



The Metaphor That is the Female Body

By Isabella Croft

ENG380: Rebels, Outlaws, and Outcasts



ABSTRACT

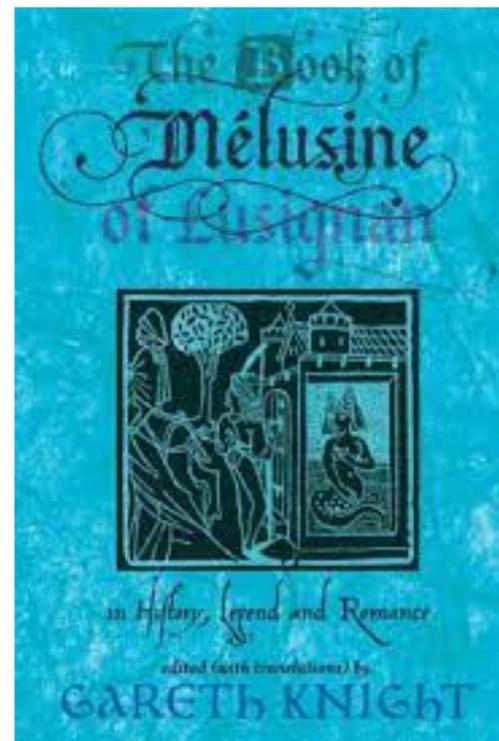
The feminine body is often used as a symbol in many different cultures. It can be used as something to represent fertility, seduction, motherhood, etc. Because of how scrutinized the female body can be as something to physically be had, both in modern and medieval literature, I would like to rather focus on the things that a woman's body can *metaphorically* symbolize, as they are often the subjects of objectification (rather than personification) in literature. Female bodies can be used to symbolize many different ideas, ideals, and so on. A woman may be the prize for the male hero, or the manifestation of everything he stands against (Queen Oluf, for example). There are two specific texts I would like to use to contrast the images of women, one being *Melusine*, where the motherly and queenly figure Melusine is represented as her own being, acting out against the subservient role she should be playing without much repercussion within the story, and is in fact a beloved queen. The other story will be focused on *The Saga of Hrolf King Kraki*, where the Queen Oluf is set as the antagonist against King Hrolf, even after he rapes her, making her out to be the villain rather than the other way around. Both have different variations of female characters, with some representing different kinds of ideals. These texts offer a glimpse into the cultural mind at the time of their writing and the way women were viewed (whether it be symbolically or otherwise) and how they were expected to act at the time of writing (which would be subservient to men).



MELUSINE

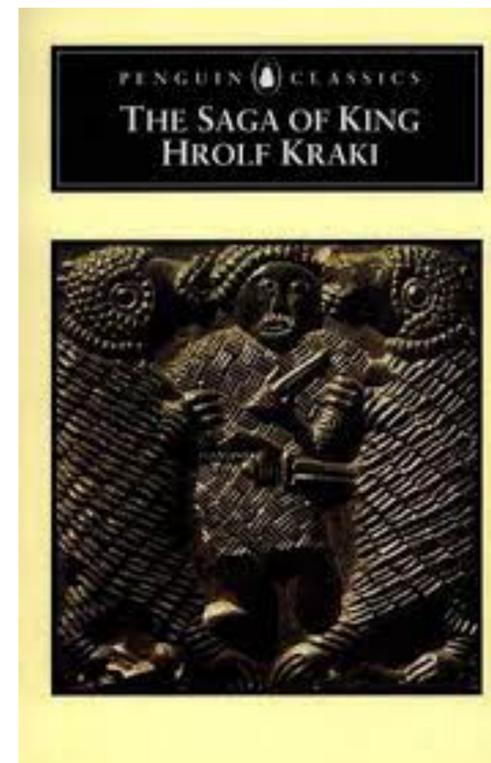
MATERIALS AND METHODS

• *Melusine* is a piece of medieval literature that focuses on a young woman cursed by her mother to turn into a beast every Saturday. It can be argued that this deformity (having a snake-tail for legs) is its own sign of imperfection in herself as a woman, at least, when compared to how a woman should have acted at the time. Melusine is not exactly a feminist ideal, but for the times, she was a more complex character, acting less subservient than was expected and instead acted on her own will. But this was not the perfect woman at the times and it easily could be argued that she stands as a symbol of how it was thought during this time that femininity could corrupt. Within *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero*, by Peggy McCracken it is discussed how the monstrosity of a child comes from the mother, while humanity comes from the father (“...the responsibility for monstrosity lies with the mother; it is explained by an excess of material, of menstruum.” Pg 83). When eventually her husband breaks his vow and looks upon her on a Saturday, seeing her monstrosity, he uses it as an excuse to blame her for how monstrous their son Geoffrey became, after he burnt down a church. And she doesn't fight against it, either as she seems to understand in some way that she is responsible for their monstrous children, going as far as to warn her husband to kill one of their children.



• Within *The Saga of Hrolf King Kraki* Queen Oluf is a warrior-queen that is sought after by the protagonist, King Hrolf. When refused, he kidnapped her for several days and assaults her, getting her pregnant with a daughter Yrsa. Eventually, she tricks the King into marrying his daughter as a form of revenge. Because the King is the hero of the story, Queen Oluf isn't treated as a woman getting revenge but rather a woman scorned.

• Metaphorically, Queen Oluf symbolizes what becomes of a woman that does not follow the traditionally set path of a woman during the times. She was demonized and seen as evil



CONCLUSIONS

Though women have always been and will always be complex, full people, there have only recently been strides taken to change the cultural idea that women are symbols. Seductress, Mother, Virgin, Whore. Symbols and metaphors that are meant to be represented by women, turning them into basic, two-dimensional beings and taking away their depth. In the end, Melusine and Queen Oluf are reduced to very specific metaphors that focus on the consequences of what happens to a woman that strays from their intended role. They metaphorically stand for the corruption and monstrosity that comes from femininity, their every action twisted to fit that narrative.

WORKS CITED

Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*. Zone Books, 2012.
 McCracken, Peggy. *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

