Melusine and the Fear of Disorder in Medieval European Society

Abstract

Man and woman, natural and unnatural, holy and sinful, human and monster. These dualities pervade the work of Jean d’Arras. Melusine: Or, The Noble History of Lusignan, written in France in the 14th century, tells of a castle called the Lusignan fortress and noble house founded by Melusine, a woman who was both human and fairy. The conflict between these various dualities shape the rise and fall of the fortress and noble house were founded by Melusine, a woman who was both human and fairy. Women were also considered “physically weaker, emotionally less stable, less intelligent, and less rational than men...[making them] more susceptible to demonic influences (magic) or temptation (sin).” Because of this, there was “a deeply rooted medieval colossal belief that women needed to deny their uncanny nature before they could become members of an ordered society.”

Analysis

Melusine, Raymondin, and the Garden of Eden

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

The Magic of Femininity in Conflict with Nature

Early on, the novel establishes a connection between females, the unnatural, and the magical:
• When Melusine’s mother, Presine, meets her father, King Elinas, diction connoting magic and power is used to describe her effect on him, illustrating how profoundly the power of magic is affected by Presine’s magical influence. He became disoriented and unable to think coherently, illustrating the danger of the feminine in its ability to bring about the magical and, therefore, disrupt order.
• She sang “more sweetly than any fairy, or nymph...Elinas was overwhelmed” and “so absorbed...by her music and her loveliness that he knew not whether it was day or night, or whether he was awake or sleeping.” He was enchanted. (Jean d’Arras 25).
• Similarly, Raymondin’s meeting with Melusine also illustrates the seemingly magical, profound influence she had on him.
• He meets her at the “Enchanted Fountain” and [marvelled at] her beauty the likes of which he had never beheld before,” (Jean d’Arras 31-32).
• “Presine curses Melusine, she explains that “the power of [her] father’s seed...[will draw her] toward his human nature, and she would soon fall behind the ways of nymphs and fairies forever.” (Jean d’Arras 25). Considering the Presine is a magical being while the human is a human, this statement clearly draws a connection between females and magic and juxtaposes it with men and nature.

This aligns with medieval views concerning the seemingly “unnatural” nature of the female form and the connection between females and magic:
• “Sirens, water-nymphs, and Melusines are produced as part of the construction of femininity and nature...This notion is characterized by demonic powers in the natural feminine element,” (Menke 42).

Methodology

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

Conclusions

By drawing connections between the Garden of Eden story and the stories of Melusine and Raymondin, the novel illustrates medieval European society’s religious sentiments, their fear of the devastating consequences of sin, and their belief that adherence to God’s will is necessary to maintain order and society. These ideas work together to illustrate how the dualities depicted throughout Melusine indicate how medieval society valued the order perceived in the holy, the natural, the masculine, and the human and, therefore, feared the disorder and the threat perceived in the sinful, the magical, the feminine, and the monstrous. Perhaps further research could explore some of the real-world consequences of these perceptions in medieval society.

References


