Remapping Transgressiveness: *Melusine* and the Impossibility of Human Existence

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Abstract

By questioning the prevalent critical inclination to hold Reymund exclusively accountable for Melusina's unsuccessful transition to full human existence, this paper reexamines the issue of transgression in Thüring Ringoltingen's *Melusine*. It contends that Melusina's failure stems from the inherited unresolved monstrosity that is ingrained in her bloodline and aggravated by her transgressive reversal of gender roles, despite the fact that scholarship frequently portrays Reymund's breach of the marital taboo as the pivotal transgression. Through close textual analysis and engagement with scholarship on monstrosity, hybridity, and Early modern conceptions of social order, this research shows how Melusina's own actions – her deliberate manipulation of power, her dominance of the marital and dynastic sphere, her haste in publicly performing humanity –undermine the very conditions necessary for her success. In contrast, Reymund's transgressions are shown to be reactive and ultimately insufficient to explain Melusina's downfall. The story's ultimate disaster, which is brought about by Melusina's son Goffroy's monstrous excesses, highlights the boundaries of what can be reconciled between hybrid other worldliness and human social norms. This paper, therefore, reframes *Melusine* as a meditation on the impossibility of fully absorbing hereditary monstrosity within the frameworks of marriage, gender hierarchy, and Christian society in Early Modern literature by shifting transgressiveness from Reymund to Melusina's endemic nature.

Key words: hybridity, gender transgression, monstrosity, Thüring von Ringoltingen, *Melusine*, Early Modern German literature

Introduction

One of the most enduring mythic traditions in European literary history is the Melusine narrative, which tells the tale of a human man's union with an otherworldly woman of remarkable. In fact, its archetypal motif has equally been identified to exist in other cultures outside Europe. For example, Zifeng Zhao (2017) notes that "[t]he European Melusine and her Chinese counterpart Madam White [are] two significant and popular figures in the literature and art of their cultures" (283). The story gained widespread cultural circulation through later adaptations, such as Thüring von Ringoltingen's version, *Melusine(1456)*, even though its first literary appearance is universally accredited to Jean d'Arras' *Histoire de Melusine* (1393), which was based on a long-standing folktale. As cultural concerns about marriage, ancestry, gender, and monstrosity change,

the fairy woman's hybrid identity reconfigured in each retelling. Caroline Prud'Homme observes that while the primary plot remains essentially consistent, each author reimagines the protagonist and makes her distinctive, emphasizing particular qualities that foreground a particular interpretive goal (2017, 54).

Von Ringoltingen's *Melusine* stands out among these different versions due to its sustained ambivalence toward its female protagonist. The story alternates between humanizing and monsterizing impulses, making Melusina both familiar and foreign, rather that portraying her as a pure-hearted fairy or a terrifying seductress (Prud'Homme, 2017, 59-60). Divergent critical interpretations have resulted from this ambivalence, especially as it relates to the causes of Melusina's failure to achieve full human existence. A dominant strand of scholarship sees Reymund's decision to spy on her while spending Saturdays alone – a violation of the marital prohibition – as the key infraction that sends Melusina into a permanent exile from humanity (Classen 2015, 363). However, the fact that their marriage outlives this episode despite what Reymund sees and now knows about Melusina, gives enough insight into the role he plays or does not play in their unhappy ending.

This article, therefore, challenges that prevailing interpretation. While Reymund's actions undeniably constitute a breach of trust, a deeper reading of the story shows that his transgression is neither conclusive nor irreversible. This research argues that Melusina's failure is rooted in an unresolved, inherited monstrosity that predates her marriage and exacerbated by her deft use of power and her reversal of gender roles in the social and marital order. Rather than being a helpless of Reymund's curiosity, Melusina deliberately manipulates the marriage's circumstances to further her own goal of human intergration, ultimately undermining the stability that such integration demands.

This paper reframes *Melusine* as a story of a structural impossibility between inherited hybridity and the normative frameworks of Early Modern marriage, gender hierarchy, and Christian community by shifting the locus of transgression from Reymund to Melusina's endemic nature and actions.

Literature Review: Monstrosity, Hybridity and Ethical Order in Early Modern Literature

One of the regular features of Early Modern texts is the portrayal of intermediate worlds inhabited by both human and non-human creatures. In such unusual worlds, according to Zifeng Zhao, there is always the possibility of "a transformation from human to non-human being, or vice versa" (2017: 282). These encounters are seen frequently as a means of interrogating or disrupting ethical, epistemological, and social boundaries.

Albrecht Classen similarly emphasizes that monstrous or hybrid figures serve "to probe what the true character of an individual was like and how s/he measured up with the ethical norms and ideals of his/her time" (2013: 522). In this context, monstrosity is not merely seen as a physical deviation but a moral and social category that renders hidden transgressions visible. Surekha Davies argues that monstrosity in the Early Modern society is in itself regarded "as a mechanism for identifying crimes that were difficult to detect. […because] monsters themselves are texts that render the private beliefs and behaviours of early modern men and women spectacularly visible" (2013:54).

This paper argues that within this framework, Melusina's hybrid body cannot be understood as an incidental obstacle to her humanity. On the other hand, it is the visible manifestation of an inherited condition that structures her actions, desires, and ultimate failure. The narrative repeatedly underscores the persistence of monstrosity across generations, suggesting that hybridity operates according to a logic of transmission rather than individual choice. Therefore, any assessment of Reymund's culpability must be situated within this broader economy of inherited transgression.

Methodological Approach

This article adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach that is grounded in close textual analysis of Thüring von Ringoltingen's version, *Melusine*, by situating the narrative within its Early Modern cultural and ethical context. By drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship in literary studies, gender theory, and monstrosity studies, the analysis combines careful reading of important narrative episodes and critical engagement with existing interpretations. Rather than advance a purely theoretical model, the study proceeds comparatively and argumentatively, reassessing critical positions by testing them against the internal logic, narrative structure, and character dynamics of the text. This method allows for a reassignment of transgressiveness within the narrative by emphasizing structural and hereditary factors over isolated acts of individual violation.

Analysis

Hereditary Monstrosity and the Curse of the Bloodline

Melusina's fate is inseparable from her maternal lineage. The narrative's late revelation of Persine's marriage to King Helmas of Albanie establishes a structural parallel between mother and daughter: both unions are conditioned upon a prohibition (*Melusine*, 103), and both fail when that condition is violated. Persine's curse – framed deceptively as a "Gabe" – marks Melusina's body with serpentine hybridity every Saturday, while simultaneously offering the possibility of redemption through marriage to a man capable of single-minded and worshipful obedience (*Melusine*, 106).

While critics often interpret this curse as a punitive response to Melusina's role in her father's imprisonment and death, the language of the text invites a more ambivalent reading. As Carola Dwyer suggests, the designation of the curse as a "gift" obscures its compelling function, transforming it into a strategic instrument through which Persine attempts to re-enter human society via her offspring (2015:210). This reading aligns with Chera A. Cole's observation that Melusina's hybridity is explicitly hereditary, embedded within a bloodline marked by unresolved monstrosity (2017: 247). It is against this backdrop that Melusina's monstrous or otherworldly origin is said to be fundamentally responsible for both her and Reymund's actions and inactions that led to the failure of their marriage. Classen also recognizes that Melusina "actually becomes a victim of her own monstrosity" (2013: 538) considering how she takes advantage of Reymund's marriage with her.

From this perspective, Melusina's desire for humanity is compromised from the onset. Her quest is not merely individual but compensatory, shaped by a maternal failure that she both inherits and reproduces. The curse thus establishes the structural conditions under which Melusina's later

actions - her manipulation of Reymund, her domination of the marital sphere, and her obsessive self-fashioning in public must be understood.

Enchantment, Reversal of Gender Roles, and the Asymmetry of Power

Melusina's first encounter with Reymund in the forest exemplifies the asymmetrical power dynamics that define their relationship. In her reading of Reymund's spontaneous reaction, Prud'Homme remarks that his "sleep state and his response of fear and fascination in the presence of Melusine, all signal an encounter with the Otherworld" (2017:66). In other words, Reymund, encounters Melusina in a state of extreme vulnerability having been traumatized by the accidental killing his uncle. She immediately capitalizes on this condition, deploying her supernatural knowledge to recount his crime and offering salvation in exchange for unconditional obedience. On the other hand, Melusina downplays her own misfortune and guilt occasioned by her imprisonment of her father in a mountain, leading ultimately to his death. And all through their conversion, she carefully fails to discuss her own past and her real intention for desiring to marry him.

As Angela Jane Weisl observes, Melusina's influence over Reymund is not merely persuasive but coercive, compelling him to accept marriage under conditions that suspend conventional masculine authority (2017:228). The oath Reymund swears - prohibiting inquiry into Melusina's Saturday activities (*Melusine, 13-14*)- ensures not intimacy but regulated distance, thereby transforming marriage into an instrument of control rather than mutual recognition.

Following the marriage, Melusina assumes roles traditionally reserved for male authority: territorial expansion, architectural patronage, dynasty strategy, and political governance. In addition to her social and religious projections of herself, Melusina also registers her humanity through having ten children with Reymund (32-33), with eight of them born with one monstrous mark or the other. Furthermore, Melusina makes serious efforts to inculcate good social and religious values in them. Reymund by contrast, recedes into passivity functioning as a nominal head whose legitimacy derives entirely from his wife's power. The success of Melusina becoming human is, however, dependent not just on her own performance of humanity and her participation in the socio-cultural and religious lives of the community, but primarily on Reymund's capacity or elasticity to uphold the conditions of their marriage, as stipulated in her mother's curse. This paper therefore argues that Melusina cuts short her own chances of attaining full humanity by projecting herself too hastily and too directly to the community, instead of projecting Reymund as the man and head of the family. A popular Igbo adage says that 'onyena-achọịhụka a na-ahụ', which can be loosely translated as 'The person who is trying to see, is the one who will be seen'. In a society where abnormality is considered a taboo (see Mary Lindemann, 1994:494 and Surekha Davies, 2013:50), and where there is always a very powerful policing mechanism (see Lennard J Davis, 1995: xvi) to check disruptive tendencies to social order, Melusina should have known that 'until the rotten tooth is pulled out, the mouth will always have to chew with caution', as a popular African saying goes. Projecting her authority and public image much more than Reymund is given space in the narrative can be likened to not chewing with caution while grappling with a rotten tooth. This is because projecting Reymund would have automatically translated to her projection of herself without any repercussion.

This reversal of gender roles, while enabling Melusina's rapid social ascent, therefore renders her extremely noticeable in a society that is highly sensitive to departure from the norm.

Secrecy, Surveillance and the Failure of Conjugal Integration

Melusina's insistence on secrecy – most notably her weekly withdrawal from society - creates the conditions for communal suspicion. As Pfleger argues, the structural distance imposed by the oath prevents the emotional and spiritual intimacy traditionally associated with wedlock, producing what she terms the "promise of unhappiness" (2017:209). This absence of transparency invites external intervention, culminating in the Count of Frost's accusations (*Melusine*, 69-70) and Reymund's moment of doubt. This doubt of his could not be weakened by the wealth and territorial expansion he acquired through Melusina's magic, her respect for him and the many peaceful years they had already shared together. Reymund's decision to spy on his wife was a very critical and dramatic moment of Melusina's monstrous influence versus the community influence. This explains why even in his rage he hesitates again at the door before the effect of his brother's words moves him to take action at once. Thus, given Melusina's distance or absence and the community's presence at that material time, the community prevails, albeit momentarily.

Significantly, Reymund's initial act of visual transgression does not result in immediate rupture. Upon witnessing Melusina's hybrid body, he responds not with revulsion but with remorse for betraying her trust, reaffirming his loyalty and concealing her secret (*Melusine,* 72). This reaction complicates interpretations that cast Reymund as an ethical failure, rather it positions him as a figure torn between competing regimes of loyalty – marital, communal and epistemological. Brownlee (1994: 73-74) observes that Melusina's reaction in this situation seems to signal a desperate move to maintain the status quo. Even though she notices Reymund spying on her, Melusina practically ignores or overrules the consequences of Reymund not keeping to the oath - as against Reymund's fears and lamentations (72-73) - which clearly stipulates loss of his wife and children, wealth, territories, honour, etc. (*Melusine*, 14). Instead, she goes to him, and having undressed, lies down with him on his bed, kissing and embracing him in a virtuous manner (Melusine, 73-74).

Although the impossibility of Melusina attaining (full) human existence becomes both immanent and imminent at this point, the fact that the marriage outlives this inglorious moment vindicates Reymund as innocent from the cause of Melusina's unhappy ending. For Melusina, on the other hand, it equally seems to be a humble acknowledgement of her own transgressiveness and embedded unhappiness in her secret nature. That explains why she pardons Reymund immediately and continues to live with him.

Monstrous Offspring and the Collapse of Maternal Authority

The narrative's decisive rupture occurs, therefore, not with the revelation of Melusina's body but with the actions of her son, Goffroy. By his description and his character in the narrative, he seems to have a greater amount of Melusina's monstrosity than his brothers (*Melusine, 32-33).* His violent destruction of the monastery, resulting in the death of his brother as well as a hundred monks, represents an excess of inherited monstrosity that can no longer be contained within the structures Melusina has carefully constructed.

Reymund's public denunciation of Melusina at this moment constitutes a second and irreparable breach of the marital bond. Unlike the earlier visual transgression, this verbal accusation directly implicates Melusina's status as mother and origin, collapsing the distinction between private secrecy and public accountability. Faced with the exposure of her bloodline's irredeemable violence, Melusina abandons her quest for humanity and returns to her otherworldly existence.

Conclusion: Endemic Transgression and the Limits of Human Assimilation

This paper set out to show that Melusina's failure to attain full human existence cannot be adequately explained by Reymund's transgressions alone. Rather, the narrative presents her tragedy as the result of an endemic monstrosity that resists assimilation into human social structures, regardless of individual intention or effort. Reymund's actions, while flawed, are reactive and incomplete; Melusina's downfall is structural, inherited, and ultimately unavoidable.

By foregrounding bloodline, gender role reversal, and maternal excess, Thüring von Ringoltingen's *Melusine* exposes the limits of Early modern fantasies of integration. The text ultimately suggests that hybridity, once inherited and publicly manifested, cannot be reconciled with the normative demands of marriage, lineage, and Christian order. In this sense, Melusina's tragedy is less a moral failure than a meditation on the impossibility of resolving monstrosity through social performance alone.

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