the romance.

The unpleasant associations of her form aside, a possible incongruence of meaning is illustrated on the literary register in two late twelfth-century and early thirteenth-century story collections. The very popularity of these collections and their adaptability to vernacular literature argues again for a mobility of both image and interpretation. The story of Henno cum Dentibus in Map’s *De Nugis Curialium* provides a few salient details which later romance authors enlarged upon, as we shall see. Map’s tale relates how the hero (identified by his large teeth) “found a most lovely girl in a shady wood at noonday near the brink of the shore of Normandy. She was seated alone, clad in royal silks, and was weeping silently in suppliant attitude—the fairest of things was she, and even the fairer for her tears.”⁶⁴ The lady says she was shipwrecked on her way to marry the king of France. Seizing his good fortune, Henno brings the lady home, marries her, “and she bore him beautiful children” in addition to aiding the poor and assiduously attending church with Henno’s mother. In time the mother notices that the wife always leaves the church before the consecration

⁶³ Saunders, *Companion to Romance*, 1.

⁶⁴ Book iv.9; 346-49 in James’ translation of Map revised by Brooke and Mynors.

of the host; curious, she spies on the dame one morning and sees the lady “enter a bath and become, instead of a most beautiful woman, a dragon.” The dutiful mother informs her son, and they call up priests to sprinkle with holy water both the wife and her maid, whereupon “[w]ith a sudden leap they dashed through the roof, and with loud shrieks left the shelter they had haunted so long.”⁶⁵

Exemplum-fashion, Map appends a moral suggesting that if unnatural creatures can ascend in such fashion, one cannot doubt Christ’s ascension. But he also ends the narrative by fixing it in near historical time and commenting that, at the time of writing, the lady’s “numerous progeny” were “yet living.”⁶⁶

Map attaches a clear value judgment to his heroine, calling her “that brilliant pestilence” [nobilem illam pestilenciam] and one of those “abominable creatures” [pessimis creaturis]. But he relies for narrative excitement on the danger and fascination inherent in the situation of a noble man marrying an attractive stranger who turns out to have peculiar habits, and his final moral regarding the Ascension fails to sufficiently fit or explain the narrative details of the story. Elizabeth Allen in her recent study on exemplarity in later Middle English literature suggests that such moments when “exemplary narratives adduce problematic morals, contradict themselves, or simply exceed the parameters of a stated moral” call upon the audience to perform the interpretative work of deducting a general truth from the particular details, participating in an ongoing process of evolving moral discernment, and learning to relate this general truth to the particularities of a far different situation.⁶⁷ In essence, Allen identifies an arena outlined by the formal literary aspects of the tale wherein meaning is always constructed and mediated by the reader, making

⁶⁵ Map 349.

⁶⁶ Map 349.

⁶⁷ Allen 6-18.

the exemplary narrative a mode at once creative and unstable. If such is the case, then Map's tale of Henno cum Dentibus not only contributes a set of identifiers of the dangerous and supernatural wife to audience recognition but also engages audiences in an act of moral discrimination or judgment (what Allen considers *phronesis*), which essentially yields their own individual interpretation. Thus the dragon-lady of Map's story does not simply embody or deliver a stated doctrine or general truth but instead invites audiences to supply her meaning.

A similar possibility of interpretation can be discovered in stories about half-fairy or half-serpent wives in Gervase of Tilbury's *Otia Imperialia* who much resemble the romance Melusine. Gervase tells a story similar to Henno's in *Otia Imperialia* iii.57, in which the lady of the castle of L'Éparvier has the same habit of leaving the church in the middle of mass. One day, her husband restrains her from leaving, and as the priest speaks the words of consecration, "the lady was carried off by a diabolical spirit and flew away, taking part of the chapel with her."⁶⁸ The lesson Gervase finds in this is that the Emperor, to whom the work is addressed, "should take instruction, learning to favour people who are devoted to the divine sacraments."⁶⁹ Gervase's (rather brief) account is spare on details, such as the lady's association with the diabolical spirit that transports her away when she witnesses the Eucharist.

All of these analogues, I argue, suggest that complexity, and not moral reductiveness, accompanies the story of Melusine, and medieval audiences would have recognized that fact as easily as modern readers do. The French romance is lauded by critics for its complex, intricate scope and multilayered agenda, which tracks not just what Sara Sturm-Maddox calls "Jean d'Arras's avowed project, the glorification of the noble house of Lusignan," but also

⁶⁸ Gervase 665.

⁶⁹ Gervase 665.

engages in two separate narrative programs, one that follows Raymondin's destiny and the other that concerns itself with Melusine's.⁷⁰ Melusine is herself slippery in her polycorporality.⁷¹ She transforms from a beautiful half-fairy nymph to a half-serpent dynastic mother and regal chatelaine to a perpetually damned, banshee-dragonlike creature doomed to prophesize the changing fortunes and inevitable decay of the legacy that she began. Of course, one could argue that the slippage between bird and fish forms for portraying the Siren do not contravene this image's primary reading as an allegory of temptation. But I suspect that for medieval English audiences, Melusine's many forms lent her a dubious ambiguity and made her necessarily problematic. While familiarity with medieval bestiaries and the equivalent analogies and allegories used in sermons, instructional literature, and exemplary narrative would have trained medieval audiences to examine the details, supply their own knowledge, and forestall making conclusions until the implications of Melusine's behaviors and qualities became clear, it was the existence of the categories, and their understood implications, that made any sort of coherent interpretation possible. Thus I propose that her category-crossing form made Melusine threatening to English readers and explains the lack of interest in her story. More than a heritage of clerical mistrust of serpent-like or supernatural creatures, Melusine's monstrous polycorporeality and her inability to belong in one world or represent a single moral meaning might suggest reasons why the printed version of her story never became popular.

As supporting evidence, one might cite the only other appearance of an aerially mobile fairy wife in Middle English romance: the mysterious wife of Henry II in *Richard Coer de Lyon*, whom he encounters upon the sea, weds and

⁷⁰ Sturm-Maddox 28.

⁷¹ I borrow the term from Brownlee 77.

impregnates, and who transforms into a flying creature and rockets through the roof when exposed to the Eucharist.⁷² While the fairy wife in *Richard* gives her name as Cassodorien, modern readers instantly recognize that she replaces—or perhaps represents—Eleanor of Aquitaine, a medieval celebrity in her own right and a woman whose well-documented life makes certain romances look tame. That a fairy mistress could come along and erase Eleanor, a woman of no little influence, just as a fairy lover replaces the real matriarch of the Lusignan genealogy suggests that there is something specific about a powerful, able woman that invites a comparison with or finds apt description in this kind of serpentine monstrosity. It also suggests that this move of exaggerating or allegorizing character is one specific to the romance and its mode of using fictionality for purposes of social interrogation. Perhaps the hybrid body explains that an efficient, real-world woman accomplishes what she does through access to supernatural resources. Alternatively, the lamia form offers the not-so-subtle suggestion that powerful women are in themselves monstrous.

Woman, Monster, Evil

There have been two main themes to the interpretations of the story suggested by Melusine's possible origins and analogues: that she is a legendary or mythological female figure invoked to explain the rise and fall of a family's fortunes, or that she is a lamia/siren/mermaid figure who signals the moral dangers of female temptation and unknowability. A third implication, that offered by the romance mode itself, is that Melusine's status as a not-quite-human entity reflects the way that powerful and influential medieval women

⁷² Brunner's edition of *Richard* recounts the event in ll. 197-234 (90-91). Brunner's text doesn't specifically mention a serpent-like transformation but merely remarks: "Out of the rofe she gan her dyght, / Openly before all theyr syght" (ll. 229-230).

were perceived, keeping in line with the standard veins of medieval misogyny discussed in the introduction. Melusine's monstrosity may simply be a fictional example of medieval misogyny at work, a rehearsal of commonly-held beliefs that put women in a firmly inferior place to men. Such anti-woman sentiments are never given overt expression in *Melusine*, but they provide a background against which Melusine's agency should be read.

Her mother's ruling, for instance, that Melusine can only become human through matrimony quite explicitly suggests that heterosexual marriage is the "natural" destiny for a female—not just desired, but required to achieve full humanity.⁷³ In all her choices as a wife and mother, Melusine's adheres to a set of ethics combining Judeo-Christian and chivalric values that typically benefit what Susan Crane calls the feudal baronial class and reinforces a system of patriarchy in the terms in which Sarah Kay envisions it, as a society that rests on the "simultaneous political and symbolic superiority, not just of fathers, but of senior males."⁷⁴ These values, systems, and beliefs all serve to reinforce and to perpetuate a social fabric highly asymmetrical in the opportunities it allows its various class and gender groups, especially when it concerns opportunities for political leadership or influence, land ownership, and inheritance. Additionally, the fact that both Eleanor and Melusine are portrayed with a similar metaphorical trope suggests that there is something explanatory not just in the general figure of female monstrosity but in its specifics: a creature with an everyday woman-like form hiding a malignant half-serpent nature.

⁷³ The physical and moral insufficiency of woman is a cherished standard of medieval European philosophy, but Pressyne's ruling may have as its background the accepted theological argument, dating back through St. Augustine to St. Paul, that while man alone can fully figure the image of God, woman can only do so when joined to man. E. Ann Matter offers a very lucid discussion of this idea in "The Undebated Debate" in Fenster and Lees 41-44.

⁷⁴ Crane, *Insular Romance*; Kay 81. See also Bennett's definition of patriarchy in *History Matters*.

In another sense, Melusine's monstrosity might figure the current of clerical theology and medieval physiology that treats woman as a malformed male, made of lesser substance. As discussed in the introduction to this study, Christian philosophy, incorporating earlier elements of Aristotelian and Platonic thought, tended to split gender into dichotomous terms that associated the spirit and rationality with the male, the corporeal and sense perception—therefore sensuality and its attendant dangers of appetite and material corruption—to the female. Melusine's Otherness—her femaleness, already a type of monstrosity—finds representation in her lamia form. If monsters are automatically read as dangerous, then in the vein of thought that regards all women as somehow monstrous, those in positions of power and influence are exponentially more dangerous, as they have the resources and abilities to build castles and found dynasties, exert authority over their vassals and workmen, own and modify the landscape, control wealth, and direct inheritance. Most perilous of all, their child-bearing abilities make it possible to imprint a whole lineage with their monstrosity—an idea expressed in the odd birthmarks or “mother marks” that eight of Melusine's ten sons bear.

Just as medieval tradition is never univocal in its ruling about what good attends the state of womanhood, however, so does the medieval tradition never unambiguously state that monsters are entirely evil. Part of the semantic difficulty stems from the philosophical viewpoint of medieval Christian theology discussed in the introduction, for which St. Augustine of Hippo serves as an oft-cited authority: if there is truly an omnipotent and omniscient Creator responsible for the order of the universe, then all things within that order are encompassed, authorized, permitted, or at the very least observed by God. Not only does all of Creation, through this reasoning, somehow belong to God, but if a beneficent divinity allows aberrant creatures to exist, then it must be to some

good purpose. Throughout her story Melusine insists that, “I am of god, and my byleue is / as a Catholique byleue oughte for to be.”⁷⁵ Such a claim neutralizes any possible objections that she has associations with the diabolic and also self-authorizes her placement, though a not-fully-human creature, within the divine order. Her claim also reads as directly oppositional to the evil associations generally given mermaids or other serpent-like creatures in the examples above.

This declaration dramatically troubles the standard dichotomies of human-supernatural, animal-monster, Christian-demon, blurring the distinctions of the customary physical—and moral—boundaries between human, animal, supernatural, and divine that the critics usually read as familiar and natural assumptions for the romance’s medieval audience. This blurring of boundaries—the work of the monster—lies behind Nolan’s conviction that Melusine’s true and essential nature is a demonic one. But Nolan’s argument overlooks Augustine’s claim that monsters formed one of the many expressions of God’s infinite creativity and wisdom, demonstrations of “almighty power.”⁷⁶ Nolan reads the case of animal-human amalgamations as threatening the divine order because they destabilize the human world. To dismiss Melusine as figuring a demonic influence, however, overlooks her repeated claims within the narrative, especially when she first meets Raymondin and alarms him with her prophetic powers, that she is “de par Dieu.”⁷⁷

Certain later medieval authors debate whether a non-human creature is necessarily a demonic evil-doer. Paracelsus (1493-1541), the German-Swiss physician who made a study of medicine as well as alchemy, observes in his

⁷⁵ Donald 31.

⁷⁶ Bildhauer and Mills interpreting Augustine on 14.

⁷⁷ In fact she declares to him: “je suiz, apréz Dieu, celle qui te puet plus aidier et avancier” and assures him: “Et saiches que je sçay bien que tu cuides que ce soit fantosme ou euvre dyabolique de mon fait et de mes paroles, mais je te certiffie que je suiz de par Dieu et croy en tout quanque vraye catholique doit croire” (Vincensini 164). See below for the English author’s translation.

study on supernatural beings and elemental spirits, *Liber de Nymphis, Sylphis, Pygmaeis et Salamandris*, that all of these creatures are designed by God and are revealed “das alles dem Menschen zu einem Erkennen göttlicher Werke [all to bring men to a knowledge of godlike works].”⁷⁸ Nolan sums up Paracelsus’ definition in this manner:

Melusines are the daughters of kings who are tormented because of their sins. Satan seized them and transformed them into phantoms, evil spirits, horrible ghosts, and frightful monsters. They live without a rational mind in a fantastic body, which is formed from the elements, to which they will return at the Last Judgment unless they marry a mortal being. Through this union they can die a natural death, since they live a normal life in their marriage. It is believed that these phantoms inhabit deserts, forests, ruins and tombs, empty vaults, and the edge of the sea.⁷⁹

Nolan attributes to these water spirits an evil intention that the original text does not suggest; Paracelsus in fact separates melusines, as water spirits, from other beings he terms *monstra*, these including giants, sirens, and dwarfs. For Paracelsus, elemental beings like melusines are born without a soul, but are able to acquire one through marriage to a human male, and to give birth to ensouled offspring in this union.⁸⁰ Thus these women desire mortal husbands because all creatures desire salvation.⁸¹ Paracelsus concludes that such beings are not devils (though they can, like humans, be possessed) and their marriages are valid. He gives the example of a nobleman, von Staufenberg, who married such a nymph; when he repudiated her as a devil and attempted to marry again, he died within

⁷⁸ Paracelsus 479-480; translation mine.

⁷⁹ Nolan, “The Origin of the Romance of Melusine,” 192-3.

⁸⁰ “Nun folgt aus dem, daß eine Wasserfrau einen Mann aus Adam nimmt und hält mit ihm Haus, und gebiert. Von den Kindern wisset, daß soche Geburt dem Manne nachschlägt; darum daß der Vater ein Mensch aus adam ist, darum wird dem Kind eine Seel eingegossen und es wird gleich einem rechten Menschen, der eine Seel hat und das Ewige. Nun aber weiter . . . auch solche Frauen eine Seel empfangen, wenn sie vermählt werden, so daß sie wie andere Frauen vor Gott und durch Gott erlöst sind” (480).

⁸¹ Temkin et. al. 219.

days. Paracelsus uses this as a parable that men ought to keep their promises, and makes the larger point that God allows the elemental beings to interact with humans in order to ensure man's humility. In short, Paracelsus's theological speculations seem to borrow as well as contribute to existing folklore.

The fairy is likewise a liminal though not unproblematic figure for Middle English romance; Helen Cooper in *The English Romance in Time* describes Melusine not as a demonic or diabolic spirit but simply as an entity outside of and alien to the chain of being. Cooper suggests that, at least for narrative purposes, fairies were accepted as a fundamentally unassimilable Other to the mortal world, and the "place occupied by fairies was, therefore, most often defined simply as *somewhere else*: a fifth world to set beside Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, and middle-earth."⁸² "Fairies," says she, "occupy that dangerous borderland that cannot be controlled by human will and is not susceptible to the normal operations of prayer."⁸³ Suggesting that the seriousness of their reception among the romance audience could be somewhat elastic ("the fairies of romance did not require belief, but they probably needed rather less suspension of disbelief"), Cooper posits that fairies signal the entrance into a liminal, or non-rational, world where the divine order simply does not apply.⁸⁴

Such a move abounds in narrative possibilities for confronting cultural, philosophical, and conceptual boundaries and observing their vulnerabilities at the point where a hybrid creature like Melusine crosses or corrupts them. Her fluid body demonstrates how the patriarchal order conceives women as monstrous, but at the same time, Melusine encapsulates the instabilities and contradictions in assumptions about monsters, pointing to their simultaneous

⁸² Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 179.

⁸³ Cooper 176.

⁸⁴ Cooper 174.

nature as dangerous and yet also at home within the divine order, suggesting that the assumptions about women may be equally unstable. Nevertheless, this instability of perceptions of women, monsters, and the moral consequences of dealings with the supernatural that make these stories so popular and oft-rehearsed in the twelfth through fifteenth centuries have a far different effect in the early sixteenth century where, as Melusine's career in England suggests, audiences met such narrative ambiguity concerning the agency, power, and monstrosity of women with a far chillier reception.

Introducing Melusine

With the abundance of literary, theological, and visual references available to them, Melusine's Middle English audience could have read her in several ways: as a diabolical demon-woman; a conventionally vain, manipulative, man-entrapping, possibly soul-sucking mermaid-siren figure; a folkloric figure on a quest for a human soul; or, at best, a neutral, amoral fairy mistress along the lines of Sir Launfal's invisible lover or Thomas of Erceldoune's elf-queen. It thus becomes salient to note the English translator's repeated stress on his heroine's qualities as a good Christian. His move hints at an intent to sanitize Melusine's demonic associations and to work against the conventional readings, suggested by clerical literature and art, that mermaid or lamia figures represent moral temptation. The translator tries to fix a place for his slippery Melusine by countering the morally ambivalent implications of her monster form and instead securing her firmly in the Christian world order. He launches this agenda most energetically during the scene of Melusine's first meeting with Raymondin, wherein Raymondin is understandably shocked when Melusine reveals her full knowledge of his identity and, more damningly, his late misadventure wherein he accidentally murdered his uncle, the earl of Poitiers, while hunting a boar.

Melusine aligns herself with Christianity in several ways, first when she praises Raymondin that he should invoke the name of God when making his apology to her (he passed by the fountain where she was “playing and disporting” without making any acknowledgement to her or the two ladies with her, and then later, when she comes up and takes his horse’s bridle, has to be shaken out of his dazed stupor with strong words.) She herself invokes God’s name in addressing him, surprising him with the knowledge that she knows who he is, and immediately establishes a relationship with him: “By god, fayre frend Raymondyn, ye shuld not hyde nothings fro me, [f]or I wot wel how it standeth with you,” she says; “I am she after god that may best counseylle the / and that may furthre and enhaunse the in this mortal lyf.”⁸⁵ Overtly challenging the traditional interpretations that would make her evil, exploitative, or otherwise suspicious, Melusine elevates herself in this exchange to counselor, guide, and intercessor. Moreover, the insistence on Melusine’s courtly, Christian education and intentions challenges either of the conventional associations possible at this point, that she is an evil spirit or “horrible ghost” or, in Cooper’s assessment, a liminal entity independent of human space and time.

Melusine, then, most assuredly does not portray herself as demonic or monstrous, and takes pains to ensure that Raymondin likewise dismisses the apprehension he forms when she goes on to reveal that she knows of his accidental manslaughter of his uncle the earl and also conveys the substance of the conversation that Raymondin had with his uncle preceding the boar attack, when the earl, who was skilled at astronomy, made a prediction regarding his own fate and Raymondin’s.⁸⁶ When Raymondin understandably demonstrates some dismay upon hearing how much this strange woman knows about him, she

⁸⁵ Donald 30.

⁸⁶ Donald 30.

reassures him: "And wene nor suppose thou nat that it be fauntesye or dyuels werk of me and of my wordes, [f]or I certyfye the, Raymndyn, that I am of god." If he listens to her, she promises, "it shalbe profytable to the, with the help of god and of me . . . For I shall not say nor counseille you nothing / but that good & wele shal comme thereof."⁸⁷ Not only are her sources pure, she assures Raymondin and the audience alike, but her intentions are also noble.

Melusine's insistence suggests more than that the author is trying to guide the audience's interpretation of her at this point. The repeated information about her alliance with God positions her as a type of exemplum, along the lines of the earlier lamia stories from Walter Map and Gervase. Her piety excuses her and, by extension, Jean's narrative project, which he introduces not as a romance but as a "histoire," a label upheld in the English with references to "this present historye." The narrative commences with the conventional homiletic opening that "[i]n the begynnyng of all werkes / men oughten first of alle to calle the name of the creatour of all Creatures, whiche is very & trew maister of alle thinges made & to be made"⁸⁸—a move not only echoed but approved by Melusine in her conversation with Raymondin, marking both her and the author as engaging in correct behavior that has divine authority and approval.

The first chapter heading begins with what turns out to be a false promise of immediately entering the narrative, when it announces its content as: "How Melusyne & her two sustirs shewid them to Raymondyn at the fountayne of Soyf or thurst." This heading, not present in the French editions, in fact refers to the subject matter of chapter VI, when Melusine encounters Raymondin at the said fountain while two unnamed ladies, not identified as her sisters, are with her. While the deceptive heading betrays the English translator's impatience to

⁸⁷ Donald 31.

⁸⁸ Donald 1.

commence with the story at hand, he chooses to translate in whole Jean d'Arras's skillful rhetorical survey of both classical and Christian *auctores*, substantiating his opening claim that "the Iuggements and the punysshinges of god ben as abysmes without bottom & without ryuage."⁸⁹ This reference to the bottomless, mystical capabilities of God and his additional notation that "neuer no man / but only Adam hadd parfytt knowledge of the thinges Inuysible or that may not be seen"⁹⁰ provides a figurative space for containing the contradictions he may possibly open up for his audience—no matter how prevalent or conventional their belief in fairies—with his taxing request that "the grette meruaylles that ben conteyned in this present hystory may be byleued."⁹¹ D'Arras calls upon authorities as diverse as King David, St. Paul, and Aristotle as well as Gervase of Tilbury and also refers to the long tradition of folklore concerning legendary creatures that exists in and around Poitou, thus participating in that supposedly primary premise of medieval historiography, that a story retold can only be true.⁹² The English translator duly renders this material in close parallel, thus reinforcing its supposed historicity. But, having grouped these legitimizing claims under a chapter heading that immediately begins the story, the English scribe makes this segment into a digression, a seeming afterthought, which suggests he feels a need to justify his heroine's existence before introducing her.

The narrator's rhetorical gymnastics concerning the nature of historical truth and the participation of the Creator in determining and revealing this truth reflect, in part, the need to authenticate Melusine as a Christian figure, decidedly

⁸⁹ Donald 2.

⁹⁰ Donald 3.

⁹¹ Donald 3.

⁹² Laura Barefield references this belief in opening her argument in *Gender and History in Medieval English Romance and Chronicle*, where she declares that in the Middle Ages, "'history' was considered not as some independently verifiable record of the events that actually occurred, but as an account of past events that was authoritative, based on previous accounts" (1).

not demonic nor in any way threatening to the order and authority which the author takes care to establish as structuring his narrative world, his own contemporary world, and indeed the historical world at large. The vigor of his claims might be read as progressing from the excessive into the ironic when he observes that travellers are always sighting marvels: "often whan a man hath yssued out of hys countree / [he] . . . hath seen many awounder & meruayllous thynges whiche he neuer wold haue byleued hit by here sayeng."⁹³ Even he himself, who has not traveled all that far, has seen a marvel or two, the narrator claims. The statement seems an almost unnecessary ornamentation, as the introduction then segues into a specific example of a fairy lover and an oath-breaking man in the story of Sir Robert du Chastel Roussel, of the province of Asy, a story again taken from Gervase. As our narrator recounts it, Sir Robert by adventure one day meets a fairy in a meadow, and takes her to be his wife, though she makes him promise he must never see her naked. They "were longe togider / and the knight grew & wexed propserous," until one day he catches her unclothed, upon which "the said nymphe putte her heed in to a watre and was tourned in to a serpent, whiche was neuer seen after that / And the knyght fro day to day wexed pouere and declyned from his prosperyte."⁹⁴ The narrator's personal aside serves, however, to offer the authority of eyewitness experience in support of the established accounts.

The narrator invokes this parade of authorities and examples to preface and ostensibly authenticate his subsequent story about a fairy woman who builds a castle and spawns a lineage that supposedly "shall regne for euer vnto tend of the world."⁹⁵ He appears to have some stake in convincing his audience

⁹³ Donald 5.

⁹⁴ Donald 5-6.

⁹⁵ Donald 6. The reference is curious because at the time of Jean's writing, the only realms left belonging to the Lusginans were Cyprus and Jerusalem, with a titular but not territorial claim to

that he copies the story from a “juste & true cronykle”⁹⁶—perhaps precisely to combat possible allegations that his story is false, his heroine diabolical. He uses the impossibility that men can understand the works of God to imply that fairy stories might actually be true, leaving his audience to deduce that the strange marvels of which they will hear may also be classified under the inscrutable workings of God.⁹⁷ However, Jean d’Arras’s changes to the story from Gervase also reveal a significantly different agenda.

In Gervase’s story, which appears in I.15 of the *Otia Imperialia*, the name of the knight of Chastel Roussel is not Robert but Raymond. The lady whom he weds and betrays is, notably, not named. *Melusine’s* author, in briefly recounting the story of Robert du Chastel Roussel, preserves the story’s particulars in that the taboo concerns seeing the lady naked, and when the taboo is violated, the lady immediately turns into a serpent, plunges into her bath water, and disappears.⁹⁸ However, inside the larger framework of Gervase’s chapter, the moral warning is not against commerce with supernatural creatures but against “the natural impulses of concupiscence.”⁹⁹ Gervase’s project of recounting the

Armenia. By the time of the English translation, even these claims had been lost. The translator notably makes no attempt to alter this prophecy.

⁹⁶ Donald 6.

⁹⁷ In this d’Arras might inherit something from one of his immediate inspirations; Gervase of Tilbury’s *Otia Imperialia*, itself an account of marvels that inherit from both literary and oral, folkloric traditions, takes pains to assure its audience of the veracity of its sources. Ediotrs Banks and Binns observe that Gervase’s sheer delight in his marvelous stories sometimes leaves him with the confessed goal to simply amuse his patron (Otto IV, the unfortunate German emperor to which the work was dedicated c.1215). They observe that Gervase not only participated in the increasingly literary status of story-telling in Latin works of the twelfth-century but that his work became itself “the point of departure for the great European tradition of story-literature” (lv-lvii). Gervase’s concerns about balancing truth and story reflect a larger concern of medieval historiography with which the later romances actively, and often creatively, engage.

⁹⁸ Gervase 88-91. He adds that while the knight declined in “prosperity and favour,” a daughter of his wed into the Provençal nobility and descendants of hers survived into Gervase’s day (91). It would seem that more families than just the Lusignans or Plantagenets claimed serpentine ancestresses.

⁹⁹ Gervase 85.

story of the Creation has reached the point of the Fall, the “opening of the eyes to sin,” and his story about Raymond thus serves as an illustration of the consequences of passion, for he is portrayed as being motivated entirely by desire first to “enjoy with her the embraces for which he longed” [ipsius poterit optatis frui complexibus] and later a “burning to see his wife naked” [ut uxorem nudam uideat accenditur].¹⁰⁰

Jean d’Arras’s account of Robert du Chastel Roussel departs from the warnings about lust for strange women and concentrates instead for its emotional impact on the way in which the knight’s fortunes were bound up in keeping a rather inexplicable oath which, once violated, not only occasioned the monstrous transformation of the lady but the knight’s entire loss of wealth and standing. The narrator gives other examples, for which he also credits Gervase, of “sayd fayrees [that] toke somtyme the fourme & the fygure of fayre & yonge wymen / of whiche many men . . . haue take to their syues by meanes of som couenauntes or promysse that they made them to swere vnto them,” some entailing the prohibition on seeing the wife in childbed, other the Sabbath-viewing taboo: “And as long as they kept theyre covenantes they had good fortune and ere euer in prosperite / but assoone as they faylled of theyr promysse or couenauntes they fell down fro theyr good happ & fortune.”¹⁰¹ The crucial narrative element here is not the potential error of marrying an unknown

¹⁰⁰ Gervase 88-91. As an aside, Gervase’s story includes the folkloric element that the serpent-mother returns sometimes at night “to see her little children,” but omits any reference to the banshee-warning, the *cri de Mélusine* of Sabine Baring-Gould’s account.

¹⁰¹ Donald 4-5. It is worth noting that the translator keeps very close to his French source here: “Et dit encores [Gervase] que les dictes faees se mettoient en forme de tresbelles femmes, et en ont pluseurs hommes prinse pour moilliers, parmy aucunes convenances qu’elles leur faisoient jurer . . . Et tant qu’ilz leur tenoient leurs convenances, ilz estoient regnans en grant audition et prosperité et, s tost qu’ilz defailloient, ilz les perdoient et decheoient de tout leur boneur petit a petit” (Vincensini 116-118).

and dangerously fascinating woman but in making and then breaking a rash promise upon which, it turns out, all one's earthly profits depend.

The narrative's careful framing, and the introduction of Melusine in terms of her castle-building and lineage-founding skills—making no mention, aside that she was “a woman of the fayree,”¹⁰² of her own series of transformations—serves to play up Melusine's human attributes and downplay the non-human attributes, such as her fairy nature, that render her a monstrous figure. The Christian associations of her story and her person as being “of God” mark her as a moral exemplar, but in this case an example to be emulated, not (as in the wives who skip out of mass) shunned. Such a positioning works against both the folkloric sources that emphasize her power as a supernatural being (perhaps resembling earlier goddess figures; perhaps not) and the clerical visual and literary sources that turn mermaid, lamia, or siren figures into warnings of moral harm. These narrative contradictions, delivered in the context of an authorial insistence on historical accuracy, set the audience up for a tale of a highly competent woman in a successful and productive marriage that results not just in wealthy estates and high social regard but in virile sons who, trained by their mother, go forth to conquer nations and extend the dynasty. The anxiety for the listener in knowing of Melusine's true form, while Raymondin does not, is used by the author not to generate fear for Raymondin's soul but to generate concern for the fate of Melusine should her unfortunate shape be discovered. The shock for Raymondin, of course, lies in learning that his beloved wife is significantly Other; but the emotion stressed for the reader is the tragedy of Melusine's exile, the breaking up of the marriage, and the beginning of a slow decline in the family's status and fortunes (and numbers, in the case of the son Melusine asks

¹⁰² Donald 6.

be executed). Throughout, the English author emphasizes Melusine's humanity and attempts to compress or defuse the monstrous implications of her suprahuman form, telling a tale not of a monster deceiving her husband for her own purposes but of an unfortunate woman doomed to suffering by the betrayal of the husband for whom she has done so much good. These very efforts to make Melusine an exemplary Middle English romance heroine, however, have the result of highlighting the suggestion that it is Melusine's human situation, and the consequences of her reliance on patriarchal systems of value and authority, that figure as the truly monstrous elements. The English translation suggests that Melusine's Otherness derives not from her fairy curse or her latent serpent form but by the human womanhood which is likewise a masquerade.

What I suggest as an answer to the question of Melusine's obscurity in England is the difficulty she poses on a hermeneutical level. Her protean, shape-shifting body signals monstrosity in the purest sense of disrupting and threatening to overturn categories, especially the highly charged categories of woman and human. Her polycorporeality makes her category-less, even categorically hostile. The very indeterminacy of meaning suggested by her moral ambivalence—in that she is both of God and associated with the chief agent of the devil, both within the human world and simultaneously exempt—is reflected in her slippery form. While modes of reading the exemplum and the romance would have allowed, even expected readers to fill in the semantic blanks, Melusine's story was perhaps too open-ended. The burden of reading a monstrous woman and accepting her multivalent potential was simply too much to ask of an audience less inclined to mimic French fashion (though not entirely averse, as the translation itself attests) and more inclined to read powerful women as dangerous and disruptive if not properly contained. The English translator, following the example of Jean d'Arras, tries earnestly to position his

heroine inside a respectable Christian order. But—as the monster always does—Melusine escapes any attempts for narrator or audience to fix her meaning.¹⁰³

In the next chapter, I will examine in greater depth the English translator's project to offer a coherent and more unified meaning for Melusine. His effort to sanitize her demonic connotations results in a dual effort to position her within the Christian supernatural (as a fairy who manages to be "of God," and a proper Catholic) and as an exemplary matriarch modeling the dearest values of the English bourgeoisie. He attempts to incite sympathy for his tragic heroine by stressing her humanity, her goodness, and her importance to her family unit. But these efforts instead cause him to interpret her transformations in a way that casts blame on Melusine's male protectors for their betrayal and their instability. And despite his efforts, Melusine's monstrosity continues to figure a number of anxieties with which misogynistic writings are concerned, specifically the influence of the powerful female and her reproductive abilities. As the lack of reception for the English romance *Melusine* shows, these efforts to control or coordinate the many implications of the character and her situation—while still remaining true to the source—fail, finally, to cast Melusine in an appealing light. For the careful reader, however, the terms which the translator uses to establish Melusine's monstrosity, and the means by which he traces Melusine's final eruption into an uncontrollable and alien form, invites reflection—using the literary strategy of the romance and its fictional possibilities for metaphor and meaning—on the construction of women, monsters, and the patriarchy itself.

¹⁰³ That the monster always escapes is the second of Cohen's seven theses; its corollary is that the monster always returns, much like Freud's repressed, or like Melusine's haunting of Lusignan castle ("Monster Culture," 5-6.)

CHAPTER 2

MELUSINE'S MONSTROSITY

The review of sources and analogues inflecting readings of the English *Melusine* given in the previous chapter suggests that the aspect that most distanced audiences from the story, leading to the disappearance of the book in print and the relative absence of Melusine in the English imagination of the early modern period, is the title character's troublesome form as combined serpent, fairy, and woman with prophetic and seemingly magical powers. Melusine's popularity in her native France and the reception of her story in Spanish and German translations seem to indicate a tolerance, fascination, or affection for the heroine's polycorporeal form and ambiguous valence which English audiences of the early sixteenth century, for any number of reasons—vexed relations with several Continental rulers, the recent civil war among its upper classes, stirrings of a schismatic religious reformation—did not share. For English audiences, interpretations of the serpent-woman may have ranged from moral ambivalence or systematic threat to dangerous temptation, a reading which the translator attempts to control and resist by stressing that his heroine is “of God.”

While the English translator's response to his multivalent heroine is to downplay her monstrous aspects, his attempt to make an exemplary woman out of the monstrous Melusine ends up suggesting that the terms of exemplary womanhood, as they are constructed by the gender ideology of the romance and the corresponding domestic ideology of late medieval conduct literature, create a monstrous, category-flexing, threatening thing. Moreover, as his heroine's traumatic transformations are all brought about through moments where male vows are broken and chivalric duties overthrown, Melusine's eruptions into monstrous form have the effect of highlighting problems or failures in the

patriarchy, which depends on the exemplary woman for its reproduction and survival. In this chapter I will examine the terms of Melusine's monstrosity, investigate their connection to the gender ideology of the romance, and trace instances in the text where the English translator implies that it is patriarchal discourse that makes woman a monstrous entity—a monstrousness that Melusine's hybrid form and her series of transformations dramatize to full effect.

It will be useful to highlight the main action of the story here. The narrative begins with Melusine's birth and the acquisition of her curse, then recounts her marriage to Raymondin, his efforts to win back his wrongly exiled father's lands, the building of their estate of Lusignan, and the birth and rearing of her ten sons. After several chapters detailing the adventures of these grown sons, the narrative proceeds to Raymondin's discovery of his wife's true shape, which he keeps secret until their son Geoffrey burns down the monastery housing his brother. In shock and anger Raymondin accuses Melusine of being an unnatural spirit who has borne unnatural children, whereupon she transforms into a 15-foot dragon and flies out the window. The story ends with the close of Raymondin's life and the final fates of all three of the cursed sisters. The analysis below focuses on Melusine's monstrosity in the English translation and how this monstrosity is constructed through her fairy lineage, her serpent form, and the terms of human effort and betrayal.

Melusine's Fairy Heritage

Part of the monstrousness that the English translator attempts to downplay, defusing Melusine's potential threat as being not-quite-human, is her fairy heritage and the recourse to supernatural powers that this lineage provides her. Melusine's repeated claims to Raymondin that she is "of God" and her beliefs are regular emphasize her self-perceived role in a divine order which, in the world of

her story, implicitly includes the fairy world of which she forms a part. Helen Cooper observes that in most English romances, the fairy world exists to enable or educate the human world: to bring wealth and prosperity to a chosen mortal, engineer an advance in social standing, administer justice where human systems fail, or sometimes simply fulfill the mortal lover's sexual fantasies.¹ If the main theme for narrative romance is, as Cooper suggests, the perfection of human virtue, the non-human world functions as a mode of comparison to and metaphorical play with human systems, though she notes that a model fairy woman "is scarcely a topic on which to build morals about normal human relations."² Cooper's point that the fairy world exists to reflect and comment on the human world allows the fairy world to act as a monstrous parallel to the fictional human world, a thirdspace that helps illuminate the failures or possibilities in the human social world. In *Melusine*, just as the translator moves to position his title character within the divine order, he utilizes the resources of the fairy world to enlarge the fortunes of his human protagonists, treating the human, not the fairy world, as the desirable ideal.

Throughout the romance, Melusine's fairy aspect is treated more as an accident of birth than as an integral part of her nature. Her part-fairy heritage, and her childhood spent on the "lost isle" of Avalon, help explain her great

¹ Mythical history abounds, of course, with supernatural creatures that function as a commentary on and metaphor for human actions, states, or events, but Waugh and Baring-Gould especially observe a long tradition of beneficent fish-like creatures aiding and abetting less fortunate mortals. In Babylonian myth, the sea-god Ea, who has a fish as well as human head, along with legs, feet, and a tail, comes ashore from time to time to converse with humans. From I.P. Cory's translation of the *Polyhistor* of the third-century philosopher Solinus: "he gave them an insight into letters and sciences, and every kind of art. He taught them to construct houses, to found temples, to compile laws, and explained to them the principles of geometrical knowledge. He made them distinguish the seeds of the earth, and showed them how to collect fruits; in short, he instructed them in everything which would tend to soften and humanize mankind" (quoted in Waugh 73-4).

² Cooper, *English Romance in Time*, 215.

beauty, her prophetic powers, and her apparently limitless resources including wealth, workmen, and courtly followers. Of these skills, her prophetic abilities might have seemed the most suggestively dangerous to her late medieval English audience. But Melusine's fortune-telling abilities are selective and limited in purpose. When she first meets Raymondin at the Fountain of Soif and reveals that she knows his name, condition, and recent trouble, her use of this information seems little more than a coy device to impress him and awaken his interest. Her special mode of knowledge comes into play again shortly after the wedding, when Melusine explains to Raymondin that his father, Henry de Leon, was tricked into murder and then forced into exile by two scheming enemies, Joscelin and his son Oliver, who were plotting to seize Henry's lands. Her detailed instructions to Raymondin about how to reclaim his family lands fit very much with the trope of the "goodwife," who gives her husband sage advice and dedicates her own talents to preserving and enlarging his fortune. Raymondin's success in retrieving his father's lands, punishing the true traitor, and then bestowing the estates on his Breton cousins only proves that Melusine's knowledge was correct and her advice useful. The wife's utility to the husband's success is likewise a key tenet of the romance's gender ideology, and here Melusine's greater resources—her fairy knowledge and, later, her employment of fairy workmen and distribution of fairy wealth—are implemented to bring Raymondin greater social status.

The third time Melusine uses her foreknowledge, she requests that her son Horrible be put to death; she claims he will threaten the entire family lineage if he survives. This is the only point when Melusine's foreknowledge results in actual harm to anyone (and as Horrible is the son born with three eyes, he is the least human-seeing anyway). On the point of her own destiny, Melusine's prescience seems to fail her; she shows no sign that she sees Raymondin's

betrayal coming—though the audience does—and she fails to anticipate Geoffrey the Great Tooth's crime of burning down the monastery with his brother inside. In essence, the story's author gives his heroine an impressive skill and then fails to use it to create any real narrative conflict or tension. The technique appears an effort to downplay Melusine's Otherness and her formidable powers. For all her foresight, she is still, finally, subject to her husband's betrayal and the full activation of suffering and torment to which her curse dooms her. On this inevitable outcome rests the entire charge of the tragic tale, and yet the English translator also uses it as a commentary on the gender ideology he has constructed and deployed.

Melusine's prophetic powers that have only a limited function—in service of Raymondin or the family, but not in her own protection—serve as one way the translator draws attention to the monstrosity of female dependency within patriarchal systems, and fit with Cooper's observation in her study of the Middle English romances of what she calls a common meme of magic that doesn't work. Cooper argues that magical elements like protective rings or other gadgets which are introduced into a story and then never used serve to highlight not the power of the supernatural but rather the superhuman powers of the hero who accomplishes his goal nevertheless.³ In essence, the inactivated power of the magical symbol points to human power, ingenuity, and strength. Melusine's limited-use prophetic powers demonstrate the same function. Douglas Kelly calls this "a domestication of the marvelous" in a romance whose plot, as he sees it, entails Melusine's attempts to assimilate into the human world.⁴ The relative lack of exercise of Melusine's fairy powers suggests, as Cooper and Kelly infer, a narrative agenda that seeks to intensify Melusine's humanity. Where the

³ See Cooper, *English Romance in Time*, chapter 3.

⁴ Kelly 32-33.

narrator has the option to amplify the excitement of his tale by invoking use of his heroine's extraordinary power, he uses this power for one purpose only: to defuse, repair, or require acts of murder in order to restore or preserve the family estates. In this context, the magic that doesn't work or the fairy powers that work to protect and further human endeavors emphasize Melusine's accomplishments as a human wife and mother. She employs the assets of her fairy world to enhance her position in the human world, validating the human, not the fairy, as the more desirable state of being.

The strategy to defuse his heroine's fairy nature and prophetic abilities might also reflect a practical decision on the part of the English translator. Cooper notes that prophecy even in narrative carried potentially risky political repercussions during the Tudor period. By the reign of Henry VIII, it was considered treason to engage in any astrological consultation that encompassed the death of a monarch.⁵ In French popular belief, Melusine's prophetic activities at some point expanded to include not only forecasting the death of members of her family but also foretelling the death of a king of France.⁶ The English version contains no whisper of this later aspect of Melusine's power, perhaps because such a talent would have been viewed as treasonous among early sixteenth-century English readers. However, the English version does keep the scene wherein the Earl of Poitiers, Raymondin's uncle and ward, reads in the stars a portent that a man who murdered his lord in that hour might find great benefit

⁵ See Cooper's discussion of Tudor prophecy 192-197.

⁶ Baring-Gould recounts: "Long was it believed in France that the unfortunate Melusina appeared in the air, wailing over the ramparts of Lusignan before the death of one of its lords; and that, on the extinction of the family, she was seen whenever a king of France was to depart this life" (478). Apparently, post-transformation, Melusine's association was explicitly not with the Lusignan family but instead with the castle she had built; Baring-Gould recites Brantome's account that Melusine uttered her greatest cry when the order was given to destroy the castle, which had become a Huguenot stronghold, in 1574; thereafter she was not heard from again (475-82).

thereby. In English law, premeditating or aiding in the murder of one's lord had been considered an act of treason since the time of the Anglo-Saxon kings.⁷ English audiences might have entertained a clear discomfort with a story wherein a prophetic woman has the ability to forecast the death of nobles or kings and which contains an incident where the murder (though accidental) of a noble is concealed and the murderer profits rather than being punished.

The sixteenth century in England also proved a time when the practice of magic came under intense suspicion as it was increasingly associated with necromancy or black magic and signaled commerce with the devil.⁸ Works like the *Malleus Maleficarum*, first published in 1486, emphasized women's special predisposition to witchcraft as an extension of their distance from the male rational nature, as discussed in the introduction. While Jean d'Arras was writing for an audience presumably already familiar with the tale of Melusine and her magical powers, the English author might have found himself introducing a prophetic, powerful woman to an audience disposed to regard her capabilities not as a local pet myth but as evoking associations with evil, destruction, maleficence, and death. This resulted in his efforts to situate her more firmly within a Christian mythology, downplaying the powers granted her by her fairy birth, and thus transferred the focus of her monstrosity elsewhere.

Melusine's Serpent Form

Her fairy birth and its attendant benefits aside, the most obviously monster-like aspect of Melusine is her weekly transformation into a mermaid. In the story's analogues in Gervase, Walter Map, and in the cycle of fairy-woman-turned-serpent tales listed in the opening of *Melusine*, her animalistic form serves mostly

⁷ Bellamy 2.

⁸ Goodman 48.

to mark the wife as a demonic creature, one who per convention cannot abide the blessing of mass. However, Melusine's serpentine form has altogether different associations. Jean d'Arras adds the narrative explanation that Pressyne's curse—a half-serpent form during the span of her life inside a normal human marriage, and torment and pain until Judgment Day if the marriage dissolves—punishes Melusine for the crime of patricide, or at least attempted patricide: it is Melusine's idea to imprison their father within an enchanted mountain in Northumberland. The serpent tail of Melusine seems to have little affiliation with that of the sirens of bestiary tradition or the mermaids of literature and art and rather literalizes Melusine's ambitions to dominate, or even replace, the failed father figure; Alban refers to her form, a woman fused with the phallic serpent tail, as representing a "parthenogenetic sexuality," entirely complete and self-contained.⁹ Part of Melusine's figurative monstrosity lies in the way her latent form, her presumably true figure, is a violation of reproductive norms.

Her curse then answers the violation of the male prerogative which she, in leading the rebellion against her father, has presumably transgressed. The conventional belief borrowed from Plato, and retained in medieval treatises like *De Secretis Mulierum*, holds that the father has the primary shaping influence in conception and the woman merely provides the raw material to be shaped. The Old French text has Pressine acknowledge this when she accuses Melusine of disrupting the natural process that would have allowed her and her sisters to otherwise become fully human: "La vertu de germe de ton pere, toy et les autres, eust attrait a sa nature humaine et eussies esté briefment hors des meurs nimphes et faees sans y retourner."¹⁰ In the course of time, Pressine says, the

⁹ Alban 16-20. Markale's argument that Melusine's fused form makes her androgynous speaks to the same effect; her liminality, the monstrosity which she must hide, is a marked difference from the accepted dual-sex model.

¹⁰ Vincensini 134; quoted in McCracken 83.

father's *germe* or seed would have completed the human transformation to free Melusine from the fairy world.

The English translator gives this passage a slightly different emphasis: Pressyne declares, "For notwithstanding the unlawfulness of thy fader / bothe thou & thy sustirs he shuld haue drawn to hym, and ye shuld shortly haue ben out of the handes of the Nymphes & of the fairees, without to retourne eny more."¹¹ The English inserts a reference to the crime of the father, in not keeping the promise he made to his wife,¹² but also depicts Melusine's becoming-human as some vaguely mystical process brought about through the affective strength of familial love or paternal goodwill instead of as a biological sequence begun by the engendering *germe*, the father's seed. Since Melusine's trespass against paternal authority has interrupted this process, Pressyne sets another condition by which her daughter may attain full humanity and, with it, salvation after death: she must live at the mercy of her husband's keeping a similar promise to her. Here Pressyne, not the father, has the ultimate control over Melusine's destiny; as McCracken observes, the power of Pressyne's curse "negates the value of the father's blood and affirms the determining influence of the mother's nature."¹³ But Pressyne's curse also makes Melusine's progress to humanity—overcoming her fairy nature, her own monstrous birth in being one of triplets, and the serpentine form she acquires by way of atonement—dependent on the fidelity of her husband. Thus Melusine can only be saved through the integrity of male authority, loyalty, and honor, the very things she punished her father for failing to uphold. Melusine's quest to find a mortal husband and gain his

¹¹ Donald 15.

¹² It is not incidental that the prohibition Elynas violates is the taboo on seeing his wife in childbed and during the subsequent lying-in period. McCracken discusses this event in the context of its connections with *Melusine's* further concerns about parental inheritance and maternal lineage in her chapter on "Parturition and Melusine" in *The Curse of Eve* 79-84.

¹³ McCracken 80.

allegiance is then a quest to repair the failure of the father, the problem that set her curse in motion. The mother has full power to punish, but her punishment is to make Melusine's forgiveness and final restoration contingent on the goodwill of her male protector.

Although her half-serpent form is the way in which Melusine is remembered in the popular imagination and depicted in the visual arts, within the narrative it is never Melusine's "serpentine corporeal identity" that is stressed but her "human affective identity" that is at stake, to use Kevin Brownlee's terms.¹⁴ After activating the serpent-woman motif to symbolize Melusine's sin, repentance, and hoped-for redemption, and repeating several times during the courtship of Melusine and Raymondin that he must not attempt to see her on Saturday, the narrator appears to lose interest in his heroine's extraordinary capability. He moves on with his declared intention of describing how Melusine built the impressive castle of Lusignan, and becomes enthusiastic in his account of Melusine's commanding presence and busy industry:

In this partye telleth thenne thystory that whan the feste was ended
and that suche as she wold were goon / she anoone aftir made to
comme grete foyson of werkmen / as massons, Carpenters, and
suche that can dygge & delue. Whyche at her commandement
fyllid dounne the grete trees, and made the roche rayre and clene.
There Melusyne sett euery man to werk. eche one dide his Crafte.
they encysed the roche & made a depe & brode foundement. and
in few dayes they brought the werk so ferfourth / that euery man
wondred of such a fayre and stronge byulding so soone doon. And
euery Satirday Melusyne payed truly her werkmen / and meet &
drynk they had in haboundaunce. but trouth it is / that no body
knew from whens these werkmen were.¹⁵

¹⁴ Brownlee 94.

¹⁵ Donald 62.

The narrator becomes so enthralled with watching the walls of Lusignan rise, and in detailing Melusine's supervisory skills and care, that he throws in the red-flagged Saturday without any explication. A reader is left to wonder at the precise terms of the transformation stressed earlier. Is it only Raymondin who is not allowed to see his wife? Does she go about a normal day and then enter seclusion on Saturday evenings? And why has she chosen to employ fairy workmen instead of using local labor? The passage stands as evidence that the narrator is actually more concerned with Melusine as a model courtly lady, the epitome of a noble woman. What holds the true horror for him, at least in this and similar passages where the narrator speaks so approvingly of his heroine, is not her blended physical form but the idea that such dedicated industry could ever come to naught, or such a grand building ever decay.

Melusine as Courtly Paragon

In addition to defusing the emphasis on her fairy nature and delaying the revelation of her serpentine form, the English translator dwells on Melusine's attributes that make her, at least in the domestic world of the romance, an ideal noblewoman, Christian wife, and mother. He stresses her courtesy and decorum at her wedding, as well as the generous display of wealth that impresses all her guests: "there ne was none of them / but that he merueylled & gretly wondred of the grete riches that they had seen at the wedding of Raymodyn."¹⁶ Having borne their first son, Urian, before Raymondin departs for his adventures in Brittany, upon his return (when he does not at first recognize Lusignan, so impressive has it grown), Melusine gets down to the business of having more sons, building castles and towns and abbeys, "and moche good she dide to poure

¹⁶ Donald 61.

folk.”¹⁷ Her activities support what Felicity Riddy calls the “bourgeois-gentry” ethos of the Middle English romance, an ethos likewise endorsed by the goodwife of the conduct literature. “And gate & acqyred so moche Raymondin thurgh the polycye & good gouernaunce of Melusyne, what in Bretayne, what in Gascoynne & in Guyenne as in Poytou,” the narrator says, “that no prynce was about hym / but he doubted to dysplaise hym.”¹⁸ He emphasizes that Melusine has made good on her promise to bring Raymondin wealth and stature, thus showing the extent to which the aristocratic woman can contribute to an estate’s financial security and a family’s material success.

By this point in the story, Melusine has delivered eight sons—all of them “moch grete & hye, and wel formed & strong,” and several of them “merueyllously hardy & cruel,” including Geoffrey the Great Tooth (so named for the inch-long tooth protruding from his jaw) who “made in his tyme many wonders & merueylles, as hereaftir ye shal here.”¹⁹ When eighteen years have passed and her sons are ready to set forth on adventures, it is Melusine who builds their ships and furnishes their supplies, equips their armies and pays the soldiers in advance, and delivers long speeches about proper behavior before she sends them on their way. Though the narrator alludes initially to Melusine’s fairy background as the source of her many wedding guests as well as the miraculous workmen, mention of her beginnings falls away as the narrator enlarges on her quite impressive, though still realistic, accomplishments in building up Raymondin’s fortunes and reputation. While the fact that she is a woman of the fairy explains her unusual and apparently limitless means, it is not proposed as the reason she adapts so well to this hyper-courtly, idealized,

¹⁷ Donald 103.

¹⁸ Donald 104.

¹⁹ Donald 104.

chivalric world of the medieval aristocratic family. Her exhibition of this behavior makes it appear natural, indeed expected for an aristocratic woman in her position. At this point in the narrative, the focus on Melusine's motherhood and the "good governance" of her extensive properties reveals that the romance's gender ideology finds women most praiseworthy when they benefit the patriarchal project by building dynasties, enlarging estates, and rearing healthy offspring. The English translator has so far achieved his aim of portraying his monstrous heroine as an exemplary romance heroine and aristocratic woman that several readers and critics announce that at this point in the story, Melusine is succeeding in her project to become fully human.²⁰

But while increasingly not mentioned in the middle chapters, both her fairy and serpent nature remain conspicuously latent in Melusine's body-text. The narrator takes pains to foreshadow her fate even during the wedding festivities, when Melusine reiterates the Saturday taboo and Raymondin initially agrees; doom and gloom are intimated in an aside: "helas! he afterward faylled Couenaunt. Wherefore Raymondyn lost his lady, and also the Erle of Forest toke deth therfore by Geffray with the grete tothe."²¹ Though at this moment in the story Geoffrey is not born yet, the narrator—even during the lengthy middle chapters following the adventures of Melusine's sons—establishes an omniscient frame that points continuously to the promised end. Far from humanizing his heroine, the persistent lack of reference to Melusine's non-humanness in chapters XX through XXXV serves rather to provoke suspense and thereby focus attention on the hidden serpent lurking beneath, or behind, the successes of Melusine and her sons. Even when absent, Melusine's concealed serpent nature and the

²⁰ Kelly in fact suggests that the absence of a mother-mark on Melusine's last two sons, Raymond and Thierry, indicates her progress towards her desired humanization (44).

²¹ Donald 61.

destruction it will spawn are always the chief referents for both her character and her story. Underneath the woman so capably rearing children, raising castles, and instructing her progeny in the chivalric ethos is the labile monster in concealed form, waiting to erupt.

To the interested reader, Melusine's curse and her latent monstrosity at this point suggest several readings. In one sense, the Otherness aphorized by Melusine's fairy-serpent nature exists to validate the normalcy, importance, and legitimacy of male-authored, patriarchal systems of power encoded in justice traditions, laws of inheritance, and cultural mores. Melusine invokes her fairy resources to abet human endeavors of construction and property enlargement that tacitly endorse the projects of the English baronial class to consolidate land ownership and further feudal patronage.²² As Cooper and other critics have suggested, the fairy realm provides a potent narrative tool for reflecting on or influencing the course of human events, thereby silently underlining the primacy, indeed the superiority of, the human social world by the desire the fairies show to be a part of it. Rather than changing any human systems, Melusine seeks to become fully part of them, thus proving their appeal. At the same time, however, like the fairy wife in the story of *Henno cum Dentibus* who only makes a show of penitence and piety, the ability of a fairy or non-human to masquerade as a human suggests that conformance or compliance with established social codes can be mimicked or performed; these behaviors are not natural but adapted for a purpose.

In another sense, Melusine's serpentine form can be read as an unmediated literalizing of the founding presumption of medieval misogyny, that

²² I share the general view offered by Susan Crane in *Insular Romance* that the romance in England endorses the social goals and culture of the baronial class, even when members of the class were presumably not in or even not intended to be in the audience.

the female body is in its essence mal-formed. Melusine's serpentine corporeality might simply represent a despised femininity, monstrous because not-male; the proximity of the carnal woman to the animal world becomes manifest in Melusine's hybrid body. Her blended form simultaneously signals inferiority and, because of it, danger; just as the boundaries of animal and human have been corrupted by her creation, so she wields the like power to violate or overturn the natural order of things. Her reproductive power as a female and subsequent influence on the social order due to her biological necessity are acknowledged through an image that shares its formal aspects with the chief villain of the Christian drama, thus working to discredit this ability and demand its control and marginalization. As Alban and others adhering to the rejected-goddess theory have supposed, the serpent form works to vilify a female figure whose power might otherwise be unlimited and uncontainable, a semantic horror to any patriarchal system of value. More simply, the merged serpent-woman image as temptress, an identifier of the siren or mermaid figures in the didactic tradition, might simply elaborate the association of women with anti-social tendencies, working to lure and destroy where she has no other authority, no creative power. The plotting mothers-in-law of the exiled-queen tales, as discussed in Chapter 4, might likewise be thought of as examples of the same misogynistic assumption. Made liminal by patriarchal systems of value, excluded by her secondary status among rational beings, woman in this mode of thinking can only be threatening to the cultural center. Melusine's serpent form might be read as playing out this assumption of the similarity of "womanhood" to "monstrosity" on a metaphorical level.

In a third sense, Melusine's not-fully-human nature might be read as explaining her enormous efficacy as an empire builder and the influence she gathers thereby. Her access to unusual resources points to the social reality that

a normal human woman, bounded by the restrictions of human economic means, would find herself much more limited. It takes supernatural power, in other words, for a woman to transcend the conventional limitations of her sex and achieve the status, wealth, and authority that Melusine attains. The same interpretation lies behind the fairy wife of *Richard Coeur de Lion* and other supernatural mothers: a woman of ordinary capabilities could not, given the generally accepted weakness of her sex, be responsible for such extraordinary offspring (or, keeping in mind Nolan's theory of Melusine's derivations, their extraordinary violence). Such an interpretation throws no spoke in the wheel of the conventional clerical misogyny that claims the social and political limitations placed upon women are fully justified—indeed, necessitated—by their corresponding inferiority of biology.

Melusine's author offers no support for any of the above readings. Instead, he portrays his heroine as fully dedicated to the dearest principles of the medieval aristocratic class and paints her, in her conduct, speech, and other outward behavior, as a template for the conventional romance heroine. She is the nobly-born and legitimate daughter of a king; she marries a man whom she makes powerful by winning him land and possessions; she builds a realm dotted with castles and monasteries; she gives birth to ten children, many of whom are celebrated warriors and who make brilliant marriages. Her blood is carried to noble houses all over Europe and her castles stand for hundreds of years. Melusine is not by any means a female whose monstrosity figures her marginalized or disempowered status; she has no designs to bring down the existing social system, nor does she seem (beyond the retribution she wages on her father) to harbor any rage. But I would argue that the English translator uses Melusine's portrait as the idealized noblewoman, co-regnant and matriarch of dynasties who also happens to be monstrous, to suggest that the terms of ideal

womanhood, as predicated by the romance gender ideology and its correspondences to actual class values held by late medieval audiences, are in themselves monstrous, creating a category-challenging, contested entity.

It certainly supports this claim that Melusine's transformation into a flying banshee-like dragon of ill portent is not, in the narrative, an inconvenient irruption into her normal duties as wife, chatelaine, and mother, but rather the inevitable progression of a cycle that began with her birth, led to her rebellion and curse, flowered in her career as the founding patroness of the Lusignan patrimony, and has its logical endpoint in her apotheosis into myth. Critics customarily read the middle chapters of the prose romance as Melusine's dip into the human career of wife, mother, and castle keeper. But the romance's narrator has too effectively established Melusine's Otherness for a reader to truly forget about her curse and her hidden nature. Melusine's latent serpentinity provokes a building tension as the masquerade of her humanity progresses. Her ability to excel in fulfilling the conventionally lauded duties of the aristocratic woman does not serve to dilute her monstrosity but, I argue, calls into question the solidity, and the legitimacy, of the social duties themselves. Melusine's changing corporeality disturbs precisely because it is fluid, covert, and so difficult to define, and her successful deception disturbs precisely because it dismantles distinctions between the normative and the Other. Her protean form dissolves differences between woman and monster, not to endorse the ethical veracity of the philosophic conventions claiming woman's inferiority but rather to suggest, to an uncomfortable degree, that this discourse requires women to be monstrous—placed, that is to say, in an unstable boundary between humanity and nature—and therefore creates them as such. The constructedness of Woman, then, exposes the philosophical foundations of law, justice, and social propriety as not real, just, implicit, or in any other way an outgrowth of divine order but in

fact nothing less than the terms of a logical and discursive process that can be imitated, perpetuated, challenged, deconstructed, or even destroyed.

Melusine's Transformations

While neither Jean d'Arras or his English translator use the word monstrous or its synonyms to describe Melusine, she nonetheless qualifies as a monster in the sense in which medieval philosophers used the term to observe a perilous confluence of boundaries, or, in the terms offered by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, the "tumultuous admixture of what was supposed to be held separate . . . a body through which can be dreamed the dangerous contours of an identity that refuses assimilation and purity . . . a defiantly intermixed figure that is in the end simply the most startling incarnation of hybridity made flesh."²³ The monster as a hybrid creature, Cohen suggests, can embody the abject, but can also represent "bodies that cannot reconcile their constitutive differences."²⁴ His definition agrees with Caroline Walker Bynum's in *Metamorphosis and Identity*, where she argues that medieval writers conceptualized hybridity as "the joining of two incompatibles."²⁵ Cohen is concerned with the formation of collective identities, and Bynum offers models for understanding changes within the single entity, both approaches that address the kind of categorical thinking that created monstrosity as a symbolic term and used its imagery to outline safe borders. Bynum identifies two techniques favored by medieval authors: the image of the hybrid, which "expresses a world of natures, essence, or substances" often paradoxical or contradictory—a metaphor that resists change—and the use of

²³ Cohen, *Hybridity, Identity, and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain*, 6.

²⁴ Cohen 6.

²⁵ Bynum views hybridity as a model or theoretical paradigm for describing change, held as distinct from the masquerade, what she describes as "changings of costume or skin, where nature endures," and metamorphosis, which entails a substantive shift in the nature of a thing, either through gradual evolution or radical replacement (17-20).

metamorphosis, which “expresses a labile world of flux and transformation, encountered through story.”²⁶

I suggest that hybridity rather than metamorphosis is the appropriate metaphor for Melusine’s shape, as she undergoes no substantial or essential change in nature; instead, her transformations are presented as ruptures. She changes at the point where she and the processes of the world she is in can no longer go on comfortably together. Her mother imposes the curse of her weekly serpent form when Melusine’s rebellion against her father has purportedly interrupted the natural progression of herself and her sisters towards humanness. She changes into a flying dragon when her husband reveals the secret he learned by spying on her at her bath on the forbidden day. Each iteration of Melusine’s hybridity—as fairy-daughter, serpent-wife, or dragon-mother—represents a collision of the constitutive points of womanhood imposed by her sociopolitical context, the traditions of cultural misogyny, and the generic conventions of the romance. Each fracture of her form takes a subtly different approach to the metaphor, but every instance signals the clash of incompatible claims about the limits of women’s abilities and the controls or expectations put upon them. Melusine’s hybrid body, in short, illustrates through exaggerated effect the sleight-of-hand at the core of medieval misogyny: the superficial insistence on female inferiority masks a fear of unharnessed female influence. Woman is the monster here.

This reading is supported by the absolute nonchalance with which Melusine’s suggestions of fairy affiliations are received by the internal audience of the story, the other characters. When the Earl of Forestz comes to visit Raymondin one Saturday and sits down to a dinner where Melusine is absent, he

²⁶ Bynum 29-30.

takes it upon himself to inform Raymondin concerning the gossip circulating about him:

. . . wete it that the commyn talking of the peple is, that Melusyne
your wyf euery sairday in the yere is with another man in
auoultire / & so blynd ye are by her saying that ye dare not enquire
nor knoweth wher she becommeth or gooth / and also other sayen,
& make them strong that she is a spyryte of the fairy, that on euery
satirday maketh hir penaunce.²⁷

The earl's remarks rank the condition of being a fairy as equally feasible as an explanation of adultery, and he also seems to be chiding Raymondin for being too obedient to his wife's commands, or too enthralled with her in general, to question her curious absences. Notably, the earl offers disapproval when suggesting unfaithfulness as a reason proposed by the gossip, but is quite matter-of-fact about the alternative implication that she is a fairy, supposing only that such a state requires weekly penance. That neither Raymondin nor his brother react negatively to the idea that Melusine is a fairy creature reveals what is and is not considered monstrous by the narrator and the characters of this tale.

The term "penance" provides an interesting connotation in this passage, as the fairy wives appearing in the introduction to the narrative (as discussed in Chapter 1) and other similar stories suggest that supernatural creatures are hostile to Christian sacraments. The hint about penance is one that appears in the French text and is preserved by the English translator.²⁸ The Middle English dictionary notes that the phrase "performing penance" could also be used to describe pagan acts of making satisfaction for sin, but as Melusine is a practicing Catholic and attends mass, most notably on the day of her wedding, the more likely suggestion here is of an ecclesiastic ritual. Additional meanings of

²⁷ Donald 296.

²⁸ "Et les autres dient et maintiennent que c'est un esperit faé, qui le samedi fait sa penaunce" (Vincensini 658).

“penance,” according to the Middle English Dictionary, include penalty or punishment, divine retribution, the “practice of asceticism and self-mortification as a penitential discipline,” and pain and suffering more generally.²⁹ The religious term firmly affixes the world of the story, like the medieval audience’s world, within a divine order, one where the implications of fairyness or the supernatural are contained and controlled. Just as Raymondin is quickly reassured by Melusine that she is not diabolical, the Earl of Forestz’s remark emphasizes that the relative humanness of Melusine’s being is not quite of the same consequence as possible infidelity. Infidelity, not being of the fairy, seems to him the more dangerous condition. This assumption adheres to the tone carried throughout the English narrative that it is the human element that behaves monstrously, and not the other way around.

The Exposure

When Raymondin arms himself and goes to find his wife, following his brother’s suggestion, he finds her in the middle of her bath:

. . . all esprysed with yre & Jalousy, [Raymondin] withall toke hys swerd & girded it aboutt hym, & syn went toward the place where as Melusyne went euery satirday in the yer / and whan he cam there he fond a doore of yron thikk & strong . . . and whan he perceyued the doore of yron he toke hys swerd, that was hard & tempered with fyn stele, and with the poynte of it dyde so moche that he perced the door, and made a holl in it, and loked in at that holl, and sawe thenne Melusyne that was within a grete bathe of marbel stone, where were steppes to mounte in it, and was wel xv foot of length; and therin she bathed herself, making there her penytence.³⁰

²⁹ See the Middle English Dictionary, part of the Middle English Compendium hosted online by the University of Michigan Digital Library.

³⁰ Donald 296.

The bath serves here as an entirely practical setting for a weekly activity a wife might wish to engage in privately, as well as suggesting a ritual of purification or a specifically Christian reference to baptism, but it also recalls the fairy wife of the folktale sources, in which the interdiction is on seeing the wife without her clothing. As McCracken discusses in *The Curse of Eve*, the prohibition against viewing the wife's nude form stands in a long history of cultural taboos against witnessing "the functions of the female body," especially functions thought specifically polluting, such as the shedding of blood during menstruation or childbirth.³¹ The description of Raymondin's scraping a peephole in the door introduces, as Kevin Brownlee notes, "the anticipation of an erotic spectacle,"³² but this anticipation is immediately abrogated by the vision of Melusine engaged in a solitary, sober act of repentance.

Here again the word "penitence" suggests an act of repentance or contrition but also, possibly, "mortification of the flesh, bodily hardship undertaken to make amends for sin" as well as the ecclesiastically sanctioned sacrament. Most importantly, the term explains Melusine's private ritual within the framework of spiritual relations with a divine father, an interesting connection in that her curse came about because of a rebellion against her human father. Pressyne's curse makes reference to divine judgment and perpetual torment, but her pronouncement seems to judge Melusine's act as a breach of affection and familial loyalty rather than a social or moral crime. At this point in the narrative, rather than being an arbitrary fairy curse, Melusine's taking on serpent form is a punishment bestowed in response to her sin of patricide. Raymondin's surprising Melusine at an act of "penitence" suggests that not only is she still suffering, via her mother's curse, for that early crime, but it also

³¹ McCracken 83.

³² Brownlee 80.

positions her as a human subject, contained within the bounds of religious ritual. The reference serves as a strategic move by the narrator to explain and diffuse Melusine's monstrosity at the very moment of its revelation, for this first glimpse of Raymondin's into the chamber describes Melusine in still human terms.

The surprise waits for the next chapter, which opens with a reference to Raymondin, still standing before the hole in the door:

wherby he might wel see all that was within the Chambre / and
sawe melusyne within the bathe vnto her nauell, in fourme of a
woman kymbyng her here, and fro the nauel downward in lyknes
of a grete serpent, the tayll as grete & thykk as a barell, and so long
it was that she made it to touche oftymes, while that raymondyn
beheld her, the rouf of the chamber that was right hye.³³

This is the moment of revelation, when the reader sees for the first time, along with Raymondin, Melusine's presumed real form. In the bath, she appears the archetypal mermaid, combing her hair, with the torso of a woman and a tail below as thick as a barrel. In the French text, d'Arras provides the detail that her tail is as thick as a barrel of herring and she splashes the water so that the spray reaches up to the ceiling:

Et voit Melusigne en la cuve, qui estoit jusques au nombril en figure de
femme et pignoit ses cheveulx, et du nombril en aval estoit en forme de
la queue d'un serpent, aussi grosse comme une tonne ou on met
harenc et longue durement, et debatoit de sa coue le'eaue tellement
que'elle la foisoit saillir jusques a la voulte de la chambre.³⁴

Instead of that rather playful image, much more like a frolicking mermaid, and the reference to herring that makes the moment seem parodic, even ridiculous, the English translator offers the more somber visual image of Melusine flexing a tail that reaches up to the roof. Along with the monstrosity of an animal form attached to a human body—a trespass of the conventional human-animal

³³ Donald 297.

³⁴ Vincensini 660.

categories—Melusine's form represents a trespass of the conventional paradigms of human sexuality, the dual and usually mutually exclusive categories defied by the phallic snake-tail conjoined to the alluring body of the woman. While it is questionable to what extent this image would have recalled a primordial goddess to the minds of medieval English readers, certainly the English author chooses to portray Melusine as formidable, even frightening, highlighting the transgressive nature of his heroine and emphasizing the power and control that literally fill a room while her lord and husband, Raymondin, stands in fright behind the door.

Raymondin's response reveals where the charge of monstrosity lies in this scene. Far from reacting with horror and revulsion at the sight of his wife's alternative form, Raymondin's shock focuses on the breaking of his promise to his wife:

And whan Raymondyn perceyued it, wete it wel that he was right dolaunt and sorrowful & not without cause, and coude neuer hold hys tonge, but he said, 'My swete loue, now haue I betrayed you, & haue falsed my couenaunt by the ryght fals admounestyng of my brother, and haue forsworne myself toward you.' Raymondin thenne was smyten to the herte . . . and toke some wax wherwith he went & stopped the holl that he had made at the doore of yron, and syn came agayn to the hall where he found hys brother.³⁵

The image of the wax replacing the hole Raymondin has made in the iron door serves as a neat narrative suggestion of the released knowledge that can, now, never be kept hidden. The Earl is naturally inquisitive as to the results of his brother's little foray, and Raymondin, struck by a sense of his own failure, orders his brother out of his house: "For thugh your fals reporte I haue falsed my feyth ayenst the moost feythfullest & Truest lady that euer was borne. ye are cause of the losse of all my wordly joye & of my totall destruction."³⁶ As did the episode

³⁵ Donald 296.

³⁶ Donald 296.

from the introduction describing Robert du Castel Roussel and his fairy-lover who stuck her head into a water, turned into a serpent, and disappeared, the narrator interprets this discovery to mean that Raymondin's trespass must necessarily result in the loss of all his worldly fortunes, a breakdown he acknowledges in his accusations toward his brother. The cause of Raymondin's bereavement is not the discovery that his wife is, on Saturdays, a mermaid, or lamia, or some other such being, complete with grotesque tail; he is distressed by his own infidelity, so much so that he attempts to pretend the whole thing never happened. The possibility for diabolical associations are not, in this portion of the story, alluded to in the least; the monstrous event has to do not with Melusine's secrecy but the very human act of betrayal, particularly the violation of a promise that a man has made to his wife.

The narrator makes this very clear in subsequent passages that dwell at length on Raymondin's anguish. Again, the substance of his lament is not that his wife deceived him but that he anticipates the overthrow of his luck and happiness in the breaking of his oath, this "venymous treson." He foresees the immediate "ende of my Joye" and makes several speeches that acknowledge Melusine as the author of all his earthly felicity:

Farwel beaute, bounte, swetenes, amyablete / Farwel wyt,
 curtoysye, & humilite / Farwel al my joye, al my comfort & myn
 hoop / Farwel myn herte, my prowes, my valyaunce, For that lytel
 of honour whiche god had lent me, it came thurgh your noblesse,
 my swete and entierly belouyd lady.³⁷

Raymondin envisions an inevitable break not because Melusine is a supernatural wife like those found in folklore but because he, in not keeping the vow he made to her, has no longer any claim on her or the good fortune he now realizes that she supplied to him. Before Melusine and he have actually parted, Raymondin,

³⁷ Donald 298.

in a long soliloquy in his chamber, bewails his anticipated loss and his deserved fall from prosperity, acknowledging that Fortune “had putte and sette me in high auctoryte through the wyt and valeur of the wysest, the fayrest, & moost noble lady of al other / and now by the / fals blynde traytour and enuyous, I must lese the sight of her of whom myn eye toke theire fedyng.”³⁸ This lament, though it progresses according to the conventions of the courtly complaint,³⁹ conflates the image of an implacable, Fate-like Fortune with an equally authoritative Melusine, for the address turns quickly from Fortune to his wife: “thou [Fortune] now hatest / thou now louest, thou now makest / thou now vndost / in the, nys no more surety ne rest than is in a fane that tourneth at al windes. Helas / helas! my ryght swete & tendre loue . . .”⁴⁰ In conflating Melusine and Fortune, Raymondin attributes to both of them the power of the goddess to create and destroy, make and unmake. Melusine and Fortune have been, in this imagined scenario, accomplices in his elevation and in supplying him with all his advantages; Raymondin is not an active player but a receiver in this dynamic.

Raymondin’s positioning of Melusine as his source of “beaute, bonte,” and so on touches on this trope of the romance gender ideology, borrowed from the conventions of courtly love, that makes the lady the fount of all goodness and the chief mechanism for the lover’s joys and sorrows. He credits Melusine as being his channel for the honor which he perceives God has lent him for a time, and he attributes all his “prowes” and “valyaunce” to her. His speech recognizes Melusine, and more broadly the female companion, as the determinant of male honor and prowess. Furthermore, Raymondin positions himself as the subject of

³⁸ Donald 298.

³⁹ Brownlee 83; he reads Raymondin’s speech as drawing particularly on Guillaume de Machaut’s *Remedie de Fortune*. This would be an even more intriguing reference if, as earlier researchers have suggested, Guillaume was the author of an early missing version of *Méluſine*.

⁴⁰ Donald 298.

both Fortune and Melusine, two powerful female influences. Because he has violated the terms of his loyalty, Raymondin imagines that it is he who must be cast forth from the social order: “Certaynly yf I now lese you / none other choys is to me / but to take myn vtermost exill.”⁴¹ On a courtly register, this construction of male and female roles resonates with a certain irony; the lady’s “power” usually consists of no more than a sexual choice, that choice is moreover granted to her by the desiring male, and her erotic sway notably does not extend to social or political dimensions. Raymondin’s lament points to the gender ideology that positions the romance heroine as an important contributor to the hero’s wealth and prestige, a preserver of his fortunes; however, his positioning of himself as a victim of Fortune attempts to shift the blame from his own agency and culpability. Raymondin’s recognized dependence on how Melusine chooses to deal with his betrayal pretends to cast him as subject to the female whim, in line with the presumed dynamic of courtly lovers, but the rhetorical move masks the real problem that a social system predicated on male authority and male control also relies on male protectors to keep their oaths. The narrator’s extended focus on Raymondin’s emotional torment suggests that his behavior, and not Melusine’s, qualifies as the real threat to social integrity and domestic peace.

The next scene, when Melusine and Raymondin meet after his discovery, seems to comply with the power dynamic Raymondin envisioned, that he is in fact dependent on Melusine’s good will. Raymondin lies in silent suffering in the marital bed, and Melusine, having resumed her human form, “toke of her clothes, and than al naked layed herself by hym.”⁴² The reference to her now-human-seeming body again magnifies the problem of her hidden serpent form.

⁴¹ Donald 298-99.

⁴² Donald 299.

This scene depicts private relations between the married couple as a companionate partnership, full of affection. Perceiving that her husband is weeping, Melusine inquires after his affliction; he answers that he has a recurring fever; she expresses her wish for his quick recovery. The romance gender ideology here ensures that they both suffer over the betrayal: “And whan Raymondin sawe that she of none other þing spake, he supposed that she nothing had knowen of this faytte / but for nought he byleued soo, For she wyst wel that he had not entamed nor shewed the matere to no man / Wherefore she suffred at that tyme & made no semblaunt therof.”⁴³ The shared secret joins them, but this interior space, the bedroom, also mediates the shift between them regarding who controls the secret and, along with it, Melusine’s fate.

For the audience knows, as Raymondin does not, that the precise terms of Pressyne’s curse were that Melusine might live a natural life:

yf thou fynd ony man þat wil take the to hys wyf / and that he wil promytte to the that neuer on the Satirday he shall see the, *ne þat shall declare ne reherce thy faytt or dede to ne personne . . .* but yf by hap or some auenture / thou shuldest be seen & deceyued of thyn husband / knowe thou for certayn that thou shuldest retourne to the tourment & peyne wher as thou were in afore [emphasis mine].⁴⁴

This rewrites the conventional taboo story in a key way: rather than the viewing being sufficient to violate the oath and cause separation, as with Elynas seeing Pressyne in childbed, the activation of Melusine’s curse rests on her husband’s “seeing and deceiving” her. The word deceive, as the Middle English Dictionary presents it, compresses a number of meanings revelatory of secrecy as well as destruction: to “deceive” is (1) to lie to, be false to, defraud, mock, or play tricks on; (2) overcome by deceit, betray, seduce, destroy, or figuratively ruin; and (3) to mislead or delude or, reflexively, delude oneself. Raymondin covers the entire

⁴³ Donald 299.

⁴⁴ Donald 15.

register: he has been false to his wife, betrayed his oath as a nobleman, and now attempts to delude both her and himself by keeping the trespass a secret. As it turns out, Raymondin's silence is the key; Melusine's fate depends not on Raymondin's seeing or not seeing her on Saturdays, but what he chooses to do once he knows the truth about her.

Melusine's serpent form, up until this point of the narrative, serves as a metaphor for her Otherness as a woman within the normative social system, the world where promises are made, contracts agreed upon, and land passes hands through the doings of the male. Her fabulous power is no more than the power of a wealthy, aristocratic woman who is able to select a choice sexual partner, bring her own resources to enlarge her husband's wealth, advise him on political matters relating to his inheritance, influence him through his personal devotion to her, and manage his estates in a productive way. While her latent serpent form serves to represent this power she has—a power granted her by class (that is to say, birth) which allows her to temporarily overcome the philosophical inferiority of her gender—it also signifies that this power is potentially dangerous. The English translator uses Melusine's hybrid form—her monstrosity—to point to the ways the gender ideology of the romance allows Melusine this significant power but, ultimately, will still not make her self-determining as to her own fate. Despite her resources, she is still subject to the theological, legal, and social frameworks of her world that privilege male decisions and make the lives of females wholly dependent; this is the paradox which her monstrosity portends.

The Betrayal

Melusine's reliance on Raymondin to keep her secret and the way that secret finally erupts into the world becomes, in the hands of the English translator, a

way to contemplate the chief anxieties and vulnerabilities of the patriarchal social order which the romance world constructs and naturalizes. Her masquerade is revealed through two acts of the male characters that violate the supposed chivalric ethos. The first is the act of violence which, according to Nolan, affords the historical core of and impetus for the story as a whole: Geoffrey the Great Tooth, in a rage because his brother Fromont has joined the ranks of monks which he considers irresponsible and corrupt, burns down the monastery of Maillezes with all the brethren, including Fromont, inside. Reeling from this news, Raymondin concludes that his wife is to blame for his seemingly not-quite-human offspring, an opinion not entirely unjustified by the fact that eight of his ten sons bear irregular features ranging from strangely-colored or extra eyes and overlarge ears to Geoffrey's prominent incisor. Confronted with his son's outrageous act, Raymondin is forced to conclude that neither can his wife be quite human, to account for the offensiveness of her sons:

By the feyth that I owe to god, I byleue it is but fantosme or spyryt werke of this woman / and as I trowe she neuer bare no child that shal at thende haue perfection, For yet hath she brought none but that it hath some strange token / see I not the horryblenes of her son called Horryble, that passed not vii yere of age whan he slew two squyers of myn / and or euer he was thre yere old he made dye two gentyl women his nourryces, thugh hys byttyng of their pappes? / sawe I not also theyre moder of that satirday, whan my brother of Forestz to me brought euyl tydynges of her / in fourme of a serpent fro the nauel downward? / by god, ye / and wel I wote certayn / it is some spyryt, some fantosme or Illusyon that thus hath abused me / For the first tyme that I saw her / she knew & coude reherce all my fortune & auenture.⁴⁵

The monstrosity at work in Raymondin's speech is the possibility that illusory spirits can work on humans, perhaps against their own knowledge or judgment,

⁴⁵ Donald 311.

and that these “fantosmes” can pass defects to their children. The latter seems to have the most weight in Raymondin’s mind, as he dwells on his son Horrible and his childhood career of violence.⁴⁶ It seems fully possible that were Melusine indeed able to “bear child that shall at the end have perfection,” her serpent form would hardly matter. The insult is not against God or nature, or even himself personally, but against the most cherished myths underlying the medieval patriarchy: that the father’s stamp has the formative power in creating children, and that only males have fully-developed reason and steady natures, which thus legitimizes male authority, inheritance, and exclusive social control.

Raymondin’s anxiety regarding Melusine’s physical body concerns what she is transmitting to her children—in effect, tainting his bloodline and creating unfit, imperfect issue. His fear illuminates the central vulnerability of a class system that is decided by birth and governed by male authority; the contribution of the mother’s blood in conceiving the child, her function as the body that gestates and then births the offspring, and the subsequent transmission of fluids and thereby essential qualities in nursing the child are all activities over which the non-gestating partner can have little to no influence. Raymondin’s distress acknowledges that the functions of the female body are a crucial social element which—once that body is engaged in reproductive activities—does not respond to male control, private or public. Thus, despite the care with which social systems might be organized and governed by ethical values and foundational philosophies molded by informed males—and no matter how shared thought might work to limit or efface the social category of woman—the system’s primary dependence on woman as child-bearer keys women into the social structure at the point where they have the most power to either create or destroy.

⁴⁶ The biting and/or suckling to death of nurses and the killing of squires are also legendary moments in the childhood careers of Robert the Devil and his analogue, Gamelyn.

Melusine's monstrosity, at this point, illustrates the essential ungovernability of the biological female body. Raymondin points specifically to the terms of childbirth, where the physical stamp of maternal lineage on Melusine's sons belies the accepted Aristotelian model whereby the woman offers only the matter or the formless blood to conception while the male provides the animating seed. More broadly, Melusine's hybrid, serpent-human body figures the fundamental incoherence of patriarchal systems of social control: the effort to reduce women to walking wombs, accessible for purposes of male pleasure or discretionary reproduction to support patrilineal inheritance, instead concentrates attention on the single social act for which women are indispensable, thereby amplifying their importance and their impact.

The Sentence

In the scenes describing Raymondin's denouncement and Melusine's final transformation, the tragedy upon which the narrator focuses is not the monstrosity of her revealed, serpentine form but rather the human anguish that Melusine, Raymondin, and their many retainers feel upon being forced to part. Again the story focuses not just on Melusine's suffering but Raymondin's too; after receiving the letter informing him of his son's great crime, he travels to his fortress of Mermant and there languishes in his chamber, overcome in proper romance-hero style by his great emotional distress. Melusine, having received at Nyort the letters informing her of same, "was ryght heuy & dolaunt, & more for the yre & wrath of raymondin than for ony other thing," but she is not out of her head with sorrow: "For she sawe wel that the meschief that geffray had doon might none otherwyse be as for that tyme present."⁴⁷ She travels to Lusignan

⁴⁷ Donald 312.

and spends a moody three days there, going about the place, despite the company of her ladies, with a heavy countenance and frequent sighs, “so grete that it was meruyalle & pyteous to here / And the hystory & cronykle, whiche I byleue be trew, sheweth to vs that wel she knew the doleur & sorow that was nygh her to come / and as to me, I byleue it fermely / but her peple thoughte nothing of that . . .”⁴⁸ In a rare moment, the narrator participates as a character in his own story, and it happens when he directs his narrative lens to Melusine’s state of misery. He highlights her isolation as a foreshadowing of the casting-out to follow, falls back on his “historical” source to authorize the return of her foreknowledge, and concentrates on the full scope of human feeling, and human expression, of which Melusine is capable, treating her otherwise supernatural form as the mere device which contributes the emotional drama with which he is concerned.

Melusine’s final exposure differs from the early spying-on-her-bath scene in that it is not a private but heavily witnessed business, suggesting again that what is at stake is not the matter of her half-animal substance but in fact her social role. When Melusine goes to meet Raymondin at Merment, she proceeds into his chamber with a full company of “many ladyes & noble damoysselles, & of the barons of the land.” Her consolatory speech to him stresses not only her own sensibility but also her shared insight, with the narrator, into the secret workings of God. She offers him consolation on a sequence of valid rhetorical grounds: he should not be so desolate because (1) it is “grete symplenes & foly . . . to maynten & make suche sorowe of that thinge that may none other wyse be, & whiche may not be amended nor remdyed;” (2) he argues against the will of the Creator, who has ordered all things, “& shal vndoo at al tymes whan it playse hym, by suche

⁴⁸ Donald 312-13.

manere wyse aftir his playsire;" (3) the greater the sin, the more "piteable & mysericordious" it is when the sinner repents;⁴⁹ (4) God used Geoffrey as a tool of punishment "for cause of the monkes mysdedes & synnes, which were of euyll, inordinate, & vnrelygious lyuyng;" though why he should have used Geoffrey they must not question since (5) "the jugements of god be ryght secret & meruyallous." Moreover, she says practically, (6) they have enough money "to do make ayen thabbey of Mayllese as fayre & bettre than euer it was tofore, & to empossesse & endowe it bettre & rychelyer, and therin to ordeyne greter nombre of monkes than euer were there ordeyned," and since (7) Geoffrey may yet repent and amend his life, Raymondin should leave his sorrowing.⁵⁰ The impressive rhetorical skill she displays argues in favor of the wisdom and wise governance with which Melusine has always been credited, and her pious references to God underline the relationship with Christian theology which she has claimed for herself from the first. Indeed her calm logic forms a startling contrast to her husband's response, considering that they neatly reverse the typical assumptions about which gender possesses reason, and which is subject to changeable emotion: "Raymondyn . . . knew wel that she sayd trouthe of that she had sayd to hym / and that it was best, after rayson, so to doo / but he was replenysshed & perced with yre, that al rayson natural was fled & goon from hym."⁵¹

Raymondin thus answers his wife with an attack:

Goo thou hens, fals serpente / by god! Nother thou nor thy birthe
 shalbe at thende but fantosme / nor none child that thou hast
 brought shal come at last to perfection / how shal they that are
 brent & bruled haue theire lyues agayn / good fruyte yssued neuer
 of the, saaf only Froymonde, that was youen to god & shorne

⁴⁹ Donald 313.

⁵⁰ Donald 314.

⁵¹ Donald 314.

monke; the whiche, through arte demonyacle, hath myserably suffred death: For all they that are foursenyd with yre obeye the comandements of the prynces of helle. And þerfor, thorrible & cruel geffray commanded of his masters, alle the deuells of helle, hath doon that abhomynable & hydouse forfaytte, as to brenne hys owne propre brother & the monkes, that had not deserued death.⁵²

Several things are immediately striking about this speech. It is the first time that anybody within the narrative has explicitly pointed to Melusine's alternative nature; Raymondin's chief concern is still her status as "fantosme" and her impact on his (or rather what he calls "her") children; and Raymondin, speaking out of ire, holds a discourse on the damages there attendant. This phrasing endorses Nolan's theory that that the explanation for Melusine's attachment to the Lusignan family lies in the philosophical need to explain the motivations for Geoffrey's horrific behavior, as "such an inhuman act might be rationalized from its inception as the result of some form of demonic influence."⁵³ However, this is the first time that the suggestion of any diabolical practice has entered the narrative, and the association is with Geoffrey, not Melusine herself. Furthermore, the bit of moralizing in Raymondin's declaration that "all they that are foursenyd with yre obeye the comandements of the prynces of helle" introduces a complication into the condemnation of Geoffrey's "arte demonyacle" and the otherwise clear accusation against Melusine and "her birth," that bad fruit. Her fairy (or serpent?) nature might be held directly responsible for transmitting to her son this fatal flaw which has allowed this "abhomynable & hydouse forfaytte" to be imagined and perpetrated. But Geoffrey's succumbing to ire muddies the explanation of "bad blood." Is Raymondin suggesting that bad blood has made Geoffrey susceptible to ire? Or is he suggesting that, as a "fantosme" like his mother and brothers, Geoffrey has

⁵² Donald 314-15.

⁵³ Nolan, *Introduction*, 145-6.

the ability to command his presumed masters, all the devils of hell? One cannot expect a literary character whose “rayson naturel” has fled him to be precise in his points of debate, and Raymondin’s confusion is both evidence for and cause of his distress. Raymondin’s blame of Melusine for her son’s act is the first time in the text that the connection between fairy and the diabolical is even suggested, the first time that another character perceives Melusine as monstrous.

The terms Raymondin uses to accuse his wife build one possible framework through which a medieval English reader or listening audience might define Melusine’s monstrosity. He describes her as “fantosme,” “spyryt,” and “Illusyon.” These the English translator renders directly from his source, for they appear also in Raymondin’s reaction when he first learns of the fire at the monastery: “Si fiz, par Dieu! C’est aucune esperite ou c’est toute fantosme ou illusion qui m’a ainsi abusé.” The English translation follows the French in identifying, in Raymondin’s eyes, Melusine’s prophetic powers as the first point of evidence of this “spirit work”⁵⁴ In Jean d’Arras’s version, Raymondin’s “go thou hence, false serpent” speech contains the same terms of accusation, but with a slightly different emphasis:

Hee, tresfaulse serpente, par Dieu, ne toy ne tes fais ne sont que fantosme ne ja hoir que tu ayes porté ne vendra a bon chief en la fin. Comment raront les vies ceulx qui sont ars en grief misere ne ton filz qui s’estoit renduz au crucefix? Il n’avoit yssi de toy plus de bien que Fromont. Or est destruit par l’art demonniacle, car tous ceulx qui sont forcennéz de yre sont ou commandement des princes d’enfer et par ce fist Gieffroy le grant et horrible et hideux forfait d’ardoir son frere et les moines, qui mort ne avoient point desservie.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ “Premiere foiz que je la vy, ne me sçot elle bien a dire toute ma mesaventure?” he asks himself in Vincensini 688.

⁵⁵ Vincensini 692-94.

The touches added in the English are small but revealing: calling Melusine's children her "fruit," specifying that Fromont "was youen to god & shorne monke," and moving the modifier "en grief misere" describing the general suffering of the burned monks to describe Fromont in particular as "having miserably suffered death" where the OF suggests the simpler "est destruit." The detail that Geoffrey must have commanded the devils of hell—and the suggestion that they are his "masters"—is furnished entirely by the imagination of the English translator. Doubtless he intended to add weight to the horror of the act with the suggestion of black magic, a concept that would have been met with disgust, revulsion, or fear among English audiences of the early sixteenth century, according to Helen Cooper.⁵⁶ The English author amplifies what d'Arras refers to as a demonic act by imagining Geoffrey in some unholy alliance for which, so Raymondin suggests, his bloodline—at least on the distaff side—disposes him. Raymondin's association contradicts what Melusine has always before claimed, that she is "of God," by calling her unnatural. But Raymondin's accusations against Melusine personally—which can only be slightly separated from her monstrous act in passing this flawed humanity to her sons—is that she is *fantosme*, not real but illusory.

The Middle English Dictionary offers an array of meanings for "fantosme" which help illuminate Raymondin's concerns. In its primary usage, a *fantosme* refers to that which has only a seeming reality, permanence, or value; vanity (of the world, its riches, joys, etc.); also, any of the world's vanities. But it may also (2) refer to: (a) that which deludes the senses or imagination; illusion (as of dream or hallucination) or (b) an illusory experience or object; an apparition, a specter. It may equally indicate (3) that which cannot be credited as truth or fact;

⁵⁶ See *The English Romance in Time* for Cooper's discussion of changing views of magic in the background of the English romance (160-167).

error; lying, a falsehood (one uses “withouten fantome” to assert veracity, as in the sense of truly, indeed), but also (4) the practice of deception; deceiving contrivance; also, a deceit, guile, or (5) the morbid experience of hallucinations or bad dreams; delirium.

The word “spirit” carries even more meanings, including that of an immaterial creature, such as a ghost, an apparition, a fabulous creature, or a demon or evil or demonic influence, “the manifestation of malign power.” Still the emphasis of the word is on immateriality, lack of substance; this seems to be what Raymondin enforces with his use of spirit, phantom, and illusion to describe his wife’s being. The words gesture toward the kind of theological framework invoked by Paracelsus, where elemental beings inhabit human environs, are able to interact with them to the point of personal and even sexual relations, and can as equally be possessed by the devil as can humans.⁵⁷ The emphasis on immateriality however carries a contradictory force, since Melusine has throughout the story possessed a very material body, from the first meeting where she actively halts Raymondin’s horse, through several births, up to and including his sight of her enormous serpent tail while she is at her bath. Raymondin seems unable to distinguish what in fact is illusory: her serpent aspect, her beneficent womanhood, or both. The blending of borders, and the suggestion that this liminal space is particularly open to devilish influence, would provoke horror or at the very least extreme discomfort in an early sixteenth-century English audience inclined to view prophecy, demonic possession, and the transmission of tainted blood as serious crimes. Melusine’s affective human emotions, though stressed by the translator, provide no more than a counterpoint to Raymondin’s distress, which is due to his revelation that

⁵⁷ Paracelsus 482-483; Temkin et. al. 240-241.

his wife has been masquerading as a human all this time. While the sight of her serpent tail failed to fill him with revulsion, here Raymondin rejects her on the grounds that she has produced tainted offspring and deceived him with her illusory form. He credits her as doing no more than what women, according to misogynistic tradition, have done since Creation: manipulate and mislead men.

Thus, Melusine's monstrosity at this point figures several interpretations. Her blended shape might represent her rebellion against the patriarchy, explanation for the fairy curse; her influence over Raymondin in the domestic sphere, the conjugal fidelity that can only be supposed given its result in ten children, and her loyal advice and contributions that have enlarged his material and psychic comforts; her ability to transmit not just blood or breastmilk but inherent qualities to her offspring, quite against one generally received scientific assumption; and her ability to dissemble or deceive her husband even after twenty-odd years of marriage, so that when disaster occurs, he can only assume it was the true state of things waiting to be given outlet, and all that came before was no more than a sham. To Raymondin, her monstrosity lies in the discord between his assumptions and fact, appearance and reality. To the narrator, the monstrosity, the perilous blending, results from the attempted combination not of the categories of human and fairy but of woman and social world. For the author and for the English translator in special points of emphasis, Melusine's eventual casting out—the only possible resolution to her curse—is also the only possible end for a powerful woman in a male-centered world. Melusine's fate proves that a conceptual framework that defines the male subject through Othering the female provides no way to coherently integrate the female—not into heterosexual marriage, not into functional motherhood, not into the role as manager for the household castles and their coffers—when the female term itself is monstrous by blending or threatening to collapse differences between

recognized and naturalized concepts like gender roles. Exile is the only way to correct the threat to the normative so the monstrous element can be sanitized and the categories restored.

Melusine's Crime

In a story that elsewhere obeys a decipherable narrative logic, the ineluctable details of Melusine's transformations might easily be dismissed as the places where the educated author found himself unable to seamlessly reconcile his literary sources with the more difficult and symbolic folkloric material. (Why Melusine's rebellion against her father requires that she turn half-serpent for one day a week, for example, is not given explanation in the tale.) But in fact, Melusine's final transformation into a fully non-human creature offers a different reading as to her primary crime.

Melusine begins the exchange to her new and final corporality by announcing her departure from the old: as she says to Raymondin, "ye shal neuer see me in no womans fourme."⁵⁸ If we recall the terms of Pressyne's original curse, we remember she specified that if Melusine's human marriage were to fail and she were to return to "tourment & peyne," then "thou shalt appiere by thre days byfore the fortresse or Castel whiche thou shalt make, and thou shalt name it aftir thy name / at euey tyme whan it shall haue a new lord, and lykwyse also whan a man of they lynce shal dey."⁵⁹ Here, particularly, it would appear that Pressyne's curse provides a slender narrative excuse for the author to insert wholesale a current oral tradition concerning Melusine and her haunting of the castle of Lusignan. As far as these terms go, the intervening narrative—all several hundred pages of it—looks little more than an elaborate

⁵⁸ Donald 318.

⁵⁹ Donald 15.

just-so story, an engaging etiological myth that explains an existing belief about an apparition that appears before an ancient castle when it changes ownership or witnesses a death.

But Melusine, in her answering speech to Raymondin, elaborates on the sentence that awaits her with knowledge that the narrator has not previously presented:

[Y]f thou haddest not falsed thy feythe & thyn othe, I was putte & exempted from all peyne & tourment, & shuld haue had al my ryghtes, & hadd lyued the cours natural as another woman; & shuld haue be buryed, aftir my lyf naturel expired, within the chirche of our lady of Lsynen, where myn obsequye & afterward my annyuersary shuld haue be honourably & deuoutely don / but now I am, thurghte thyn owne dede, ouerthrowed & ayen reuersed in the greuouse and obscure penytence, where long tyme I haue be in, by myn auenture: & thus I muste suffre & bere it, vnto the day of domme / & al through thy falsed . . .⁶⁰

It is striking that only through marriage should Melusine receive all her “ryghtes;” she too seems to regard heterosexual union as the institution that makes her, if not essentially human, then at least a fully realized social being, with privileges of burial and remembrance after her death. Her speech about both her desire for Raymondin and her desired end reveals the curious paradox that, while Melusine has seemed all along to enable Raymondin’s enlargement of fortunes and ascension in the eyes of his peers, it is in fact he who made possible all of her activities. She could have accomplished nothing that she did—founding castles, bearing children, living a “lyf naturel”—without the avenues available to her as the wife of a nobleman and her secure interweaving into the patriarchal systems ruling the world she seeks to enter. Despite her personal resources—beauty, foreknowledge of events, dedicated workmen and attendants

⁶⁰ Donald 316.

whom she can summon at will, and bottomless coffers with which to equip her sons' armies or replace monasteries they might happen to destroy—her entire existence depends on the good will and tolerance of the patriarch. Without that, she is cast into an undefined void constituted of nothing but suffering.

By this point, furthermore, it is clear that in Melusine's eyes, her punishment has been handed down by God. When Raymondin weeps and asks her to stay with him, she tells him "but as to myn abydyng with you ony more / it is Impossible / for the veray jugge & almighty god wold neuer suffre me to doo soo."⁶¹ Just as she has always claimed to be of God, Melusine credits a powerful Creator and Judge with orchestrating her fate. Pressyne invented the curse but, as far as Melusine is concerned, the Christian God endorses it. Such a claim works to neutralize the strangeness of her turning into a flying dragon as she leaps out the window; instead, the gesture toward the omnipotent Christian authority brings the tone more fully into the conventional romance mode, where the narrative tension rests on the heightened emotion expressed by the main characters as they face separation:

'My swete loue,' sayd Raymondyn, 'there shal be no fawte of it / but, for goddis loue, haue pyte on yourself, & wyl abyde with me.' And she said to hym: 'My swete frend, yf it were possyble / soo wold I fayne doo / but it may not be. And wete it wel, that my departyng fro you is more gryeuous & doubtous a thousand tymes to me than to you / but it is the wyll & playsire of hym that can do & vndoo al thinges.' And, with these wordes, she embraced & kyssed hym full tenderly / sayeng: 'Farwel, myn owne lord & husbond; Adieu, myn herte, & al my joye; Farwel, my loue, & al myn wele / and yet as long as thou lyuest, I shal feed myn eyen with the syght of the / but pyte I haue on the of this, that thou mayst neuer see me but in horryble figure' / and therwith she lept vpon the windowe that was toward the felde & gardyns ayenst Lusynen.⁶²

⁶¹ Donald 317.

⁶² Donald 318-19.

Rather than an exchange of disgust or mutual repudiation, the language between the two in this scene resonates with the lyricism of courtly love poetry (while Melusine's saying "I shal feed myn eyen with the syght of the" recalls Raymondin's earlier lament that "I must lese the sight of her of whom myn eye toke theire fedyng"), and the author adds an effective narrative touch in framing Raymondin's last sight of Melusine against the fields and gardens of Lusignan. It is their main home and fortress, the place where they met and married as well as their first construction project; it is the central anchor of Melusine's life, the one term used to describe her from the story's beginning, before ever her name is introduced, when the author proposes "to trete how the noble ffortresse or Castell of Lusygne was bylded & made of a woman of the fayree."⁶³ Significantly, Lusignan is also the place to which Melusine's spirit is bound for the rest of her unnatural life. The "fields and gardens" remind the reader in this crucial moment of Melusine's own fertility, her status as a *materfamilias*, and her iconic guardianship of the estate. The evocation of her beneficent history reminds the reader that Melusine's curse does not actually exile her from the castles she built; nor, as it turns out, does it prevent other people, for instance her sons or the later English steward of the castle, from seeing her in "woman's form." It is only her marital relations with Raymondin that must end.

If the punishment suits the crime, then it appears Melusine's crime—as Raymondin suggested earlier—was in attempting, as a not-quite-human entity, to integrate herself into the human world. As a result she is doomed to haunt her holdings as a "horrible figure," permanently Othered from the human world, bound by her duty to prognosticate the castle's fortunes. She has transformed fully into a *monstra*, a portent, but what she signifies serves as a reminder of what

⁶³ Donald 6.

she contributed to her world—the physical artifact as well as its name, a “mother-mark” upon the landscape as Kelly calls it.⁶⁴

The ongoing presence, at least in the imagination, of the name and image of the woman who played a key role in building the Lusignan dynasty works against the customary processes of both history and literature which would tend (as in the example of Eleanor of Aquitaine being replaced by a fairy wife calling herself Cassodorien) to otherwise efface the woman who figures in this key moment in the genealogy. Melusine’s monstrosity, here, is that she does not quietly disappear from time and history, as the patriarchal current would have it, but instead comes screaming back to announce and in fact highlight moments when the male-favoring systems of inheritance and ownership are at risk. Even in her final form, Melusine’s monstrosity signifies the anxieties of the male-ruled world—which failed to accommodate her from the moment of her birth—about its own vulnerabilities, weaknesses, and failures of the patriarchy. Not only are her transformations explicitly tied to male failures—her father’s failure to observe customary marital relations and not see his wife in childbed; her son’s failure to respect Christian institution, familial relationship, or his duties as a chivalric knight; her husband’s inability to first keep his promise to her and then keep quiet about what he actually learned—but Melusine’s exile also figures, finally, the patriarchy’s inability to fully integrate the social category of woman.

Poised on the window, about to depart, Melusine’s final words express her own perceptions of womanhood, in keeping with the customs of the romance gender ideology:

Thenne Melusyne in her lamentable place, where she was upon the
wyndowe hauyng respection toward Lusynen, said in this wyse,
‘Ha, thou swete Countre / in the haue I had so grete solas &

⁶⁴ Kelly 36.

recreacion, in the was al my felicite / yf god had not consented that
I had be so betrayed I had be full happy / alas! I was wont to be
called lady / & men were redy to fulfyll my commandements / &
now not able to be alowed a symple seruante / but assygned to
horrible peynes & tourments vnto the day of fynal judgement. And
al they that myght come to my presence had grete Joye to behold
me / and fro this tyme forth they shal dysdayne me & be ferefull
of myn abhominable figure . . .⁶⁵

It is perhaps a mere effect of the translation that the “horrible peynes & tourments” to which she is consigned are syntactically subordinated to the woes of not even having a single servant to attend her, she who once had vast workforces at her disposal. The emphasis that those who once beheld her in joy shall now look on her in fear nicely captures the reversal of Melusine’s fortunes and also continues the concern with appearances, touching again on the idea that her semblance as a human was but an illusion. Her reflection that she was “wont to be called lady” reminds her auditors of her status, which she then follows with the announcement she is “the doughter of kynge Elynas of Albany and of þe queene Pressyne,” and therefore Raymondin ought not reproach her children as being born of a serpent woman or fairy.⁶⁶ She seems to suggest that her royal blood negates, assuages, or somehow forgives what is essentially non-human about Melusine herself; her sons, she says, are in no way non-human, and she has neither tainted them with her non-human nature nor foreclosed on their destinies of salvation. In fact the revelation of her parentage seems designed to emphasize, one last time, the transmission of qualities from mother to child that takes place in gestation and parturition and is carried in the blood.

Melusine’s maternity defines her, but so does her rank as practical strategist, manager of construction efforts, and supervisor of the household. In

⁶⁵ Donald 319.

⁶⁶ Donald 320.

keeping with the textual emphasis throughout on her virtuous motherhood, Melusine's final address to Raymondin reminds him to think of his sons and heed her advice concerning them. Her directions are not entirely tender; she specifies that her son Horrible (who has three eyes) must be killed or he will harm the entire family. Sentiment is subordinated to practicality, and the advice merely iterates Melusine's status as protectress and benefactor of the Lusignan inheritance. She then proceeds into her final transformation to nothing resembling the human. Her final shape, it is important to note, is not a reversion to her pre-lamia state but a conversion into full serpent, a dragon several feet in length:

Thenne she bygan to gyue a sore syghte, & therwith flawgh in to thayer out of the wyndowe, transfigured lyke a serprent grete & long in xv foote of length. And wete it wel that on the basse stone of the wyndowe apereth at this day themprynte of her foote serpentous . . . And foorthwith they lokked out of the wyndowe to behold what way she toke / And the noble Melusyne so transffygured, as it is aforsaid, flyeng thre tymes about the place, passed foreby the wyndow, gyuyng at euerche tyme an horrible cry & pyteous, that caused them that beheld her to wepe for pyte. For they perceyued wel that loth she was to depart fro the place, & that it was by constraynte. . . . And so she flawgh to Lusynen thre times about the Fortres, cryeng so pyteously & lamentably, lyke the voyce of a Mermayde. . . . And whan she had floughe about the Fortresse thre tymes she lyghted so sodaynly & hooybly vpon the toure called poterne, bryngyng with her such thundre & tempeste, that it semed that bothe the Fortres & the toun shuld haue sonk and fall.⁶⁷

The description of her final alteration is both dramatic and framed by the human emotion which accompanies it; the interior audience, who "wepe for pyte," cue the story's listening audience as to their appropriate reaction. From the tower she flies away, so that the people "wyst not where she was become . . . And

⁶⁷ Donald 320-21.

thenne bygan Raymondyn to entre into hys sorowe."⁶⁸ This final note leaves the lingering impression that though Melusine is being punished for being non-human—as if the human/animal or human/supernatural categories are being corrected through her dramatic expulsion—she is nonetheless subject to human emotion; the watchers at the fortress can detect that she does not wish to leave. She is not prevented from seeing and even nursing her remaining sons or otherwise interacting with humans; a later episode describes how Melusine visits the English steward of the castle just before the French are to win it back, and she appears then in the form of a woman. She remains essentially a hybrid, though now her woman's form is the "illusion" and the dragon her persistent form. But in linking the tragedy of her final transformation to her emotional distress at being parted from her husband and home, the English narrator defers emphasis on the monstrous or category-defying qualities of Melusine's final shape and instead pictures her as an exiled matriarch, social outcast, and tormented figure.

Raymondin would have it that Melusine's crime was not being what she seemed; the terms of the curse suggest her crime was an attempt to topple the father. But the narrative has taken every opportunity to cast Melusine as a normal and actually quite admirable woman, going about the business of being a wife, mother, and housekeeper. Her lamentable fate results rather from a failure of the primary male to observe the taboo regarding the secreted female body; first the father sees his wife in childbed, and then Raymondin spies on his wife, on the forbidden day, at her bath. The taboo itself suggests there is something faintly polluting about the processes of and sometimes the mere viewing of the female body. The monstrosity is the state of being woman, something between the rational male creature and an unprincipled, unsouled, carnal animal. These

⁶⁸ Donald 321.

terms can never be absolute and the narrative does not suggest they are; rather, the story implies through the monstrous aspects of Melusine's corporeality that she confuses boundaries precisely because those boundaries are themselves precarious. Her non-human elements such as the serpent tail and, later, the dragon form call attention to the slightly-less-than-human terms that are used to describe women in the social, biological, ethical, and philosophical discourses with which the romance's audience is surrounded. Melusine's hybridity reminds listeners that even the definitions of and claims about women given in the medieval literature are not solid or coherent truths; they are constructs that themselves overlap and confuse in ways that can be considered monstrous. Melusine's narrative suggests that in both biological and social traditions, the state of womanhood is inherently of a perilous, blended character and, in the end, unassimilable to a social world ruled by men—especially when men do not adhere to the codes upon which the protection of women relies.

Melusine's Legacy

In her final conversion, the terms of Melusine's monstrosity have subtly changed again. In the scene of Melusine's departure, his heroine's flying through the air in the form of a dragon seems to interest the English narrator less than her lingering human-likeness, in that the serpentine figure calls out with a woman's voice. In the description he likens her to a mermaid, the single point where the text calls upon any of the conventional medieval iconography concerning fabulous creatures. It also happens to be the invention of the English translator; the French text says simply that Melusine "*crioit moult piteusement, et se lamentoit de voix femmenine.*"⁶⁹ This description highlights the physical menace

⁶⁹ Vincensini 704.

of Melusine's new form, at least in her impact on the tower, as much as it stresses her sorrow over the death of her hopes to become human.

The French text suggests that the footprint left on the windowsill captures Melusine's dissolving female form: "Et sachiez que la pierre sur quoy elle passa a la fenestre y est encores, et y est la forme du pié toute escripte."⁷⁰ But the English text references her "foote serpentous," which confuses her lingering humanity with her new and last corporeal form. Once again Melusine's attempts at self-representation—much like her attempts to protect the secret of the monstrous form imposed upon her by her mother's curse—are voided by the authorities to whom she is subject. She endeavors to imprint on the minds of her listeners her claims to aristocratic stature, emphasizing her birth of a human father and her maternal link to her human sons, but the metamorphosis which her husband and attendants subsequently witness immediately contradicts her humanity. As Brownlee notes of the French version, Melusine's human footprint on the window, "the last mark of her corporeal identity as a walking woman," heightens the paradox; the "empty trace of the now absent human body points toward the monstrous presence of the serpentine body, and vice versa."⁷¹ The evidence which becomes, in the English translation, the first mark of Melusine's definitively transformed body marks her somehow as more wholly serpentine, more wholly removed from the human realm, more coherently Othered.

Readers of the French text tend to find productive territory in the contrasts between Melusine's dual (or multiple) nature; as Gabrielle Spiegel observes, "Jean proliferates the paradoxes that make it so difficult to interpret the text in any unilinear way."⁷² But the tone given by the English translator offers a more

⁷⁰ Vincensini 704.

⁷¹ Brownlee 92-93.

⁷² Spiegel 118; but in the same volume, *Melusine of Lusignan: Founding Fictions*, Sturm-Maddox in "Crossed Destinies," Kelly in "The Domestication of the Marveous," and Pickens in "The Poetics

unified interpretation of Melusine and positions her as a coherent character, not an embodied paradox, and, moreover, a character of a type recognizable within an English cultural tradition. In attempting to more securely position his heroine inside a hierarchy of the Christian supernatural, moving her away from the liminal and somewhat amoral thirdspace of the fairy world, the translator's stress on her latent serpent form instead increases the suggestion of Melusine's demonic associations, or at least possibilities. In addition, the visual and exemplary traditions given in ecclesiastical art and literature, which use the half-serpent woman to symbolize temptation, vice, or Lust as types of mortal danger, all predispose English audiences to see Melusine as a threatening figure, a tradition which culminates in the revolting *Errour of Spenser's Faerie Queene*.

Part of the English translator's interpretation depends on the material circumstances of and generic conventions within which he is writing. The romance tradition relies on the highly patterned and exaggerated emotion of its main characters, which might account for a stress on the affective aspects of Melusine's transformations. Second, he is somewhat limited by the choice (perhaps the choice made by the printer for whom he is preparing the manuscript, whether Wynkyn de Worde or another) to transcribe fairly closely from a French prose story already a hundred years old. He is not, however, (assuming that the redactor is in fact a he) trying to please a patron by creating an entertaining tale about a fortress that has recently come into that patron's possession. He is not undertaking to incorporate a well-known local folktale into the larger narrative demands of a history, chronicle, or romance. But he is consciously working within a romance tradition which is already well-established in England, which had been unfolding and developing since the

of Paradox" and well as Brownlee all structure their arguments on the delineation of contrasting elements in the romance.

Anglo-Norman romances circulating almost four hundred years earlier, and he is, arguably, aware of his own English literary tradition—a literary culture which had been significantly shaped by the individual genius of writers like Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate. His position within the print revolution, his relationship to an English literary tradition—especially its typical treatments of romance women—and the requirements of his audience may all variously inform his creative agenda. This agenda, as the small but pointed differences in his translation from the French original suggest, has to do with presenting Melusine herself as a more easily translatable figure, more identifiable as one thing or another, rather than as a traveling set of contradictions. His emphasis throughout has been on her human emotions and human behaviors, even to the moment when Raymondin discovers her curse, when he presents his heroine not as a splashing animal but in the attitude of a woman enjoying her bath. The consequences of this, I argue, are unintended by the translator, but inevitable in light of the material: what he chooses not to emphasize, that is Melusine's blurred and shifting form, becomes all the more eloquent because it functions as the repressed, and what it represses signifies both her elemental monstrosity and the ways this monstrosity is linked to the vulnerability of the patriarchal order.

In her last scene especially, the narrative emphasis falls not on Melusine's startling transformation but rather on the emotional suffering which she is doomed to undergo. What qualifies as monstrous, for the English narrator, is not her half-human-morphed-to-dragon form but the pain of separation from her husband, children, lands, and class situation. In this sense Melusine shares less with the half-serpent women of clerical and iconographic traditions but does greatly resemble the suffering women who are otherwise emphatically not a rarity in other medieval literatures. Martyred women permeate medieval romance, chronicle, and hagiography; these genres are figuratively strewn with

exiled queens and persecuted virgins, accused mothers and abandoned mates. The trend is not an English phenomenon but a cross-cultural one; supposed defenses of “good women” such as Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*, Boccaccio’s *De claris mulieribus*, and Christine de Pizan’s *Le livre de la cité des dames* read as catalogues of the wrongs done not by but to women. Even tellings of the most ordinary of stories bristle with allusions to Lucretia, Dido, Philomela, Proserpina, and all sorts of mutilated Ovidian heroines next to their hysterical “historical” sisters (Semiramis, Cleopatra, and Criseyde, to name a few of the most popular). The ubiquitousness of the imperiled woman could be dismissed as a simple narrative motif, a classic device that performs the fundamental narratological purposes of creating conflict and driving plot. But her recurrence as not just literary event or theme but literary ornamentation—as analogy, allusion, or simple illustration—argues for a more substantial metaphorical role in the English imagination than as a simple superattenuation of a literary trope or fading repetitive echo in the Blochian sense of medieval misogynist conventions that take voyeuristic and sadistic delight in violence against women.

Melusine and the romance type of the martyred, suffering woman do, in fact, borrow something from the standard linchpins of medieval misogyny. As Anna Roberts notes in the introduction to *Violence Against Women in Medieval Texts*, the pervasiveness of violence enacted on women in the romances has a very useful goal; it results in a depreciation of female torments and achieves, finally, what Anne Laskaya calls the “patriarchal theft of women’s suffering” by using the abused or endangered woman to illuminate or accentuate the trials of the central male characters.⁷³ *Melusine* performs much the same by making its heroine’s torments secondary to Raymondin’s, whose welfare, as it is bound to

⁷³ See Laskaya’s chapter on *Émare* in Roberts 97-114, and Anna Roberts’ introduction to the volume (10).

hers, all of her actions have been designed to extend and support. The text itself emphatically subordinates Melusine's departure to the later adventures and reunions of her husband and sons; the story does not end with her final transformation but proceeds for several more chapters to detail Geoffrey's further adventures, more wars calling for the participation of Urian, Guyon, and her elder sons, Raymondin's pilgrimage to Rome, hermitage and death, and then the final confrontations of Melusine's issue with Melior and Palatine, her cursed sisters. Indeed the entire story can be interpreted—and has been, by Alban and others—as the patriarchal appropriation of a powerful, formidable, primal serpent-goddess to explicate the fortunes of a medieval dynasty where the men have all the interesting opportunities. But in its subtleties, the narrative relies for its drama and impact on Melusine's human emotions attending the final activation of her curse, when an implacable and inscrutable Judge has decided to rob her of her status as mother, wife, and noble patroness and instead doom her to a life of pain and torment, not because she doesn't meet the criteria of being fully human but because two patriarchs, first father and then husband, failed to uphold their social roles.

Melusine's suffering, then, dramatizes the difficulties of belonging to the social category of woman in her particular time, class, and place. In true romance fashion, the English translator locates his story in the distant past but then gives his characters properly English, bourgeois-gentry loyalties, values, and sensibilities. He fully means for Melusine's situation to comment not on the trials of being a fairy-cursed serpent masquerading in the human world but, in fact, being a human woman in the world. Melusine's monstrosity figures the conceptual paradox that no matter what power or resources a woman may possess due to birth, marriage, wisdom, or personal beauty, nor what level of secular social and political stature she may gain through the exercise of these

assets, female mobility and authority is ultimately limited in a world that rests entirely on the exercise and judgment of male authority to legislate courtly behavior, govern systems of inheritance and social justice, and provide an ethical and philosophical backdrop to the ordered world in the form of a divine and inscrutable male being. Melusine's monstrosity lies in her essential Otherness as woman, figured metaphorically by her fairy birth and serpentine curse, and her transformations reflect on the paradoxes of a patriarchal society that demands the repression and subordination of the female at the same time that it inarguably relies upon her for reproduction of a correct social order.

Melusine's English Reception

Gervase of Tilbury's version and even the tone of the d'Arras text take issue with the idea of a fairy woman manipulating a human man for her own (presumably nefarious) purposes, endorsing the generally held idea that women are dangerous and commerce with supernatural creatures can come to no good. As Spiegel suggests, Melusine's monstrosity, as it is portrayed in the French story, plays to a fundamental medieval anxiety about categories, boundaries, borders, and the pollution thereof.⁷⁴ However, the English author's focus on Melusine's human vulnerability repositions her monstrosity as a lens that reflects on vulnerabilities in the patriarchal system—the potential of daughters to rebel against fathers, the ability of wives to betray or deceive husbands, the capacity of mothers to transmit blood and thereby inherent qualities to their issue, the capability of women to leave physical legacies on the landscape in the form buildings and other monuments. Also, the sequence of Melusine's metamorphoses vividly highlights how a woman's situation or opportunities in

⁷⁴ Spiegel 113-114.

such a system can follow only in consequence to a male choice, and her changes reflect how the patriarchal system attempts to defend its vulnerabilities by limiting the damage females might exercise through the above. Melusine's physical alterations figuratively press at the boundaries of her patriarchal world, while the story's emotional arc traces the tragic ruin of a powerful woman—a woman considered wise, admirable, upright, and far-thinking in all of her actions, and who moreover entirely endorses the chivalric ethics and courtly values that function to authorize exclusive male privilege—through the failure of the male characters to abide by their agreements or meet the obligations that their self-created social position demands. Melusine's multivalent, polycorporeal form both illustrates and responds to the ideological paradoxes which enclose her, becoming, in the hands of her English translator, a powerful literary image that reveals the profound illegibility of a social system in which the modes of self-authorization rest on the systematic devaluation and subordination of the class (or sex) upon which the system simultaneously depends for its survival.⁷⁵

In suggesting that the story of a monstrous woman is really a tool to reveal social anxieties connected to a gendered power imbalance, I do not propose once again to efface women from the historical or literary register by subordinating their existence to androcentric interests. Rather I suggest that the English translator uses Melusine's monstrosity as a lens to encourage reflection in his audience. I am not the first to suggest that medieval audiences were sophisticated enough to detect counter-cultural implications in the narratives they enjoyed; Roberta Krueger bases her study, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance*, on the theory that "simultaneously romantic, seductive, and misogynist fictions," while inviting complicity on the part of the

⁷⁵ One of Cohen's seven theses of monster theory is that, like Freud's subconscious, the monster, when repressed, always reappears in another, revealing form (*Monster Theory* 5).

reader, could also spur critical moments of resistance to the larger framework of “chivalric values” and “patriarchal ideology” they clearly endorse.⁷⁶ Within her larger argument that romance’s narrative moves to highlight or privilege women often mask a displacement of what she calls “female reader subjectivity,” Krueger analyzes a series of moments in certain French romances to discover how the same moves expose, to a discerning (and, presumably, female or female-sympathetic) reader, just how, and on what grounds, a fictive “ideology of ‘femininity’” gets constructed.⁷⁷ Melusine’s monstrosity, as it is described and received by other characters in the text and, at a higher level, by the narrator himself, reflects on just such an “ideology of femininity” as it functions in the world of the romance narrative—and thus to some extent, though not perfectly isomorphic to, the world of the early sixteenth-century English audience.

The first and most obvious interpretive complexity that the monstrosity of Melusine (and indeed any monster) points to is the masquerade or constructedness of such social roles as gender. That a woman whose latent form is that of a serpent from the waist downward can circulate among humans, attract and enchant a human man, have full (and presumably mutually enjoyable) sexual relations with him, and never be discovered for her “true” self until her husband breaks a promise he made to her years earlier exposes how certain superficial markers that point to “femininity” or “womanhood” can be simulated. The suggestion that a non-real woman or “fantosme” can masquerade as and be taken for the real thing jeopardizes the definition of what a “real woman” actually is. This has more than a simply individual relevance, for as Carolyn Collette notes in her study of the good wife topos, the chief claim of this pervasive and popular literary subject was that female virtue had an

⁷⁶ Krueger 14 and xiii-xiv.

⁷⁷ Krueger 23.

explicit connection to the working order of not just the domestic but also the wider public sphere.⁷⁸ The emphasis on guiding married women to the exercise of prudence, judgment, and self-control rested on the assumption that domestic harmony created by the good wife rippled outward to and silently supported the wider socio-political sphere (though women were not to play a public role in events, and indeed the fear existed that they would “insinuate themselves into affairs of state, and that their private passions could result in disastrous public consequences”⁷⁹). The dramatic rupture caused by Melusine’s final transformation, when she seemed such a paradigmatic good wife in her fulfillment of marital duties to Raymondin and careful nurturance and education of her sons, exposes through a narrative device how easy it could be to disrupt or threaten the structures of authority created by the patriarchal ideology and conservative values that the romances were meant to endorse. The import of the good wife social ideal rests on a shared understanding of what legitimizes “woman” as a philosophical and political construct, but the success of Melusine’s deception raises the question of what “real” or “human” women (i.e. those whose sons may in the end “tend toward perfection”) look and behave like—an instability that is itself monstrous.

Second, Melusine causes complexity in the way she both works within and exposes certain misogynistic tenets of the romance ideology, which ostensibly celebrates the socially productive powers of exemplary women. Raymondin’s anxiety that all his married life has been an illusion, and that she is a spirit who has worked to deceive and abuse him, are clear articulations of the fear of women’s probity, or presumed lack of, which has been a staple of misogynistic discourse from well before the European Middle Ages. Obviously,

⁷⁸ Collette 151-68.

⁷⁹ Collette 157.

if a fairy creature can masquerade as a powerful aristocratic woman, and do an admirable job of it, raising ten sons and building an empire to boot, then the romance calls into question how exactly such a thing as “woman” — and, in particular, a nobly born, aristocratic woman — is supposed to be defined, recognized, and authenticated. Melusine’s hybrid body and her narrative adventures expose how, in terms of the gender ideology ruling the courtly world of the romance, Woman is a monster because the attempt to define this category as a class, sex, or social role further presses at and imperils definitions of humanity, gender, and the divine order which presumably scripts and legitimizes all the other categories arranged within it.

In addition to the problematic interpretations of the heroine’s hybrid nature, *Melusine* in her English translation works against several long-cherished standards of the Middle English romance canon. As Helen Cooper has observed, the stereotype of the “passionate but pure” woman is a cultural fantasy warmly endorsed by the English romance, a genre which generally lauds female virtue, though it is not itself innocent itself of misogynistic discourse.⁸⁰ But several aspects of Melusine’s story undermine this presumably English convention. Her decades-long deceit of Raymondin gives weight to the standard antifeminist assumption that women are inherently deceitful, manipulative, and self-serving, morally weaker than men. Her fairy heritage seemingly endorses the assumption that women are naturally politically and socially less efficacious than men, as Melusine’s prodigious (and quite masculine) accomplishments are explained, in part, by her access to supernatural resources. She even suggests, though glancingly, that women are spiritually inferior to men, as she herself admits that God has seen fit to put her under the curse of “hideous pain and

⁸⁰ Cooper, *English Romance in Time*, 218 and 290ff.

torments," part of the divine authority's inscrutable will. On one level, Melusine's adventures in the human world scarcely challenge the misogynistic convention that all women are potentially dangerous and cannot be trusted. Melusine's half-ophidian form portrays her literally as in league with the devil, bearing the form of the serpent who seduced Adam and Eve from their edenic paradise. Upon discovery, her transformation into a screaming harpy associated with death and misfortune literalizes the accusations that women are inconstant, their true nature is evil and destructive, and as such they should be generally abhorred and feared, all assessments that can easily be found in more satiric veins of medieval literature. Though Melusine, in true English heroine fashion, keeps her promise to only work toward Raymondin's good, the secret of her true nature hidden by the inexplicable Saturday taboo, and her unrevealed project of gaining a human soul through his devotion to her, seriously magnify the problem of women's honesty with which much medieval literature, misogynistic in purpose or otherwise, was obsessed.

Melusine also poses interpretive complexities in the matter of her influence upon the upbringing, nature, and destinies of her sons. Melusine's children literally show their parentage in the various "fairy marks" or deformities that they bear, in a metaphor that Peggy McCracken calls "an ambiguous valorization of mother's blood."⁸¹ As McCracken points out, these marks are received very casually by other characters in the story, and only become a point of contention after Raymondin connects them to the presumed moral defects contributed by Melusine's non-humanity. As McCracken puts it, "The physical anomalies of Melusine's sons are . . . marks of their mother's 'unnatural' origins that are not completely erased by their father's nature."⁸² Indeed the textual anxiety around

⁸¹ McCracken 79.

⁸² McCracken 82.

Melusine's parentage, in its focus on the visual markers of maternity, helps emphasize the invisibility, in the era preceding the DNA test, of genetic paternity, an emphasis that "challenges the rhetoric of paternal blood ties," in McCracken's terms.⁸³ Raymondin's initial laments clearly focus on the idea that Melusine's infected blood far outweighs whatever he has contributed to the physical makeup of his children, and his anxieties expose a serious flaw in the system of primogeniture upon which the laws of aristocratic inheritance were based. Not only can paternity not be proven, but the fitness of sons to inherit and succeed rests a great deal on the fitness of the female parent, here an unknown and potentially dangerous factor. Such fears result, not illogically, in means of insurance that valorize a wife's virtue or better yet virginity and license close sexual control over the woman once married, in order to ensure that any children she bore were the product of the marital union. Melusine's monstrous, potentially illusory nature exposes this fear and its consequences.

At the heart of the story lies the issue that Melusine's monstrosity symbolizes her power—power that she wields on several levels. She is an influential woman: authoritative, informed, resourceful, wise, and always in control of her emotions. In this she seems the perfect pattern for the "good wife" prescribed by the manuals. She is verbally proficient, extremely well behaved, and much admired by Raymondin's family and friends. She provides an argument that the passive wife (which, as Helen Cooper argues, was never that much of an ideal in the English literature in the first place) is less preferable to a smart, capable, active wife. She proves that women can hold and wield authority to effect great good and that the exercise of personal virtue, as suggested by the conduct manuals, extends to stability in the public realm. All of Melusine's

⁸³ McCracken 91.

actions as a married woman support the smooth implementation of patriarchal ideology, down to the instructions she gives her sons upon parting. But her final exposure as a “spyryt” and “Illusyon”, as Raymondin sees it, dramatizes the danger ever present in the pattern of the good wife: that she is not really what she seems. Melusine’s bearing of sons, building of kingdoms, and proselytizing for chivalric values go hand-in-hand with the supposedly tainted blood she transmits to her sons, evidenced by their physical appearances. Her posturing as a good aristocratic woman challenges the social order and its constructions of gender just as her fairy heritage imperils the definitions of humanness.

Read in this way, Melusine’s monstrosity is nothing more than the mark of her power for dangerous subversion, in that she reveals how tenuous the basis for paternal systems of social authority really are. Melusine plays the part described by Robert and Karin Olsen, who observe that in medieval literature, “‘fantastic’ beings resemble the embodied ‘traumas’ of the cultural imaginary.”⁸⁴ The trauma pointed out by Melusine is the efficacy of male-authored systems of control that semantically figure the autonomous male as normative and thereby limit and marginalize all other forms of being. In turning into a serpent who flies around towers and warns of impending death, she transcends to myth, escaping firmly from any man’s control or judgment. Melusine’s monstrosity, in effect, signals a disruption to conventional, expected social patterns that rest on the informed knowledge and full authority of the male figure. Every turn of Melusine’s narrative follows on the failure on the part of a powerful male—her father to offer her a proper home, her son Geoffrey to behave by the precepts she has taught him, her husband to keep the vow he has made, even God to forgive

⁸⁴ See their introduction to Olsen and Houwen 15.

her the trespass for which she has been making weekly penance—all of which serves to dramatize how fragile the basis for male-centered control can be.

In *Melusine* it is not the serpent that is exposed as monstrous but rather her vulnerability as a woman, who no matter her personal virtues or achievements is still entirely at the mercy of male authority, and, equally, male curiosity, desire, jealousy, and ire. The stories of *Melusine* as well as of her mother Pressyne and that of her sisters Palatine and Melior, whose adventures more or less close the narrative, demonstrate that the woman's fate, at least in this story, is to impose conditions that are always violated, offer self-representations that are always contravened by male objectification, and to fail, ultimately, in achieving either happiness or satisfaction. The supposedly happy marriages of *Melusine*'s sons who acquire pretty and well-behaved heiresses for wives do not in fact offer any persuasive evidence counter to this claim. Their rehearsal of the trope of the damsel-in-distress only points in its own way to the problems of woman's utter reliance on male protection, a dependency as much complicated as it is excused by the exercise of female erotic desire, which prompts the romance heroine to choose and pursue her subjugation. *Melusine* too is complicit with a certain cultural mindset; she does not contradict the social system but rather takes full pleasure in its advantages, including wealth, status, title, ladyship, and the rewards of the marriage bed. But the stories in *Melusine* that tell of courtship and end in marriage do not foreclose on the difficulties illustrated in the stories of the married couples, with their attendant problems of male fidelity and judgment. The ruin of the system, as the narrative finally suggests, comes about through the failure of male subjects to abide by the values upon which the system rests: male faith, truth, loyalty, and obedience.

It is, finally, this exposure of the fragile and unstable nature of the social order that, I argue, was likely to most discomfit medieval English audiences of

Melusine. In fact the lack of reception itself hints at a lack of tolerance for either the ambivalent nature of narrative or the monstrosity, literal or figural, of woman. However the English translator chose to emphasize Melusine's humanness, he did not avoid recounting in full her vivid hybridity, and he made the further effort to use her monstrosity to challenge assumptions about male power and female dependence. Perhaps this alone made the story difficult for English audiences to assimilate.

As Caroline Walker Bynum concludes, to be a monster is "to point. To point to meaning, to ask for explanation."⁸⁵ In this story the *monstra*, the portent, points to the problems of the patriarchy and how its misogynistic attitudes and traditions create a social category of and sets of expectations concerning women which are fundamentally paradoxical. In Krueger's terms, the story and the character of Melusine invites the resisting reader to pay close attention to the way his or her contemporary society figures the powerful woman and how the systems of social justice explain—or fail to explain—the consequences visited upon women. Melusine's attempted deceit and final eruption into a fully Othered figure symbolize the patriarchy's positioning of women as both outside of and yet still necessary to the stable social order. Furthermore, *Melusine* is not the only story in the medieval English romance canon to interrogate contemporary systems of social justice in just such a fashion. As the succeeding chapters of this study will show, the English author of *Melusine* was working within an established tradition of using monstrous women to flex the borders of current thought. Late medieval English narratives following the romance pattern and employing its particular literary strategy feature a whole regiment of monstrous women who become tools, in various ways, to investigate the

⁸⁵ Bynum 192.

premises of the romance gender ideology and its relationship to medieval misogyny. Just as Melusine explores and exposes the ideology of femininity that surrounds the good wife, Melusine's sisters in monstrosity further interrogate this ideology of the romance. The figure of Medea, discussed in Chapter 3, more closely examines the problems of the courtly love ethos that employs the "passionate but pure" woman's desire in service of the chosen sexual partner, while romance depictions of Constance, analyzed in Chapter 4, borrow from hagiographic tradition to interrogate the uses of female suffering and the consequences of an ideological emphasis on—and varying interpretations of—the far-reaching terms of female virtue.

CHAPTER 3

THE REHABILITATION OF MEDEA

The first two chapters of this study suggest that the hybrid body of Melusine, as depicted in the English prose romance of that name, dramatizes the kinds of contemporary discourse that pictured women—especially reproductive and nobly-born women in a position of social influence—as a type of monster. Melusine’s lamia form, especially when viewed in context with the uses of this figure in medieval art and other literature, encodes the elements of medieval misogyny that already regarded women, as a category of sex and a sub-category of humanity, as subnormative beings: a mal-formed male, in the scientific tradition dating back to Aristotle, or the debased and more fleshly companion to Adam, formed as a theological afterthought. The English translator of the French romance by Jean d’Arras makes full use of the complex symbolism of Melusine, in her multivalent form as a cursed half-serpent fairy who is also an exemplary wife, mother, and estate manager, to examine the rhetorical paradoxes that enclose aristocratic medieval women by arguing their biological and moral inferiority at the same time that they are relied upon to join noble houses, legitimate succession, and secure the lineage through which inheritance and gentle blood descend. The English translator’s moves to humanize Melusine by emphasizing her status, her being “of God,” and the emotional impact of her human relationships results in a final reading that attributes Melusine’s exile from the human world to the betrayal of her male benefactors, who first demonize and then abandon her. In the subtle ways in which he frames Melusine’s transformative moments, the English author self-consciously uses the romance form to highlight the terms of patriarchal necessity that create Melusine’s tragedy and to make the suggestion that misogynistic moves to

discredit or disempower women stem from an unreasonable fear of their influence, not from a rational discourse that proves them second-rate. In the end, the final paradox of the story—which is made possible by the use of the romance form, and the gender ideology that in Middle English predominates in this type of narrative—is that the monstrous woman is simulatenously the matrix for reproduction of the social order *and* the matter which must be expelled from the order to ensure its survival and persistence.

This chapter concerns itself with narratives that feature a monstrous woman far more well-known in the medieval English imagination: the murdering sorceress Medea. Not the least aspect of Medea's monstrosity is the resemblance she shares with Melusine. Both are mothers who kill their children; both are depicted in visual media with serpent imagery, Melusine with her long tail (or, later, full dragon form, as pictured in several medieval illuminations including the Duc du Berry's *Book of Hours*)¹ and Medea with a chariot drawn by dragons (in Lefèvre, the vehicle she uses to devastate Jason's wedding feast).² Both characters belong to French romances translated around the turn of the sixteenth century into Middle English prose. And in each story the eruption, or unveiling, of feminine monstrosity takes place in connection to the betrayal of an oath made by the husband. As in Melusine, the Middle English Medea operates as a multifaceted character whose monstrous aspects provide a lens which the author uses to interrogate the gender ideology at work in his fictional world and

¹ This Book of Hours, *Les très riches heures*, was commissioned by Jean, Duc du Berry, the same patron who commissioned Jean d'Arras to compose *Méluſine*. Finely detailed illuminations accompany the calendar portion of the book, and in particular the illustration for the month of March shows farm work taking place outside the castle of Lusignan, the Duc's holding, while the faint dragon-like form of Melusine flies about the castle towers. The workers' unconcern at her presence suggests that she is a fixture of the estate's landscape, if not a point of pride.

² See, for example, the plate reproduced in Ruth Morse's *Medieval Medea*, taken from BNf. f.fr. 331 (fol. 139v), which depicts Medea's dragons immolating the guests at Jason's wedding to Creusa.

the vulnerabilities that the rhetoric concerning women, and the subsequent place it allots to them, creates in a male-authored and male-privileged society.

Just as the unassimilability to the patriarchal order that makes Melusine a permanent outcast in her narrative reflects her unassimilability to English romance-reading tastes of the early 1500s, the important changes to Medea that take place through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in England provide further clues to audience reception of the monstrous woman. The portraits of Medea given in works by Chaucer, Gower, and William Caxton reveal her as highly ambivalent, intriguing and yet repellent. Like their classical antecedents, Middle English authors found Medea emblematic of revenge and scorned womanhood, but they also showed a great interest in Medea's victimization and the way in which her crimes were a response to Jason's rejection of her. In fact the focus of Medea's story in all of its medieval retellings is on Jason's betrayal. While the Medea who emerges from the classical tradition appears to be the archetypal devouring woman—a murderess witch who, like Medusa, destroys all she looks upon—this basic misogynistic stereotype has no place in the Middle English treatments of her. Rather than replicating her as the icon of the destructive woman in the tradition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Middle English romance treatments of Medea discussed below engage in a wholesale rehabilitation, casting her as an abandoned woman, a wronged queen, and a sympathetic narrative character.

For instance, Medea appears in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* as the companion piece to the legend of Hypsipyle, the balancing entry in a diptych of women whom the underhanded and commitment-phobic Jason has abandoned and betrayed. This version of her story scrupulously excises any mention of her violent crimes and emphatically mutes her agency both in aiding Jason in his conquest and in demanding redress for his subsequent desertion. In the Tale of

Medea told by Genius to the languishing lover Amantis in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, a work which in its larger effort educates Amantis that desire is destructive and moral sensibility reforms the suffering inflicted by vice, Medea represents the innocent and trusting casualties of male inadequacy and disloyalty.³ Male fickleness is highlighted in this tale by attention to Medea's strenuous efforts to aid both Jason and his father. Most surprising of all, in the mid-fifteenth-century *History of Jason* written in French by Raoul Lefèvre and translated and printed by William Caxton, Medea is the triumphing heroine of the whole adventure, the cleverest of many women vying for the hero's affection; she wins Jason in the end (after destroying his other wives and children) and, once reunited, they live happily ever after. Rather than rendering her as the exemplary murderous mother, who in the words of Ruth Morse only proves that "a woman in the grip of strong emotion is a dehumanized and unbalanced threat to order,"⁴ these Middle English depictions of Medea stress her humanity and the drama of her comprehensive conversion, through love, to stable and ideal womanhood.

This effort to sanitize the classical character and rewrite her story to cast her in the mold of the medieval romance heroine—the "passionate but pure" woman whose desire is constructive and whose single-minded pursuit of the hero assists his ascent to fame and fortune⁵—fits inside a spectrum of narrative moves, examined in this study, that deal with the disruptive or monstrous

³ Medea's tale appears in Book 5 of the *Confessio*, which treats the subject of Avarice. Genius presents Jason's adventures with Medea as an example of perjury. This study uses Peck's edition (with Latin translations by Andrew Galloway), vol. 3 (107-128).

⁴ Morse 39.

⁵ Helen Cooper describes this female figure as an essential romance meme in *The English Romance in Time*. See chapter 5, in which she treats the subject of female desire in the romances and argues that "women's sexuality is centrally regarded as positive, to the point where it is one of the key factors that enables the restoration of social and providential order" (220).

woman. Where the story of Melusine deals with its heroine using masquerade that results in a final exile, and the Constance tales discussed in Chapter 4 displace the heroine's violence, the Middle English romances featuring Medea use various strategies of rehabilitation to explain her violent acts and situate her in a stable social order. What is of interest here is the way these gestures toward rehabilitation of the monstrous point back to the ways the romance genre functions, expose the rhetorical moves by which its gender ideology is constructed, and reveal the broader strategies used by patriarchal thinking to contain and control women's choices, representations, and scope of action.

In the narratives that focus on the victimization of Medea, the gender ideology of the romance is most revealed through emphasis on the means by which she is recuperated. If part of the romance's function is to engage with a cultural imaginary, as Stephen Knight claims, then the union of chivalric prowess with landed estate through the event of the heterosexual marriage is a key way—or so the bulk of the Middle English romances suggest—to present as normative, or even to naturalize, certain modes of behavior and inheritance.⁶ Running counter to the conventional strands of clerical misogyny noted in the introduction, the romances in particular offer the dangerous suggestion that women are crucial, indeed instrumental, to the reparation and replication of a desirable social order. More specifically unsettling is the license they give to female characters to express and act on their desire. As Helen Cooper notes, a feature of the romance mode which distinguishes it from epic or history is its claim that “[s]pontaneous and active female desire, rightly directed, becomes a driving force in the larger providential scheme” of restoring lost fortunes and identities.⁷ Such possibilities for female agency suggest a means for transcending

⁶ See his chapter in David Aers, ed., *Medieval Literature*, 99-122.

⁷ Cooper, *English Romance in Time*, 220.

the paradox of woman's being both inside and outside of culture, crucial to the social and symbolic order and yet used, through her Otherness, to identify that order's boundaries and laws.⁸ Yet, in giving full play to women's monstrosity in making a character like Medea their heroine, the romances below also draw attention to the persistent fear of medieval misogyny, as encapsulated in Medea's crimes, that the devouring, murderous, monstrous mother is not simply the potential of all women but, in some manner, their fundamental nature.

Thus Medea's monstrosity, and the responses to it, introduce yet another set of terms into the study of how monstrous women function within the corpus of Middle English romance. Melusine's monstrosity discusses a kind of female dynastic power that has female influence and reproduction as its core anxieties, symbolized by her secret lamia form. Constance's authors, as part of a larger meditation on the values of female virtue, use narrative strategies of displacement in an effort to absolve their heroine from monstrous accusations. But Medea's monstrosity, which takes up the problems of female desire and male betrayal, is used in the hands of her Middle English authors to examine the misogynistic trope called courtly love and the limited range of expression it offers to female characters. As Bloch points out, the courtly idealization of woman works just as well as the standard misogyny to delimit the feminine, controlling modes of representation and shaping the available discourse with conventional rhetoric.⁹ Answering her monstrous capabilities with moves to reduce her agency (as in Chaucer's legend) or to explain and even validate her violent acts as an answer to male unfaithfulness (as in Gower and Caxton), the three tales below use Medea to examine the contradiction at the core of this key element of the romance: the stereotyping imposed on women by the

⁸ Yamamoto 206-207.

⁹ Bloch 148.

requirements of courtly conduct, and the vulnerability created by their utter reliance on male fidelity within this male-privileging mode. As with the case of Melusine earlier and Constance to follow, this conscious exposure and reflection through the trope of the monstrous woman comes fully to life in the romance because of the distinct gender ideology that supports this mode, the expectations between author and audience upon which it plays, and the narrative thirdspace which this literary strategy uses to visibly construct, and therefore show the seams of, the value systems and codes that govern the fictional world.

Backgrounds to the Middle English Medea

Just as the half-serpent-woman tradition illuminates a reading of the romance *Melusine*, the literary traditions of Medea provide a context for understanding Middle English authors' attitudes to her along the spectrum of integration and expulsion which represents the broader range of narrative responses to the monstrous woman. Fourteenth and fifteenth-century medieval English audiences were not likely to have known of Medea's original mentions in Western literature, in the ancient Greek poetry of Hesiod and Homer, which picture her as a famous healer and high-born woman, the descendant of gods and herself a type of goddess figure. In Greek vase painting in the early fifth century B.C.E., Medea is often depicted exercising her healing powers, such as when she restores Jason's father to health using a technique she demonstrates by first rejuvenating an old ram. However, later Greek heroic poetry concerning the voyage of the Argonauts and Jason's adventures turns Medea into a dangerous and potentially destructive woman. The *Fourth Pythian Ode* of Pindar, written c.462 B.C.E., and the *Argonautica* of Apollonius of Rhodes, an Alexandrian writing in the third century B.C.E., contributed a great deal to Roman treatments of the story, including the problems attending Medea's status as a barbarian princess in

relation to Jason's Greek citizenry.¹⁰ The play by Euripides, written around 431 B.C.E., is the first existing record to mention Jason's marriage to the princess of Corinth and Medea's retribution. The condensed action of the drama highlights Medea's fiery revenge on the wedding guests, her escape in a flying chariot, and what the literary imagination considered her most horrific action, the slaying of her and Jason's two children. That last episode became the focal moment of the tragedy written by Seneca in the first century C.E., and it remained the single best known element of Medea's story in Roman art and literature.

Medieval English authors and audiences were more likely to have access to versions of Medea's story composed in Latin, including mentions in the first-century *Thebiad* of Statius and possibly the unfinished epic poem *Argonautica* by Valerius Flaccus, composed in the same period.¹¹ Indubitably any medieval treatments of Medea drew heavily from Ovid, whose works present a conflicted picture of this classical figure. Ovid's *Heroides* tells the heroine's side of the story through a letter she writes chastising Jason for his betrayal and abandonment of her.¹² Far more influential in the European Middle Ages was Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which Medea appears as a clever and ruthless sorceress, the iconic destructive woman, a conflicted and love-torn barbarian princess who ultimately kills her children to punish her faithless husband.¹³

¹⁰ See Richard Hunter's introduction to his translation of the *Argonautica* of Apollonius, ix-xxxi.

¹¹ The explanatory notes to Benson's edition of *The Legend of Good Women* proposes both these authors as a source for Chaucer (1068).

¹² Translator Harold Isbell does not, however, find this a sympathetic portrait; while he observes that "she is a woman of great feeling who has been gravely injured," she defends her own actions of murder and "her argument is so flawed that finally she cannot be pitied" (104-105).

¹³ See book 7, which includes the meeting with Jason and the conquest of the Golden Fleece; Medea's efforts to rejuvenate Jason's aging father Aeson; her trickery in convincing the daughters of Jason's uncle Pelias, who has stolen Aeson's throne, to mistakenly kill their father; her disruption of Jason's next wedding, infanticide, and escape; and her subsequent efforts to poison the hero Theseus.

This conflict of interests offered diverging interpretations of Medea in the medieval period. Boccaccio's gallery of infamous women, *De claris mulieribus*, calls her "the most cruel example of ancient wickedness . . . quite beautiful and by far the best trained woman in evil-doing."¹⁴ The twelfth-century *antique roman* by Benoît de Sainte-Maure, *Roman de Troie*, dwells at length on the courtship of Jason and Medea but elides the violent episodes that plague their married life after the conquest of the Fleece. The thirteenth-century prose Latin redaction of this romance, the *Historia Destructionis Troiae* by Guido delle Colonne, accuses Medea of being a model for female frailty and incontinence.¹⁵ The fourteenth-century *Ovid Moralisé*, a generous expansion of the *Metamorphoses*, focuses on Jason's perfidy and explains Medea's woes as the consequence of her utter absorption in love and her reliance on an unsteady male subject.¹⁶ Medieval authors were also aware of the late antique tradition that gave a happy ending to Medea's story, in the history of Trogus Pompeius as redacted by the third-century Roman historian Justin; following her exile from Athens after attempting to poison the hero Theseus, Medea meets up with the wandering Jason, is reconciled with him, and manages to help restore both his kingdom to him and

¹⁴ Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, 35. His allusions to Medea in *Il Filocolo* and the *Genealogia* are no less flattering (Feimer, "The Figure of Medea," 262-273).

¹⁵ Jason and Medea meet in book 2. In the translation by Mary Elizabeth Meek, this passage follows the moment when King Aeëtes orders his beautiful (and well-dressed) daughter to sit next to their guest: "Is it wise to trust to feminine constancy or the female sex, which has never been able, through all the ages, to remain constant? Her mind always remains in motion and is especially changeable in girlhood, before the woman, being of marriageable age, is joined to her husband. For we know the heart of woman always seeks a husband, just as matter always seeks form. Oh, would that matter, passing once into form, could be said to be content with the form it has received. But just as it is known that matter proceeds from form to form, so the dissolute desire of woman proceeds from man to man, so that it may be believed without limit, since it is of an unfathomable depth" (15).

¹⁶ Feimer in his dissertation on the medieval Medea notes that the *Ovid Moralisé* treats Medea's crimes as an answer to Jason's hatred and betrayal, ultimately using her fate to enlarge reader sympathy for a "heroine whose great gifts were exploited by a lover who knew no loyalty" (259). See his discussion on 247-260.

the realm of Colchis to her troubled father.¹⁷ Most Middle English versions of the story, including the versions of Chaucer and Gower below, borrow from the tradition that ends with the lovers' separation and Medea's exile, a circumstance which allows them to embellish Medea's victimhood. In composing *The History of Jason* as a paean to the cultural and political accomplishments of his patron the Duke of Burgundy, who established a knightly Order of the Golden Fleece, Raoul Lefèvre borrowed the happy ending in order that his Jason not die as a lonely outcast but, instead, live out his life a respectable, if not exemplary, member of the order of manhood and chivalry. With this variety of sources available to them—including sources that did not spare Medea from accusations of monstrosity—it is even more telling that the Middle English versions should recuperate Medea as a type of the “good” woman and use her character as a critical tool to explore, in imaginative terms, the suffering caused to women by the demands of courtly love and the instability of male loyalty in a world dictated by male authority and predicated on male oaths.

While Lefèvre's history and Caxton's translation can be little disputed as a romance, my use of the term to refer to Chaucer and Gower's tales requires some explanation. *Melusine* serves as an example that romance stories do not always have happy endings, and so the rupture between the lovers that ends Chaucer and Gower's extended treatments of the Medea tale cannot disqualify them. In their comparative brevity to the *History of Jason*, Chaucer's legend and Gower's tale appear more like brief *exemplum* rather than fully-imagined romance narratives. Furthermore, in their ironic reflections on the pitfalls of courtly love, its attendant idealizations, and the suffering which it necessarily imposes upon

¹⁷ This version of the story was also available to English audiences through Arthur Golding's translation, first printed in 1578. Boccaccio follows this version of the story in *De claris mulieribus*, in which he concludes his account of Medea's terrors with the laconic statement that she was “[r]estored to Jason's good graces” (36).

women, Chaucer and Gower's tales both read as anti-romances rather than examples of the mode. But this ironic treatment is made possible, I would argue, by the reflexivity that forms an essential feature of the romance's literary strategy. Moreover, the structure of the larger works in which each of these shorter tales is found—Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, which reads as a highly satiric martyrology, and Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, a narrative journey toward moral enlightenment—does not fully obscure the romance pattern which is at the story's core. Medea's tale operates between two worlds, the public world of heroes, kings, adventures, and fame, and the deeply interior world of human love relationships, and in this has the vertical axis which Frye suggests is characteristic of the romance. The story establishes the type of fictionality discussed by D.H. Green as a quality of the romance, which is based on an understanding on the part of the audience as to what sort of story will be communicated, and what it means. Not least, Medea's story in all its Middle English iterations uses the historical setting as a thirdspace to navigate in terms of character and metaphor the ideology that structures the fictional world—an ideology presumed to be relevant to the listening audience. By their function, then, Chaucer and Gower's treatments of Medea may be regarded as much a romance as the more extended treatment in the *History of Jason*. Certainly all three unite in their self-conscious use of the monstrous woman to examine the problem of women's agency and self-representation within the romance gender ideology and its confined and contradictory version of courtly love.

Chaucer's Medea

Whether the author tended toward sympathy for her as an abandoned woman and foreigner, helpless to patriarchal decree—as is the Medea of Euripides's play—or viewed her as the archetype of the destructive mother, as in Seneca, all

the most popularly known versions of Medea's story in late antiquity end with rupture, blood, and exile. It is curious, then, that the blood is almost entirely lacking from Chaucer's portrait of Medea in *The Legend of Good Women*. Chaucer undoubtedly knew Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus*, which served along with hagiographic legendaries as the model for his unfinished poem, and he also drew on Guido delle Colonne, Statius, Ovid, and possibly his own contemporary, John Gower.¹⁸ From these sources Chaucer would have been familiar with the more violent highlights of Medea's life: the murder of her baby brother Aspyrtus to keep her father's men from chasing her when she flees Colchis with Jason; the rejuvenation of Jason's father Aeson which she uses to convince the plotting king Pelias's daughters to boil and dismember him; and her final immolation of the bride Creusa, her father Creon, and all their guests at Jason's next wedding. Yet these incidents are entirely lacking from the account of Medea given in *The Legend of Good Women*. I will turn in a moment to Chaucer's highly allusory text to decipher how he is both using and playing against his sources concerning Medea, the conventions of courtly love poetry, and the demands of the hagiographic and romance genres to which he makes ruthless modifications. But first, I propose that we can better understand Chaucer's project with the *Legend* if we first examine Medea's appearances in other of Chaucer's works.

Studies including Jill Mann's *Feminizing Chaucer*, Angela Jane Weisl's *Conquering the Reign of Femeny*, and Susan Crane's *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* have all explored in great detail how Chaucer uses the romance genre to think through relationships between gender and power in complex and highly sophisticated ways. Though none of these studies classify *The Legend of Good Woman* as romance, I would like to consider it here as such, for

¹⁸ See Benson's explanatory notes to the LGW (1069-1070).

the poem takes as its theme the questions of gendered power that the broader use of Medea throughout the Chaucerian oeuvre powerfully focuses. Chaucer's references to Medea in other poems point to his knowledge of the fuller story and also to a way that Medea, for him, serves as one of the paradigmatic figures of classical history. These references elsewhere present a sharp contrast to the Medea of the *Legend*, in which the character is so paradoxically compressed to an icon of passive naïveté that the tale cannot help but offer, finally, a critical reading of the requirement for sacrifice and near-ecstatic suffering that the convention of so-called courtly love imposes upon the female lover.

Chaucer's other references to Medea make her an example of the destructive power of love. Wherever a temple of Venus or a list of betrayed lovers features in Chaucer's works, Medea is in it. She appears as one of several victims depicted on the wall in the temple of Venus built in "The Knight's Tale;" along with Narcissus, King Solomon, Hercules, and Turnus, Medea and Circe serves as supporting examples of the theme that "wysdom ne richesse, / Beautee ne sleighte, strengthe ne hardynesse, / Ne may with Venus hold champartie."¹⁹ The Man of Law refers to Medea in the prologue to his tale, in which he references Chaucer's "Seintes Legende of Cupide" as a work in which "may be seen the large woundes wyde" of a string of damaged females, among whom he mentions "[t]he crueltee of the, queene Medea, / Thy litel children hangynge by the hals, / For thy Jason, that was of love so fals!"²⁰ Medea's appearance in this catalogue positions her as a "cruel queen" whose actions are expiated by the fact that she is a woman abandoned and a lover betrayed.

¹⁹ Benson I.1941-1919 (51).

²⁰ Benson II.61-74 (88). The Man of Law shows a curiously inexact reading both of Medea's traditional story—in which she customarily uses other means, not hanging, to dispose of her unfortunate children—and of his rival Chaucer, whose Legend of Medea, as we shall see, makes no mention of slain children.

In the dream vision *Book of the Duchess*, the Dreamer spots Medea among a series of glazed windows that tell stories of classical history; here she is grouped with Hector and Priam, Achilles and Lamedon, and other figures of Troy.²¹ Her inclusion in this list suggests that Medea is not only every bit as famous but also instrumental, in the same ways, of contributing to the shape and meaning this history holds for its inheritors, this next step in the *translatio studii et imperii*. Later in the same poem, the Dreamer holds Medea up to the sorrowing Black Knight as an example of one who made too much of a fuss over love; along with Medea “[t]hat slough his children for Jasoun” he mentions Phyllis who hung herself for Demophon, Dido who killed herself for Eneas (“which a fool she was!”), Echo who died for Narcissus, and Sampson ditto for Delilah. While such excess might be the marker of antique lovers, the Dreamer insists: “But ther is no man alyve her / Wolde for a fers make this woo!”²² Medea might be representative of the classical histories, but they are histories that at their core tell stories of failed heterosexual relationships, often with deadly results, and are examples of an unmodulated emotional register unsuitable to members of the modern, more informed world.

Medea’s treatment in *The House of Fame* bears the closest resemblance to the figure who appears in the *Legend of Good Women*. The dreaming narrator visits a temple made of glass and, in observing the series of graven images recounting the destruction of Troy, he dwells on the story of Dido’s heartbreak and from there goes on to consider “the harm, the routhe” caused not just by Eneas but in a number of failed pairings also found in Ovid’s epistles: Demophon and Phyllis, Achilles and Briseis, Paris and Oenone, Jason false to Hypsipyle and then again to Medea, Hercules to Deianira, and the extended

²¹ Benson ll. 328-331 (334).

²² Benson ll. 727-741 (339).

example of Theseus's abandonment of Ariadne in favor of her sister, Phaedra.²³ This collection of examples leads him to contemplate male infidelity and gently hint that misogynistic claims of women's falseness function as the excuse men give for seeking to replace or upgrade their sexual partners:

For this shal every woman fynde,
That som man, of his pure kynde,
Wol shewen outward the fayreste,
Tyl he have caught that what him leste;
And thanne wol he cause fynde
And swere how that she ys unkynde,
Or fals, or privy, or double was.²⁴

This speculation makes women the unsuspecting victims of male predation, which in the case of Medea appears to be explanation for her shocking acts of infanticide. Medea's place in classical history is continually defined, in the world of Chaucer's fictions, by her function as a woman whose notable actions were fueled by vengeance and betrayal in love. As such she provides a cautionary tale for love's destructive power, but she also stands within a circle of gendered power in which men possess the mobility of sexual choice, men act or woo or betray, and women, like a series of graven images open for viewing, have no recourse but to fall to the onslaught.

The Prologue to the *Legend*

Given her treatment elsewhere in Chaucer, it is not as surprising as it might otherwise be that Medea should appear in a poem referred to as *The Legend of Good Women*. But Chaucer's references to Medea elsewhere load her figure with irony; she is an example of the destructive power of love that both victimizes women and spurs excessive behavior in them. Grouping Medea with a catalogue

²³ Benson ll.382-426 (352-3).

²⁴ Benson ll. 279-285 (351).

of “good” women, given her history, brings attention to the sanitizing process that must perforce follow. In the *Legend* Chaucer is able to exploit both Medea’s colorful history in love and her valence as a marker of the antique historical world to examine, within the poem as a whole, the project of history—in essence, the project of storytelling itself—and the project of romance storytelling in particular, with its emphasis on love relationships. That the stories he selects could be interpreted as having a strong anti-romance bent—in that they portray love as a socially destructive force, demolishing royal houses, countries, even empires—brings even more into focus the narrative moves Chaucer makes to fit these stories to a romance mold. His efforts reveal a great deal about the demands of the romance story pattern, investigate the dynamics of gendered power at play in the rituals of courtly love (themselves a key element of the romance’s gender ideology), and aptly point to the ways in which “history” begins to blur with “romance.” For that reason the *Legend*, though it ends mid-sentence, can be thought of as thematically complete in that it furnishes more than enough material for readers to draw their own conclusions.²⁵ In fact one can gain a whole sense for the poem’s purposes simply in the Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea, which uses Medea’s excised monstrosity as a lens to refract the romance ideology at work and the gendered politics of love.

As in *The House of Fame*, the prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* takes up the question of the place of love in history, but does so in a way that suggests love and history are contradictory elements. The bookish narrator of the *Legend* imagines that his ongoing project “to yive credence / To olde stories, and doon hem reverence”—in which he styles himself as a gleaner of words which the

²⁵ I agree with Elaine Tuttle Hansen’s conclusion that the *Legend of Good Women*, as is, amply fulfills the narrator’s implicit purpose to dramatize the repetitive failures of the patriarchal societies which circumscribe the fictionalized women and the men upon whom they are obliged to depend.

ancient authorities have left behind them—is one in opposition to direct experience, particularly the direct experience of being in love, here imagined as an obsession with a flower which draws forth moving poetry and causes men to “speke in rhyme.”²⁶ While the natural world, as in the case of the singing bird, provides models for human behavior in love, the narrator sees love as antithetical to the project of history until the entrance of Love personified, leading his companion Queen Alceste, results in his being given the task of uniting the two strands. As penance for giving a poor account of love and lovers in *Troilus and Criseyde* and his translation of *The Romaunt of the Rose*, the narrator is commissioned to write a paean to the “trouthe of womanhede,” which can be found in examples throughout history; Cupid selects from among the fathers of medieval misogyny’s most cherished traditions, referring particularly to Jerome’s tract against Jovinian as a plentiful source of portraits of “clene maydenes,” “trewe wyves,” and “stedefaste widewes.”²⁷ The God of Love’s description of Jerome’s virtuous women focuses on the “wo that they endure for here trouthe,” explicitly defining the virtuous woman as one who “chose to be ded in sondry wyse . . . some were brend, and some were cut the hals, / And some dreynt for they wolden not be fals.”²⁸ He immediately establishes that fidelity in love has a painful consequence for women, given the proof of historical texts, and that their model is one suggestively lacking in male counterparts.

Thus, when Alceste gives the dreamer his commission to “maken . . . / Of women trewe in lovyng al here lyve,”²⁹ she naturally suggests a narrative format that accommodates the exemplary mode and at the same time implies

²⁶ See Benson’s F prologue to “The Legend of Good Women,” especially the beginning lines to 114, and the corresponding lines in G (588-591).

²⁷ Benson G.ll. 282-285 (597).

²⁸ Benson G.ll. 290-293 (597).

²⁹ Benson G.ll. 427-428 (600).

sainthood, martyrdom, and suffering: that of the saint's life or legend. In implicitly connecting the "trouthe" of women to the falseness of men, Alceste confirms that the loyalty of women must necessarily be shown through the infidelity of the men who torment them; the one requires the other. "Truth" is very much at issue in the narrative to follow, in terms of the "truth" of old books recording histories to which no one living can attest with direct experience and in terms of "truth" or loyalty between lovers. Alcestis, portrayed in the prologue as the fit companion for the God of Love and the very exemplar of womanhood, is a woman whom these old books tell us died for her husband, which underwrites the general consensus that "true love" for women requires suffering, betrayal, and most likely a gruesome death. Playing on the apotheosis of love to the form of a god and as a religion with attendants and worshippers, Chaucer offers his readers an assembly of Cupid's martyrs, who in the form true to that of other saint's lives—such as those offered in Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend*—have horrible fates and, usually, die in terrible and painful ways. The irony of choosing to equate love with suffering, and in selecting as his subjects women whose full stories ripple with monstrous behavior, immediately presents as problematic the narrative and thematic conventions that the narrator, and his author Chaucer, chooses to employ.

From the start, Chaucer's project with the individual legends is to egregiously cut and rearrange source material, almost entirely voiding any historical setting or relevance and funneling political consequence to the individual and deeply personal relations between lovers and friends. His rearrangements highlight the themes of male betrayal, women's humiliation, male oath-breaking, and the relentless pattern of history that imposes this dynamic on heterosexual liaisons. Aside from Antony, whose death is accidental, and Piramus, whose suicide for love is so unusual that the narrator

remarks of it, “[o]f trewe men I fynde but fewe mo,”³⁰ the male players in the legends are ubiquitously introduced and defined as “false traitours.” While the violence the women do to themselves is enlarged upon, as in the case of Cleopatra’s suicide, the violence they do to others is entirely elided. Procne and Philomela’s stew of Tereus’s son goes without mention; Medea never takes her violent revenge on Jason. A coy skirting of physical violence seems a general theme; even in the legend of Lucrece, the narrative action of the rape at swordpoint is replaced with a series of couplets wherein the narrator chides Tarquinius for his neglect of “manly” duty. At issue is his violation of the code of chivalry, not the specific offense committed against the woman.

In recasting and highlighting the violence committed toward women and muting the violence *by* women, the legends as a whole make female passion a static, even passive construct. The project of sanitization makes very obvious the patterns which the romance gender ideology imposes upon women, especially its requirement of female continence—directed by a steady will and principled desire—to seal the lineages upon which inheritance depends. By turning the subjects of his poem into a relentless parade of very similar women tricked and betrayed by men in very similar ways, Chaucer satirically exposes the rigidity of female representation which this ideology demands. He highlights the relative freedom of male agency by severely compressing the agency of the women in ways that spell out the assumption that history, romance, and legend are really about men. In the *Legend*, men are the authors and actors in the broader narrative of history as well as in private sexual relationships. Women, the objects of history or sexual relationship, can only suffer from their drastically circumscribed modes of representation.

³⁰ Benson l. 917 (608).

Hypsipyle and Medea

Chaucer's un-monstrous Medea, standing as a forlorn poetic subject without any recourse to the bloody revenge given her in other versions of her tale, points especially to the requirements of the romance mode, in which the tragic ending serves to exaggerate the ways in which women's agency in the romance is limited only to the pursuit of their selected love object, at all personal cost. In fact the shared legend of Hypsipyle and Medea casts Jason in the role of monster, addressing him as "[t]hou rote of false lovers . . . sly devourere and confusioun / Of gentile wemen, tendre creatures," who plays false by showing good manners and "humble cheere."³¹ Casting the blame on Jason means removing any references that would make the women culpable. Thus this legend omits the story told elsewhere that Hypsipyle led her Amazon sisters in a revolt to kill all their menfolk; here she is rendered as the emblematic innocent king's daughter, epitome "[o]f verrey bounte and of curteysye," who graciously extends hospitality before she even knows her guests are "gentil-men of gret degre."³² Jason's companion Hercules acts as go-between, praising Jason with the declaration "[t]hat half so trewe a man there nas of love / Under the cope of heven that is above," and at the same time incongruously describing Jason as "agast / To love," one who "hadde lever hymself to morder, and dye, / Than that men shulde a lovere hym espye."³³ The mention of murder in reference to Jason curiously replaces Hercules's own bloody history, which is also tellingly absent. Nowhere is there mention that Jason's loyal friend is a betrayer of multiple women, or that as a husband he will in a fit of madness murder his own wife and children, but there is a strange allusion to the slaying in the suggestion that he,

³¹ Benson ll. 1368-1375 (614).

³² Benson ll. 1478 and 1506 (615).

³³ Benson ll. 1526-1537 (616).

Hercules, would give his own “blood and flesh” if he might live to see Jason worthily wedded.³⁴ The sanitization suggested by this treatment of Hypsipyle and Hercules is most dramatic in the excision of Medea’s memorably bloody act, which is channeled into a muted curse that Hypsipyle levels on Jason after he leaves her. She prays:

That she that hadde his herte yraft hire fro
Moste fynden hym untrew to his also,
And that she moste bothe hire chyldren spylle,
And alle tho that sufferede hym his wille.³⁵

This promised mayhem never erupts in the narrative, but the shadow of what is left out of the story still looms over the legend as a whole. The decision to exclude the violence, necessary to any portrayal of Medea as a “good” or exemplary woman, makes it clear that the portrait of a “true” woman must perforce show that female self-expression is ineffective, agency impossible, and women’s actions and words are insufficient.

In turning to Medea’s segment the legend once again calls attention to Jason’s monstrosity, calling him “of love devourer and dragoun,” driven by sheer appetite “[t]o don with gentil women his delyt, / This is his lust and his felicite.”³⁶ Against this destructive force, the famed Medea deflates to yet another iteration of the wise and comely king’s daughter who “wex enamoured upon this man,”³⁷ tricked by a pleasing face and a foul ploy of Fortune. In this version, naïveté prompts Medea to aid Jason in securing the Golden Fleece in return for a promise of marriage. The brief narrative portrays her as a second object of his quest: “Now hath Jason the fles, and home is went / with Medea,

³⁴ Benson ll. 1538-1542 (616). Hercules’s exclamation is quite curious. Since he presumably could not die to extend his life in order to see Jason with a wife, the “blod and flesh” he vows to offer more logically refer to issue.

³⁵ Benson ll. 1572-1575 (616).

³⁶ Benson ll. 1580-1588 (616).

³⁷ Benson ll. 1598-1610 (616).

and tresour ful great won."³⁸ Their success is not the point; Jason's abandonment is, and the narrator describes the rupture as both inevitable and poor Medea's reward or "mede of lovyng and guerdoun" in return for "hire trouthe and for hire kyndnesse."³⁹ Far from displaying any violent reaction on her part to his abandonment, this narrative fails even to make it clear if the two children Jason leaves with her are Medea's own; they are described as "his yonge children two," and could very well be the two children he fathered on Hypsipyle in the first half of the legend. The narrator's sympathy clearly lies with Medea; he sums up Jason's "vassellage" or knightly virtue as his distinction of being the most "fals a love goinge on the ground," and wraps up the legend with Medea's lament that it were better Jason had died trying to conquer the fleece, so his "[f]ul mikel untrouthe hadde ther deyde" with him.⁴⁰ Medea's full letter is not recorded; the author directs readers to Ovid for a full rendition of the epistle, abbreviating both Medea's full narrative and the one avenue of response left open to her.

In pronouncing the scurrilousness of Jason, emphasizing his deceit and traitorousness, and condensing her tale with that of Hypsipyle, the narrator makes it impossible for Medea to be anything other than a willing dupe. The elision of Medea's barbarous actions and their displacement into oblique references made by Hercules and Hypsipyle emphasize the reduced agency women have in this conception of love and the behavior of "true" lovers. Here, Chaucer invokes the romance mode to suggest that the only fate for women in love is to suffer as passive and largely disposable objects. Stripping Medea of her legendary vengeance suggests that, historically speaking, the actions women take either to correct injustice or even influence men are in fact ineffective;

³⁸ Benson ll. 1650-1652 (617).

³⁹ Benson ll. 1662-1664 (617).

⁴⁰ Benson ll. 1667-1677 (617).

moreover, Chaucer's dramatically selected and condensed reinterpretation of Medea as a victim of love dramatizes the reduction of women's agency that discourses about love demand. On a far different note, the surprising treatment of Medea in the legend also suggests that behind the portrait of the destructive, monstrous woman is a wronged person with a broken human heart.

In the *Legend*, the excision of historical context and consequence which flattens the combined narratives to the simple repetition of one ongoing pattern—the hubristic hero or calculating king cheating a simple woman out of her virtue—elaborates the sense given by Chaucer's other allusions to Medea that the core of historical narrative is the wayward progress of men and the exploitation of women. In uniting love with woe and in casting women as victims both of deceitful men and of a trope of romantic love that falsely assures them of a happy ending, the *Legend of Good Woman* talks back to the courtly tradition within which it is cast. Chaucer slyly exposes the misogyny at that tradition's heart by using the romance conventions to appeal to male vanity, exploit women, and tell stories that end in unhappiness and failure while at the same time dramatizing the severely limited agency and ineffective speech of the female subjects. This representation of Medea removes her monstrosity to instead present her as a pitiable figure, proving that only extreme passivity (and subsequent victimization) truly rehabilitate women into the discourse of courtly love. Likewise, the move of sanitization shows that the “good” woman is a representation so limited in scope as to be little more than a static image, much like the Medea painted onto the walls of rooms in “The Knight's Tale,” *The House of Fame*, and *The Book of the Duchess*. Chaucer's compressed and self-consciously rewritten narrative of Medea illuminates in action the literary and historical process that performs the greatest violence against women: robbing them of their full range of representation, especially any acts that might be viewed as hostile to

the patriarchal order, and instead reducing them to one dimension. Here the casting of Medea as the exemplary woman only suggests, again, that the “good” woman is somehow monstrous.

Gower's Medea

Where Chaucer's rehabilitation of Medea takes place through a dramatic sanitization of the legend and Caxton's, as discussed below, results in her repatriation into the social order, Gower's rehabilitation of Medea occurs through authorial moves not to avoid but rather to explain, even justify her violence. Gower's version of Medea's story resembles the romance pattern of *Melusine* with the key plot points being the meeting, the marriage, betrayal, and the final exile of the monstrous woman from the narrative. Gower's tale, much more than Chaucer's, adopts the mode of the romance in its focus on the relationships among the chief subjects, the hero's conquest, and the heroine's support of the hero's exploits. But it also uses Green's concept of fictionality to reflect on the tropes that structure the romance, particularly the requirements of the gender ideology and its representations of women. The aspects of Medea's monstrosity emphasized in this tale are not her epic violence but rather her magical capabilities, which seem to make her more than human. By the end of the narrative, the inability to distinguish Medea from animal, fairy, or goddess is both the explanation for her power and the consequence of it. Gower's attempts to sanitize Medea by portraying her as the exemplary romance heroine, whose efforts are directed to benefit the object of her fixed desire, also have a dark side: the lack of limits for love-service turn into a lack of restraint on her revenge. As in Chaucer's *Legend*, the employment of Medea as a moral lesson ironically conflates the woman and the monster, revealing, more than the other versions, the fear at the heart of misogynistic discourse that women's good behavior is

always and only a choice, never a behavior that can be commanded or imposed upon them.

Offered as an example of perjury in Book V's larger theme of avarice, Medea's tale in the *Confessio Amantis* also presents the character of Medea quite sympathetically and takes care to portray Jason as a cad. Unlike Chaucer's portrait in the *Legend*, Gower's version openly narrates Medea's slaughter of her and Jason's sons, but rather than a shocking turn to the bloodthirsty, the incident is staged as a *coup* against Jason's infidelity. Editor Russell Peck goes so far as to suggest that Medea is presented as "a positive role model for a young aristocratic woman."⁴¹ In keeping with Chaucer's choice of Medea for his legendary of love's martyrs, Gower's version of the tale repeats the idea that the female experience of love, at least in the courtly-inflected, pseudo-historical tradition of the romance, can only be an experience of betrayal, devastation, and pain. Gower's presentation of the tale overtly suggests that the restrictions of courtly love make women monstrous. As with the story of Melusine, Medea's special knowledge and resources make her powerful and therefore dangerous; the risky implications of her magical powers and the sexual desire which she actively harbors and expresses are both obviated in the narrative by her devoted attachment to one man and the use of her powers to advance his fortunes; and, the scene in which her latent monstrosity erupts is put in direct consequence of her husband's betrayal of her. Like the author of *Melusine*—but unlike Chaucer's treatment of Medea, in which the obvious elisions leave the rehabilitation effort interrupted and incomplete—Gower overtly suggests that it is the process of representation that makes women monstrous, not monstrous women that need representing.

⁴¹ See the introduction to his edition of the *Confessio Amantis*, vol. 3 (15).

Given that the theme is perjury, it makes sense that speeches and the exchange of words both frame and play an important function in Gower's tale. Medea's story serves the speaker Genius's larger point that while men may and have deceived women, the natural state of womanhood is fidelity—a fidelity, Genius implies, which is taken advantage of by men who "[f]alswitnesses bringen inne / That doth hem ofte for to winne, / Wher thei ben noght worthi therto."⁴² Amans asks for, and receives, a story of male infidelity that turns female dedication into murderous revenge—a curious illustration of Genius's expressed point that "wommen deceived are / Whan thei so tendre herte bere, / Of that thei heiren men so swere."⁴³ As Natalie Grinnell observes in her study of the tale, Gower uses Medea not simply to illustrate male infidelity and female victimization but also to dramatize the larger pattern of human history with which the *Confessio* as a whole is concerned: "the faithlessness and the resulting violence is part of a pattern which encloses the fate of humanity from Adam's Fall through the Peasant's Revolt" and on, she suggests, to the final Day of Judgment.⁴⁴ In this way, the tale shows Medea's actions as in a sense explicable but also in a way caused by—and a natural result of—a fallen state of humanity. But I might go further and suggest that Gower's tale implies that the restrictions of courtesy—a courtly behavior created by and dependent on certain patterns of speech—and its terms of womanhood fail to appropriately describe or contain such a complex character as Medea, leaving her, in effect, without or beyond category—monstrous. The tale's theme of perjury plays a supporting role in illustrating and dramatizing this larger implication that it is the behavior of men—especially the behavior of men predicated on codified love, created by

⁴² Gower V.3215-3217 (106).

⁴³ Gower II. 3236-3238 (106).

⁴⁴ Grinnell 77.

social and political prerogatives, and demanded by the cycle of history—that makes women into monsters.

The number of conventions evoked in the opening 50 lines place the story firmly within the parameters of romance. It opens with a focus on Peleus, Jason's uncle, as a sonless king: a historical social problem cast in terms of family dynasty, where succession ensures legitimacy of rule. Jason is introduced in formulaic romance style as a "worthi knight," surpassing all others in feats of arms, the best and most famous, whose single goal is to obtain "worschipe overal."⁴⁵ The most marvelous knight deserves the most marvelous prize: the sheep of Colchis "[t]he which his flees bar al of gold."⁴⁶ Outfitted by his uncle with a company "[w]hich full was of chivalerie," including the redoubtable Hercules, Jason sets out for Colchis "in the monthe of Maii, / Whan colde stormes were away," in a ship with a good wind at its back.⁴⁷ These formulaic signals anticipate the consequent adventure and lay the ground for a love story involving the conventional romance heroine, but the story likewise takes as its theme the structure of romance and its literary formulae, especially its conventions concerning love.

As with other romances, in Gower's tale the historical impact of the hero's adventures is made a non-issue, and the narrative focuses instead on the affective and personal relationships, especially the ways relationships are dictated by the codes of courtesy. The narrator presents the inhospitality of King Lamedon of Troy to the Argonauts as a breach of courtesy; when he "oghte wel have mad hem joie, / Whan thei to reste a while him preide, / Out of his lond he hem congeide."⁴⁸ This interpretation explains the first destruction of Troy as

⁴⁵ Gower ll. 3256-3261 (107).

⁴⁶ Gower ll. 3268-3272 (107).

⁴⁷ Gower ll. 3295-3299 (108).

⁴⁸ Gower ll. 3302-3306 (108).

redress for a failure of proper conduct, a just remedy on “that king, which was noght curteis,”⁴⁹ hospitality being the issue. Jason’s interlude on Lemnos and his relations with Hypsipyle—which could be similarly read as a breach of hospitality—are entirely elided in Gower’s tale. Repulsed from Troy, the Greeks sail on to Colchis, where King Oetes acts correctly: upon learning he has guests, he “thoghte don hem gret worschipe” and in fact comes down from the palace to the gate “[t]oward Jason to done him chiere.”⁵⁰ Removing the framework of political cause and effect, such as this incident’s relation to the cyclic history of Troy, Gower’s tale offers individual and personally-motivated reasons for what come to be seen as far-reaching historical actions as well as the core of the classic tales of adventure. As long as the transactions take place between men, foreign relations play out rather straightforwardly: a native king is either receptive and generous to travelers, or he is not. It is with the introduction of Medea, and a different kind of courtesy associated with courtly love, that conflict enters the tale. This in itself slyly points to the ways that commerce with women is fundamentally incompatible with the larger business of historical accomplishment and adventure.

Given the customary romance emphasis on speech and courtliness, the first exchange between Medea and Jason is significantly silent. She “[w]elcomed him into that lond” in good hostess fashion, but then she and Jason seat themselves and proceed to fall in love largely through mutual gazes.⁵¹ Just as Oetes lives up to the expectations of a generous host, Medea’s beauty is described as also fitting a certain standard: “Of beauté sawh he nevere hir evene, / With al that fell to wommanhiede.”⁵² Their mutual falling in love transpires

⁴⁹ Gower l. 3312 (108).

⁵⁰ Gower ll. 3325-3331 (108).

⁵¹ Gower ll. 3378-3384 (109).

⁵² Gower ll. 3386-3387 (110).

according to the proper formulae, but it is at the same time a process where words fail or do not even have the opportunity to arise: “Here hertes bothe of on acord / Ben set to love, bot as tho / Ther mihten be no wordes mo.”⁵³ While there will be plenty of other speechifying between them—as there must, for vows to be made and perjury to commence—the initial “accord” is established as a non-verbal congruence. This contrast between verbal and silent communication extends the pattern of opposition which the opening of the tale has established. As the narrative unfolds, this binary of oppositions—courtesy and non-courtesy, speech and silence—continues to propel the story on a thematic as well as stylistic level. A further example is the confusion of Jason’s thoughts as he lies awake that night: “Som time yee, som time nay, / Som time thus, som time so, / . . . he was stered to and fro” between dwelling on love and the purpose of his journey.⁵⁴ There is no narrative reason that falling in love with Medea should be perceived as contradictory to Jason’s aims; the opposition surfaces not out of plot necessity but rather to illustrate the tension between two incompatible and irreconcilable things—love and adventure, history and romance, choice and duty—that forms the structural and thematic basis of this tale.

The need for secrecy about Medea and Jason’s love affair reinforces the suggestion that Jason’s pursuit of either Medea or the fleece, or both, is in direct conflict with his dealings with her father King Oeetes. Medea’s first conference with Jason takes place in private, when she sends her maid to Jason at night to lead him to her bedchamber, where they make plans as well as wedding vows. Jason’s pursuit of the fleece itself is certainly not a secret. The plain-dealing, heroic Jason presented thus far would, a reader might expect, at this point inform Oeetes that he has married his daughter, or, even more courteously, ask for his

⁵³ Gower ll. 3388-3392 (110).

⁵⁴ Gower ll. 3410-3414 (110).

blessing. The secrecy seems necessary merely according to the convention of courtly love which holds that only a secret love can be titillating—the more dangerous the consequences of exposure, the better. However, the courtly triangle supposes that the second male (here, Oeetes) is the lawful guardian of the desired lady. Like the suggestion in Chaucer's opening to the legend of Hypsipyle and Medea, part of the tragedy of Medea's story is her leaving the protection of the wise and careful guardian for the false promises of the wily fox.

The imposition of secrecy maintains the suggested opposition between love and adventure but also leaves a curious knot in the plot of Genius's narrative. Medea is fully expressive of her intentions and her part in the transaction, declaring to Jason (while swooning as he leaves her bedchamber that morning), "O, al mi worldes blisse, / Mi trust, mi lust, mi lif, min hele, / To be thin helpe in this querele / I preie unto the goddes alle."⁵⁵ Her swooning, lamenting, and showering him with a hundred kisses, while quite in keeping with the requirements of courtly expression, also pointedly contrast the organized, even businesslike manner in which she briefed her knight on how to pass the trials and win the fleece. Jason's motives are more inscrutable, though he does take his companion Hercules into his confidence. While after achieving the fleece Jason is the hero of the hour and could have anything for the asking, he again meets Medea in secret, going to her bedchamber not just for a joyful reunion but also to "setten whanne and how / That sche with him away schal stele."⁵⁶ Their secret get-away from Colchis is a plot element found in the antique versions of the story given in Ovid and the romance of Benoît, but here the reason for secrecy is unclear; there is no hostility from Oeetes, nor indeed any other cause but Jason's own whim: "For he woll go withoute leve, / And lengere

⁵⁵ Gower ll. 3642-3645 (115).

⁵⁶ Gower ll. 3861-3873 (120).

woll he noght beleve."⁵⁷ What follows keeps in tune with Gower's revisions to the violence of Medea's traditional story and the pointed harnessing of all her motives to the purpose of pleasing and winning Jason. Even though there is no stated purpose in this narrative for her to act treacherously, she secretly steals her father's treasure and leaves with the Greek fellowship. The purpose of this otherwise perplexing addition to the tale seems only to expose the demands of courtly love that the passion must remain secret, the guardian must be tricked, and the lovers' interest can only last if there is some element of danger and therefore allure.

But this move casts Jason as a betrayer of hospitality, an interpretation endorsed by Oeetes's emotional reaction to the news that he has lost his daughter. As if to make this the focus, the narrative remains silent on the crime which is usually attributed to Medea at this point: the slaying of her brother Aspyrtus to delay her father's pursuit. Genius does not mention this episode; Oeetes simply gives up his vain pursuit, and Jason returns home famous and wealthy. The murder of Aspyrtus does not fit with the courtly characters Gower has so far established, and such an event would distract from the narrative's close, even claustrophobic focus on the relations and emotions of Jason and Medea. The narrator's concern at this point is to press the tale into the romance conventions, though in so doing he draws ironic attention to those very generic demands. The cycle of the tale thus far fulfills the lack at the beginning: the sonless king now has heirs, the knight has completed his adventure, the marriageable woman has found a mate. Were things to end here, Genius's tale would be a compact and efficient example of the romance formula, though admittedly one with some obvious departures from the traditional story.

⁵⁷ Gower ll. 3889-3890 (120).

But in the last 300 lines, the tale takes a strange and otherwise unforeseen turn, continuing the story with the same characters but a different narrative agenda. This is where the romance paragon Medea begins to reveal her monstrous qualities. In response to Jason's request to restore his aging father's youth and vigor, Medea employs her "art magique"⁵⁸ in conducting an elaborate spell, one that includes a long search—in a chariot drawn by dragons—for special herbs found from Crete to Thessaly and secret rituals which give her spell its efficacy. Whereas Medea's organization of Jason's quest for the fleece had some magical elements to it, including protective ointments, ritual spells, and a ring to make him invisible, that process seemed very matter-of-fact in contrast to this heroic undertaking, in which the narrator portrays Medea's actions as a supernatural stealing about which makes her seem not quite human:

With open hed and fot al bare,
 Hir her hotsprad sche gan to fare,
 Upon hir clothes gert sche was,
 Al specheles and on the gras
 Sche glod forth as an addre doth.⁵⁹

Genius goes on to recount her invocation to Hecate, her travels in the air-borne chariot, and the exotic herbs she gathers from fabled lands in a nine-day quest. Medea's magic further separates her from the conventional romance heroine as the narrator continues to refer to her as either more or less than human; she undertakes "[s]uch thing as semeth impossible," including making herself invisible.⁶⁰ Such a depiction places Medea well and truly outside the courtly structure; her power comes from her own knowledge, not any outside source.

In a way, Medea's solitary performance of this demanding ritual parallels Jason's quest for the fleece. Her power makes her more equal to him, the

⁵⁸ Gower l. 3947 (121).

⁵⁹ Gower ll. 3963-3967 (122).

⁶⁰ Gower ll. 4026-4032 (122-3).

unmatched knight; their corresponding adventures suggest their fitness for one another, as do separate references to each as being superhuman.⁶¹ Further, Medea's undertaking of such a time-intensive process for the mere purpose of pleasing Jason in an unnatural request signals her dedication to pleasing him. With this part of the story, however, Gower's attempted rehabilitation of Medea begins to lose its grip. The Medea he invents for his version of the tale does not remain within the courtly, seemingly natural boundaries set up for her.

Genius's tale produces in Medea a character who shows the limits of the generic formula and its literary definitions of womanhood: the courtly paragon requires a passive object, and Medea's agency presents an uncomfortable extension of the female behavior and activity usually licensed in pursuit of love. Medea's strange ability to meet Jason's every request—as strenuous as the effort may be—ironically exaggerates this seemingly innocent requirement of romantic literary love into a dangerous and unnatural force, one that blurs even the limits which nature itself puts on humanity. Eson is returned to youth by the draining of his presumably feeble blood, but the strange spell makes Medea seem in part a goddess and in part a wild animal; as she dances around the fire, “[t]her was no beste which goth oute / More wylde than sche semeth ther,” and she appears “[a]s though sche were oute of hir mynd / And torned in another kynde.”⁶² Her power is beyond any earthly control, including that of her husband. The unstudied consequence of the narrator's efforts to recount her devoted efforts on Jason's behalf, these passages depict Medea as a blur of the animal, human, and divine, a threateningly monstrous and potentially quite dangerous figure.

⁶¹ The Colchian onlookers watching his return speculate that “Jason was a faie kniht, / For it was nevere of mannes miht / The flees of gold so for to winne” (ll. 3769-71, 118). Later, Medea is described as a “goddesse.”

⁶² Gower ll. 4080-4084 (124).

Genius's choice to narrate Medea's slaying of her sons is the final and most significant curiosity of his tale. As he left out the homicides of Aspyrtus and Peleus that feature in other versions, in Gower's tale this child-killing—Medea's single most famed and powerful act—remains the sole instance of her doing violence to another human. The manner in which her revenge against Jason and his new bride is related is clipped and comparatively toneless; Creusa is dispatched with her fiery gown in no more than six lines, and Medea has a telling speech when she confronts Jason "[w]ith bothe his sones on hire hond:"

[She] seide, 'O thou of every lond
 The moste untrewe creature,
 Lo this schal be thi forfeiture.'
 With that sche bothe his sones slouh
 Before his yhe, and he outdrouh
 His swerd and wold have slayn hir tho,
 Bot farewel, sche was ago.⁶³

Gower adds another twist to the classical verion of the tale, one more in line with Euripides than Ovid: leaving Jason "in gret destresse," Medea escapes to the court of Pallas to dwell among the gods⁶⁴—a true rehabilitation for a murderess and witch. Not only has she escaped human justice, but she is beyond the reach of any human judgment whatsoever. Jason stands punished with the consequences of her perfidy—"Thus miht thou se what sorwe it doth / To swere an oth which is noght soth," Genius comments⁶⁵—and the monstrous woman, like Melusine, simply erupts altogether from narrative constraint.

The final fate of Medea in Gower's tale suggests that there is no way to harmonize the definition of woman with either the public or private, amorous demands put upon her by courtly-political functions. Natalie Grinnell's claim

⁶³ Gower ll. 4211-4218 (127).

⁶⁴ Gower ll. 4218-4222 (127).

⁶⁵ Gower ll. 4223-4224 (127).

that Gower “restores Medea to the complex character of Greek tradition” does not quite, to my mind, explain the subtlety of Gower’s point about the *generic* requirements within which he is working.⁶⁶ Genius’s tale portrays a Medea who is in some ways an ideal mate: one beautiful and accomplished, who saves his life and that of his father’s, and goes to the ends of the earth, literally, to do everything he asks. She is passionate, devoted, but also secretive, and ultimately ungovernable. As Genius says again and again, Jason’s only power over her is through her erotic attachment to him. When that is subverted, as it must be when he chooses another wife, he has absolutely no control over her whatsoever; she escapes from him just as he draws his sword.

Genius attempts to frame the moral of his tale with the suggestion that Jason brought his fate upon himself by breaking his oath. But what the tale actually portrays is an unimaginative man limited by the dictates of courteous, romance-quality behavior, which requires him to make extravagant promises to the woman he wishes to seduce, carry her away in a titillating secrecy, and then accept the duties of kingship when it passes to him. But these same conventions require him to marry a landed heiress—and Medea, despite her lineage and the treasure she steals for him, is apparently not a fit queen, which compels his choice of a new bride, Creusa. Medea is instead a powerful witch with esoteric knowledge and supernatural powers, for whom the violence of child-killing is a rational, even inevitable response to sexual betrayal. The irruption of violence at the end of the story explicates female mostrosity as, somehow, a necessary consequence: the logical extension of a gender ideology that demands female effort in service of a chosen love partner, to the exclusion of all other bonds of loyalty and even, in this version of the tale, the very laws of nature.

⁶⁶ Grinnell 70.

Caxton's Medea

Raoul Lefèvre composed *Historie de Jason* for the Burgundian duke Philippe le Bon and presented the manuscript to his patron in the middle of the fifteenth century. Among other attempts to establish a ducal court that would rival the kingdoms of France and England, Philippe founded the Order of the Golden Fleece, in which Edward IV of England became a member in 1468. As with other literary projects the Duke had commissioned, Lefèvre perceived an opportunity to produce a work that would reflect well on the policy and culture endorsed by the Burgundian court while exploiting the flexible relationship with history presented by the genre of the *romans antique*; the result, as Ruth Morse puts it, is a long prose work that serves both as “cultural fantasy” and a mirror for princes.⁶⁷ In drawing on a history prior to the fall of Troy—the voyage of Jason and the Argonauts—Burgundy’s symbolic regalia predate the fabled roots of his French and English rivals. But the character of Medea proves as difficult for Lefèvre to adapt to a courtly model as it was for Chaucer and Gower, and Lefèvre’s choice to conclude with a happy marriage between Jason and Medea proves the boldest example among the medieval efforts at rehabilitating Medea. The author’s choice to turn the classical sorceress into an exemplary late-medieval gentlewoman allows the English translator, William Caxton, to take as one of his themes the gender ideology of the romance and the problematic roles of the aristocratic, desirable lady within this ideology, using the monstrous behavior of the heroine he first redeems and then repatriates into the world of the romance.

Caxton’s translation, made after the end of the Hundred Years’ War and a few years before *Melusine*, adds references that serve to further frame and explicate Medea, suggesting that he expected some difficulty on the part of his

⁶⁷ Morse 156.

audience in reading the character of the monstrous woman. In Caxton's suggestions as to how Medea is to be read, we find a late-medieval English author's conscious reflection on the difficulties of interpretation offered by the monstrous woman and an attempt to facilitate meaning for his audience. The translator's stated aim is to render the original as closely as possible, "folowyng myn auctor as nygh as I can or may not chaungyng the sentence, ne presumyng to adde ne mynusshe any thing otherwyse than myne auctor hath made in Freysshe."⁶⁸ But Caxton's prologue betrays a subtle bias for certain elements of the story when he relates how, as part of the effort to establish the Order of the Golden Fleece in which Edward IV is a part, Duke Philippe:

dyd doo maken a chambre in the Castell of Hesdyn / where in was craftyly and curiously depeynted the conqueste of the Golden Flese by the sayd Iason / in whiche chambre I haue ben and seen the sayde historie so depeynted. & in remembraunce of Medea & of her connyng & science. he had do make in the sayde chambreby subtil engyn that whan he wolde it shuld seme that it lightend & then thondre / snowe & rayne.⁶⁹

Caxton's digression on the odd and fanciful chamber supposedly furnished by the duke, and the technology or "engyn" which makes it appear to have its own weather, reference Medea's craft as a touchstone of Jason's story. The mention of her here suggests that for at least one reader, Medea's "cunning and science" were the most memorable aspects of the tale, if not its central feature. As further study will show, this romance is as much about Medea as it is the knight whose history it purports to be.

A second point to be observed about Caxton's prologue is its concluding address to the Prince of Wales. Caxton dovetails his introductory statement that

⁶⁸ All quotes from this study are taken from the edition of Caxton's translation prepared by Munro (1), based on the copy held by the British Library, shelfmark C.10.b.3. For information on other editions, see Bühler 255.

⁶⁹ Caxton, *History of Jason*, 2.

he undertook this translation to tell the story of the Golden Fleece, which predates and helps explain his previous work the *Recuyel of the Histories of Troy*, with the hope that the young prince shall not only “encrease in vertue” and worship but also that “he may begynne to lerne rede Englissh, not for ony beaute or good Endyting of our Englissh tonge that is therein. but for the nouelte of the histories whiche as I suppose hath not be had bifore the translacion herof.”⁷⁰ The practice of English literacy is here linked to the learning of ancient histories, and not just any history but one that has as its central figure a powerful and resourceful witch. In supposing that the story at large must be instructive, Caxton also supposes that the monstrous woman holds a special moral valence. In this regard his textual choices concerning the rehabilitation of Medea show him working through broader concerns of medieval misogynistic thinking and how they intersect with the gender ideology of the romance that regards women as necessary constituents of a proper social order.

The Misogyny of Romantic Love

Part of the text’s strategy is to confront the misogyny that exists elsewhere in medieval literature and subject it to debate, exposing it as a rhetorical artifact and not a true or God-given state of affairs. As Ruth Morse observes, Lefèvre gives his audience plenty of debate material, drawing on ideas about women and the problems of love modeled by such French poets as Machaut.⁷¹ More in line with the kinds of clerical pronouncements on women given in the introduction to this study, Jason’s aged friend, the knight Mopsius, speaks for the “case against” contingent, regarding women as fickle, indiscriminating in their lusts, not easily pleased, but easily replaced when the opportunity arises. The formula of the

⁷⁰ Caxton 2.

⁷¹ Morse 176.

romance demands an ethos that weighs more heavily on the case for, which may be considered explanation for why a narrative that already holds three different love interests for the hero requires the French author to invent a fourth in the form of Mirro, the princess of a land called Olierne. Jason's involvement with Mirro plays out the debate about knightly relations with women on a thematic level, while the debate also becomes a concern of the characters, as expressed in the aging Æson's advice to his son that he may reach renown if he is not blinded by covetousness, applies himself to all virtues, and believes "no lyars Theuis / Ioglers / ne deffamers of women."⁷² This version of the tale takes pains to cast Jason as a defender and champion of women in ways that highlight the conventions of the romance ethos concerning love, its requirements for behavior on the part of both men and women, and the ways in which its representations of gender are no less misogynistic than the overtly antifeminist rhetoric of Mopsius.

The narrative draws attention to the requisite ethos of faithful love-service on the part of the knight by introducing Jason through his lament over the poor reputation which he has been left. His opening speech, like Caxton's prologue, identifies Medea as somehow the center of his tale and the aspect that bears most on its interpretations. The author encounters in a sort of dream vision the specter of Jason, who entreats him "take thy penne for to write & put in memoire my faites & dedes" and then identifies himself:

I am Iason that conquerd the Flees of Golde in the Yle of Colchos. And that dayly laboure in sorowe roted in tristresse for the dishonneur that somme persones hurte & empesshe my glorie. Inposing to me not to haue holden my promys anenst Medea. . . Thenne I pray the that thou do make a boke vnto them that daily speke & inpugne my gloire maye knowe their indiscrete iugement.⁷³

⁷² Caxton 5.

⁷³ Caxton 3.

The project of the subsequent narrative is thus staged as a rehabilitation of Jason, but it is one in which Medea figures prominently. Jason's plea for reincorporation into the realm of honorable heroes necessitates a clean record as far as his conduct towards women is concerned, and this explains somewhat the introduction of Mirro. By being previously betrothed before ever he meets the women whom he is later accused of betraying, Jason has, in the context of fifteenth-century marriage law, a binding contract that explains why he can fulfill the amorous designs of neither Hypsipyle nor Medea and must eventually abandon them to keep this previous vow.⁷⁴ Mirro also provides a reason why the rehabilitation of Medea into a worthy object of love-service is both necessary and still, in the course of the narrative, somewhat incomplete.

Another way the text depicts Jason as a defender of women is in his vehement intervention in the rape of Hippodamia, whose wedding feast is attacked by centaurs. The vigor with which Jason pursues and slaughters dozens of the offenders and then successfully restores Hippodamia to her bridegroom not only establishes his prowess on the battlefield but also identifies him as a champion of female honor. He takes up the defense again in a verbal debate with Mopsius, which takes place after Jason has offered himself to Mirro and been rejected by her. Mopsius attempts to allay his friend's gloom with some practical wisdom: "one lost and two recouered," the knight says prosaically, counseling Jason to "seche another without long taryyng" since the wise man always has at least "ij. strenges on his bowe."⁷⁵ His advice recalls the situation of Jason in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, which structurally portrays Hypsipyle and Medea as nearly indistinguishable and easily exchanged. Mopsius's diatribe contains more warning than comfort:

⁷⁴ Morse 171.

⁷⁵ Caxton 57.

Women one and other properly to speke ben malicious in her werkes. & this procedeth that eche of them adresse other of suche conceyll exhorter & of fauour. Men saye / that the most orguilloust & proudest creature that is / is the deuill / and next after him is the woman . . . Somme women ther be that must haue one amorous man to whom they kepe hem treuly / Other ther be many that ben full of wordes and lene their eeries to alle the worlde. Other loue to haue a eye and tokenes. And they make like signes also ferre as they may not speke to hem. Other ther ben that wole ben more prayid & requirid for to enioye them & to haue their grace / than the goddes ben for the haue their fair paradys . . . Certes gentyll knight. They be wel happy that haue not to do with them in only suche receptes. & they be foles that haue to do moche with hem.⁷⁶

Mopsius's speech rehearses several of the standard tenets of clerical medieval misogyny: women are conceited, vain, unprincipled in their desire, capricious in the expression of that desire, and unsteady in both their words and their pride. Romantic love, to one who views women as Mopsius does, is utter foolishness.

Mopsius's "counsel" performs two important functions in the text. It defines a position against which Jason can distinguish himself as a proper wooing knight, since his perception of knighthood is simply amorous devotion: "Thenne it is so that if a noble man for to auaunce him self in worship maye doo no better thenne for to chese an honourable lady whiche he maye loue treuly secretly & so parfaytly that he fere and drede to doo ony thing but that it be honest in all thingis & of Recommandacion."⁷⁷ This formulation of romance ideology positions itself in direct opposition to the conventional misogyny, but it betrays the devotion of the valiant knight as no less than another rhetorical stance, a picture no more accurate than Mopsius's.

The second function of Mopsius's speech is to introduce the requirements of the "worthy" lady who is the honorable knight's counterpart. Against

⁷⁶ Caxton 57.

⁷⁷ Caxton 57.

Mopsius's list of should-nots, Jason adds a telling should: "for all ladies desir nothing but honour & hye renommee / hit is their propre vocacion & their naturell condicion."⁷⁸ Jason's statement about the behavior of the proper lady reflects not just on his current mate, Mirro, but also succinctly declares the ideological framework by which the reader must view Medea. Notably, Jason's definition of worthy womanhood mirrors the highest aim of the knight: achieving honor and high renown. The text will go on show that for women as well as men, "honor" is not linked to heroic deeds but to fidelity in love. In this version as well as the other Middle English versions discussed above, the tale of Medea becomes a stage for examining women's efforts to achieve that honor—equal fidelity in love—and the ways in which their suffering for that love drives them, at least in Medea's case, into monstrous behavior. Thus, while the terms of her rehabilitation betray the formative moves of the romance pattern and the demands of its ideology (an ideology evolving from the practice of courtly love, though with some modifications), the terms of Medea's monstrosity illuminate how the requirements of that ideology bestow a powerful agency, and a potentially dangerous blurring of ethical boundaries, upon women.

Responses to Female Violence in Caxton's Text

Unlike the versions of Medea's story given in Chaucer and Gower, Caxton's translation does not shy away from including the more violent elements of the story as traditionally known. He encapsulates these episodes in a way that seems to defuse the violence and, if not explain, then at least shift the focus to a larger purpose. The episode where Jason and his Argonauts encounter the Amazons of Lemnos is just such a moment that reveals this text's larger strategy

⁷⁸ Caxton 57.

for subordinating the violence conducted by women and for containing, if not sanitizing, the effects of monstrous female action.

Greeted by fifty thousand armed women after damage to their ship has cast them up on the Lemnian shore, Jason and company are informed that they cannot be received or succored because it is the city's policy to allow no men to set foot within the gates. Messengers tell the story of how, after King Thoas led away all the menfolk to lay siege to the Argiens, he enraged the womenfolk by refusing to heed their pleas for the men to return to their own city. The scorned women first "put to deth al the men children that were in the cite" and "after they determined & iuged that if their husbondes or faders. parents & frendes cam again from the warre or other what someuer they were sholde be slain the first night of their coming assone as they shold be a slepe." True to their vows, the women systematically dispatch all the returning men; save for King Thoas, who is placed on a boat and put to sea, "escape none from the murdre & pestylence but he was slayn & murdrid."⁷⁹ The narrative is presented without justification, unlike contrasting episodes of male violence; the rescue of Hippodamia, for instance, is treated as restoration of justice, and when Jason fights the armies besieging Mirro and slays the giant Corfus, the narrator conspires with the grateful citizens of Oliferne to treat him as a conquering hero. But the fury of the Lemnian women is described without moral commentary, then forgotten entirely when Jason enters the presence of Queen Hypsipyle and she at once falls violently in love with him, quite abandoning her previous vow that the island should harbor no males.

The author has managed to preserve the traditional material but to defuse it by making Hypsipyle's passionate pursuit of Jason the real focus of this

⁷⁹ Caxton 77.

interlude. In contrast to the other Middle English versions in which Jason is the wooer, here he is relentlessly pursued by Queen Hypsipyle, who spares no tactic that will keep Jason on Lemnos, including the nightly destruction of repairs to his ship in order to delay his departure. When flirtatious words and the promise of treasure fail to persuade him to break his promise to Mirro and marry her instead, Hypsipyle sneaks into her guest's bed, entreating him "but sythe that ye haue not willed to be my husbonde & spouse / at the leste ye shall be my loue & frende. And take ye no desdayne of the loue of a poure folissh gentile woman."⁸⁰ Jason is no Sir Gawain, to resist such a temptation; "he was a man," Caxton offers, and progeny suitably result not just for the queen but for all the other damsels of the town who are enjoying their guests in the same fashion: "And in this wise was the Cyte repeuplid of yong childeren masles."⁸¹ The ardent affection which Hypsipyle conceives and which she acts upon serves to correct, in consequence, the extermination and expulsion of the island's men. A more balanced social order follows upon Jason's personal indiscretion; in this version he is much less a problem than a remedy. Moreover, the narrative attention to the love affair defuses any threat that the active (and armed) Amazonian queen might otherwise represent. As in the example of Chaucer and Gower's Medea, Hypsipyle's resources are employed in the pursuit and achievement of her desired sexual partner. This imperative of the romance mode, however, also casts Hypsipyle as a type of monstrous woman, who chooses to subordinate a judicial decision to the pursuit of her sexual goals.

As the adventure moves to Colchis and beyond, the narrative engages in the same tactic of neutralizing Medea's arguably monstrous and certainly violent actions with an emphasis on her devotion to Jason as a loving partner. Morse

⁸⁰ Caxton 85.

⁸¹ Caxton 86.

reads this as a silencing of Medea, whom, she argues, Lefèvre regards as a dangerous entity and consistently tries to defuse.⁸² However, in Caxton's English translation, Medea does not read as silenced so much as caught between two interpretive impositions: the one a vein of historical accumulation that associates her with female violence and mayhem, and the other a need to fit her, eventually, into the code of the "worthy" woman as established by the gender ideology of the romance. As a result, this complexity adds a psychological depth to Medea's character that far exceeds the interest given to any other character in the story. On a thematic and structural level, the rehabilitation of Medea is necessary for a full rehabilitation of Jason. For Jason to maintain his reputation as an honorable and worthy knight, Medea must somehow transform into a Mirro, the ideal courtly lady. Her devotion to Jason—following a pattern begun by Mirro and perpetuated by Hypsipyle—firmly casts her in the courtly love and romance tradition, but the struggles of the author to reconcile his Medea with the violent and well-known actions of her history make visible, and in fact call into question, the terms of love, romance, and honorable behavior that are so much at issue in this text.

The effort to rehabilitate Medea takes place on several levels. One involves making her necessity to Jason's quest a matter of historical predestination. After a long description of the early history of Colchis and how the island came to be home to its unique treasure, the narrative describes how the first king of the island, Apollo, bequeathed to his daughter a detailed script or "bylle" explaining how a conqueror was to obtain the famed Fleece.⁸³ Medea is of course a descendent of this original daughter, the keeper of this precious document, and a co-conqueror in Jason's famed endeavor. By this she is already

⁸² Morse 166-167.

⁸³ Caxton 107-108.

strategically positioned, according to Jason's own terms, to be a lady worthy of an honorable knight's love.

A second strategy to effect Medea's rehabilitation is to place her affections firmly on Jason and justify all her subsequent actions in pursuit of her goal to win his love. The clever single-mindedness by which she pursues and wins the hero is after all a firm requirement of the romance heroine, and Medea's magical abilities, which she employs to make Jason forget about Mirro and instead fall in love with her, demonstrate Medea's fulfillment of this condition. She has adopted the conquest of Jason as her own adventure, the equivalent of the fleece, and her heroic dedication to this quest is reflected by the episode in which she prays for counsel at the temple of Venus and phrases her request in terms that reveal both her pride and ambition: "if I may do somoch that he accorde vnto my will / this shalbe to me the most grettest glorie that may come to ony woman of a noble hous."⁸⁴ Thus Medea's quest for glory casts her as Jason's partner and equal in chivalric and heroic concerns. Certainly she views her own efforts to win him as a matter of life or death and declares on several occasions that she will die if she fails in her pursuit.

The explanation of enchantment helps ameliorate the questions that might otherwise attach to Jason's reputation as a true and faithful knight, and it ironically replicates the courtly love trope by making Jason subject to Medea's will. As in Chaucer's version and even more strongly in Gower's, Medea is stage manager and accomplice for Jason's achievement of the fleece. The realization of their separate quests also helps harmonize the two as equals and partners, a suggestion that no other version of the tale makes quite as explicit. If there is any aspect that can be called monstrous to Medea's actions here, it is her single-

⁸⁴ Caxton 124.

mindful and unrelenting pursuit. The attempt to rehabilitate Medea by establishing sexual conquest as the motivation for her actions serves to emphasize, once again, that the ambition of female characters in the romance realm extends only to selection of sexual partner—but it also conveys the narrative suggestion that love makes women monstrous.

Medea's Monstrosity

The project of keeping Medea a figure capable of redemption while remaining true to the infamous highlights of her career provides a worthy challenge for the *History's* narrator, who faces the difficulty of explaining how both Medea and Jason are to be excused of their respective crimes and eventually reconciled into a socially and generically-prescribed heterosexual union. The task is made more interesting by this version's inclusion of extra crimes attributed to Medea's doing: the death of Hypsipyle and, as will be seen in a moment, the death of Mirro as well. Customarily the romance demands for the "pure but passionate" heroine do not extend to her clearing the field of competition through murder, but Lefèvre's story makes it so, and Caxton, as vowed in the prologue, keeps true to his source. Medea's manipulations to win Jason can be more easily explained than her murders, and while the narrator persists in attributing the deaths to Medea's relentless devotion, the explanation does become problematic in time.

The first of Medea's murders shows the lengths to which she will go to secure Jason, and also her sense that some sacrifice is necessary. She murders and dismembers her infant brother as part of her larger plan to depart with Jason, the preparations for which also include stealing her father's treasure. Later, when the Argonauts are pursued by a maddened Oetes and Medea tosses the child overboard piece by piece, she deals with Jason's shock and horror by earnestly assuring him that she is only saving the lives of her father and his men,

since if they engaged in battle Oetes and his soldiers would be killed by the superior Greeks. Besides, she adds, her brother would only have been happy to be such a sacrifice and “in his tendre yongth . . . be cause of the helthe of so moche peple & specially of his fader naturel.”⁸⁵ She likewise assures her father that she has done this only to slow him down and thus save his life, thereby phrasing her first act of infanticide in terms of devotion; at the cost of only one innocent life, she has preserved the lives of her beloved, her father, and several soldiers. It is key to her later redemption that Medea’s motives here, at least to her own eyes, are neither malicious nor capricious but carefully thought out.

As Medea’s agency in support of Jason’s fortunes increases, however, she begins to look less and less like the paragon of the courtly romance heroine and Jason begins to look more and more like her victim. Medea is directly responsible for Hypsipyle’s suicide; when she learns that Jason means to keep his promise and return to Lemnos to see Queen Hypsipyle, “the old maystresse and the fair Medea putte their sorceries to werke and their enchantements”⁸⁶ and conjure up a wind that keeps the Argo from sailing to the island. Of her intentions, the narrative says only that Medea and her old nurse were the only ones on the ship not sorry when they were unable to land. The consequent sufferings of Hypsipyle, her arrangements for her own suicide by drowning, and the misery of Jason and his crew when her body drifts to the boat where they are anchored all suggest that Medea’s actions far exceed the boundaries of courtesy. Medea deals very practically with this sorrow as well, saying to Jason “me semeth that ye haue better the corage of a woman thenne of a man / & that is no nede to wepe ne so bewaille a lady that was so despaired,” before advising him to give the queen a proper royal burial. “By the wordes & remonstraunces of the

⁸⁵ Caxton 148.

⁸⁶ Caxton 152.

fayr Medea / the duiel & sorow of her loue Iason cessed a litill & a litil," Caxton writes, explaining Medea's apparent lack of compassion or remorse, as well as her sexist accusation, as a project to ameliorate Jason's pain.

Altogether, this narrative's tactic for attempting to control the monstrosity of Medea's actions is to harness them to an explicable motive concerning either devotion to Jason or a general fidelity to male authority, as in the case of killing her brother to spare her father's life. Her violence is thereby seemingly excused. For instance, the murder of her brother poses no obstacle to the reconciliation with her father that takes place upon the birth of Medea and Jason's first son. Oetes comes to visit the royal couple and "whan he vnderstode & knew the grete honour that the preu Iason had don to her. he was content with him and with his doughter."⁸⁷ Later, Medea's arcane rituals to restore the health of Æson and destroy the regent king Peleus are likewise muted in their monstrosity through the narrator's focus on Medea's motivations in service to man, family, and heroic ideals. She undertakes the spell to rejuvenate Jason's feeble father out of deference to male authority and her wish to support the welfare of the patriarch. Whether the reader shares this opinion or not, Medea certainly regards herself as operating within the boundaries of the romance ideology. As with the revolt of the abandoned women of Lemnos, Medea's plot against Peleus, in which she convinces Peleus's daughters to kill him by persuading them they are performing the spell of rejuvenation, is regarded by her as a just action, an appropriate response to his plotting against Jason by sending him to supposedly certain death in quest of the Golden Fleece. As with the suicidal Hypsipyle, exaggerated female suffering is the consequence; the heartbreak of Peleus's widow Cypriane and the hysterical suicide of the daughters spur Jason to

⁸⁷ Caxton 161.

repudiate Medea without delay. After this, the narrative moves into high gear and proceeds to rapidly list events, suggesting that the author, at this point, was either baffled by his project of explicating Medea's crimes within the romance framework, or being pressed by an impatient patron to complete his project.

Caxton's Middle English version retains the convention that Medea's slaying of her children is an answer to Jason's rejection of her, but here the infanticide takes place in two parts. The first follows on Jason's unwise adoption of the advice given him by King Creon that the proper way to forget his troubles over Medea is to take a new wife. Hearing the news that Jason intends to marry the princess Creusa, Medea goes immediately to confront him; he repudiates her again, saying he refuses to be associated with her crimes. Here Medea plays the part of the scorned and abandoned woman. She weeps "so parfondly that hit semed that ther departed fro her two fayr eyen two ruyseauls or two springes of a fontayne" and she piteously reminds Jason that she has "don alle thise thinges wyth good entencion and for to gete [his] grace."⁸⁸ For a moment, she resembles the tragic figure of Hypsipyle, or the abandoned and near-forgotten Mirro. Her actions have all been the extreme version of the love-service demanded by the conventions of the tale within which she is cast.

Again, Medea's next actions are to redress a perceived injustice. Retiring to a chamber, she "began to studye in many of her sciences" and manages to conjure "foure grete and horrible dragons whom she knetted to gyder by their tayles / and maad as hit hadd ben a chayne."⁸⁹ The dragons here invoke recollections of the half-serpent form of Melusine, aside from being a handy romance motif. Love, so passionate it inspires uncontrollable jealousy, is once again Medea's primary motivation. In her accusing speech to Jason—once she

⁸⁸ Caxton 173-174.

⁸⁹ Caxton 174.

crashes the bridal feast “sittyng in the myddes of the four dragons holdyng her yongest sone alle naked in her handes” —she again presents her actions as a just consequence, reminding him that she is his wife, she preserved his life, and he has done her “grete wrong and ouermochte grete blame.”⁹⁰ However, unlike the slaying of Aspyrtus and Peleus, the narrator does nothing to counter the full and splendid mayhem of the ensuing scene:

Whan the desolate lady had sayd these wordes she holdyng her yong childe whiche was moche tendre. toke him by the two legges & by the force of her armes Rente him in two pieces. & in that poynt cast him in the plater to fore Iason and Creusa / And with that the four terrible dragons on whom she satte opende their throtes in disgorging fyre & venym. somoche & so horribly that all they that were there deyde miserably & in grete torment.⁹¹

All die, that is, save Jason, who is still mysteriously protected by the ointment Medea gave him to escape the fire-breathing bulls of Colchis. When Jason views the mass slaughter, he, remarkably enough, manages to abide by the requirements of knightly conduct, warning her that “[i]f thou were a man like as thou art a woman peruerse and myrrour or chief of alle euyl. with oute lenger tarieng I shold take vengeance of this trespaas and grief. But for as moche as thoue arte a woman. hit shall neuer happen that my hand employe hym vpon thy body.”⁹² Medea is in full form as the monstrous woman, in the conventional sense of being evil and destructive, but her response to him falls curiously in line with the individual code of honor to which she has adhered throughout the tale and through which she explicates her actions: “She answerde him and sayde in this manere. ‘Certes my dere loue knowe ye for trouth / that I had leuer see all the world deye. thenne I knewe that ye shold haue habitacion with any other

⁹⁰ Caxton 174-175.

⁹¹ Caxton 175.

⁹² Caxton 176.

woman thenne with me.'"⁹³ Life and death are not the issue here; at issue is the promise he swore to her, and of which she views him in default. This vow, apparently, supercedes all requirements of civil conduct; the extremes of passion which are a motif of romantic love are here taken to their illogical end.

The reiteration that she is motivated by justice, and her actions can be validated by her great love for Jason, are Caxton's key tools to effect Medea's rehabilitation. The straightforwardness with which her havoc is described, the emphasis on her "science" and craftiness, and her own conviction that she acts justly all work to contain the otherwise monstrous implications of Medea's character. Lefèvre's story, and Caxton's true-to-sense translation of it, manage to contain the more unconventional aspects of Medea's career—and the potential danger which unlicensed female power otherwise poses—by portraying her as a rational creature whose actions are dictated by the requirements of romantic love and whose excesses are a consequence of violations of that code. Her monstrosity reflects on the figure of the romance heroine in love, exposing the key tenets of the ethos that limits all female action to the pursuit and preservation of the love relationship.

Medea's Repatriation

In a neat narrative economy, Medea's final act of monstrosity leads to her recovery and ultimate reincorporation into the social order. Jason, fleeing Corinth, is subsequently reunited with Mirro, who gives him a ring that breaks the enchantment which Medea has cast upon him. An enraged Medea calls upon Æson to lay siege to Mirro's castle and, in essence, attack his son. When Jason repudiates Medea yet again, she stabs their second child to death with the

⁹³ Caxton 176.

explanation that as the boy looks so much like his father, he is bound to grow up to be like his father, “the most double & leest trew knight of the worlde,” and thus “hit is moche better that thou deye an angel in thy yongth / thenne a deuill in thy olde age.”⁹⁴ After this she flees, weeping, and “put her self in a wode al desperate weping & making a passing grete sorow.”⁹⁵ The narrator includes but speedily glosses over the next phase of Medea’s career—her marriage to Ægeus of Athens, the birth of her son Medus, her plot to poison Theseus, and her subsequent exile from Athens—which allows him to put his Medea back where he wants her to be: in “a grete woode in Thessayll where she liuyd moche solitarly & in grete bitternesse / and had ther so grete & fayr repentaunce of her syunes & of her euyl lyff that she mighte no more haue but if she sholde haue receyued the death.”⁹⁶ The secluded setting of the wood forms a backdrop for this additional element that does not appear in other medieval versions of Medea’s story: her acknowledgement of and repentance for her crimes. Medea’s conversion here parallels the tradition of saints’ lives such as Mary of Egypt, who atones for her past sins by living in abject poverty in the wilderness.

Mirro is killed by an arrow during the siege and Jason, in sorrow, departs and goes “riding fro countre to countre by many Iourneyes where he had plente of meruailous aduentures. whiche were to long to reherce.”⁹⁷ The final reconciliation is quickly narrated but still the crowning move in Medea’s rehabilitation. In the wood of Thessaly Jason encounters Medea, who has been subsisting on a humble diet of acorns, herbs, and roots, and upon recognizing him she falls on her knees “in grete humylite tofore Iason requiring & cryeng

⁹⁴ Caxton 192.

⁹⁵ Caxton 193.

⁹⁶ Caxton 193.

⁹⁷ Caxton 197.

him mercy.”⁹⁸ Jason himself experiences a turn of heart as he recalls the “innumerable goode dedes that she had done for him tofore,” which include abandoning her father and her nation for him, and she nobly born and a king’s daughter. When he asks her to be his wife again, “she was more Ioyous in her corage thenne if he had gyuen to her the beste and the most noble royaume of the worlde. And thenne she sware to him & auowed that she sholde neuer medle more with sortes ne enchantements ne none other malefices ne of ony thing but first he shoulde haue the cognoissaunce and knowleche.”⁹⁹ It is interesting that the condition on her abjuration of magic is that she will first gain his consent; she does not plan to give up her enchantments altogether, but will subject herself to husbandly authority. Lefèvre’s version concludes with a final reconciliation between Jason, Medea, and Æson, which involves Æson handing over the reins of government to Jason. And so the story ends happily, with a restoration of the domestic dyad which forms the foundation of the patriarchy and, in its security, assures the health of kingdom and empire: “And thus the preu Iason & Medea regned & gouerned their Royaume hyely long time / During the whiche they liued to gyder in grete loue & concorde and had many fayr chilrden toger that regned after hem.”¹⁰⁰

Lefèvre’s reconciliation of the two main characters suggests that sincere regret, a wholesale, Christian-like humbling of spirit, and passionate devotion to the sexual partner of her choice can exonerate Medea’s prior murders, including infanticide. However, the episode takes place quickly, even awkwardly, and reading it raises the possibility that the author was wresting his tale into the ending he wanted—not necessarily the ending that had been predicted or

⁹⁸ Caxton 197.

⁹⁹ Caxton 198.

¹⁰⁰ Caxton 198.

prepared for by previous events—but one that would, presumably, please his patron the duke of Burgundy. In this way, Medea's rehabilitation in the narrative reads as not quite convincing or complete. Moreover, it reinterprets Medea's monstrosity as a product of the romance's gender ideology, which valorizes the clever, "passionate but pure" woman who single-mindedly pursues her own version of "honor" and views justice only in terms of what supports her lover and the vows they have made to one another.

Caxton's epilogue to his translation, as if in response to this lack in the original text, extends the idea of rehabilitation and puts a greater emphasis on the reconciliation. Where Lefèvre's narrative ends, Caxton again refers to Boccaccio's *Genealogy of the Gods* to describe the further adventures of the pair: they proceed to Colchis to see Oetes and end up helping restore the exiled king to his throne, "& after went into Asie / where he [Jason] had victorie in many batailes And made so many conquestes with grete magnificence in somoche that he was honoured & worshipped for a god."¹⁰¹ Caxton reiterates the notion of rightful kingship with an allusion to the restoration of Oetes, which again suggests that Jason and Medea's earlier crimes of fleeing without his permission—taking his treasure and in the process murdering his son—have been laid to rest. According to the reception Caxton relates, Jason was elevated to the level of a deity, and stands firmly in the succession of semi-divine heroes such as Alexander of Macedon. Furthermore, Caxton rehabilitates Hypsipyle, too; he includes the alternative ending to her story which has her banished from Lemnos, joining the household of a king as nurse to the prince, and eventually reconciling with her grown sons by Jason. This alternative ending subtly repairs Medea's infanticides by introducing an episode where mothers and sons are

¹⁰¹ Caxton 199.

happily reunited. This ending also redeems both Medea and Hypsipyle from their suffering, but in a way that makes it clear that the boundaries of the original narrative—encased within and dictated by the romance ethos—have in fact brought the suffering into being. As with the Medeas of Chaucer and Gower's tales above, Caxton's Medea demonstrates, through the use of her monstrous behavior, that the suffering and virtual enslavement of women required by courtly love are no less misogynistic than the clerical representations that portray women as instruments of the devil.

Caxton's last point repeats the idea of Jason's exoneration and glosses Medea's crimes in saying, "therefore I make here an ende of this storie of Iason. Whom diuerce men blame because that he left & repudied Medea / but in this present boke ye may see the euydent causes / why he so dyd."¹⁰² His added conclusion reaffirms the entire narrative project as chiefly concerned with rescuing Jason's reputation and reuniting him with Medea. Just as Jason's reputation is restored by the frame of proper knightly conduct (here, keeping to an earlier betrothal vow, after a fashion), Medea's destructive power is neutralized and the damage she inflicts reinterpreted as impermanent, explicable, contained, or repaired. Caxton's version, as a whole, makes clear the problems of the romance ideology—and the monstrous position it demands of women—through the overt moves it makes to repatriate the cunning, fascinating, irrepressible Medea into an exemplary romance wife, mother, and queen.

Conclusion

Taken together, the versions of Medea's story presented in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, and Caxton's translation of *The History*

¹⁰² Caxton 199.

of *Jason*, though employed for different purposes, rehabilitate the Medea of earlier accounts such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where she is a dangerous sorceress, and Guido delle Colonne's *History of the Destruction of Troy*, where she is the iconic fickle, foolish female. Chaucer's tragically pitiable and highly patterned figure, Gower's piqued goddess who ends up getting away, and Caxton's redeemed worthy all contain far more complexity than the customary medieval interpretations, such as the *Ovid Moralisé*, in which Medea functions largely as a critique of Jason's faithlessness.¹⁰³ Though using different strategies of recuperation—sanitization, explication, or containment, as shown—these Middle English versions of Medea take issue with the ethos of the medieval romance, especially the literary formula of courtly love. The career of Medea in each of these three authors' hands presents a study of the terms by which the romance heroine is made desirable and shows how these demands can become excessive, even socially destructive. The moves to excuse Medea's behavior as the consequence of excessive love met with a rude betrayal disclose the ways in which the romance's gender ideology rigidly controls its representations of women, limiting female agency, power, and choice solely to the arena of the sexual relationship. Thus Medea's monstrosity serves as a critique of the romance ethos itself—but one only made possible within the structure of the romance story pattern, which has the ability for such reflexivity.

In another sense, the rehabilitation of Medea, as does the reception of *Melusine*, suggests yet again that the monstrous—the uncontained, powerful, or boundary-crossing woman—earned an inhospitable reception among medieval English audiences. Even as the horror of her story invited fascination, each author saw the need to reframe her tale to mute her monstrosity as much as

¹⁰³ See, for instance, Feimer's reading in "Medea in Ovid," which also explicates Medea's crimes as being for Jason's benefit (40-55).

possible. Where Chaucer and Gower's spiteful women were left on their own, or in Gower's version practically rewarded, Caxton's Medea—as he emphasizes through his prefatory and concluding material—has to be safely repatriated into a domestic dyad that is instrumental to proper kingship and rule. The happy ending to the story suggests that neither patron nor audiences would have appreciated a Medea left to roam free and unfettered. These instances of Medea, in line with the figure of Melusine discussed in the previous chapters, add evidence to the claim of a narrowed reception of women's influence or representation at the turn of the sixteenth century in England. Unlike Melusine, who erupts out of the text, Medea has to be cut down and contained. Her history shows how these tales, taking advantage of the narrative possibilities constructed by the romance, make the monstrous woman a lens for examining the paradoxical restraints put upon women by the medieval rhetoric of misogyny and for showing how these restraints themselves create a monstrous—contradictory, boundary-imperiling, highly symbolic—entity: the Othered woman.

CHAPTER 4

EXILED QUEENS, MONSTROUS MATRIARCHS

I previously suggested that the monstrous women of this study plot an arc of narrative stances that deal in various ways with the integration of the monstrous woman into the fictional social world which she inhabits. Unlike Grendel's mother or Albina of the histories, who exist to be conquered in ways that legitimate male prowess and authorize male rule, the monstrous women of the Middle English romances pose an interpretive challenge in that they often function as the heroines of their tale, obeying the dictates of a distinctive gender ideology that employs the desires, activities, and talents of women in support of patriarchal goals including domestic harmony, patrilineal reproduction, and proper inheritance. In examining the translation of *Melusine*, where the heroine happens to be a half-animal, half-fairy woman, I proposed that her progressive transformations and final eruption from the human world to the level of pure *mosntrum* provided means for her translator to reflect on this gender ideology's demands for legitimate reproduction, female subservience to patriarchal values, and the vulnerabilities of a system of authority predicated entirely on male oaths. In the end, Melusine's polycorporeal body emblemizes the competing discourses that enclosed women in clerical, scientific, and imaginative literatures but ultimately could find no coherent place for them. The Middle English versions of Medea, which I argued function as romances because of a like ability to reflect through fiction on the ideology they employ, attempt a rehabilitation of the monstrous woman by showing her as an exemplar whose actions can be explained by male disloyalty. At the same time, Medea's eruptions of monstrosity are used by her authors and translators to figure the excesses of a gender ideology that uses the rhetoric of courtly love to limit female agency to

the sole purposes of winning and serving her chosen mate. In this chapter I will turn to a third example—treatments of the exiled queen, best represented by the Middle English versions of Constance—which employ a narrative strategy that completely integrates the monstrous woman into a functional, reproductive patriarchal society while showing at the same time how the exemplary woman is made monstrous by the rhetoric that constructs her.

Like Melusine, Constance suffers the betrayal of her male protector; like Medea, she stands in the center of dramatic scenes of blood, violence, mayhem, and murder. In the versions told by the Middle English authors Chaucer and Gower, Constance undergoes a careful sanitization of her monstrous elements through a series of displacements that transfer the violence that attends her onto surrounding villains and innocent bystanders. This move of displacement becomes a tool these authors use to interrogate the gender ideology of which Constance is the imagined epitome and to trouble the markers of female virtue which this ideology demands. In the end, this technique of displacement of monstrosity, and the residue of that monstrosity which is taken up or recognized by the characters and situations surrounding Constance, suggest that the formative terms of female virtue create a monstrous figure of the idealized heroine. This chapter will examine in detail the tales of Constance in Gower and Chaucer to investigate the various strategies these authors use to reflect on female virtue—and its demands for passivity, complicity, and reproductive integrity—as the key element of a successfully self-perpetuating patriarchal society that can absorb and survive male violations of its own code. I will conclude with another example of a monstrous matriarch, the mother of Sir Degaré, to show how the accused queen provides the premier example of romance thinking that exposes the monstrous woman to be simultaneously

constructive and constitutive of the correct social order, its necessary point of origin.

As noted in Chapter 3, neither the larger structure of the *Canterbury Tales* of Geoffrey Chaucer, in which the Constance story is retold by the Man of Law, nor the *Confessio Amantis* of John Gower are proper romances. Several of the individual tales which make up these collections, however, overtly invoke romance formulae, including the thematic emphasis on the adventures of a single protagonist or family, a keen attention to the personal and affective relationships of the protagonist, and involvement with the supernatural. In the introduction I argued that these features alone do not a romance make, and the romance as a literary approach is best identified by its use of fictionality, for instance in the way it uses psuedo-historical settings and characters, to tell stories that realize a moral and imaginative truth through their ability to reflect on contemporary values and cultural mores. As Winthrop Wetherbee points out, “[r]omance is properly a vehicle for testing the integrity of social institutions, of culture itself as a means of regulating and mediating human relations.”¹ As the previous chapters have shown, one of the ways the romance achieves this exploration is through its use of the monstrous woman to test and decode the strategies of representation that construct and regulate the terms of female behavior. The romance thus performs a “thinking through women” that uses women’s bodies to analyze problematic rhetoric and investigate problems of social order, and a further look at this use of Constance in Gower and Chaucer will reveal her to assume this same function.

Constance’s affinities with the romance form are strengthened by the popularity of the accused queen motif, of which she is one derivation, in

¹ Wetherbee 82.

romance as well as folklore throughout medieval Europe.² The earliest written versions of the story circulated as Latin prose exempla in the early twelfth century; in them, the female protagonist set adrift in a boat is an early medieval Empress of Rome. A subsequent translation into Old French in Gautier de Coinci's *Miracles de Nostre Dame* highlights the miraculous nature of the heroine's patient suffering, the guidance of supernatural powers which protect her through her exile, and the empress's withdrawal into a convent after she is finally cleared of all charges against her. Later vernacular versions such as *La Manekine* by Philippe de Remi, *Roman du Comte d'Anjou* by Jehan Maillart, and the German *Mai und Beafloer* are more easily classified as romances, pointing to the genre's readiness to adapt earlier narrative material for its own purposes.³ Accused or set-adrift queens occur in popular Middle English stories that are undisputably grouped as romance, including *Octavian*, *Sir Isumbras*, *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, and *Sir Tryamour*,⁴ as well as in tales with female protagonists like *Emaré* and *Le Bone Florence of Rome*. By the fourteenth century, when the Constance story first appeared as such, the motif of the exiled queen was already an established romance motif. The narrative inserted by Nicholas Trivet in the Anglo-Norman *Cronicles* he completed around 1334 for Mary of Woodstock, daughter of Edward I, shows the clear romance pattern at the heart of the Empress of Rome story; he invents trials for his heroine, now named Constance, that include everything from assault and attempted rape to accusations of bearing monstrous progeny.⁵ Gower and Chaucer adapt this presumed episode

² Margaret Schlauch's *Chaucer's Constance and Accused Queens* offers an early, full-length study of this popular story type that traces it across several European cultures.

³ Black examines several of these early versions in *Medieval Narratives of Accused Queens* 20-90.

⁴ Indeed, Harriet Hudson uses this trope to organize and unite these narratives in her TEAMS edition of *Four Middle English Romances*.

⁵ Schlauch, *Chaucer's Constance*, 156; Barefield 37.

of English history in ways that conflate the moralizing bent and the imaginative possibilities into a story best classified as hagiographic romance.⁶

While a critical tradition has been established for reading Constance as a romance, a tradition for reading her as a monstrous woman has not. In fact the plotting mothers-in-law of the tale—the Sultanness, mother of her first proposed husband, and Donegild, mother of King Aelle of Northumberland whom Constance eventually marries—are the more conventional monsters. Chaucer’s *Man of Law*, as a narrator, can hardly conceive of them as human, so outraged is he by their “unfeminine” behavior. But as I argue in the introduction, the work of the monster is not just to threaten but to signify; not simply to imperil boundaries, but to point meaningfully to the language and beliefs that construct them. Constance, as the analysis below will demonstrate, is as much a term in the debate over female virtue as are her villainous mothers-in-law. Though carefully sanitized of destructive motives or antisocial desires, Constance is still haunted by a residual monstrosity, cast partly by her central involvement in scenes of blood and mayhem and partly by the false rumors of non-humanness with which she is accused. Constance’s voyages outline cultural boundaries but also threaten to collapse them, bleeding Christianity into the Muslim realms of Syria or Barbary and the pagan reaches of northern England. Ultimately, her use by her narrators as a critical lens for reflecting on issues such as social justice, order, providence, and the appropriate channels of desire puts her in a monstrous position: it turns her into a portent, a signifier. In such a place she is perfectly located to examine and critique the terms that create her, particularly the gender ideology that values female virtue and intact chastity over human life.

⁶ Wetherbee 69-70 and 81-82.

Meaningful Violence

Narratives of accused or castaway queens in general, and the Constance story in particular, participate in a well-established literary strategy that assumes that violence committed by or toward women has a special explanatory power. The violence carries a spiritual valence, especially in a story designed as a hagiographic romance, but it can also be understood through the general assumption, as discussed in the introduction, that women occupied a secondary and inferior place in the hierarchy of biological beings—a hierarchy where physical frailty connoted moral pliability as well. In the case of Constance, the violence threatened is never permanent or irreparable. Her life is in danger, her chastity endangered, her reputation repeatedly brought under attack, but through all her adventures she is protected and delivered by a mighty supernatural hand. In fact the violence directed toward her is eventually deflected onto her attackers, so that Constance emerges from her trials as an intact, seemingly indestructible being. The peculiar ability of Constance's preserved body to refract violence and displace destruction onto those around her seems to confront and be fundamentally inconsistent with the customary purpose of violence against women in medieval narrative, in much the same way that the gender ideology of the Middle English romance seems to conflict or be fundamentally incompatible with the habitual strands of medieval misogyny rehearsed in clerical or didactic works. What is "monstrous" about Constance is, finally, what is monstrous about tortured women saints; yet unlike those women, her ability to withstand impossible assaults refracts judgment not on devilish or pagan sin but on secular, patriarchal values.

One explanation for violence against women in medieval romance, as suggested, is that it simply reflects the cultural misogyny that forms a persistent background to medieval English life and thought. It serves as a general feature

of the landscape or an accepted feature of the “romance imaginary” to which Stephen Knight refers,⁷ and often serves a narrative purpose. The rape that introduces Chaucer’s “Wife of Bath’s Tale,” for example, inspires female outrage and the sentence of the erring knight’s penitent quest, which becomes the stage for the Wife’s narrative rather than a tale of corrective or reparative action directed at the violated woman herself. On a less physically violent note, the self-recriminations of Gawain as he escapes beheading by the Green Knight subscribe to a current of thought shared by Biblical *auctores* and the distinguished fathers of the church on the dangers of feminine wiles:

Bot hit is no ferly þaȝ a fole madde,
 And þurȝ wyles of wymmen be wonen to sorȝe,
 For so watz Adam in erde with one bygyled,
 And Salamon with fele sere, and Samson eftsoneȝ —
 Dalyda dalt hym hys wyrde — and Dauyth þerafter
 Watz blended with Barsabe, þat much bale þoled.
 Now þese were wrathed wyth her wyles, hit were a wynne huge
 To luf hom wel, and leue hem not, a leude þat couþe.⁸

Here Gawain claims that if worthies such as Adam, Solomon, Samson, and King David could be tricked by a woman, he might be excused if the same had happened to him. But in these romances, it should be observed, the misogyny is engaged to be subtly complicated. The educative project that the rapist knight undergoes puts him at the mercy of a woman, temporarily reversing the power dynamic to support the narrator’s final claim for women’s “sovereyneteȝ” and men’s “gentilesse.”⁹ Gawain’s reflection avoids acknowledging that the real orchestrator of his deceit is the witch Morgan le Fay, whose ostensible motives seem no more than spite. Thus while the Middle English romance borrows from

⁷ See “The Social Function of the Middle English Romances” in Aers 99-104.

⁸ Tolkein and Gordon 66-67.

⁹ Benson III.1025-1024 (119) and II.1109-1212 (120).

medieval cultural misogyny for its own purposes, those purposes are rarely absorbed uncontested into the world of the romance as a whole.

Specifically, the motif of the exiled or castaway queen provides a means for examining more closely an institutional violence against women that is taken up in the literary imagination of the romance. This is a violence that manifests in legal records and laws where physical chastisement or mutilation serve as an appropriate judicial response. The laws of Cnut, published around 1030, call for a woman guilty of adultery to lose both her nose and ears,¹⁰ while the law treatise called the *Fleta*, compiled c.1296, advises that “strumpets” apprehended in the royal quarters should, after the fourth offense, have their upper lips cut off.¹¹ Legal records of the later medieval English period abound with instances of physical punishment being meted out to women who were convicted of that particularly female crime, being a gossip or scold.¹² These laws not just accept but authorize and legally sanction abuse of the female body in response to what was considered inappropriate behavior. While mutilation was not a legal measure reserved solely for women, as it happens the instances described here share points of concern with misogynistic clerical literature, specifically addressing the control of women’s sexual conduct as well as the restraint of their tongues. As for appropriate behavior, it was up to the man to judge, as in the case of beating one’s wife to correct her faults; while excessive battery was frowned upon, Emma Hawkes notes that the general acceptance of the practice of wife-beating institutionalized the kinds of misogyny presented in clerical and medical treatises, for the “idea of just chastisement was based on the belief that disobedience resulted from a lack of reason or discipline and that patriarchs were

¹⁰ Robertson 202-203.

¹¹ Brundage 469, quoting Richardson and Sayles 2:114-115.

¹² Karen Jones’s *Gender and Petty Crime in Late Medieval England* abounds with such examples. She notes also the much lesser incidence of male convictions for verbal incontinence.

uniquely endowed with reason which allowed them to perceive and to correct appropriately the errors of those under their power."¹³

Perhaps borrowing from the judicial tradition, mutilations occur in the romance literature as punishments visited upon women. In Marie de France's *Bisclavret*, the betrayed husband, trapped in his werewolf form by his adulterous wife, tears the nose off her face (in consequence of which, several future generations of her female offspring are born noseless, presumably as a physical marker of their ancestress's treachery). In the insular versions of the Constance tale, the plotting mother-in-law Donegild suffers various fates, the most bloody being that of Trivet's version, in which her betrayed son Aelle cuts off her head and then hews her to pieces as she lies naked in her bed.¹⁴ Amanda Hopkins, in discussing the violence perpetuated upon women in Middle English Breton lays, suggests that while male protagonists must actively respond to a threat, female protagonists have a more passive role as a consequence of the "biologic and sociopolitical identity" in which a woman "is primarily defined by her ability to bear offspring, to fulfill her husband's reproductive destiny."¹⁵ Hopkins argues that the vulnerability of females in these stories acts as a catalyst for narrative conflict and male action, while the need to respond to or prevent the heroine's endangerment corresponds to her moral worth; she suggests these scenes are neither "voyeuristic nor concerned with the proto-sadomasochistic titillation" of saints' lives but rather reflect a social reality. Female vulnerability, she concludes, "is an expression of female identity defined in terms of sexuality and procreative potential."¹⁶ Her observations help explain the threats visited on Constance and similar accused queens as a peculiar paradox: the violence enacts

¹³ Hawkes 69.

¹⁴ See the English translation of Trivet's tale in Furnivall, Block, and Clauston 38.

¹⁵ Hopkins 43.

¹⁶ Hopkins 50-58.

a biological and legal assumption that women's bodies are pliable, while the need for protection answers an assumption that a functional patriarchy rests on the proper action and correct judgment of the benevolent, and empowered, male subject. The sorts of literary threats made to female chastity reflect the assessment that the prevailing value of the female lies in her reproductive worth. The institutionalized violence of the law codes, as reflected in the romance, is essentially concerned with the proper deployment of feminine sexuality, which often manifests metaphorically as a concern with proper female speech, suggesting that an unrestrained tongue corresponds to unregulated sexual conduct. Both literatures recognize that female virtue is primarily defined through her procreative potential.

The romance's gender ideology, expressing its own concerns with female reproductive power and female virtue as defined by decorous sexual behavior and correct speech, is therefore not as disengaged as it might otherwise seem to be from the misogynistic debate. Its focus on the exemplary woman and the terms by which, in the case of Melusine and Medea, the exemplary woman is made monstrous expose the misogynistic bent of what Alcuin Blamires names the "case for" side of the debate about women, which generally works to illustrate how the "good wife" upholds patriarchal values and serves, even legitimates, a male-authored social order.¹⁷ In clerical writings certainly, the

¹⁷ See Blamires, *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture*, enlarging the idea proposed in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended* that part of the appeal of taking the "case for" side was the greater rhetorical skill it demanded, since the opposition held the weight of evidence and authority. R. Howard Bloch established in *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* that the idealized lady of courtly verse was no less a misogynistic trope than the conventional remarks about Eve; the misogyny lay in the very act of representation, not the interpretation given. The same point is made by Andrée Kahn Blumstein in *Misogyny and Idealization in the Courtly Romance*. Other works that observe the restrictive tendencies of the trope of the exemplary woman include Glenda McLeod's *Virtue and Venom*, Jill Mann's *Apologies to Women*, and Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski's article on Jean Le Fèvre's *Livre de Leïse*.

“case for” served as little more than a rhetorical exercise. Fenster and Lees point out in the introduction to their work on medieval gender debates that the convention of spiritual “privileges” assigned to women by philosophers such as Peter Abelard—one of the privileges suggestively being that Eve, made second, was thereby an “improvement” on the first effort, Adam—had no real impact on the material situation of women; an “exchange on the issues, that is, one with social, political, or economic consequences, was never contemplated.”¹⁸

Similarly, E. Ann Matter points out in the same volume that the exaltation of women’s spiritual capacities and the celebrated exemplariness of women in the tradition of Christian servants and mystics never led the Church to modify its opposition to women preaching or being ordained. Clerical thinking, she concludes, was too invested in Augustine’s conclusion in *De trinitate* that “woman as an embodied being (*femina, mulier*) does not participate in the image of God, but as part of the category ‘human being’ (*homo*).”¹⁹ Thus, woman alone or as helpmate is not in the image of God; only when she is joined to man is she fully the image of God. Man, on the other hand, is the image of God all the time, whether joined or not. In replicating this idea that the fully functional woman is one united to a man, delivering on the potential of her spiritual and reproductive capacities, the romance ideology entertains the same contradiction in thinking that involves attempts to both elevate and contain the female creature. Fenster and Lees, in suggesting that secular imaginative narrative tries to address this impasse by using women to find a “way, however tentative, of imagining a new order of things, a new relation between the particular and the general,”²⁰ begin to point to the undertaking of the Middle English romance, which recreates the

¹⁸ Fenster and Lees 8.

¹⁹ Matter in Fenster and Lees 44.

²⁰ Fenster and Lees 8-14.

ideological impasse in order to reflect on the assumptions that energize it and entertain alternative solutions. One critical lens the romance uses, as I have been arguing, is the trope of the monstrous woman. The uses and effects of the violence committed toward, around, and by Constance—violence which, I will endeavor to show, works equally as the cause and result of her monstrosity—encodes a symbolic meaning that goes well beyond the need to imperil the innocent heroine for purposes of creating narrative tension. The violence reveals how the terms of the ideological impasse are replicated in the romance gender ideology but serves at the same time to trouble the assumptions that govern the fictional universe and, by extension, the world of the listening audience of the romance.

The meaning of violence in the Constance tales must further be considered in terms of what the stories borrow from the hagiographic tradition as well as what they borrow from romance. The meaningful use of violence, especially violence graphically staged against or upon women's bodies, appears with vivid effect in hagiographic literature that takes women as its subject, especially in the subgenre of the virgin martyr, which exploits the abused and violated female character for narrative and thematic purposes. In these tales, violence against women appears far in excess of any mimetic reflection of a cultural or institutional misogyny. The excess has posed an interpretive puzzle for critics, who hold varying opinions as to whether the attacks function as "thinly disguised pornography that provides men an acceptable outlet for their hostility toward women" or as self-conscious literary strategies designed to expose attitudes regarding the mercantile worth and circulation of women in both social and sexual terms.²¹ The violence, however, achieves a singular and unified

²¹ See Winstead 3 for a summary of the pornography argument, Cazelle 63 for the mercantile argument in relation to Old French versions of virgin martyr tales.

effect: the test—no matter how imaginative its horrors, whether knived wheels, cat-o'-nine's-tails, pots of boiling oil, or malicious demons—illustrates the heroine's persistent and unshakeable faith, which then guarantees her spiritual deliverance from torment. Medieval authors of saints' lives used their spectacular subjects to arouse their audience to *admiratio*, not *imitatio*.²²

The required ending in martyrdom, however, makes the virgin saint an unpromising subject for romance. While both romances and saints' lives explore familial roles and the institution of marriage, Julia Boffey points out that "romances generally [work] towards suitable marriage and the prospect of some dynastic confirmation, saints' lives towards martyrdom and assimilation into the greater family of heaven."²³ Rhiannon Purdie likewise points out that while both romances and saints' lives follow an exemplary hero or heroine, share a similar narrative structure, and equally "cater to a taste for excitement, adventure and unequivocal triumph over adversity," the purpose of hagiographic literature, unlike the romance, is primarily didactic.²⁴ The combination of these necessarily contradicting genres in a tale styled as a "hagiographic romance" adds an additional layer of complexity, and an additional interpretive opportunity, to the Constance story. Constance strives to be exemplary of both a spiritual paradigm and a system of domestic values more appropriate to a "bourgeois-gentry" class, as Felicity Riddy terms it.²⁵ She thus serves as a demonstration for how Christian ethics get co-opted to validate certain domestic structures. But she is also put, literally, in a liminal position, adrift in her rudderless boat, demonstrating the paradox Dorothy Yamamoto notes in the ways medieval women are central and peripheral to culture at the same time, a simultaneous "presence" and

²² Bynum 43.

²³ Boffey 621.

²⁴ Purdie 114.

²⁵ Riddy in Krueger, *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, 235.

“absence.”²⁶ From this position on the margins—a territory usually inhabited by the monster—Constance stands perfectly poised to comment on the baffling contradictions of a cultural imaginary that presents women as tertiary to the image of God and thus prohibited from entry into the most sacred spaces,²⁷ yet at the same time, through their duties of reproduction, child-rearing, and moral instruction of their dependents, makes them central to the customs of inheritance which allowed property to pass among male heirs and to upholding the practices and beliefs which continued to support patriarchal systems of authority as natural, God-given, and unquestionably right.

Problematic Virtue and Monstrous Queens

While the romance gender ideology acknowledges what it shares with other traditions of thinking about medieval women—that the chief determiner of a woman’s virtue is where her experience puts her on the spectrum of reproductive activity—the evaluations of sexual continence acquire other signifiers in the metaphorical world of the romance. Most commonly, the attributes of personal beauty, faith, and learning function as signals for moral worth, but part of the work of monstrosity in tales of exiled queens is to demonstrate how moral worth really just stands in for sexual value.

At first glance, the exiled queens do not, of course, seem monstrous. In fact they are described as *non pareils*, the fairest example of their kind. Custance, in the “Man of Law’s Tale,” is esteemed for her goodness as well as her beauty; Roman merchants reporting to their Syrian compatriots observe:

In hire is heigh beautee, withoute pride,

²⁶ Yamamoto 206.

²⁷ Schulenberg notes that as a model for the celestial space, for instance, earthly churches often restricted access for women to its holiest areas, as a way of preserving male sanctity and authority (353-354).

Yowthe, withoute grenehede or folye;
To alle hire werkes vertu is hir gyde;
Humblesse hath slayn in hire al tyrannye.
She is mirour of alle curteisye;
Hir herte is verray chambre of hoolynesse,
Hir hand, ministre of fredam for almesse.²⁸

The Constance of John Gower's version is mostly famous for her faith, so "[t]hat al the wide worldes fame / Spak worschipe of hire goode name," but she too is not without "[the] beauté and the grace" that would be expected of one of her birth and situation.²⁹ That the heroine must be beautiful is of course a cherished part of the romance tradition, but one might observe that exiled queens are often, in addition to their beauty, accomplished in other areas as well. Emaré is "gent" and bryght," "semely . . . of syght," the "fayrest creature borne," and learns "curtesye and thewe" as well as "[g]old and sylke for to sewe."³⁰ Le Bone Florence of Rome is "boþe meke and mylde, / So fayre was seen but selde," and also well-educated in book learning as well as playing the "harpe and sawtyre;" her beauties surpass the narrator's ability to enumerate them.³¹ Just as Paul Beekman Taylor has observed of heroic women in the Old English poetry, the beauty of the Middle English heroine is the guarantor of her worth, the signal not only of her high stature but of her high moral fiber as well. It is this intelligence of conduct, blazoned by beauty, which provides the guarantee that the heroine will conduct herself within the bounds of appropriate sexual behavior; nothing else could lead the audience to invest in her perils and preservation.³²

Of particular emphasis in the Constance stories, the heroine's faith also doubles as the key guarantor of her moral, therefore sexual, worth. Her

²⁸ Benson II.162-8 (89).

²⁹ Gower II.595-6 (622).

³⁰ Laskaya and Salisbury ll. 45, 48, 50, 58-9.

³¹ Heffernan ll. 32-3, 63-65.

³² Taylor 211-221.

Christian learning and commitment function as an argument in favor of educating women, for Constance's reach is broad and her influence, deeply felt, proves the chief engine that moves the story through its various iterations of testing and deliverance. Trivet's version introduces Constance through her education, which includes not only "the Cristen feythe" and "diuerse langages" but also "the vij sciences," specifically "logyke, naturel, moral, astronomy, Geometry, Musique, perspectiue."³³ It is only after the converted Saracens return to their homeland, proclaiming their new faith, that they also speak persuasively to the Sultan concerning "the mayde Constaunce, the whyche had conuerted hem, of her hygh and so nobull prudence, and of so grete and meruelous beaute and ientilnesse with grete nobles of blood."³⁴ Constance's introduction signals how in Trivet's version, her missionary capabilities take precedence over, and in some ways explain, both her powerful presence and her careful preservation throughout her adventures.

Trivet's Constance, though she follows a general romance pattern, is not used as a monstrous woman in the same ways as in Chaucer and Gower, who will source the investigation below. These two Middle English authors to a much greater extent use the romance as a literary strategy to reflect on the terms of Constance's virtue and explore the ideology which constructs her and which she, at the same time, imperils. What these authors acknowledge in their treatments of Constance is that her moral and therefore sexual worth, as demonstrated by her beauty and wisdom, can also be signified by her passivity. In fact both authors recognize that the trope of the exiled queen, helplessly adrift in her rudderless boat, offers a perfect opportunity for interrogating not just the

³³ This mid-fifteenth century Middle English translation of Trivet is based on a French chronicle, which follows Trivet's version quite closely. See Furnivall et. al. 225.

³⁴ Furnivall 226.

status of exemplary medieval women, the terms of their liminality and their simultaneous presence and absence in culture, but also how the chief determinant of their value can be alternatively identified by sexual chastity (which it is), moral exemplariness (where beauty and learning act as guarantors for sexual chastity), and passivity, which itself guarantees compliance with a Christian ethos concerning female conduct and thus ensures both moral and sexual continence.

Chaucer's *Custance*, for example, a "mirour of alle curteisye," functions quite stably as a reflective surface throughout the entire poem; in her extreme passivity she becomes little more than a blank space that can take nothing into itself and can only reflect what is put before it. Geraldine Heng, following Wetherbee, calls her "an inviting cipher, a blank," while Carolyn Dinshaw shares this impression of *Constance* as a space onto which the intentions or desires of others are projected, "a no-thing in herself."³⁵ Gower's *Constance*, so aptly named, allegorizes faith, not just the Christian faith but a sense of congruity between words, intention, and action which is the opposite of the *Envy* under discussion. In Gower's story *Constance's* passivity is not so much an inertia as the ability to resist attack—a power far more flexible than her capacity to act. In both stories, the two meanings of Christian faith—offered repeatedly as one sort of "truth"—and verbal objectivity or sufficiency are represented as morally related and, in the *Constance* narrative, often confused. Both stories equally highlight how the Christian ethos and the romance ideology demand a certain passivity as a marker of female virtue, and both authors use the fictional possibilities offered by the romance to investigate the problems that this demand presents.

³⁵ Heng 182; Dinshaw 110.

I have already observed how the clash of genre in Constance's story makes visible the congruences between what I am calling clerical misogyny and the romance's gender ideology and puts the heroine, because between categories at the level of plot and theme also, in a monstrous position. I have also suggested that the use of violence in the tale, and the way it is displaced from and yet always connected to the heroine, also identifies her as threatening and therefore monstrous. I will suggest here that Chaucer and Gower invoke the critical lens of monstrosity in their tales in order to reveal the ways in which female virtue, buried at the heart of the competing gender ideologies in which Constance is at once enclosed and yet marginalized by and to, functions as an essentially monstrous term. Concerned not just with issues of female reproduction, which is a core issue of the Melusine story, or with female sexual desire, which is the problem central to Middle English versions of Medea, Constance interrogates how the cultural imaginary of the romance constructs the terms of exemplary womanhood and betrays how those terms cannot, in fact and function, be other than monstrous.

Gower's Constance: Moral Motherhood

Gower's version of the castaway queen story uses Constance to investigate the problem of female virtue in terms of motherhood. The maternal figure functions as the controlling image and central argument of the tale, beginning with Constance's surrogate parenting of the merchants who visit her father and ending with her return to Rome and final installation as the mother of the next emperor. Though Russell Peck has noted of Gower's compositional style that he favors the technique of juxtaposition,³⁶ the main women of Gower's compact tale

³⁶ See his introduction to vol. 2 of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, especially 25.

are best read not in opposition but in a different sort of relationship to one another: effectively, all serve as variations on the chief maternal image. The one model of femininity offered in Gower's story is the high born, well-mannered, beautiful woman who first becomes wife to an important man, then mother to an important son, and who, while she might yet order affairs or give advice, usually withdraws into the shadow of her protecting male and employs her great virtues in the service of either her earthly guardians or her supernatural father, God. The story declares its intent to demonstrate the perils of envy, especially detraction or "bacbitinge," but in fact becomes a study of how the romance ideology constructs the maternal woman as an image of unlimited power. The author dramatizes the force of envy through metaphors that rely for their explanatory charge on the relationship of sons to their mothers and uses the figure of the monstrous woman—including that of his heroine—to illuminate the terms of female virtue and their fundamental, and contradictory, importance to the cultural imaginary built by the romance.

The tale, in its use of the four variant female characters—Constance, the Sultan's mother-in-law, Dame Hermyngheld, and Constance's own mother-in-law, Domilde—first sets up the connection between female virtue and speech, then proceeds to examine the relationship between speech, virtue, and motherhood. Beginning with Genius's lecture to Amans about how he ought to use words, especially when it concerns his adored lady and rivals for her attention, the introduction to the tale of Constance signals its obsession with words and the ways in which they are employed. Straight away the marker for Constance's value is her reputation; all the wide world speaks well of her. She "was so ful of feith" that she has managed to convert several high-ranking merchants of Barbarie through the conversation they engage in while she is

ostensibly reviewing the wares they have for sale.³⁷ They straightaway receive baptism and “alle here false goddes weyven,” and upon returning to their homeland, “thei, whiche hadden undertake / [t]he rihte feith to kepe and holde,” inform the Sultan about Constance’s persuasive powers.³⁸ Hearing that she is in addition beautiful and full of graces, he too resolves to marry her and, to seal the deal, convert to Christianity for her sake. The effectiveness of Constance’s speech, which is predicated on the moral value of her faith and education, immediately signals, along with her beauty, her desirability as a mate, a suitability so convincing that the Sultan is willing to dispense with the barrier of his own religion in order to acquire her. Wifehood combines with Constance’s missionary activities as the pope arranges to send two cardinals, along with many other assembled lords, to witness the Sultan’s baptism.

Immediately following this, the Sultan’s mother takes up a different, competing use of words. What the episode with the Sultana shows—“[t]his olde fend, this Sarazine,” the narrator calls her³⁹—is that speech can be efficacious even with the suspect motives of envy behind it. Telling herself that if “[m]i sone him wedde in this manere, / Than have I lost my joies here, / For myn astat schal so be lassed,”⁴⁰ the Sultan’s mother “feigneth wordes in his ere” to the effect that she is delighted that he is to take a new faith and wishes to give her daughter the first welcoming banquet.⁴¹ After introducing a heroine whose reputation relies on her use of words as a reflector of moral worth, the tale promptly portrays a woman, a mother, who uses words to deceive, thus making the connection between female virtue and successful speech highly suspect.

³⁷ Gower II.598.

³⁸ Gower II. 610 and 616-7.

³⁹ Gower I. 705.

⁴⁰ Gower II. 646-49.

⁴¹ Gower II. 654-71.

The first threat of violence enters the tale at this point to highlight this tenuous connection. When all are settled at the feast, the Sultana's men spring upon the diners and "slowh hem in a sodein rage / Endlong the bord as thei be set."⁴² To illuminate the horror of the moment, the narrator dwells on the image of Constance, the sole survivor, standing pale with shock among cups and dishes covered in blood. Though not unaffected, she is physically untouched by the carnage; it is as though her virtue, which before reached out via her reputation to attract the Sultan to her, now acts as a deflective shield that makes the attackers unable to kill her. Holiness is not enough, as the other Christian representatives, including the cardinals, perish in the slaughter; there is some quality that allows Constance to stand untouched, Medea-like, amid the bloodbath she has inadvertently caused. The violence, which momentarily makes Constance a monstrous figure, offers a moment for the narrative to suggest that even the supposedly good woman's powerful speech can work to destructive effect.

The second iteration of this narrative movement, which entails proselytizing speech by Constance followed up by murder perpetrated by a jealous detractor, serves to emphasize this initial suggestion even more forcefully, and at the same time questions female innocence. Literally unmoored once deprived of male protection, Constance in her little rudderless boat fortunately falls under the stewardship of the holy father, who "[h]ire schip to stiere hath take in honde,"⁴³ and plunks her down in Northumberland, where she is taken in by the king's chamberlain, Elda, and his wife Hermyngheld. Here again Constance puts her education to use with missionary zeal and manages to convert her hostess. The comfortable intimacy of Constance and Hermyngheld's relationship, as the narrator imagines them in a companionable domesticity that

⁴² Gower ll. 688-9.

⁴³ Gower l. 716.

involves frequent conversation, long walks together, and sharing a bed, provides a telling counterpart to the more tension-fraught relationships that Constance has with the men in her life. In time Hermyngheld is so advanced in her faith that she is able to heal a blind man in Christ's name, again a verbal performance and testament to the transformative power of women's speech. That the miracle spurs Elda to convert also and implants in him the idea that Constance would make a good wife for his king only reiterates the suggestion that, in this world at least, a woman's value as a reproductive partner is signaled by her beauty, meek Christian faith, and facility with words; so convincing are these markers that upon mere report of them a man can resolve on his choice of such a woman as spouse.

The wisdom of such trust in report is immediately brought into question by the next narrative scene, in which Constance stands accused of a crime she did not commit. Envy is ostensibly the issue, described as the motivation for the Northumbrian knight who, soured by lack of success in his campaign to woo Constance, begins to hate her and plot her destruction. "Of hire honour he hadde Envie, / So that upon his tricheries / A lesinge in his herte he caste,"⁴⁴ and a few lines later the knight slits the sleeping Hermyngheld's throat in her bed and plants the bloody knife next to Constance, her bedfellow. Unlike the versions of the story given in Chaucer and Gower, which move quickly to the accusation scene, Gower's tale describes how Elda sneaks into the bedchamber with a dim light so as not to wake his wife and discovers her dead and bloodied body. The narrative attention to the spectacle of the violated female body not only serves to make immediate the severity of the knight's hatred and the peril in which Constance stands but also serves as a mute comment on the consequences

⁴⁴ Gower ll. 811-13.

of female innocence. Hermyngheld appears as much Constance's victim as the earlier banqueters at the Sultana's feast; once again the violence aimed at Constance personally is refracted onto those around her, leaving Constance at the center of a bloody scene. Hermyngheld is of rank, is Christian, is no less powerful in speech than Constance herself, as proven by her miraculous healing of the blind man on the beach. Yet the mysterious hand that descends to guide and protect Constance is absent when it comes to Hermyngheld's defense, suggesting that far from being its own reward, female virtue is instead a point to be contended over and decided by men.

This suggestion is emphasized by the accusation scene which immediately follows Hermyngheld's death and Constance's implication by the knight, who "discovers" the knife and "sclaundreth [her] there in audience / With false wordes whiche he feigneth."⁴⁵ Constance has no more ability to defend herself than Hermyngheld did, a situation which exaggerates the dependent position doubly enforced by Christian ethics and patriarchal values that insist on the secondary and subordinate relationship of women to men. Notably Constance's own words do not surface at all as an issue in her defense; rather the transactions deciding her innocence take place among Elda, the knight, and a third supernatural party. The knight recklessly attests to Constance's guilt on a book which Elda presents, and his own dismembering actions and accusatory words promptly turn back upon him:

With that the hond of hevene him smot
In tokne of that he was forswore,
That he hath bothe hise yhen lore,
Out of his hed the same stounde
Thei sterte, and so thei weren founde.
A vois was herd, whan that they felle,

⁴⁵ Gower ll. 864-65.

Which seide, "O dampned man to helle,
Lo, thus hath god the sclaundre wroke
That thou ayein Constance hast spoke:
Beknow the sothe er that thou dye."⁴⁶

The knight's punishment upholds the earlier treatment of Christian parlance as true speech in that the blind man who asked for healing in Christ's name was granted it and the knight who falsely swears of Constance's guilt immediately loses his eyes. The heavenly voice's injunction to confess the truth ("beknow the sothe") reinforces the link between Christianity and the correct use of words—the antidote to Envy—but it also sets the seal of approval on Constance's innocence. The crime redressed by the supernatural power is not, notably, the murder of Hermyngheld but the slander against Constance.

The disappearance of Hermyngheld's troubling body and its replacement with the knight's dismemberment and death doubles the displaced violence against Constance and once again portrays her as a sort of indestructible being, preternaturally protected by her defense shield of virtue. The same shield operates quickly and precisely in the later episode when Constance is adrift yet again and a Spanish knight sneaks onto her boat intent on raping her. In Gower's version, Constance calls upon God to protect her and at the word "sodeinliche he [the knight] was out throwe / And dreynt."⁴⁷ This sudden action gives Constance the power of the virgin saint, with the ability to turn sexual attacks into misfortunes for her attackers, but it also shows her to be not vulnerable but rather *invulnerable*: nothing can penetrate her layer of protection. It is just this protection—quite at odds with the more conventional female body of Hermyngheld, which proves pliant and penetrable, quick to bleed and as easily made a pawn for male actions—that marks Constance as different, as

⁴⁶ Gower ll. 874-83.

⁴⁷ Gower ll. 1120-22.

monstrous. The mantle of her virtue, which strikes readers as not so much a passive element but an actively resistant, even repellent one, so tightly envelops her that Genius as narrator has a difficult time accounting for how she became pregnant by her new husband, the now-converted king. "The hihe makere of nature / Hire hath visited in a throwe," he offers by way of explanation for how Constance "was with childe be the king."⁴⁸ Constance's innocence and protection come at the cost of the lives around her, in incidents of vivid mayhem that cast Constance herself as a monstrous, even destructive figure and strongly question the rewards of female virtue and the corresponding merit of male protection.

Unlike the Sultana, who in Gower's version has the motivation of preserving her station, the motive of Alle's mother Domilde for interfering in her son's marriage is not explained other than by her general unpleasantness, in that she "was thurghout untrew" and "thoghte to deceive."⁴⁹ This description keys into the narrative question of how "truth" or virtue in females relates to the efficacy of speech. As with the Sultana, Constance, and Hermyngheld before her, Domilde's words have the power to cause action and transform events: when the messenger bearing news of Alle's healthy son Moris stays the night in Knaresburgh, at the queen mother's place, she hears the news "with feigned joie" and that night modifies the letter to Alle to claim that Constance his wife "is of faireie" and "[o]f such a child delivered is / Fro kinde which stant al amis."⁵⁰ For fear of shame, she writes, the deformed child has been hidden and replaced with a healthy boy called Moris.

⁴⁸ Gower ll. 916-19.

⁴⁹ Gower ll. 957 and 984.

⁵⁰ Gower ll. 952 and 964-66.

This suggestion of the supernatural wife recalls not just Melusine or even Medea, with her supernatural powers, but also the similar tales which surface in broader literatures, as discussed by Schlauch, where the revealed monstrosity of the wife usually symbolizes the dangers of taking a foreign bride. The false accusation, like the knight's slander, will come back to haunt Domilde, and her plotting makes her look the monstrous woman, not in fact Constance. But the accusation of monstrosity attributed to Constance reflects the status she has in the tale as a liminal creature, between categories rather than within them, threatening and even destructive in effect if not in intent. The allegation of monstrous birth speaks once again to the problem of the hidden and usually indeterminable state of a woman's virtue (that is, sexual activity) and the need for, as well as the tricky signification of, markers that indicate said virtue. The issue with female speech as a marker of moral and reproductive worth, problematic before, here focuses into a concern that acknowledges the functionality of female virtue as a seal of legitimate motherhood. Domilde uses monstrosity to point to anxieties about the crucial role of the woman in the patriarchal system of legitimacy and inheritance in just the same way that the authors of other monstrous women narratives do.

The accusation completes itself in action when the messenger, on his return journey, stays again in Knaresburgh where Domilde "made him feste an chiere aright, / Feignende as thogh sche cowthe him thonk."⁵¹ This time the counterfeited letter insists that since Alle stands in danger of being deposed, such an outcry is there against his "faie" wife, she and her child must be exiled. The letter, presumably from the king, calls for her ship to be stocked with food and for Constance and Moris to depart before Alle returns. When the company

⁵¹ Gower ll. 1006-7.

receives this message, the narrator says, "So gret a sorwe their beginne, / As thei here oghne moder sihen / Brent in a fyr before here yhen."⁵² This simile marks the first time Genius, in this narrative, has resorted to such rhetorical ornamentation. It also emphasizes the thematic importance of motherhood, introduced as the functional result of Constance's proven and preserved virtue, by invoking the affective quality of the maternal relationship.

Virtue, faith, and motherhood all come together in Constance's speech as she is led to the water and told what will become of her. Martyr-like, she has no thought of her own well-being but laments only for her son:

"Of me no maner charge it is
What sorwe I soffre, bot of thee
Me thenkth it is a gret pité,
For if I sterve thou schalt deie:
So mot I nedes be that weie
For moderhed and for tendresse
Wich al myn hole besienesse
Ordeigne me for thilke office,
As sche which schal be thi norrice."⁵³

Constance's announcement that she cares not what she suffers suits the Christian piety and masochism characteristic of her hagiographic models but also seems to identify the passivity of women's position as equally enforced by the romance mode. Identifying the ideological convergence of both traditions that value the woman only for her (correctly employed) reproductive ability, Constance observes that her "besieness" or function in the secular realm is to be not so much a parent as a representative of the abstractions of "motherhood" and "tenderness." Her remarks likewise show the awareness that this totalizing of her identity is one sanctioned by Christian belief, which treats motherhood as a

⁵² Gower ll. 1046-48.

⁵³ Gower ll. 1068-76.

holy office for which women are specially ordained. The silent identification with the Virgin Mary, the ultimate Christian mother, is a powerful and emotionally significant move, but Constance's peculiar casting of herself in the role, or rather vocation, of motherhood quietly positions herself and her child as equally innocent victims, revealing the enforced passivity of their positions.

From this point on, with the second exile that begins to convey Constance back to Rome, the narrative takes up a sequence of plot events and thematic parallels that slowly repair and restore the problems caused by events in the first half of the story. One additional episode of violence surfaces to imperil Constance's virtue and once again show her being shielded by supernatural protection at the cost of another's life. Repelling the afore-mentioned lusty Spanish knight, Constance makes an actual move in her own defense, using false words to mislead by asking "[t]hat he ferst loke out ate porte, / That no man were nyh the stede, / Whych myhte knowe what thei dede, / And thanne he mai do what he wolde."⁵⁴ Presumably because both her chastity and her life are on the line—the preservation of the first well worth the sacrifice of the other—Constance is excused for lying after the example of the Sultan's mother and Domegild. Yet as with the false words of those mothers, Constance's dissembling results in a death; the knight promptly tumbles overboard and drowns, and her ship moves on: "And thus the myhti Goddes hond / Hire hath conveied and defended."⁵⁵ Like the murder of Hermyngheld, the innocent woman who has no supernatural protector, the violence once again deflected from Constance's body onto another shows the price set on female virtue, while at the same time her plotting allows the narrative to trouble its own formative terms about speech and moral value.

⁵⁴ Gower ll. 1114-1117.

⁵⁵ Gower ll. 1124-25.

In the episode following Constance's safe but anonymous return to Rome, where she takes up residence with a relative and his wife, the narrative turns to the consequences which Domegild's false words have brought upon her. Alle and not the hand of God administers Domegild's punishment. Learning that he both read and was represented by false letters, an enraged Alle finds her and:

His moder sodeinliche he tok
And seide unto hir in this wise:
"O beste of helle, in what juisse
Hast thou deserved forto deie?"⁵⁶

He accuses her explicitly with "treasoun of thi bacbitinge" and serves vengeance in the form of ordering a fire to be kindled for her, a neat parallel to the metaphor of his own fiery wrath; the anger is literalized in Domegild's punishment, which is also the sentence on the law books of fourteenth-century England for women who commit treason against the monarch, according to J.G. Bellamy's *The Law of Treason*. A petty crime such as "bacbitinge" would normally have resulted in a fine or, at worse, time in the stocks;⁵⁷ but high treason, which by 1381 had come to include not just plotting against the king and counterfeiting money but also conniving harm on the king's wife or children, definitely merited burning.⁵⁸ Thus the audience, when listening to what happened to Domegild, can concur with the citizens of Northumberland that her sentence was fitting:

And tho sche was to dethe broght
And brent tofore hire sonnes yhe:
Wherof these othere, whiche it sihe
And herden how the cause stod,
Sein that the juggement is good
Of that hir Sone hire hath so served.

⁵⁶ Gower ll. 1275-79.

⁵⁷ Karen Jones 95.

⁵⁸ Bellamy, throughout.

For sche it hadde wel deserved
Thurgh tresoun of hire false tunge.⁵⁹

Being tossed on a pyre for slandering the king's wife certainly illustrates Genius's moral point about the perils of Envy, but the image of the mother burning before her son's eyes recalls the simile earlier. The Sultana's murder of her son and Alle's murder of Domegild violates the sacred office of motherhood as articulated earlier by Constance. While Constance's speech points to the ideological convention that the act of reproduction compels nourishment and care, both the Sultana and Domegild demonstrate that the duty of maternal protection and child preservation is not in fact a universal or absolute response but an individual and highly contingent one.

The impact of mothers appears twice more in the remainder of the story to elaborate both the affective impact of the maternal image and to further sketch a functional maternal relationship, in contrast to the envious mothers-in-law above. Moris is so like his mother that, upon first meeting him, Alle "sih his oghne wif Constance. / For nature as in resemblance / Of face hem liketh so to clothe, / That thei were of a suite bothe."⁶⁰ The resemblance to his mother as a key point of recognition, while it serves the purpose of reunion in the narrative, validates the maternal link in a way that runs counter to the conventional privileging of the paternal claim. As McCracken observes of Domegild's accusation that Constance has given birth to a monstrous creature, "[s]tories about monstrous birth imagine mother's blood as a contribution to lineage, and that contribution is noticed or made visible because it is seen as a threat."⁶¹ This manifestation of the mother in the son runs directly counter to the assertions in *De secretis mulierum* and other medical tracts that the male parent provides the

⁵⁹ Gower ll. 1292-99.

⁶⁰ Gower ll. 1375-78.

⁶¹ McCracken 75.

spark of life in conception and the female contributes only shapeless matter.⁶² In *Melusine*, the marks Melusine's sons bear are eventually seen as problematic, representing the imprint of her fairy and thus, according to Raymondin, corrupt blood. The suggestion in *Melusine* of the identifying "mother-marks" and in Constance's tale of the identifying resemblance presents a compelling counterpoint to the myth of sole paternal accountability, asserting that motherhood is not only the key to legitimate offspring but itself a simultaneously creative and destructive, indeed monstrous power. As a last resounding note in the tale and perhaps a final attempt to restore motherhood as a sacred, socially acceptable, and spiritual duty, the Emperor of Rome's emotional response when he rediscovers his daughter plays on the conventional sentimental attachment between mother and child: the emperor is as moved upon receiving his daughter as "though his moder were come / Fro deth to lyve out of the grave."⁶³

In this narrative that is introduced as a cautionary tale against Envy and backbiting, an image of the virtuous woman as vessel of truth begins to predominate, to be replaced by an affective model of motherhood that serves as the register for conveying the deepest extremes of human emotion, from great happiness to great grief. Constance's calling to the holy office of motherhood might narratively explain why the death that surrounds her—all of which she is implicated in, if not directly responsible for—never touches her, and why death is the immediate punishment for all who menace her (which includes, presumably, the Sultana, who we can only assume perished in the seven-year war waged by the Christians in which they had "taken such vengeance, / that non of al thilke alliance, / Be whom the tresoun was compassed, / Is from the swerd

⁶² Lemay 63-64.

⁶³ Gower ll. 1524-27.

alyve passed"⁶⁴). But Constance is in a certain if remote degree guilty of the same actions which were so terribly met when committed by the mothers-in-law of the tale: manipulating words and information (especially the information concerning her identity, which is of pressing interest to all) and strategizing for her son, when she plans that he will fall under the eye of Alle while he is a guest at her guardian, the senator's, house. The difference is only intention: Constance feigns or withholds words to protect her life and honor and manipulates only to effect a touching reconciliation of family members, reinstating the patriarchal family.

Genius wraps up his narrative by presenting Constance as illustrative of "the wel meninge of love" and how "[t]he false tungen weren lore, / Whiche upon love wolden lie."⁶⁵ In true romance fashion, he offers a happy ending that relates the personal happiness of the domestic unit to a secure dynastic succession: Alle "goth a glad lif for to live; / For he Constance hath in his hond, / Which was the confort of his lond."⁶⁶ This conclusion makes visible the romance ideology that regards the exemplary woman as a linchpin of financial security, legitimate inheritance, and here a sort of spiritual insurance. But as the instances of violence in the narrative show, the terms of female virtue, especially the emphasis on speech and chastity, are a struggle both to define and to prove. The very ways in which the four key women play as variations or images of one another imply a difficulty in assessing female virtue, this core guarantor for the success of patriarchal authority, while the mother characters demonstrate that the monstrous woman might as easily accept as repudiate this holy charge. The instances of violence provide a stage for the story's most present and powerful character, the invisible hand of God which organizes people, relationships,

⁶⁴ Gower ll. 1183-86.

⁶⁵ Gower ll. 1599-1603.

⁶⁶ Gower ll. 1560-62.

armies, and faiths into their corresponding places, thus offering a silent stamp of propriety—or perhaps inevitability—on the social order thus restored. But the same episodes of violence also display Constance's virtue as a resistant, even actively destructive power, quite a contradiction to conventional assessments that equate female virtue with silence and passivity. The blood and mayhem serve to make Constance, at least momentarily, a monstrous figure, painting with dramatic effect the tests of her virtue in ways that reveal the troubling nature of defining, controlling, and utilizing this latent power. In making his heroine monstrous not only through her liminal position but her destructive effects, Gower exposes how the romance ideology makes motherhood the sole mode of being for the woman, the one end for which her virtue prepares her.

Chaucer's Custance: "Grace" and "Place"

Chaucer's Custance, while monstrous in the same ways as Gower's—in her liminality, her boundary crossing, and her ability to deflect violence onto those around her—takes a slightly different approach to the question of female virtue and its terms within the romance ideology. Rather than motherhood, the defining feature of female goodness as presented by Custance is passivity. Indeed Custance's complete lack of agency or will can almost be read as parodic excess.⁶⁷ While Gower's tale draws its moral weight from its consideration of the effects of envy, the Man of Law's Tale reveals its thematic emphasis in the conclusion, in which the Man of Law offers this prayer:

And fareth now weel! my tale is at an end.
Now Jhesu Crist, that of his myght may sende
Joye after wo, governe us in his grace,

⁶⁷ Wetherbee points out that the Man of Law renders Custance "as nearly as possible inoperative in social terms" (70).

And kepe us alle that been in this place!⁶⁸

While obeying the conventions to end medieval narratives, especially romances, with an appeal for the well-being of both author and audience, the last rhyme of “grace” and “place” particularly resonates with the abiding concerns of this story. Through his version of the Constance tale, the Man of Law investigates grace as a universal mechanism ordering human life and examines the place of individuals within a social order structured by a male authority and reliant on male protection and justice. In choosing to approach this theme through a story told about a woman, the narrator investigates the relationship of the individual to family, society, and heavenly guardian through the weaker term, one defined by secondariness and subordination. The Man of Law’s need to emphasize Custance’s passivity to effect his Christian moral gives the author an opportunity to reflect on these terms through the gender ideology of the romance formula, showing how both the Christian ethos and the romance thinking about women takes female virtue as its shared term, but also showing the problematic aspects of female virtue in definition and application. As in Gower’s tale, the moments of violence which serve to portray Custance as monstrous—dangerous, even destructive in her effects—connect to the moments when the author has located a central clash or contradiction in the very rhetoric he has adopted, the ideological framework he is helping to construct.

The portrait of the Man of Law which emerges in the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* describes his learning, thrift, and industriousness, all with a hint that the “Sergeant’s” performance of these attributes is carefully staged. “Nowher so bisy a man as he ther nas,” the narrator observes, and yet: “he semed bisier than he was.”⁶⁹ The reference to a contrived impression of

⁶⁸ Benson II.1159-62 (103).

⁶⁹ Benson I.321-2 (28).

industriousness amplifies the Prologue's other veiled questions concerning the Man of Law's ethics in his legal transactions which, along with the ominous scope of his learning, implies an insincere use of this knowledge—and power—to which he has privileged access. The portrait given in the General Prologue and the Prologue to the Man of Law's Tale reveals an intellectual posturing that masks a canny legal manipulateness, evoking an anxiety about the law, and in particular an anxiety about whom the law benefits. Given the Man of Law's occupation, it is not surprising that concerns about justice and law abound within the tale he tells. Also, given this disjunct between seeming and fact which is used to characterize him, it is equally unsurprising that the tale he tells somewhat escapes his intentions for it, calling into question the structures of authority which he professes to support. The Man of Law's choice of subject matter for his tale, and the monstrous women with which it abounds, serve to reveal the slippages between the narrator's purported meaning and the author's actual use of the tale.

The Man of Law's prologue to his tale works more to establish his attitudes on the topics of women, storytelling, and commercial success than to introduce the story that follows. Womanhood for the Man of Law seems to be as wretched a condition as the poverty he references through his quotations of *De miseria condicionis humane*, a work on human affliction written in the later twelfth century by the man who would become Pope Innocent III.⁷⁰ In referencing the various tales of Chaucer's doomed lovers the Man of Law offers a catalogue of abused women, not one of whom has not suffered "large woundes wyde" in some manner.⁷¹ He dwells with particular vehemence on two stories which he reviles as being accounts of incest: the tale of Canacee who "loved hir owene

⁷⁰ See Benson's explanatory notes 856.

⁷¹ Benson II. 62 (88).

brother synfully" and Antiochus who "[b]irafte his doghter of hir maydenhede" and "hir threw upon the pavement."⁷² Carolyn Dinshaw observes that the Man of Law does not seem conscious that "swiche unkynde abhomynacions" pervade his source material, however much previous redactors attempted to sanitize it; other versions of the castaway-queen story, for instance *Le Manekine* by Philippe Remi and the anonymous Middle English *Emaré*, use an incestuous ardor by the father as the event that precipitates the heroine's exile.⁷³ To assume that the Man of Law is innocent of previous versions of his tale would fit with an explanation of naïveté or misprision that likewise explains his apparently incomplete knowledge of the female martyrs featured in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, to which he refers. By these sly reinterpretations, Chaucer sets up his reader to know more, and see more, than the Man of Law apparently sees or concludes about his control of his tale. The reader understands that not only does the Man of Law manipulate knowledge to his benefit but he also derives a voyeuristic pleasure from female suffering.

A look at the tales of Anitochus and Canacee as they are as represented in Gower's *Confessio Amantis* also reveals a slippage visible to an informed reader or listener. Both stories deal with anxieties about law and social order. In the story of Canacee, the cruel punishment meted out to her and her brother Machaire suggests that the real fault lies not in the innocent love that results between the siblings but in the failure of the governing authority, the king, first to teach his children the appropriate prohibitions and then to have mercy on those who offended through ignorance.⁷⁴ The story of Antiochus also hinges on a

⁷² Benson II.79 and II.83, 85 (88).

⁷³ Trivet was the first to sanitize the Constance story by omitting the incest, and Gower follows his example. Dinshaw contends that the Man of Law's willful blindness demonstrates the workings of patriarchal ideology, which "does not even register the discord" (101).

⁷⁴ Gower, vol 2, III.143 and following.

perversion of law, for the king not only willfully flouts the social taboos by violating his daughter but also creates a “statute” which he uses to behead the hapless suitors who are unable to answer the riddle he puts before them, thus perpetuating the injustice.⁷⁵ Dinshaw observes that in a patriarchal system based on the protection of fathers and the exchange of women to cement community, the danger of the incest narrative is that it shows the system violating its own laws.⁷⁶ Therefore, in choosing to use the story of a woman to ostensibly confirm the prevailing rhetoric concerning justice, providence, and the female role in society, the Man of Law first invites a critique of the ways in which these social practices objectify and manipulate women, and second points to an anxiety about male-authored or father-based systems both secular and religious. In a world where patriarchal authority is accepted as a natural, God-given condition, the Man of Law questions what happens when the father is wrong.

The Man of Law’s first introduction of Custance as a character, given above, establishes that her virtue lies in her nature as a passive object. He presents her as an inventory of creditable qualities, less a person than a mirror, a blank, reflective space. Her dissected personhood in the form of her heart, a chamber of holiness, and her hand, a minister of alms, represents not only the ways in which Custance’s subjecthood is consistently diffused but also the ways in which women are generally depicted by the Man of Law: as commodities for the exchange of faith, links between kingdoms, instruments written upon by larger and more powerful forces, or as vessels for religion, virtue, or heirs. Like a merchant displaying his wares, the Man of Law presents a catalogue of Custance’s characteristics that establishes her worth through sheer weight of

⁷⁵ Antiochus appears in Book 8 of the *Confessio Amantis* in the Tale of Apollonius of Tyre, ll. 271-2008. Gower compares the king’s predations on his daughter to cannibalism: “The wylde fader thus devoureth / His oghne fleissh” (vol. 1, VIII.309-10).

⁷⁶ Dinshaw 99.

accumulated detail, but the result calls attention to the depersonalizing and objectifying strategies by which it is constructed.

The Man of Law's careful attempts to restrict Custance, both literally and figuratively, to a vessel contribute to the very terms by which she becomes monstrous. The rudderless boat in which she spends the bulk of the years which the narrative spans represents her own inability to direct or govern her life, her absolute reliance upon higher powers, and her ability to cross the customary borders of nation, religion, or kingly domain. Of no real meaning herself, Custance only acquires meaning through the forces that use her; her signification rests on whatever the power directing her—narrator, king, husband or husband-to-be, steward, father, or God—intends. For the Man of Law, as Sheila Delany observes, Custance is a type of "'Everywoman,' who suffers because that is the human condition," and her passivity uniquely highlights that function, for "passivity is what orthodox Christianity recommends as a response to the human condition."⁷⁷ Custance is in effect only the signal, the sign or portent, through which a greater meaning is read.

The Man of Law thus installs Custance not only as an image of Christian suffering, an illustration of the dynamics by which grace and place play out in human life, but also as a mouthpiece for the dominant cultural beliefs that make her a cipher. "Wommen are born to thraldom and penance, / And to been under mannes governance,"⁷⁸ Custance laments when she learns her father is to marry her to the Sultan. Her very resignation to this fact of her life confirms the ways that Custance powerfully subscribes to Christian ideology, especially where it concerns women. But the statement also has ironic resonances, for through most

⁷⁷ Delany 64.

⁷⁸ Benson II.286-7 (91).

of the text, Custance is under no “mannes governance” at all; she drifts in her boat under the protection of God alone.

Likewise, the figure of Mary the mother is the customary Christian icon that unites womanhood and suffering, and parallels between Constance and Mary become clear when Custance herself becomes a mother. When Donegild’s plotting leads to Custance’s second exile, the narrative focuses with extreme attention on the weeping Custance, with a “deedly pale face,” who kneels with her child in her arms and calls out to that heavenly mother in a gesture that both links and yet coyly denies identification between them: “Sooth is that thurgh wommanes eggement / Mankynde was lorn, and damned ay to dye, / For which thy child was on a croys yrent,” Custance says, yet she claims “is ther no comparison bitwene / Thy wo and any wo man may sustene.”⁷⁹ Her acknowledgement that the sin of Eve is the root cause of all human suffering serves as no more than an empty, perhaps even ironic gesture at this point, for after appealing to Mary for pity Custance goes on to clarify that it is in fact the boy’s father who is causing all her current woe: “O litel child, alas! What is they gilt, / That nevere wroghtest synne as yet, pardee? / Why wil thyn harde fader han thee spilt?”⁸⁰ Not only does the silent parallel to herself and Mary as mothers witnessing their child’s suffering exalt Custance’s innocence, but she leaves no doubt that it is a not just human but specifically male villain at work here: “Farewel, housbonde routhless!” she flings over her shoulder as she marches down the beach toward her pathetic little boat.⁸¹ The pious understanding that misery is the human state shows up in Custance’s speech as insufficient, for she cannot help but blame who she sees as the real author of her

⁷⁹ Benson ll. 842-847 (99).

⁸⁰ Benson ll. 855-7 (99).

⁸¹ Benson l. 863 (99).

troubles, her husband and his inexplicable demand that she be exiled. Despite her own confusion about his ways and means, Custance clings to the customary prescription that Christ “kan me kepe from harm and eek fro shame” and her trust in the Holy Trinity “is to me my seyl and eek my steere,”⁸² yet the Christian consolations ring out against the dramatic irony that, in this case, Custance’s misfortunes are indeed due to “wommanes eggement.” The Man of Law’s telling draws into tenuous conflict the motives and strength of male champions and protectors by alluding to the deeper, more persistent influence of female figures in and upon this scene.

Christian grace and one’s mortal place would seem a more general human concern, but in choosing to use a female figure for his narrative purpose, the Man of Law brings in a set of gendered tensions that constantly disrupt his moralizing agenda. Moreover, his attempts to dramatize Custance’s sole reliance on heavenly protection results in a curious tension between the human systems of authority which he silently interrogates and the heavenly modes of authority he explicitly supports. This tension erupts in the narrative at the points where the female characters act or become most monstrous; their monstrous behavior is, in this instance, a symptom or indicator of the collision of the Man of Law’s two systems of authority, one he thinks of as “grace” and the other, earthly system connected to “place.” The violence attending the murder of Hermengyld and the judgment of Custance shows the disjunct between these two systems and also, due to the Man of Law’s subtle emphasis, points out how both systems require and in fact depend upon female passivity, defined as virtue.

⁸² Benson ll. 827-33 (99).

Monstrous Passivity

The pair of scenes involving Hermengyld's murder and Custance's trial further serve to illustrate the key issues of women's nature and value upon which the gender ideology of the romance depends. The substance of Custance's attractiveness, for instance—the guarantor of her worth, as argued above, and also the fact which makes her desirable to Alle, proof of how desire knits (re)productive relationships—is also what leads directly to Hermengyld's murder. The Man of Law attempts to explain this impulse through the corruption of "Sathan, that evere us waiteth to bigile," who hates Custance's perfection in much the same way Milton's Satan, later, hates Eve for her beauty.⁸³ Satan causes a young knight of the town to "[l]ove hire so hoot, of foul affeccoun," that "hym thoughte he sholde spille, / But he of hire myghte ones have his wille" and, when his wooing avails naught, he decides he will "maken hire on shameful deeth to deye."⁸⁴ The Man of Law makes no attempt to deal with why the lustful knight chooses to cut Hermengyld's throat rather than Custance's, and the omission is a glaring one. His attitude becomes clearer when he describes the wedding night as a time when wives must set aside a little of their holiness and "take in pacience at nyght / Swiche manere necessities as been plesynges / To folk that han ywedded hem with rynges."⁸⁵ It would seem from this awkward description that the entire issue of sexual desire is, for the Man of Law, a problematic one, and he would prefer to view something so potentially dangerous as entirely bad, a risk to be avoided. While the virtuous woman is, in the terms of his ideology, sexually desirable, this episode in the Man of Law's tale silently points out that the problem of desire lies in this case not with the

⁸³ Benson I. 582 (95).

⁸⁴ Benson II. 582-88, 592 (95).

⁸⁵ Benson II. 710-12 (97).

woman, as writers in the tradition of Tertullian would claim, but in how the desirer, in this case the man, deals with his pursuit and its lack of success. Custance's ability to both evoke and participate in sexual desire is an essential part of the romance ideology, but sexual desire is for the Man of Law incompatible with the "hoolynesse" with which he is ostensibly concerned, and the clash reveals itself in the tense episode surrounding Custance's trial, when the violent desire directed towards her gets turned first on Hermengyld and then on the accuser himself.

Aside from being beautiful and desirable, the romance formula also demands that Custance be of high birth, a fact that the Man of Law stresses in his description of Custance's vulnerability in the judgment scene. He begins with the feudal suggestion that she has "no champioun," nor can she herself fight; he moves to the assurance that Christ will be her champion, and then gives Custance a speech in which she, kneeling, calls upon Christ and Mary to succor her. Then, as though he has no hope at all that God will actually answer her prayer, the Man of Law issues a rhetorical plea to highborn ladies everywhere to mark Custance's plight:

O queenes, lyvyng in prosperitee,
Duchesses, and ye ladyes everichone,
Haveth som routhe on hire adversitee!
An Emperoures doghter stant allone;
She hath no wight to whom to make hir mone.
O blood roial, that stondest in this drede,
Fer been they freendes at they grete nede!⁸⁶

The Man of Law's contemplation of Custance's deprivation would not be necessary in a virgin martyr's tale, as the supplication to Christ would be enough to assure her of a champion. This speech coming after Custance has already

⁸⁶ Benson ll. 652-58 (96).

called upon heavenly help almost suggests that neither she nor her narrator believe it forthcoming; the tension of the scene, and the Man of Law's obvious relish for his heroine's distress, results from the questionable nature of human justice and human decision as to her fate, resting as it does on male actors whom, as the murder shows, have the power to be corrupted.

The Man of Law moves quickly from the romance register back to the hagiographic in describing the consequent judgment, when King Alle (not present in Gower's version) has the knight swear on a holy book that:

She gilty was, and in the meene whiles
An hand hym smoot upon the nekke-boon,
That doun he fil atones as a stoon,
And bothe his eye broste out of his face
In sight of every body in that place.
A voys was herd in general audience,
And seyde, 'Thou hast desclaundred, giltelees,
The doghter of hooly chirche in heigh presence;
Thus hastou doon, and yet holde I my pees!'⁸⁷

The mighty voice appearing as Custance's champion, and claiming her as a daughter of the church, certainly trumps the scene of feudal judgment with a higher authority. But the moment also shows how female peril has resonance in both the spiritual and the romance traditions, which equally use female vulnerability to prove male power. The Man of Law focuses at length on Custance's emotional response to her jeopardy, comparing her to a lamb led to slaughter (line 616) and dwelling, in a somewhat confused stanza, on her extremely pale face (lines 645-651). As with the slaughter at the Sultana's feast, the narrator concentrates on Custance's reflective qualities, calling her a "hooly mayden, that is so bright and sheene."⁸⁸ She alone emerges from the spectacle of

⁸⁷ Benson II. 667-76 (96).

⁸⁸ Benson I. 692 (97).

the knight's supernatural punishment, which makes everyone else cower "[f]or drede of wreche,"⁸⁹ to preside over a largescale conversion to Christianity and subsequently wed Alle, a sequence of activity that leaves the bloody body of Hermengyld far behind. As "doghter of hooly chirche," Custance is a vessel for the same power that makes the knight's eyes burst from his head; her pale indestructability as given in this scene has a faintly chilling effect, emphasizing as it does the relative weakness of human justice. Both her and Hermengyld's threatened bodies magnify the vulnerability of women that stems not just from the precise means by which women are valued—birth and beauty—but also the ongoing possibility that the male actors who judge and hold power of life or death over them can be led astray "thurgh Sathanas temptaciouns."⁹⁰ In magnifying Custance's vulnerability and presenting it alongside swift heavenly justice, the Man of Law makes the monstrous suggestion that female virtue can be an active, even destructive force. While he ostensibly means to highlight the swift and accurate judgment of God, especially in protection of the meek and innocent, the Man of Law has instead presented an episode that dramatizes the risks and consequences of the gender ideology that his tale has helped to create and foster.

Curiously, Custance herself seems perceptive about the workings of this gender ideology as well as its consequences, as expressed in her lament that women are born to be under man's governance, which she equates with thralldom and penance.⁹¹ Not only must they behave as pawns, as she herself acknowledges, but they are also compelled to put on a good face about the business: "She peyneth hire to make good contenance," the Man of Law says as

⁸⁹ Benson ll. 679 (97).

⁹⁰ Benson ll. 598 (95).

⁹¹ Benson ll. 286-7 (91).

Custance boards the boat for Syria.⁹² The contemplation of this moment allows the author to betray the ideology at work in his tale as well as its inherent troubles. As Custance voyages to her proposed groom, the Man of Law muses:

what wonder is it though she wepte,
That shal be sent to strange nacioun
Fro freendes that so tendrely hire kepte,
And to be bounden under subjeccioun
Of oon, she knoweth nat his condicioun?
Housbondes been alle goode, and han been yoore;
That knowen wyves; I dar sey yow na moore.⁹³

Custance would have no cause for weeping if, in fact, all husbands were kind, generous, attentive, or whatever else is implied by “goode;” these lines hint that wives themselves possess a knowledge running counter to the patriarchal assumption that marriage is not just normative but a safe, productive, and otherwise rewarding career for a woman. “Subjeccioun” in this usage connotes not just submission and obedience to a governing authority but also, according to the Middle English Dictionary, carries the suggestion of bondage, servitude, or subjugation—a quiet comment on the nature of marriage and how its sentimentalization requires female compliance and cooperation. Custance’s paleness in this instance highlights her vulnerability to male power in a way that, at least it would seem for the Man of Law, adequately reflects the ways in which the human soul is at the mercy of divine forces. But, his observation also points to the material condition of a female and the kind of commercial exchange—veiled with a thin moral—that ensures her isolation and sorrow.

Custance’s declaration as to women’s status, while articulating what seems the logical conclusion of a patriarchal society predicated on the inferiority of women and the necessity for men to rule them, is also not shown to be

⁹² Benson I. 320 (92)

⁹³ Benson II. 267-73 (91).

universally true. In fact these are the very terms in which the Sultan's mother objects to the new religion: "What sholde us tyden of this newe lawe / But thraldom to oure bodies and penance?"⁹⁴ The Sultan is no less committed to her religion than is Custance, declaring "The lyf shal rather out of my body sterte / Or Makometes lawe out of myn herte!"⁹⁵ The resonances with Custance are a touch added by Chaucer, for in Gower the Sultaness's motivation is simply the fear that, with the marriage, her estate shall be lessened.⁹⁶ Chaucer's Sultaness, "cursed krone," "wolde al the contree lede,"⁹⁷ but the Man of Law also presents her as defending the "hooly lawes of our Alkaron" and acting to "make us sauf for everemoore"⁹⁸—the actions, so it would seem, of a devoted leader and clever strategist, which the Sultaness also shows herself to be, at the same time that she demonstrates a religious zeal akin to Custance's.

Curiously, in his explanation for how a woman could be so passionate in her convictions as to slaughter a banquet hall full of guests, her son included, the Man of Law separates the Sultaness from her femininity, revealing that his paradigm of womanhood is one that can neither contain nor condone female agency of any sort. The mother of the Sultan, a vessel in her own way, is "welle of vices;" the narrator devotes several lines to unflattering comparisons, calling her "roote of iniquitee," "serpent under femynynytee," "feyned womman," "nest of every vice."⁹⁹ Having established her as a breeding ground for "all that may confounde / Vertu and innocence," the Man of Law continues building what he believes is the case against her, but when he casts her as the instrument of Satan, who "madest Eva brynge us in servage," he curiously exonerates her from

⁹⁴ Benson II. 338-9 (92).

⁹⁵ Benson II. 335-6 (92).

⁹⁶ Gower, vol. 2, II.648-9.

⁹⁷ Benson II. 432-4 (93).

⁹⁸ Benson II. 332 and 343 (92).

⁹⁹ Benson II. 323, 358-64 (92).

intentional evil and instead makes her, like Custance, no more than a pawn at the hand of mightier forces.¹⁰⁰ So evil as to deserve the name of serpent, the Sultanness is nevertheless victim of that greater serpent, the one who specifically makes women his prey. In positioning women as natural dupes, the Man of Law calls into question not just the consequence of women's wrong-doing but also the real value of women's virtue. If they can or are not to be granted any agency of their own, then the real responsible parties are those who have first made women pawns and then used them for their own purposes.

This is the same problem dramatized by Custance's trial scene, where part of the shock associated with the scene, at least as the Man of Law tells it, is that Custance has no champion—no defender—and no male power, in that suspended moment, telling her what to do. The hand of heaven then descends as described, but it would seem that the real concern of this moment—the real monstrosity of Custance's condition—is her free-floatingness. The paradox is that her moment of free radicalism is the consequence of the very moral or at least socio-cultural demands that make her the dependent of more powerful (male) forces: she is only alone and accused because the knight, moved by Satan (just like the Sultanness) and acting out of soured lust, has not behaved within ethical boundaries.

This confusion over who directs human actions, and when, prevails thematically throughout the Man of Law's Tale, and comes into question where it specifically relates to female virtue and passivity, which the monstrous women in the tale (Custance included) serve to illustrate. From early gestures towards the weight of heavenly bodies such as stars and planets, the "firste moevyng" and "[c]rueel firmament" that put the stars in such a dismal alignment for

¹⁰⁰ Benson ll. 362-3, 368 (92).

Custance's first proposed wedding,¹⁰¹ the narrator alternates between praising God as the heavenly power and judge and condemning the power of Satan to intervene in and disrupt human events. His description of the other mother-in-law, Donegild, fully dramatizes the way the Man of Law views the human body as a platform or stage for a greater psychomachia:

O Donegild, I ne have noon Englissh digne
Unto thy malice and thy tirannye!
And therfore to the feend I thee resigne;
Lat hym enditen of thy traitorie!
Fy, mannysh, fy!—o nay, by God, I lye—
Fy, feendlych spirit, for I dar wel telle,
Thogh thou heere walke, thy spirit is in helle!¹⁰²

The very idea that a human could be prey to such "tirannye" defeats the Man of Law's generally worthy powers of expression and his only recourse is to conclude, in vehement, broken language, that she is in fact not even human—"mannysh"—but a hell-spirit walking around in human clothing. The danger of feigned appearances is a theme that arises in his description of the Sultanness as well, when the Man of Law recounts how she, "this scourpioun, this wikked goost," threw the royal banquet and yet "for al hire flaterynge, / Castue under this ful mortally to stynges."¹⁰³ In contrast, Custance's markedly pale face in the moments of her greatest trials seems the signifier that she is not feigning anything, that her facial and speech expressions accurately and truthfully represent her internal feelings and motivations. Such transparency sets the seal on female virtue, at least in the Man of Law's model of it, for this clarity reveals the power acting behind or through the woman who is only a stage, a vessel, a mirror for greater forces.

¹⁰¹ Benson ll. 295 (91).

¹⁰² Benson ll. 778-84 (98).

¹⁰³ Benson ll. 404-6 (93).

Contaminating Agency

The tale's main themes—the interplay of supernatural forces, the relationship of human motivation to these forces, and the problematic terms of female virtue when defined as passivity—become complicated by Custance herself in the two later parts of the narrative where she demonstrates a contaminating spark of agency and the dangerous ability to think and act on her own. The attempted rape when her ship comes to the coast of Spain is the first example; here, when Custance is threatened, while “[h]ir child cride, and she cride pitously,” “blisful Marie heelp hire right anon” and arranges affairs so that Custance’s struggles throw the would-be rapist off balance and “[t]he thief fil over board al sodeynly, / And in the see he dreynte for vengeance.”¹⁰⁴ So anxious is he to exonerate his heroine from being merely murderous (as, say, the Sultanness) that the Man of Law devotes three stanzas to an explication of the consequences of the “foule lust of luxurie” and a catalogue of Biblical stories, including that of Judith, demonstrating how Christ gave strength to the weak and “saved hem out of meschance.”¹⁰⁵ Custance is excused from harboring villainous intent; for the moment, God fills his vessel Constance with the “myght and vigour” necessary to her own defense,¹⁰⁶ imbuing her for the first time with an active energy. The deliverance from evil does more, however, than reaffirm God’s power to protect the innocent or explain the profoundly bewildering way in which “this wayke womman han this strengthe / Hire to defende agayn this renegat.”¹⁰⁷ As much as the Man of Law tries to credit Mary and Christ with the actual exertion, and cushion the terms of manslaughter by disconnecting Custance’s actions from the

¹⁰⁴ Benson ll. 919-23 (100).

¹⁰⁵ Benson ll. 925 and 944 (100).

¹⁰⁶ Benson ll. 945 (100).

¹⁰⁷ Benson ll. 932-3 (100).

thief's drowning, her tiny act of self-defense has dramatic parallels to other scenes in the narrative where women act in their own interests.

The sheer volume of moralizing that follows this episode betrays a real anxiety on the part of the narrator concerning his themes of right and justice and the problems of female agency, but it also betrays a strategic move on the part of the author to highlight, once again, that the female heroine is at risk because a male actor showed himself as vulnerable to evil influences as the preceding women. If the narrative has proven anything, it is that the males around her are incapable of resisting Custance's allure; whether they offer the security of marriage or simply try to make her their "lemman," they all fall prey to some extent to the desire magnetized by her beauty, manner, and overwhelming virtue. Custance's chastity in the near-rape and in her trial scene is no passive entity but in fact an active, and destructive, power: the men she doesn't want to sleep with die. This repeated movement signals again that female virtue is really a term of value or interest to men. Moreover, the narrator's attempt to fall back on religious justification fails to mask the real problem exposed by Custance's continuously imperilled chastity: the construction of the desirable woman is in fact potentially hazardous for the males who, by the requirements of the heteronormative passions that rule the romance, must not only acknowledge but also succumb to it.

Custance's final moments of self-revelation, which she selects and orchestrates, likewise show her capable of an agency that seems to surprise and dismay the Man of Law, causing him to fumble for words. In Gower's version of the tale, Custance is responsible for maneuvering Moris before his father when she learns that Alle is in town, but the Man of Law stumbles and prevaricates over this scene. "Som men wolde seyn at requeste of Custance / This senatour hath lad this child to feeste," he begins, and then summarily dismisses the need

for explanation: "I may nat tellen every circumstance -- / Be as be may, ther was he at the leeste."¹⁰⁸ The Man of Law keeps the convention that Alla recognizes his son by virtue of his resemblance to his mother, for Maurice is "as lyk unto Custance / As possible is a creature to be,"¹⁰⁹ once again a curious tribute to the mark of the mother instead of the standard recognition of paternity. Unlike the source tales, the Man of Law allows his Custance a moment of righteous anger when she sees her husband again, for "she remembred his unkyndenesse."¹¹⁰ In Gower's version the two fall upon one another in great delight, but here Custance makes her husband grovel for forgiveness. "Long was the sobbyng and the bitter peyne," the narrator says, ere she believes that "Alla gilteless was of hir wo."¹¹¹ True to the Man of Law's view of life, much must be suffered before joy can follow. He likewise notes Custance's "longe, pitous pyne" when she meekly suggests that her husband have the Emperor dine with them;¹¹² it seems as though the Man of Law can only allow his heroine to act when great pain and suffering attend the event. Nevertheless, the culminating moment of Custance's agency is when she reveals herself to her father. Here, repeating the move she made in her first speech, she names herself, calling him her father and herself his child, as though this were the circumference of her identity. "Sende me namoore unto noon hethenesse," she requests, and then directs his own response: "But thonketh my lord heere of his kyndenesse."¹¹³ Custance's efforts here to organize events and issue orders are sanctioned by the fact that her actions serve to resolve her story, reknit the familial domestic unit, and at the same time restore the succession for imperial Rome.

¹⁰⁸ Benson ll. 1009-12 (101).

¹⁰⁹ Benson ll. 1030-1 (102).

¹¹⁰ Benson l. 1057 (102).

¹¹¹ Benson ll. 1065, 1073 (102).

¹¹² Benson l. 1079 (102).

¹¹³ Benson ll. 1112-3 (103).

Two things, then, qualify to make Custance monstrous in this version of the story—every bit as monstrous, I would argue, as the evil women plotting the downfall of Christianity or simply the exile of Custance herself. The terms of the patriarchal, heteronormative world structured to respond to male passion and reproduce according to the dictates of male desire (in consequence of which wives must lay a little of their holiness aside in order to please their husbands) create a dynamic where—unless she has the benefit of a non-sexually-interested guardian such as a father, happily-married steward such as Elda, or avuncular protector such as she finds in Rome—a desirable woman like Custance is constantly besieged. Second, the terms of providential and human justice which deny her agency make any act of hers monstrous or potentially so, even that of defending herself from rape or revealing her identity to the father and husband searching for her. Quite logically for the world of this story, female virtue can only be recognized and female agency permitted only when it is productive for the social good. Female will on its own terms is only ever shown as being constitutive of the social order. When female motivations are destructive, in the case of the Sultanness or Donegild, some other force must be at work to account for it. But the very similarities shown between the Sultanness, Donegild, Custance, and to some extent poor Hermengyld prove that the distinction between the “good” and the “bad” woman never really holds, and that female virtue, when defined as passivity, is profoundly problematic. Chaucer’s *Man of Law* shows through his Custance that in terms of this patriarchal society, underwritten with its heavenly authorizations and reinforced on the human level through shared opinions in biological, social, and cultural discourses, the romance ideology of femininity is at heart no different from the clerical strands of misogyny, proving woman to be contested, corruptible, and uncontrollable—a monstrous thing.

Custance's Conclusions

Pain and suffering are indeed the human condition, the Man of Law seems to be saying—with some relish. But behind the Man of Law is the more subtle Chaucer, who has constructed a narrative that puts particular emphasis on the gendered predicaments of its characters and examines the problematic nature of human agency through a female heroine, a task made more difficult by the relationship that women have to power and the ways this relationship is recognized in the story. The kind of world of which the Man of Law speaks and seemingly approves is one that rests on the prerogative of God and man but moves merely from crisis to crisis instigated by the women, who are either made vulnerable or made demons—a distinction that is, in the end, not quite clear. The monstrosity of the women in these tales serves as an image that magnifies the problems associated with the social order that depends for its formation and continuance on female virtue, defined as a compliance to male authority, and on male governance that ensures she is a fit reproductive partner—the full sum of her value in the imaginary world of the romance.

Constance's monstrosity, in the Middle English versions of her tale, is created not just by the violence that rebounds off her body onto bystanders and other perpetrators but also by the contradictions in terms of female virtue, agency, and motherhood which she represents and interrogates. Presumably chosen as subject matter because woman's weakness more aptly demonstrates the full might and authority of the Christian God, who can accomplish mighty works with a poor instrument (the main theme of women's saints' lives), Constance's survival of her many trials reads as a testament to her own strength. While the narrators try to attribute this strength to God, Custance's passivity has a dynamic function, and appears no less potent than the actions of the viragos

(literally, “taken from man”) represented by the mothers-in-law.¹¹⁴ Her passivity even has a heroic quality, which Jill Mann argues is a key feature of the romance mode as shown in tales where the hero’s “role is to respond rather than to initiate, to suffer rather than to struggle.”¹¹⁵ “Passive heroism,” the defining characteristic of a romance hero like Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, involves, Mann argues, “not a merely negative failure to act, but a positive acceptance of submission.”¹¹⁶ In her dynamic passivity, by this definition, Custance acts more in the capacity of a romance hero than as an exemplary weak and male-guided woman. This conflation of the traditionally gendered notions of agency and accountability adds the final touch of monstrosity to my reading of Constance.

The monstrous passivity of Chaucer’s Custance and the themes of monstrous motherliness in Gower’s tale extend the argument made in the previous chapters that the monstrous women in the romances serve to show how their monstrosity is a creation of the several ideological frameworks that problematically enclose and simultaneously marginalize women in patriarchal discourse. The romance ideology, borrowing from several discourses about women on the philosophical, scientific, theological, sociopolitical, legal, and culturally material level, shows how these discourses *make* women monstrous in both the sense of a hybrid, cross-category being as well as an entity that threatens the security of normative social relations. The exemplary women in these Middle English tales, with their eruptions into monstrous behavior, serve to illuminate the various contradictions, paradoxes, and vulnerabilities at work in the order, and the rhetoric which creates and attempts to dictate to them. That

¹¹⁴ Dor 73-76.

¹¹⁵ Mann in Carruthers 107.

¹¹⁶ Mann in Carruthers 116.

the ideal wife, mother, housekeeper, and emblem of Christian virtue can wield her own potent monstrosity suggests that the discourse itself regards the exemplary woman as a potentially dangerous, not-quite-fully-human thing. The monstrous woman is, if not the norm, still somehow normative, the key to securing the social order which the romance ideology validates as natural and right. One further example taken from the romance canon, invoking a version of the castaway queen story that involves the fatherless son motif as well as the incest theme, will serve as a final proof.

Monstrous Relations: Fairy Births and the Threat of Incest

One further aspect of Constance's monstrosity is her connection, not real but supposed by Donegild's accusation, to the fairy wives found in romances such as *Sir Launfal* and *Melusine*. Part of the tension of this accusation, at least for medieval readers or listeners, is the danger of lineal corruption and the risk of the male partner's soul, possibilities dramatized by the use of the motif in stories such as Gervase of Tilbury's *Otia Imperialia* and in Walter Map. The accusation of the fairy wife who has given birth to a monster also hearkens back to the many appearances of this motif in folklore, an abundance amply surveyed by Schlauch in *Chaucer's Constance and Accused Queens*. Donegild's accusation, not entirely uncalled-for considering Constance will say nothing of her true origins—just as real fairy wives maintain or impose a condition of silence on their lineage—is of course unfounded, as the reader knows, for Constance has a quite high birth. But in again representing the process of birth as not only mysterious (for males were not allowed to be present) but also monstrous (because not only a dangerous physical process at this time but also something males could not participate in—something that belonged solely to the inferior biology and problematic material body of woman) this aspect of the Constance story

responds to the conventional myths of medieval misogyny in a different and subtle way.

Narrative attempts in both Chaucer and Gower's stories to elevate Constance as a mother by comparing her with the Virgin Mary inevitably fall short, as the character herself realizes the parallel does not strictly hold. Instead, in Donegild's crafty strategizing with the letters, the narrative dramatizes an anxiety about relying on woman's words to vouch for what happens at the secret—and yet, to the issue of inheritance by blood, quite crucial—scene of childbirth. Chaucer's Alle acts on this anxiety when he is distressed by but resolves to reserve judgment on the feigned report that his wife has given birth to a monster. He chooses to decide based on the only evidence he really trusts, that of his own eyes. His punishment of Donegild with a traitor's death responds not just to her destruction of what was in fact a legitimate heir but also to her abuse of this one issue that depends so vitally on female veracity and sexual continence: the fact of paternity. Part of the narrative's popularity, I would argue, and the reason it can be classified as a romance, rests on its expression of these concerns about birth and inheritance in Alle's affective relationship with Custance. The threat to the kingdom, in the loss of the king's wife and son, is tied to Alle's personal grief and his resolution not to marry again. This makes for a satisfactory narrative restoration at the end when Custance and Alle are indeed reunited, but it tacitly approves and authorizes these larger cultural beliefs about dynastic rule by portraying the royal household as a functional and quite happy domestic unit.

Sir Degaré illustrates a different danger in taking an unknown wife, an interpretation once again offered through the lens of the monstrous-seeming woman. Degaré, raised by a foster mother and educated by a hermit, knows nothing of his parentage but sets out on adventures that lead him through

dragon-slaying to knighthood and, after besting a king in a joust, the conquest of the king's daughter as bride. The author, following the ceremony at the church door, inserts a his rare piece of moralizing:

Butt loke what foly and balaunce
Befallyth many man throghe chaunce
That com togedryrss wyth gay rede
To take a wyff for any mede!
For he knew nat off hur kyn,
Ne sche ne knew ryght nought off hym;
And were ordeyn together for to lybbe,
Yytt paraventure they myght be sybbe.¹¹⁷

Aside from the dangers of taking an unknown bride illustrated by pairings where the mortal man later discovers the mysterious woman he married is not human, this author points to a graver danger: Degaré has, in fact, married his own mother. She proves yet another instance of an imperiled woman who unfortunately meets with a rapacious, unknown knight who forcefully impregnates and then abandons her, leaving her to convey her child to foster care or risk shame and possibly death inflicted by her angry father. As Dinshaw observed earlier about incest narratives showing the society breaking its own rules, this incident highlights the failure of the patriarchy in creating the dependent, vulnerable woman and then abusing her.

But the author is not simply hinting at the possibility, Oedipus-like, of incest; he presents a knottier problem with the device of the gloves possessed by the son that fit the mother alone. The gloves serve not just as a way for the unnamed mother to identify her son but, explicitly, as a way for her to control his marriage. It seems that the king's daughter *means* for her own son to marry her: these gloves, sent to her by her unknown lover, "wold [fit] on no womannes hond" but hers, and she gifts them to her infant son:

¹¹⁷ Rumble ll. 547-554.

And badd that he schold wedd no wyff in lond
Butt yf the glovys wold on hur hond
For they wold, nyether for nor ner,
But on the modys hond that hym bere.¹¹⁸

The author leaves no doubt that the mother is, at the least, intending that her son marry no one and, at most, positing herself as his only acceptable sexual partner. This stipulation of the mother is treated by all as a binding oath; the hermit who finds the castaway baby, and furnishes him with the gold and the gloves left with him when the fully-grown Degaré sets out to discover his identity, gives him the letter, and in his early encounters Degaré abides by it. After rescuing an earl from a dragon, he promises to stay only if his magical gloves fit one of the ladies of the house; after all fail the test, he leaves and, as promised, never comes back. His memory about the gloves lapses in his later joust until after the marriage is performed, and on his wedding night he recalls the oath he has broken. His distress is nothing compared to his new wife's when she hears of the gloves; "[s]he knew the glovys that were hur,"¹¹⁹ and the revelation is accompanied both by a joyful reunion of mother and son, concurrent weeping at the embarrassing situation in which they find themselves, and moreover shame for the mother as she has to confess, to her father, that twenty years ago she was raped by a stranger and bore a child.

Degaré's subsequent quest to find his father reinforces the convention that it is not the maternal lineage that determines identity but, in fact, the paternal—distant and confused as that paternity is in this case, provable only by the phallic emblem of the sword. Interesting and not irrelevant, perhaps, is the mention that the sword left with the mother is "poyntles"—it has no real efficacy as a weapon and as such represents the impotency of the father in either protecting or

¹¹⁸ Rumble II. 180-6.

¹¹⁹ Rumble I. 591.

providing for his son. Degaré's choice to find his father before he marries (a more socially acceptable partner this time) offers the psychoanalytic reading that the father must be displaced before the child can join in a functional partnership. The same suggestion resides in the folkloric prohibition of the king that only the man who can best him in battle shall marry his daughter and heir. Margaret Schlauch proposes that such arrangements in folktale and romance are traces of the story's ancient roots in what she calls a "matriarchal" society, a culture where sovereignty is bestowed by women and the king's attempt to block his daughter from marrying is nothing more than an attempt to retain rule, which would pass from him to his daughter's mate.¹²⁰ To medieval English audiences, the prohibition would more likely reflect the prerogative of the patriarch to select as his successor the man who is his equal, thus most like him (at least in cases where there is no son, a substitute-self, to carry on the father's line and/or seed).

Degaré must likewise find his father to legitimately replace him, which might be why (Ywain-like) he leaves the appealing damsel he rescued in her unprotected castle and tells her he "must into other londe / Mor aventure for to fond."¹²¹ The battle with his own father—of which the author laments, "lo, what foly beygan that tyde! / The sone agayn the father gan ryde"¹²²—illustrates the inevitable dynamic of the patriarchy in that the son must replace the father, given the order of things, but it also points to a key ritual in the succession: that the patriarch must acknowledge and thus validate his heir. The fact of the incestuous marriage is mentioned again in the end, when the author points out that the marriage between Degaré and his mother had to be invalidated, "[f]or they were to nyghe off kyn,"¹²³ before his father can properly marry his mother

¹²⁰ Schlauch, *Chaucer's Constance and Accused Queens*, 58-9.

¹²¹ Rumble II. 897-8.

¹²² Rumble II. 931-2.

¹²³ Rumble I. 986.

and, with his whole family in attendance, Degaré can return to his mysterious maiden and, in full ceremony, wed her. (Never mind that he appears to know nothing of her heritage or history and does not see fit to inquire, which lack of curiosity led him into the situation of marrying his own mother; presumably as long as Degaré has now identified his mother, any other woman is a safe bet.) The point made about his second and legal marriage is that after all the narrative focus on straightening out the confused desires of the previous generations and normalizing the relationships of parent to child, Degaré does not make his fortune through inheritance of his mother or father but, rather, acquires an estate of his own through marriage to a nubile heiress. The implicit suggestion that women bequeath lands and status—though not functioning here, I would argue, as an echo of what Schlauch would call an earlier “matriarchal” society—carries the concurrent proposition that women’s desires are instrumental to properly endow inheritances and confer property. Thwarted in her own marriage by her father, Degaré’s mother uses the gloves to control the marital choices of her son (and, presumably, heir); the unnamed maiden in the forest castle freely offers herself to Degaré, with of course her lands and wealth attached to her, if he plays her protector and slays the giant who has wiped all the men from her retinue.

The suggestion of female monstrosity is subtle here, and contained only in those small lines wherein the mother specifies that her son only marry the woman who fits the gloves (ie., her). The genital representation of the mother’s gloves is as hard to miss as the father’s sword but, again, it endorses the woman’s exercise of choice in the matter of her sexual partner. While Degaré would seem to correctly sort everyone into their proper heteronormative relationships at the end, it cannot be denied that the mother’s gloves are key to this achievement. The gloves provide the artifice which controls Degaré’s quest, serve as the device for identifying one of his parents and the impetus for

discovering the other, and function, in the end, as the sole recourse to agency that the king's daughter has when the aberrant desire of her father (who refuses to allow her to marry, itself vaguely incestuous as if suggesting he wants to keep his daughter to himself) and likewise her lover (who rapes her will she or nil she and then abandons her, leaving her to hide the fact of her child) have deprived her of any other choice. The problematic desires of the older generations create the problems and dangers within the tale; the more functional desires of the younger generation (Degaré's near-brush with his mother excepted) act as the corrective. In keeping with the traditional exiled queen motif, the lost son reinstates his mother with her appropriate sexual/marital partner, but this is motivated by the monstrous female desire which repairs the conditions constructed by the failing fathers. The mother's desire, working through the gloves, is the secret force which organizes and unites, pulling everything into its presumably proper place at the end. Degaré's quest to find his father is not to claim any inheritance or name from him but to restore his mother's sexual partner to her. Once the mother's desire is satisfied, Degaré can satisfy the other female in the text, his own proper marital-sexual partner, who makes both the union and the enlargement of his estate possible through her physical desire for him.

The monstrous woman, as we will call her, here again exposes the real workings of desire in the tale, in which it is in fact the male desire which is potentially hazardous to proper succession and heteronormative pairings. This romance, like the tale of Constance, uses the paradox of women's monstrosity to suggest rather that female desire is socially constitutive and culturally normative, while the male desire must be guided or corrected. Far from responding to the misogynistic charge of the sexually voracious or insatiable female, as this use of the incest-motif might first be read, the female monstrosity arises as the power

that overcomes non-reproductive restrictions on social unions and sorts all the pairs into their properly reproductive roles. The secret agenda of portraying female desire as socially constitutive again underlines the gender ideology particular to the Middle English romance.

Taken together, this evidence suggests a second interpretation for the uses of female monstrosity in medieval romance. Not only do the metaphors of monstrosity point to problems with the patriarchal discourse surrounding women, but also the female monsters arise in the romances where they need to expose or correct the failure and injustices of the patriarch. The monstrousness of Melusine, Medea, and Constance, as shown here, is not simply an engaged and revealing reflection on the internal contradictions of medieval misogyny and the workings of the romance gender ideology. When employed as a critical lens for magnifying and metaphorizing the problems at the heart of patriarchal discourse about the woman, the monstrous female plays out the paradox that woman, this contested category—this Othered entity constructed as opposite of and subjected to the rational male being—is at heart the element most relied upon to stabilize, protect, reproduce, and transmit a secure social order.

CONCLUSION

I have argued throughout that the romance, as a literary strategy or mode, allows for a new possibility in narrative literature by opening up a metaphorical thirdspace—by establishing a fictionality, in D.H. Green's term—that has the power to reflect imaginatively on a contemporary issue. I have claimed that in its construction of a particular gender ideology that runs alongside but not exactly in tune with the tenets of medieval misogyny, the romance provides an opportunity for reflecting on the ways in which women—treated in scientific and theological traditions as biologically and morally inferior—are constitutive of the social order, and the anxieties this contradiction causes for prevailing patriarchal systems of authority. The monstrous women in the Middle English romance do far more than simply illustrate or rehearse the standard fears of female corruptibility or influence; in keeping with monster theory, they offer a third term, or a thirdspace, superceding the dialectic and offering a new way of logic that seeks a way out of the impasse constructed by the paradox that the inferior woman is relied upon to reproduce and maintain a social order by managing households, raising children, producing legitimate heirs, and observing a set of values that establish and promote proper heteronormative relations within the domestic unit.

In their analysis of female reproductive power, desire, and virtue—as signified by beauty, sexual chastity, and a beneficial use of speech—the narratives of monstrous women discussed in this study all use their heroines to suggest that this paradoxical construction of women's nature and women's roles essentially makes woman a monstrous concept, one with the ability to threaten established boundaries, bend philosophical or cultural categories, and reveal the terms which have created her as a liminal and portentous being. At the same

time, these narratives portray the monstrous woman as productive of the very social order that defines her as monstrous; they reveal her place at the core, the origin, the matrix of the patriarchal social order (a function similarly demonstrated by the emergence of the myth of Albina into historiographical accounts of Britain's origins). The Middle English romances, rather than creating the monstrous woman to be defeated, instead use her as a self-conscious literary tool to dramatize the contradictory claims of the rhetoric, the constructedness of the ideology, and the ways in which the cultural hegemony is perpetuated. In keeping with what other theorists have shown about the uses of monster theory, the monstrous woman can never be truly expelled because she is necessary for the order to be as it is. However, the monstrous woman of Middle English romance further reflects how her monstrosity is created: by the very terms which have made her Other.

While the narratives under discussion share in this use of the monstrous woman as literary trope, their varying narrative responses connect, in the end, to the different approach they take to the terms under investigation. The strategies of deception and eventual exile that mark Melusine's career figure the anxieties about female reproductive power and maternal influence that emerge from a patrilineal social order firmly convinced as to the inferior biology of its female term. The moves to sanitize the story of Medea and rehabilitate her into a functional, even exemplary heroine betray the romance's dependence on a gender ideology which requires that female desire be engaged exclusively in service to male success and advancement. The deflections and displacements of female violence that attend the character of Constance likewise problematize the terms of female virtue, reveal how it is equated essentially with reproductive value, and present its chief definitions as passivity and compliance—a dependence revealed, throughout all of these narratives, as extremely hazardous,

given that female monstrosity erupts in response to a failure on the part of the male. The use of the monstrous woman as exemplary heroine, as shown in all the narratives analyzed in this study, makes full use of the romance's possibilities as a reflexive and multivalent mode of fiction to dramatize the contradictory nature of medieval thinking about women, invoke the signifying power of monsters to work through phenomenological problems or semantic paradoxes, and offer the rather startling suggestion—a logical extension to the misogynistic claims, pointed out by Christine de Pisan, that women are essentially monsters—that the monstrous woman first creates and then allows a functional social order to exist.

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