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Intertextuality Is the Name of the Game: *Melusine*–Undine–Theophrastus Paracelsus–Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué–Christian Petzold: Water Spirits Are with Us, Throughout Time

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Abstract: The concept of intertextuality often remains a catchphrase for many different phenomena, but it is really a crucially important concept involving all narrative processes from the past to the present. What writer would not borrow from a plethora of sources, whether s/he does it deliberately or unconsciously? In fact, we could identify literature as an infinite fabric of narrative threads, and the more closely we examine a literary work, and the denser its composition, the more we can recognize the essential weave it is composed of. This can be powerfully illustrated in the case of the many different narratives involving the water nixie Undine (or Melusine), who was already popular in the Middle Ages, then was discussed in the sixteenth century, subsequently entered the fantasy of Romantic writers, and has most recently become the subject of a major modern movie. The cultural-historical arc from the past to the present powerfully demonstrates the fundamental working of intertextuality on both the vertical and horizontal axes. Writing, whether creative or factual, constantly operates within a web of narrative exchanges. On this basis, we are on firm ground when we claim that ancient or medieval literature is just as important for us today as nineteenth- or twentieth-century literature as a source of inspiration and influence, shaping both our worldview and value system and this through an intertextual chain of narratives. Of course, we move (hopefully) forward in our own time, but many of the analytic tools available to us are historically grounded.

Keywords: intertextuality; *Nibelungenlied*; *Melusine*; reception of medieval literature; Paracelsus; Romantic literature; Fouqué; Petzold; movies; the nixie; otherworldly perspectives

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1. Introduction

Virtually no text, especially no literary text, has ever been created in a complete vacuum. As research on intertextuality has observed already for a long time, all narratives respond in one way or the other to previous statements, compositions, or poetic creations, and they in turn influence or impact future works in a myriad of different ways. The best examples would be the ancient Scriptures, whether the Bible, the Qur'an, the Torah, or the Sanskrit texts, which continue to be the pilot lights for countless people across the world in the twenty-first century and determine even post-modern mentality, imagology, fantasy, and visuality. In fact, there always appears to be a narrative background in practically all literary texts, whether as direct quotes, translations, inspirations, comments, satires, parodies, allusions, allegories, or references. Literary criticism, *querelles*, analytic engagement, and similar processes extend the intertextual process on a more intellectual level, but they all confirm the same phenomenon, hence the need in our interpretive

work and philological investigations to pay attention to the historical, textual dimension of this process. This is, of course, not really surprising, but drawing our attention to this phenomenon in light of a specific motif—the uncanny relationship between humans and water creatures—makes it possible to comprehend the basic workings of fictional writing from the Middle Ages to the present. Moreover, the concept of intertextuality thus facilitates a much better understanding of the significance of pre-modern texts also for us today, insofar as our contemporary culture and imagination are certainly deeply determined by ancient ideas, concepts, themes, and topics.

At the same time, there has always been the danger of plagiarism, as we today tend to call it, and hence condemn it as morally and ethically unacceptable in all academic writing. Of course, AI-generated texts do not constitute plagiarism as such in the narrow sense of the word, but they certainly represent efforts to cheat because a computer program does the job of writing for the author, culling from many different sources online and creating a seemingly authentic document that, however, basically offers no new insights at all. We might go as far as to identify AI as the most sophisticated modern tool in intertextuality (see, for instance, the contributions to Cruz-Benito 2022; Dawson 2023; Dasgupta et al. 2024). Nevertheless, AI deceives the user by pretending to create a meaningful text when the end-product consists of nothing but a compilation of words and sentences borrowed from a wide range of sources available online—and nothing else! The intertextuality becomes, in this case, a devious tool that threatens human creativity, individuality, and freedom (for a highly productive analysis of this issue through the lens of Friedrich Nietzsche's texts, see now Sushchenko and Yatsenko 2025, who rightly claim that AI stifles our human creativity and gives way to mechanization of our world).

In the pre-modern world, by contrast, writers constantly tried to demonstrate their learnedness and, hence, cultural education by drawing from a variety of sources, leaning on them, rendering them into their own language, or adapting them in one way or another. In fact, if a poet developed a really new work, concept, theme, or motif, such as Wolfram von Eschenbach with his *Parzival* (ca. 1205), he made sure to explain that he did not only rely on Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval* (ca. 1160) but also on Kyot and Flegetanis, hence imaginary sources, whether real or imaginary (Classen 2005; Hartmann 2015, pp. 23–25; Wehrli 1984, pp. 95–113; from a historical perspective, see 2000/2008, p. 7). The entire corpus of Arthurian romances, or the many different *Tristan* romances, the interconnection between Old French *fabliaux* and Italian novelle, Middle High German *mæren*, or Middle English *tales* has been well established and is best described as an expression of a dense process predicated on intertextuality. We can observe fairly similar phenomena in the visual arts when we consider universal icons or images that have deeply influenced past and present cultures, which is certainly a reflection of intertextuality. Religious ideas, messages, or themes expressed in an infinity of art forms have been constantly handed down throughout the ages and have often turned into staple icons easily recognizable across the world, such as the cross, the crescent moon, or the Dharma wheel. Those are all manifestations of intertextuality or intervisuality, that is, documents of a rich network of ideas, narratives, motifs, themes, subject matters, or images.

Not surprisingly, in the world of modern advertisement, for instance, the Starbucks corporation uses the famous Melusine or siren motif as its key icon (coffee cups, stores, letterhead, etc.), whether the customers have any idea about this ancient figure or not (https://www.istitutomarangoni.com/en/maze35/community/hear-the-sirens-the-untold-story-behind-the-starbucks-logo; last accessed on 22 December 2024). As disrespectful as it might sound in this context, all world religions similarly rely on historical symbols, icons, or logos that carry a great weight until the very present because of their deep roots in the past. In simple terms, we cannot understand anything about our present

world without a solid comprehension of the past that can be equated with the roots of a tree, whereas we today are the leaves in the panoply. We live in and exist by an intertextual (and intervisual) network, whether we are fully aware of it (scholarship) or not (general readers). To shed more light on this issue and to make it very concrete, this paper will trace a unique literary motif from the high Middle Ages to the present and illustrate how much the world of cinema continues to profit deeply from the intertextual nexus. This motif pertains to the essential relevance of water as the fundamental element all life is made of and which assumes in the various literary iterations an agency by itself. As fantastic as this observation might be, both the medieval and Romantic authors acknowledged that fully, and their fascination with nixies—certainly an ancient folkloric myth—has also exerted a deep influence on modern cinematographic narratives.

To lay the foundation for the subsequent analysis, let us first clearly establish what we mean by intertextuality. Numerous scholars have already explored this phenomenon and have recognized in that process how important intertexts or pre-texts prove to be for any new 'creation', which then becomes, almost automatically, the new pre-text for future works (post-texts) (Classen 2025). Consequently, literary researchers have busily investigated for a long time the practical implications of this writing strategy. In the Middle Ages, for instance, it was generally regarded as a sign of learning or authority when a poet proudly referred to his/her source and paid great respect to it (see, for instance, the contributions to Kangas et al. 2013). Innovation was not the true ideal, whereas the reverence of the classics, such as Ovid or Cicero, mattered the most, not to speak of the sacred Scriptures, of course. Curiously, as we will observe below, intertextuality continues to play a significant role in contemporary literature despite quite different concepts relevant for modern writers or poets (for modern studies on intertextuality, see Kristeva 1969; Kristeva 1986; Culler 1981; Ahmed 2003; Allen 2000). This medieval attitude was predicated on the realization that ancient Greek and Roman poets, philosophers, scientists, and medical doctors had already examined the whole range of plant matter, for instance, serving effectively for the healing process (Kristeva 1984; Plett 1991; Emmelius 2015; Roozen 2015; Guadu 2023; Carter 2021). The same applied to astronomy, medicine, philosophy, and theology, as reflected in the typical university curriculum combining the *trivium* with the *quadrivium*.

Of course, today, we live in a postmodern, rational, scientific world and would no longer simply accept such a position. However, all science and scholarship, like the present paper, depend on previous research and aim to develop it further, adding new insights, critiquing older ideas, and moving us forward along similar or new paths of knowledge. Nothing should or can be studied in isolation; there is no absolute vacuum of human ideologies and concepts. All people interact with their neighbors, their friends, their predecessors, their present audiences, their colleagues, and then also with posterity (via wills, addressing future readers through novels or other narratives). The same applies to all visual, literary, philosophical, musical, religious, scientific and medical works. Through critical engagement with the past, an innovative perspective can emerge since we learn from mistakes and can improve our material conditions or our intellectual concept of the world, maybe profiting from previous experiences, maybe opposing traditional viewpoints. Tropes and topoi have contributed to the almost endless concatenation in literature, for instance, as Ernst Robert Curtius has magisterially demonstrated in his seminal study from 1948 (Curtius 1948).

Famous deconstructionist and psychoanalytic critics such as Jacques Lacan have argued that all texts are fragments and depend on pre-text and co-text, emphasizing that there is no absolute 'original' and that the intertextual relationships are based on randomness, hence contingent on chance. According to Jacques Derrida, there is no center or origin in the entire literary and linguistic process, a phenomenon he called *différance*,

which mirrors a "chain of differing and deferring substitutions". As Helen Regueiro Elan (Elan 1993) observes, summarizing those viewpoints, "In the absence of an origin that would guarantee presence, meaning, and voice, there can be no originals—only copies. And without a univocal and transcendental referent, all texts refer to one another—translate one another—in infinite and utterly random ways" (p. 621; cf. also Tronzo 2009; on fragmentarity, an intriguing expression of intertextuality, see now the contributions to Herberichs and Schöller 2024).

2. The Water Fairy: From the Middle Ages to the 21st Century

Considering a long history of literary discussions from throughout time and space, it has been commonly claimed that physical power is useless against the force of fairies or nixies since those exist in a different material dimension or can use water, for instance, as they wish, such as to hide behind, to travel through, to create a screen, or to exert influence and authority. But there has always existed a great chance and opportunity for contacts and interactions between both spheres, as we regularly hear in many pre-modern texts, but also in modern fantasy narratives (or movies). We find a most intriguing example in a major heroic poem where the nixies know the future and voice their warning but are not listened to, which then results in an Armageddon.

When the Burgundians, the protagonists in the Middle High German heroic epic *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200), try to cross the Danube on their way to the kingdom of the Huns, where they want to visit Kriemhild and her husband, King Etzel (Attila), they are at first stymied because there is, after a major flood, no bridge left to reach the other shore, and no ferryboat is to be seen (stanza 1524). The court steward Hagen, who had actually severely warned them not to undertake this dangerous journey because he knows only too well that Kriemhild wants nothing but revenge for the murder of her first husband Siegfried, searches for an opportunity to handle this challenge. He happens to come across a pond where three water nixies are swimming, all otherworldly creatures.

Trying to force them to prophecy the outcome of their journey, Hagen takes away their clothing and questions them. The first one tells him a lie and projects a happy outcome; the second one, however, reveals the truth. They would all suffer their death at the Hunnish court, except the chaplain who is accompanying them. Then, she points out where he can find a ferry boat, which is located on the other side of the river. Pretending to be someone else, Hagen can convince the ferryman to come over, but both then get into a fight, and Hagen slays him and takes the boat for their own purpose. The Burgundian kings (three brothers) note this bad outcome with considerable concern when they recognize the blood in the boat, which looks like a bad omen (stanzas 1563–66).

But the steward dismisses their questions, and with his great strength, he manages to transport the entire army across the water. However, when they are in the middle of the river, he throws the poor chaplain overboard and pushes him with the oar even deeper into the water because he does not want him to live; otherwise, the nixies' prophecy might come true. Although the chaplain cannot swim, he manages with God's help to reach the northern shore and thus return home.

Hagen thus understands that their destiny is sealed, as the second nixie had foretold him. Consequently, once everyone has reached the other shore, he destroys the boat to the great surprise of everyone. Hagen explains his action by emphasizing that he does not want any of their warriors to become a victim of cowardice (stanza 1580). In reality, however, the destruction of the boat powerfully symbolizes that they all leave their lives behind and are bound to march toward their death. This then actually happens, just as the second nixie had prophesied it, and the *Nibelungenlied* indeed concludes with a horrible Armageddon. Only King Etzel and his two vassals, Dietrich and Hildebrand, survive

(Schulze 2010; Whobrey 2018; for a comprehensive and insightful discussion of the entire epic, see Müller 1998), but none of them mattered critically in the heroic battles over the sense of revenge, identity, love, and honor.

These nixies knew only too well the consequences of the Burgundians' visit to their sister and warned Hagen explicitly, but he questioned the truth of their prophecy and tested it. To his own horror, he had to realize that they were correct, so once they had crossed the river, their destiny was revealed; that is, Hagen understands only too well that none of them would ever return home alive. The poet, however, never revisits the motif of the nixies, as crucial as their appearance at this critical juncture proves to be.

Water nixies, sirens, and other mysterious water creatures have populated world literature since ancient times (Homer, *Ulysses*), so the anonymous Middle High German poet simply borrowed from a common folkloric motif and integrated it into his heroic epic, a perfect example of intertextuality, although the source texts are not visible per se. Similarly, the crossing of the river and the destruction of the ferryboat were not really literary inventions of a novel kind, although we cannot tell exactly what sources the poet might have been familiar with. He, or they, certainly belonged to a monastic community and must have had some knowledge of ancient Latin literature, which undoubtedly influenced his narrative concept. The reference to the water nixies, to be sure, stands in a long tradition of similar aquatic figures who know much about the past and also the future and yet are not part of human society (see the contributions to McConnell 1998; Classen 2018).

The famous Lorelei at the Rhine has sung throughout history and bedazzled countless unfortunate sailors who allegedly threw themselves into the water to reach her and thus drowned. The myth of this water fairy experienced continuous adaptations and translations in poetry, music, the arts, and folklore (Krogmann 1956; Arend 2002; Kramp and Schmandt 2004). But she had many sisters across medieval and early modern Europe, especially Melusine, along with her two sisters, and then the mysterious figure of Undine, who will be the center of attention in this study.

Already in the 14th century, the south-German poet Egenolf von Stauffenberg had created a verse narrative, *Peter von Stauffenberg* (ca. 1310), dealing with a fairy-like Undine, which also results in a catastrophe for the protagonist because he breaks the taboo she had imposed on him and marries a human woman, which he was not allowed to do according to her rule (Walker 1980; Lundt 1991). Many other poets, musical composers, artists, philosophers, and theologians have engaged with Undine and similar creatures, whose twitter or amphibious nature exerted a tremendous appeal, being both sexually attractive and uncanny, fascinating and scary at the same time (Fassbind-Eigenheer 1994). In fact, she has become ubiquitous in literature, film, radio, classical music, rock music, theater, computer games, anime, manga, and ballet (see the contributions to Max 2009; Mertens 2012).

Intertextuality becomes profoundly manifest and deeply relevant when we consider any of these ancient folkloric characters who certainly represent global human archetypes, whether the storytellers knew of each other or not. There are countless Romantic and other poems dealing with water fairies, their dangerous allure, and their highly erotic attraction. Moreover, the fascination with water as the source of all life has been a universal phenomenon, and we today are the direct heirs of it, as we can observe, for instance, in the recent and highly acclaimed German movie "Undine" by Christian Petzold (launched in 2020; for the basic details, see https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11617052/; last accessed on 22 December 2024; see my discussion below). Throughout the Middle Ages, for instance, water mattered centrally for many poets and artists who regularly acknowledged its precious nature and existential relevance (Classen 2018) and seem to have paid more

respect to this element than we might do today although we depend just as much on good drinking water for our survival as medieval people and others.

Valuable examples of the central motif in modern literature would be Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem "Water", Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner", William Butler Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree", or William Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud". In fact, we can find examples of the theme of water in poetry and other genres across the world and throughout time, whether in German or Hawai'ian poetry (for medieval Arabic examples, see now Diem 2024). Considering, however, the current global crisis of water shortage, along with climate change, it is a matter of great urgency to sensitize us all once again to the essential relevance of water for our survival as humanity, such as expressed in the literary discourse, both past and present. Literary studies thus can contribute in a very meaningful manner to the ideal of sustainability by embracing an ecocritical perspective regarding water and the creatures existing in, through, and with water. The intertextual hermeneutics can thus contribute to this critical task because the concern for water and, hence, the apprehension of the water creatures continue to be of great relevance to us today, whether we believe in nixies or not (Classen 2018, 2020).

3. Melusine in Her Bath

Melusine appears, maybe, at the earliest time in the mosaic floor of the Otranto cathedral in southern Italy on the Adriatic coast (twelfth century). The first significant writers to refer to this powerful female character who regularly disappears in her bath on Saturdays when her husband is not allowed to visit or even to see her were Walter Map and Gervasius of Tilbury (late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries). However, Melusine experienced her full development as a literary figure only by the late fourteenth century when Jean d'Arras wrote his prose romance (1393), Couldrette composed his verse version (ca. 1400; both in Old French), and when the Swiss Thüring von Ringoltingen created his German translation/adaptation (1456). When the early book market developed, a vast number of copies of the *Melusine* narratives were sold far into the seventeenth century. The Romantics rediscovered this account and retold her story in their own ways, and Melusine has thus become a mainstay of modern literature ever since (Classen 1995; for a wide range of critical comments on this literary tradition, see the contributions to Schnyder and Mühlethale 2008; and to Urban et al. 2017; Zeldenrust 2020, who have already outlined the extensive intertextual network characterizing the Melusine tradition).

When Melusine's future husband Reymund appears in the middle of the forest, terribly upset, guilt-ridden, and completely disoriented after he has accidentally killed his uncle in a fight against a mighty boar, she, along with her two sisters, awaits him next to a well, and she offers him marriage, wealth, and public esteem if he only accepts her taboo never to visit her when she disappears every Saturday in her bath. Reymund happily agrees and manages to observe this taboo for a long time, but eventually, due to bad circumstances and evil influence by his own brother, he explores what hides behind the door to her bathroom and discovers his wife sitting in the tub, being half-human and half-snake. But the catastrophe does not yet set in since he keeps her secret and is mindful of the taboo. Only when he finally exposes her true identity in public, cursing her because he believes that her monstrous nature is responsible for one of their sons, Geoffrey, having killed a brother who had previously joined a monastery, is the disaster upon them because the taboo has been transgressed. She is forced to leave him, her family, and human society, so she flies away in her hybrid shape, never to return to live with her husband, who soon enough succumbs to his death out of grief over the loss of his wife. We do not know where Melusine flies to and what her ultimate abode might be, but she is certainly and consistently associated with water as her essential attribute while she operates in the world

of people. We are also not informed what powers force her to depart except for her mother's taboo imposed on her as a punishment for a transgression she and her two sisters had committed against the father. The etiology can be traced further back somewhat, but it remains mysterious altogether, maybe as mysterious as water and its creatures prove to be, both then and today. After all, water constitutes our own existence; we consist, to a large extent, of water, and all living processes depend on the availability of water.

4. Undine

Quite similarly to Melusine, Undine was a seemingly human creature who belonged, however, to the world of water figures and desired to join human society, which would grant her a soul. Just as in the case of Melusine, however, her desperate attempts to leave the aquatic dimension behind and join humanity ultimately fail because of the major differences between herself and her husband. The marriage of a fairy and a human regularly appears as an intriguing motif in world literature—see, for instance, the *lai* "Lanval" by Marie de France, ca. 1190—but rarely does that have a happy outcome because of Undine's mysterious nature, her strange powers, and her attempts to impose a taboo on her male partner as the critical secret that could preserve her existence in human society. There is always something uncanny about those water nixies because they partly continue to be associated with the underworld, and yet they already belong to or interact with human society, bonding with a male through a love relationship. Little wonder that poets throughout time have already engaged either with Melusine or Undine, or any other similar water fairy (Mertens 2012).

4.1. Undine in the Post-Medieval World: Early Modern Theosophy and Spirituality: The Case of Paracelsus

In ancient Greece and other countries, the notion of water nymphs was widely acknowledged, which subsequently had a huge influence on Germanic or Celtic folklore. From early on, Undine represents water as one of the four basic elements (water, fire, soil, and air), a deeply medieval concept of the fundamental principles defining all life. In the sixteenth century, the medical doctor, theologian, and philosopher Theophrastus Paracelsus (1493/94–1541; with the full name: Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim), both highly admired for his mystical and spiritual insights and also badly maligned as a swindler until today (for a broad text selection, cf. Weeks and Kahn 2024) identified her specifically as such and might have coined that name in his treatise *Ex Libro de Nymphis, Sylvanis, Pygmaeis, Salamandris et Gigantibus,* etc. (A Book on Nymphs, Sylphs, Pygmies, and Salamanders, and the Other Spirits), published only posthumously (Paracelsus 1941; Henry E. Sigerist 1941; here p. 1; partially online at: https://books.google.com/books?id=YIKLKqwsEc0C&pg=PA213#v=onepage&q&f=false); for the full text, see https://archive.org/details/fourtreatisesoft00para/page/230/mode/2up; both last accessed on 23 December 2024; cf. Telle 1992).

Until today, especially among esoteric circles (Rosicrucians), Paracelsus enjoys a high reputation because of the intriguing merging of very different epistemologies, reflecting on human nature from many different perspectives, regularly identifying the combination of the spiritual with the material as the very essence of all life. As contested as his medical and theological teachings might have been, they are considered today as major contributions to early-modern intellectual life and medical research, offering perspectives that integrative and holistic medicine is finally recognized today as fundamentally valid. After all, he was highly respected as an early-modern toxicologist, astrologer, geologist, pharmacist, and spiritual healer (cf. the contributions to Telle 1992; Classen 2010).

Paracelsus urged his readers to accept all things here on earth, whether material or spiritual, as created by God because there are many mansions in the house of the Lord. Hence, he emphasized that all people have a divine obligation to study and acknowledge all creatures since they reflect God and his infinite creation, who wants us to understand all beings and objects. Comprehending those, including spirits, constitutes to "walk in the path of God" (p. 224). Hence, the purpose of his book is, as Paracelsus underscores, "to describe the creatures that are outside the cognizance of the light of nature, how they are to be understood, what marvelous works God has created. For it is man's function to learn about things and not to be blind to them" (p. 224).

This then leads him to conclude: "There is more bliss in describing the nymphs than describing the medals" (p. 224). In fact, he goes so far as to claim that "[t]here is more bliss in describing Melusine than in describing cavalry and artillery" (p. 224). The reason for this astounding comment is that "in these things, the spirit is used to move in divine works" (p. 224). Thus, Melusine, or Udine, becomes elevated to being a catalyst to recognize God's infinite powers even beyond material limitations.

In other words, for Paracelsus, the nymph, or water nixie, was a medium to perceive the divine nature behind the material screen and to recognize features of God as creator, which the ordinary observer, limited by the material perspective, would not be able to perceive. The accounts about giants, undines, or nixies would serve as additional media to access the deeper level of universal understanding, beyond what the Bible had revealed (p. 226). Those other beings have, however, no soul and thus want to join humanity to gain a soul (p. 228). They are similar to spirits and human beings, but they lack the divine core, which makes them desire to be with people (p. 228).

Paracelsus emphasizes that these Undines, or nymphs, are the closest to people in body and reason, but that they lack a soul and thus cannot follow in God's path (p. 230). As mysterious as they might be, they still deserve the highest respect: "queer and marvelous creature[s], to be considered above all others (p. 230). Water is allotted to them as their natural environment, which makes them as amazed about people who live in the air as the latter are amazed about those water creatures (p. 232). Despite the differences in essence, the nymphs look, eat, behave, and operate like people, which explains why they desire so much to gain a soul to leave their existence behind and gain access to God's grace like human beings (p. 235).

Paracelsus provides a most detailed discussion of these nymphs and the other non-human creatures, presenting himself as the absolute authority on this matter. He does not reveal his sources, but it is evident that his account was predicated on a long tradition of learned treatises. We can thus identify the dominant role of intertextuality here, with the author offering a sort of encyclopedic narrative, which was certainly the result of extensive research in older relevant literature (Bergengruen 2007).

4.2. Undine Among the Romantics and in Modern Film

The narrative tradition of the water nymphs/nixies presents us with the ideal example of intertextuality, connecting antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the early modern times with the present. Although we have traditionally considered the year 1500 as a rough signal post for the end of a thousand-year history and culture, in light of the continued popularity of this literary, artistic, and musical motif uninterruptedly throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, we have to accept that the notion of a radical paradigm shift can no longer be upheld, at least with regard to the continuity of the literary and religious discourse (Classen 2022, 2023; Moore 2024). Certainly, globally speaking, there was a major hiatus in literary history, strongly driven by the profound changes in the book markets due to the modern printing press invented in ca. 1450

by Johann Gutenberg in Mainz. Religious, military, political, intellectual, and economic changes added their share to bring about the introduction first of the Renaissance and then Humanism, both closely correlated. The seventeenth century witnessed the rise of the Baroque, the eighteenth century the emergence of the Enlightenment and the Anacreontic period, and finally of *Sturm und Strang*, Classicism, and Romanticism, with which we arrive already in the early 19th century.

As we know only too well, the Romantics were the leading forces in the rediscovery of the Middle Ages, and so it comes as no surprise that the archetypal motif of Undine, or Melusine, re-emerged in the early 19th century. Most famously, the German poet of French descent, Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué (1777–1843), composed his novella "Undine" in 1811, which subsequently quickly experienced international success, as documented by countless reprints and translations (for a very detailed anc certainly useful plot summary in German, see https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Undine_ (Friedrich_de_la_Motte_Fouqu%C3%A9; cf. the detailed list of relevant documents taking us almost to the present online at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friedrich_de_la_Motte_Fouqu%C3%A9; both last accessed on 23 December 2024; there we also find a useful plot summary). At first sight, "Undine" does not seem to have much in common with the accounts of the medieval water nixies (*Nibelungenlied*), the late medieval Melusine, or the Paracelsian concept of nymphs and their fellow creatures.

Nevertheless, as we can recognize quite easily, there are numerous intertextual relationships that deserve to be examined at greater length (for an English translation online, see https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/2825/pg2825-images.html, last accessed on 23 December 2024; for a trustworthy German text edition, see 1959/2001; for the original, see https://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/book/show/fouque_undine_1811; last accessed on 23 December 2024). It cannot be the purpose of this paper to offer once again a comprehensive analysis of this famous novel, which scholars have discussed already for decades and more (cf., e.g., Hentschel 2020). Instead, the emphasis rests on the intertextual component, which is easily observable in the case of the water motif and the danger of that element for human individuals. However, there are also a number of unique narrative elements that allow us to recognize Fouqué's novel as an independent and innovative work of Romantic literature.

Undine is intimately associated with water, like her various relatives, most ominously and threateningly her uncle Kühleborn, both of them carrying symbolic names associating them with water, as literary scholarship has already observed numerous times (see, for instance, El-Nawab 1993). As in the Middle Ages, 'Undine' is based on the Latin word 'unda', 'wave', and 'Kühleborn' can be translated as 'the cold well.' The latter is young Undine's uncle and tries with all his might to influence his niece's development toward gaining the status of a human being through her marriage with Count Huldbrand. He can produce at will a wild forest stream that forces the latter to ride toward a fisherman's house located at the shore of a lake where Undine lives. The couple had lost their daughter when she had fallen into the water but were then graced with the appearance of the mysterious girl, Undine, who operates very much like the spirit Ariel in Shakespeare's *Tempest* (1610–1611). She is eventually successful enough to convince Huldbrand to marry her although he had had a romantic relationship with another woman, Bertalda. The latter turns out to be the fisher people's biological daughter, and despite all attempts to live a peaceful life together, there is fierce competition between the two women.

Undine displays a very gentle and loving character, but she is afraid of her uncle, who could disrupt her entire life again. To protect all of them from Kühleborn's power, upon Undine's order, the castle's well is covered with a strong board and a rock, and she instructs Huldbrand never to speak badly about or to her in public, which would force her to leave

this world and return to the sphere of the spirits, certainly another type of taboo as in the medieval literary sources.

Tragically, and parallel to the *Melusine* story, a major conflict subsequently emerges when the couple, along with Bertalda, goes on a voyage down the Danube to visit Vienna. The emotional tensions among the three, the workings of water spirits, and especially Huldbrand's lack of self-control combine to make him break the taboo despite her repeated appeal to guard his tongue. In his unfettered wrath about Undine's secret powers that make him look foolish and lacking in masculinity, he yells:

> So hast du denn immer Verbindung mit ihnen? Bleib bei ihnen in aller Hexen Namen mit all deinen Geschenken und laß uns Menschen zufrieden, Gauklerin du! (p. 89)
>
> [So, you have always connections with them (the water spirits). Stay with them in the name of all witches, keep your gifts, and let us people in peace, you deceiver!]

This is her 'death-knell', just as it was the condemnation of Melusine by her own husband; she cannot stay with him and must leave to return to her water world. Yet, she warns him additionally that he should stay loyal to her even after her disappearance so that she could protect him from a distance against her evil family members, and other water spirits. Yet, she has no chance at this moment and must depart from him and human society for good.

Huldbrand attempts to return to his ordinary life and marry Bertalda, although he had pledged to Undine that he would marry her. Against all previous warnings by Undine herself, Bertalda has the board and rock that cover the well removed so that she can use the healing water for her complexion. This releases Undine from her self-imposed imprisonment, so she rises from the depths and enters the castle, where she finds her husband and tells him that he has to die. He is afraid that she might have turned into a horrifying monster, but she calms his fear, lifts her veil, and exposes her beautiful face to him. Accepting his destiny, Huldbrand sighs: "Wenn ich sterben dürfte an einem Kusse von dir" (p. 101; if only I would be allowed to die from your kiss—all my own translations). This then happens, indeed:

> sie küßte ihn mit einem himmlischen Kusse, aber sie ließ ihn nicht mehr los; sie drückte ihn inniger an sich und weinte, als wolle sie ihre Seele fortweinen. Die Tränen drangen in des Ritters Augen und wogten im lieblichen Wehe durch seine Brust, bis ihm endlich der Atem entging, und er aus den schönen Armen als ein Leichnam sanft auf die Kissen des Ruhebettes zuurücksank (p. 101).
>
> [she kissed him with a heavenly kiss, but she did no longer let him go; she pressed him more intensively toward her and cried as if she wanted to cry her soul away. The tears penetrated into the knight's eyes and waved lovingly and with pain through his chest until he was out of breath and sank, as a corpse out of her beautiful arms unto the pillows of the bed.]

During his funeral, Undine reappears one more time and transforms into a little stream that circles his grave. Once this has been accomplished, the stream moves forward and runs into a quiet lake located near the cemetery, which symbolizes the eternal unity of the two lovers after all, whereas the narrator completely casts a shadow of silence over the destiny of the human bride, Bertalda. The poet concludes his account with a reference to a well that continues to flow from the cemetery to that lake and which the people identify with Undine, "die auf diese Art noch immer mit freundlichen Armen ihren Liebling umfasse" (104; who in this way continued to embrace her lover with her kind arms). Thus, love and water become part and parcel of the same aspect, reminding the readers, perhaps, that these two are directly linked to life, creating and taking it away again.

One of the main reasons why Fouqué's *Undine* enjoyed such popularity was undoubtedly the nexus of love, water, spirits, and death. The human protagonist is deeply fascinated by the nixie and yet faces severe danger from her and her relatives, the other water creatures, the commonly shared motif in this long-term intertextual tradition. Of course, this Romantic story also appealed to the audiences because of the powerful emergence of water creatures who defy all human efforts to control them and who are reflections of a deeper world normal humans do not have access to. Insofar as Undine is part of the aqueous realm, she is also intimately tied to the very essence of life. But insofar as Huldbrand naively and foolishly betrays her out of a lack of self-control and a deeper understanding of the spirits surrounding him, he has to die. Fouqué thus signaled to his audience that the force of love had to be treated most carefully because once an individual was committed, breaking the bond could have deadly consequences.

In the *Melusine* story, the hybrid female only disappears without causing harm and leaves her emotionally destroyed husband behind, who cannot cope with this personal loss and slowly but certainly declines and then passes away. As pagan as the myth of the love affair between a human and a spirit certainly was, both medieval and Romantic poets—here considering also the many imitators, translators, and adaptors of Fouqué's *Undine*—emphasized the magical power of love that could create a soul and yet could also kill in the case of transgression.

5. Christian Petzold's *Undine*

In light of this long and strong narrative tradition extending from antiquity (Homer) to the Middle Ages (*Melusine*), and from there to the early modern age (Paracelsus), we are not surprised at all that the Romantics then happily adapted this old narrative motif, especially because they were at the forefront of rediscovering the Middle Ages for themselves as a source of literary inspiration. And from there, leaving out many other musical, visual, or literary attempts to adapt this (in)famous and mysterious figure, Undine made a remarkable reappearance recently in the highly acclaimed movie "Undine" (2020) by Christian Petzold, a well-established German moviemaker (see the contributions to Köhler et al. 2022).

Through the lens of intertextuality, we can recognize many salient points of contact with the novel by Fouqué and then with his own sources, going back to Paracelsus and then the long tradition of *Melusine* novels. But Petzold approached his task quite creatively, yet certainly deeply informed by the tradition of the water nixie or fairy who wants to marry a human being so that she can acquire a human soul for herself. However, that latter part is entirely excluded since the movie focuses only on the mystery of Undine and her conflicts in love. The Romantic depth is lost here, and so is the pre-modern intrigue with the aqueous creatures, whereas the motif of water remains a steady feature.

We first encounter Undine as a young historian with a Ph.D. working for the Berlin administration, offering tours to international tourists and informing them about the history of the city's architecture and urban planning. In all previous *Undine* or *Melusine* versions, we can trace an evolving love relationship leading to marriage, which is then undermined and destroyed, leading to the male protagonist's death. By contrast, Petzold has turned this completely around, presenting Undine in a serious conflict with her former lover Johannes, who wants to return to his previous girlfriend or fiancée and abandons Undine. In the first scene of the movie, however, she explicitly tells him that if he were to withdraw his love from her, she would have to kill him, which eventually actually happens.

After Johannes has left the scene, she meets Christoph, who works as an industrial diver and welder, which matters centrally for further development because many of the critical episodes are then situated in or related to the underwater world. What the previous intertexts had touched upon only in subtle terms, the movie starkly confronts us with the

role of the nixie who cannot fully live out her existence in the human world because she is betrayed by her first lover and then has to experience the seeming death of her second lover. Christoph realizes that she still has feelings for Johannes, but she lies to him, which then leads, at least indirectly, to Christoph's accident at work when he is suddenly cut off from oxygen for twelve minutes.

In the hospital, the doctors pronounce him brain-dead, which deeply shocks Undine and destroys her own façade as a human person. Following the traditional and tragic path of the nixies, because Johannes had betrayed her, she now visits him secretly and drowns him in his own swimming pool, which does not find a direct parallel in the literary tradition. However, she knows that she can no longer exist in this world, so she returns to the same reservoir lake where Christoph had worked and enters the water and so disappears from the scene, or rather, from human existence.

In a radical change in the cinematographic narrative, her death brings about Christoph's sudden revival, if not miraculous resurrection, who then embarks on a long search for his disappeared girlfriend without success. But one day, while working under the water in the same catchment lake, he has a vision of Undine, which moves and upsets him deeply. Yet, when he checks the video of his workplace, the nixie does not appear in the film, which confounds him significantly. Hence, the next night, he returns and enters the water without any diving equipment and mysteriously encounters Undine in depth, with whom he can float through this underworld for some time. On the outside, above the water, Christoph's new girlfriend, his co-worker and, by now, the expecting mother of their child, Monika, have followed him and screamed in desperation, yet without being able to do anything about it. After all, she actually understands in her horror and sorrow that he needs to figure out that Undine is really lost to him and that he cannot live with a water nixie. Although we are first made to believe that Christoph has drowned, he suddenly returns to Monika, and the couple goes home, which, as the angle of the camera shoot suggests, Undine apparently observes from below with approval.

Movie critics have consistently praised Petzold's work and related it to another modern version of Undine (such as by Ingeborg Bachmann 1926–1973; "Undine geht" from 1961), and indeed, "Undine" might well be his best film production so far (see, for instance, Husmann 2020). The plot is well organized, the relationship between the main figures is full of drama and certainly realistically developed, and yet there are the strong mystical elements that dawn upon us only in the course of time. Udine is and remains a nixie, although she is presented here as a young woman with her Ph.D. in history and as a professional urban planning tour guide for visiting experts in that field. However, water is her true nature, as much as she seems to have turned away from it, as Fouqué had also indicated in his novel. The movie starts with her realizing that her boyfriend Johann is leaving her, although she threatens to kill him, which later actually happens when she drowns him in his swimming pool. Ironically, her true lover, Christoph, works underwater and is highly trained as a diver. Nevertheless, he suffers from a major accident and would have certainly died if Undine had not returned to her own element, water, thus giving him a new chance to live, though without her. The dramatic love crisis at the beginning results in a happy end with Christoph and Monika returning home from the water being able to close this chapter and embark on their own life outside of the realm of nixies or fairies.

This does not mean at all, as some critics have assumed (Husmann 2020), that the traditional myth of the nixie would have been deconstructed or removed from our modern lives. Undine certainly lives on in the mind, in our collective fantasy, in erotic desires, and in the fear of the depth of water as a life-threatening element. The movie actually revives the myth of love being closely associated with water and death, although it builds, at the end, some distance to the nixie. However, as in the case of Fouqué's *Undine*, this

uncanny creature continues to watch out for her lover and thus exerts a constructive influence because his love relationship with the other woman is consolidated and becomes fruitful. Moreover, the fact that the movie's soundtrack continuously draws from Johann Sebastian Bach's Adagio BWV 974 builds a significant epistemological and aesthetic bridge to Christian Baroque music, which conveys a deep sense of human loneliness here on earth and yet also hope for salvation in the afterlife. This does not make Undine or Melusine a representative of God within her watery environment, but she certainly indicates the male protagonist's longing for a deep love relationship with the natural element of water. These nixies remind the reader/watcher of the timelessness of nature and the essence of spiritual life.

6. Conclusions

The concept of intertextuality proves to be highly effective in analyzing the literary-historical connections between medieval, early modern, modern, and now post-modern narratives, poems, images, movies, and music. Traditionally, we have called this the 'history of literary motifs' (*Motivgeschichte*), but we gain a much deeper understanding of the universal process of giving and taking when we consider the intimate exchanges between pre- and post-texts, hence the intertextuality (see now Classen 2025). There is, as we could observe in light of Melusine or Undine, a continuous weaving of narrative strands that altogether create a new literary or visual fabric predicated on the archetypal fascination with or fear of water. Through this female figure, water is recognized as an element and a force all by itself which people have to acknowledge with respect and carefulness; it can create happiness and love (Undine and Christoph for a short time), it can bring about death (Undine and Johannes), and it represents for all characters in the movie—but so also in the Romantic version by Fouqué and the medieval and early modern tradition (Melusine and Undine)—an uncanny force with its own agency. Moreover, water's fluidity and permeability shed important light on the phenomenon of love and death, which have to be negotiated carefully in unmeasurable literary iterations.

As Petzold's movie indicates, the world of the Middle Ages continues to be very much alive and relevant for us today, providing us with stimulation, inspiration, challenges, and concepts. The narrative interconnectedness between, say, the nixies in the *Nibelungenlied* and Petzold's Undine are quite obvious and relevant; ignoring them would deprive us of the ability to recognize the inner weave of the literary discourse in the first place. This does not mean that the medieval poets determined our own (post)modern perceptions and worldviews; quite the contrary. However, the intertextual operations powerfully reveal the constant give and take from the past to the present, so we realize the global concatenation of the narrative flow we are all heirs of.

Water is the stuff we are made of, both in material, spiritual, and imaginative terms. We are born when the amniotic sac, i.e., water, breaks, which allows us to enter this world. We drink water throughout our lives, and we water plants that we later eat. Water is the elixir of all existence, and it constitutes the material framework for spiritual transcendence, such as through baptism in water and the purification of the soul in water, and this is in virtually all major religions. The stories of the nixies, Melusines, Undines, and other water creatures simply remind us of the mythical and archetypal origin of our being here on Earth. Ecocritics have already explored many features of this phenomenon, as water proves to be essential in people's lives, and so it appears regularly throughout world literature (Classen 2018). For Jessica Datema and Manya Steinkoler, the meaning of Petzold's movie rests in this cinematic phenomenon: "As a water sprite and mythic figure, Undine marks the amniotic unity that must be sacrificed for symbolic life. Ultimately, the film underlines that life requires a loss and that loss is mythic, like Lacan's Lamella" (Datema and Steinkoler

2023, p. 64). And they rightly conclude, "Undine is a warning to be attentive to repetition and avoid drowning in the oceanic to forget history, which repeats itself. We have to stop saying "water under the bridge" and viewing the other as superfluous to remain submerged in oceanic small screen culture" (p. 77). The focus of this paper, however, rested on the aspect of intertextuality, shedding important light on the continuity of the Undine myth from the high Middle Ages to the twenty-first century and, hence, on the universal relevance of water as the source of all life. Both literary and artistic works, including the modern movie, serve as a powerful reminder of the profundity of all existence far beyond material limitations. The archetypal intrigue of water stays with us in humanistic terms and proves to be the pilot light for our future.

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