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The Myth of *Melusina* from the Middle Ages to the Romantic Period: Different Perspectives on Femininity

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Abstract: My essay aims at considering the mythological figure of Melusina and her literary development, starting from the Middle Ages up to the Romantic period. The main purpose is to determine how this fictional entity, originally regarded as the symbol of nature and its fecundity, has changed over the time in relation to the historical and cultural complex and how this has reverberated in terms of interpretation of the identity of the literary character. I will consider the medieval versions of Jean D'Arras (1392), with some consequent references to Coudrette (1401–1405) and von Ringoltingen (1456), and the German romantic fairytale rewriting of Ludwig Tieck (1800). If the thematic nucleus remains the same, the configuration of the female character changes by reflecting the new Romantic poetics in terms of interest towards femininity, subjectivity and the study of the morphology of the Earth. In particular, Melusina is no longer seen as a mere and passive object, but as a *subject* who for the first time, hiding in an emblematic cave, reveals to the reader her own interiority and her own truth, totally assimilating herself to the external environment. The conclusion will show how the cultural subtext modifies the interpretation of this atavistic character.

Keywords: Gender studies; comparative literature; femininity; cultural studies; myth



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1. Femininity over Time

Literature is a cognitive artifact, reflecting cultural norms and values. As mirrors of the society, literary texts play a crucial role in shaping specific ideas, particularly concerning gender: characters can embody, challenge or complicate existing notions of femininity and masculinity, allowing them to engage with complex themes related to identity, power, authority and influencing readers' perceptions and social attitudes. In particular, feminist literary criticism highlights the importance of female characters in literature and their role in redefining gender norms. Some scholars argue that the female tradition in literature has been historically marginalized, yet it is crucial for understanding the evolution of women's roles (Gilbert and Gubar 2000). From a literary perspective, the two scholars have recognized throughout the centuries a "patriarchal theory of literature" (Gilbert and Gubar 2000, p. 7) which led to a specific and a monopolistic consolidation of male authority as a writer. As a consequence and as a response to this long literary tendency, the analysis of female characters in the mythical narration and in all the different *genres* results to be urgent and necessary, as it is a powerful tool to understand the formation of patriarchal structures and consolidated stereotypes, to criticize and subvert them and, eventually, to advocate for gender equality.

Although female authors have long been sidelined due to inveterate socio-cultural mechanisms, the idea of femininity has always fascinated the collective imagination and

is also regarded as fundamental in European history and culture in relation to the most important psychological studies. In *The Archetypes and the Collective Imagination*, Jung recalls female fantastical creatures in these terms:

Whoever looks into the water sees his own image, but behind it living creatures soon loom up; fishes, presumably, harmless dwellers of the deep—harmless, if only the lake were not haunted. They are water-beings of a peculiar sort. Sometimes a nixie gets into the fisherman's net, a female, half-human fish. [. . .] The nixie is an even more instinctive version of a magical feminine being whom I call the anima. She can also be a siren, melusina (mermaid), wood-nymph, Grace, or Erlking's daughter, or a lamia or succubus, who infatuates young men and sucks the life out of them. Moralizing critics will say that these figures are projections of soulful emotional states and are nothing but worthless fantasies. One must admit that there is a certain amount of truth in this. But is it the whole truth? Is the nixie really nothing but a product of moral laxity? Were there not such beings long ago, in an age when dawning human consciousness was still wholly bound to nature? Surely there were spirits of forest, field, and stream long before the question of moral conscience ever existed. (Jung 1980, pp. 24–25)

From the scholar's perspective, mermaids have always permeated the cultural and literary *humus*; they embody an atavistic semantic value, a primordial and unitary dimension with respect to human consciousness. At the same time, this imagery has become linked to a fascination with water, which is not only configured as a generic archetype, but it is part of the archaic desire for the dissolution of the boundaries of the self. From this point of view, water contributes to stage elementary psychological processes connected to dissolution (Stuby 1992, p. 9). As a consequence, the original core of the female myth appears to be linked to the aspirations of fusion, but also to fantasies connected to domination and submission. It is also recognized that the root of this relationship—ancestrally identifiable in a pagan mythologem—could be the mother–son relationship, only later it seems that it has been developed with a differentiated feminine and masculine imagery. On the whole, these female figures recall an atavistic and organic bond of man with nature and with the archetypal complex of human life. It is interesting what Calabrese, for example, writes about them:

Perhaps Undine speaks to us of the Olympian order which is now established, when the totality of the Great Mother Goddesses was replaced by the plurality of daughters, the Korai [...]. Undine is then a Kore, Artemis more than Athena in her uncontaminated relationship with the totality. But she is only partly, in fragments, like a dark regret for sins which are not completely forgotten.¹ (Calabrese 1992, p. 66)

Melusina is found on the same interpretative line: she represents ancestral memories of a Great Mother², determined by her rich fertility, fecundity and abundance. She recalls Nature and its cyclical rhythm conveyed by the transformations that Melusina herself regularly experiences. Even the destructive aspect that characterizes her, probably, represents the soul of the natural world that hides its mysterious relationship with evil forces and with the night (Poirion 1988, p. 109). Melusina's cyclical transformation and physical aspect tend to support this conception, since the representation of the snake-woman turns out to coincide, also according to the Greek myth, with the very beginning of the world. This animal is an almost omnipresent companion of female divinities of fertility and of the underworld, since the snake, after the ram (spring) and the lion (summer), is the third animal linked to the agrarian–lunar calendar, symbol of winter, period of gestation, but also of death (Kindl 1986, p. 45). On the whole, Melusina is a female character who recalls the

ambivalence of the forces of nature, its cyclicity, its fertility, its prosperity, she is a symbol of the eternal cosmic order, the personification of the bond, as a part and as a mediator, with another reality, as its chthonic origin reveals, in line with the Nordic and Greek pagan cultural *humus*. This non-human identity complex “with which the artist must deal with and he is subjected to its destructive fascination, because his relationship with it is false and wrong” (Jesi 1967, p. 21) constantly relates to the human world, denouncing the profound dialectical and ancestral attempt to recover and to establish a deep relationship. Moreover, in literary history, many examples can be found about similar ancestral female figures, their double representation and their difficult connection with the human world, starting from the ancient myth of Odysseus, who has to face the mysterious power of the mermaids and the horrible figure of Medusa, displaying a duality concerning femininity which will always be re-elaborated. In both cases, as for Melusina and her transformation, these examples express indeed what seems to be an archetype of the female depiction: an aspect which hides a profound link with the darkness.

It is well known that the cultural and literary story is organized in relation to specific processes of affiliation and mutual dependency which are translated into the acceptance, the rejection and the transformation of inputs deriving from different encounters and fertile intersections (Curtius 1995, pp. 27–28). As the Greek and Latin aesthetics, which are the basis of the modern one, were strongly influenced by the Oriental culture (Tatarkiewicz 1979, pp. 367–68, 374); similarly, the Celtic cultural system was in turn deeply modified by the impact with Christianity, which activated “a Christianization of ancestral paganism” (Cardini 1981, p. 133). This process of transfiguration was then developed in a reciprocal sense, as the non-Christian influence entailed “the gothic personalization of sacred texts” (Cardini 1981, p. 133) because the Christian system needed aspects of the war culture in order to fill a structural gap within its system. On the whole, the encounter resulted in the inclusion of instances of classical and Christian culture and, at the same time, in the spiritual survival of pagan origins, it also provoked a re-semanticization of barbaric values, such as the idea of strength, which was now read and interpreted according to a Christian perspective. This *iter* of cultural transfiguration, as consequence of this historical encounter/fight, necessarily involved the discourse on femininity also, inevitably, from a religious point of view. As a variant of the pagan *Matres*, as Ginzburg observes, “for a long time—centuries, even millennia—matrons, fairies and other beneficent and mortuary deities invisibly inhabited Celticized Europe” (Ginzburg 2017, p. 92). The Celtic idea of femininity, as a pagan symbol of fertility and fecundity, started to be signified and molded in relation to specific Christian elements, involving other female characters, which have always to do with the animal imagery of the snake:

[...] We could also add to the series the serpent of Eve from the Jewish-Christian tradition, symbol of the beginning of the history of the human race, as well as of original sin and female sexuality, cause of perdition and eternal damnation. Christianity saved the pure Mary from this sad fate who crushes the head of the serpent, chaste virgin, but also mother-goddess. A significant prototype of the Western feminine ideal was created, irremediably split between the Marian idol of virgin-mother and the horrible vision of the sinful woman, Eve the enchantress, accomplice of the devil and ruin of humanity (Kindl 1986, pp. 45–46)

The religious change modifies the original European idea of femininity and it causes a different re-semanticization of the “prototype of the Western feminine ideal”, presenting Eve as the primary cause of the original sin and of the human Fall and Mary as a pure and chaste mother. The direct consequence is a cultural reconfiguration of Melusina, who in the Middle Ages oscillates between the two Christian poles. On the one hand, she is represented as a “powerful mother goddess of noble lineage”, who continues to be

connected to the goddess Aphrodite, since she is associated to the water and to the snake as well, to the goddess Juno for her ability to decree law, to bestow royalty and to ensure continuity of power and, eventually, to the goddess Athena for her wisdom and her ability to foresee the future. On the other hand, Melusina absorbs and acquires traits that connect her to Eve and to Maria: she is not a fairy anymore, but she is a haunted being who needs redemption. During the Middle Ages her physical aspect also tends to fluctuate:

The link between the water and Melusine, and between the tail of a serpent and that of a fish, in part already present in the medieval tradition, is particularly evident in the bathing scene and in that of the metamorphosis. [...] Not only in the texts, but also in the early manuscripts Melusine is initially portrayed in the form of a serpent. But a gradual transformation of the image of the fairy is found in the depictions in later manuscripts, where the woman/snake increasingly resembles a siren; that is, she assumes the traits of sea creature, a woman with a fish's tail. (Saporiti 2020, pp. 34–35)

Melusina continues to possess a double physical nature, whose meaning changes over time. If, in the pagan *humus*, the fish and the snake are closely connected to fertility rites and abundance, in the Middle Ages the serpent of Eden and the siren with a fish's tail were metaphors for sexuality and seduction. As a consequence, both figurative elements—the fish and the snake—recall two separate hermeneutic spheres—the maternal order and the female-sexual order—connected to two divergent cultural systems (Saporiti 2020, p. 35).

In relation to these premises, I am going to discuss the literary result of this cultural and religious syncretism by means of the different versions of Melusina, starting from the assumption that this literary figure, who originally embodies the most ancestral forces of life and nature, changes and undergoes specific variations as a response to the cultural substrate.

2. A Medieval Melusina

It has been shown how the Celtic cultural and value complex survived in a re-signified form in the European Middle Ages: the imagery of Celtic matrons maintained those atavistic traits which, as we have already seen, connected them with natural and archetypal reality, but, at the same time, they were revisited and reconfigured in relation to the culture of the time and they underwent a crucial process of Christianization.

Although scholars possess a clear-cut idea of the circulation of the *légendes mélusiniennes* starting from the twelfth century, as Chirassi Colombo suggests, the complete dossier of the different variants, which is essential for a comprehensive analysis of the myth, still lacks (Chirassi Colombo 1986, p. 61). Harf-Lancner prefigures the figure of Melusina in Latin literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in detail, in *De Nugis Curialium* (1181–1193) written by Gautier Map, in *Super Apocalypsum*, written towards the end of the twelfth century by Geoffroi d'Auxerre and *Otia Imperialia* (1209–1214) by Gervais de Tilbury (Harf-Lancner 1989, p. 133). The scholar emphasizes how topical aspects emerged in these texts, in particular, in relation to space and thematic configurations, which are maintained over the centuries and which can be summarized in three phases. The first moment is the meeting between the fairy, described as beautiful, and the human hero, who is generally alone and disoriented. The crucial encounter always takes place in a forest near a body of water, such as the sea or a river. Then, the pact follows and, eventually, the violation of the promise occurs, this episode is generally set inside the castle, in a room or in a bathroom. The story ends with the disappearance of the fairy (Harf-Lancner 1989, pp. 120–54). Moreover, this narrative scheme develops as a *leitmotif* in the literary representation of the encounter between human and non-human reality, recalling an atavistic rituality: it is not a case that this core continued to be developed over time in other European legends and fairytales.

In 1392, at the request of the Duke Jean De Berry, Jean D'Arras wrote in prose *La noble histoire de Lusignan* or *Le Roman de Melusine en prose*. Later, between 1401 and 1405, Coudrette wrote in verse *Le Roman de Lusignan ou de Parthenay, or Mellusine*. Thus structured, the story of Melusine then reached the Flanders and the Germanic countries. In particular, in 1456, Thuring of Renggeltingen of Bern translated Coudrette's version; it was printed in 1477 and later in 1491 in Heidelberg. The original and pagan fecundity, which originally characterizes the fairy, acquires a new value that responds to the social and economic processes of the time. In detail, Le Goff recognizes Melusina's peculiar activity as a tiller, "the clearings open up beneath her footsteps, the forests are transformed into fields" and as a builder since "she sows along her path, in her numerous journeys, strongholds and cities that she often builds with her own hands, at the head of a construction site" (Le Goff 2000, pp. 306–307). These characteristics of clearing and construction, together with her atavistic fertile biological nature, allow her not only to acquire the status of fairy of the medieval economic development, but, more specifically, in the case of the House of Lusignan, Melusina is now configured as the symbolic and magical incarnation of their social ambition, since she brings lands, castles, cities and lineage (Le Goff 2000, pp. 307–308). From this perspective, it emerges how the original idea of fertility is now semantically transfigured and developed in relation to a specific medieval structure and, above all, to the necessity of the aristocracy which needed a social legitimacy and authority. In other words, Melusine's original fertility develops in a dynastic direction that gives power to the Lusignans. Moreover, the story of Melusina, as an expression of transformation, also responds to the interest of the Prince of Lusignan towards the value of wealth and to his personal goal of growth. As Poirion observes, regarding an image reported in the calendar of the House of Lusignan:

The image faithfully translates the prince's thought, but in a code that is intended for the initiated only: astrology and alchemy converge to explain everything according to the same principles. Cosmic movements, biological time, the apprenticeship of the soul, the secrets of strength, the recipes for healing, the laws of wealth obey the same transformations. Worthy of particular attention is wealth, which ultimately reveals itself as the supreme wonder, the source of all power, an incitement to the search for gold, for a technique that allows the precious metal to be manufactured. [...] Here we are dealing with a luxurious alchemy, where Melusina, the fairy mother, personifies matter, the origin of all metamorphoses and therefore of every form of life and wealth. (Poirion 1988, pp. 104–5)

The principle of transformation, deriving from the interest of the Prince of Lusignan in alchemy, seems to be another reason for the choice of this female character as a symbol of the lineage: the pagan culture concerning nature in constant transformation is now linked to the world of alchemy as a form of knowledge and economic well-being.

The atavistic aspect is now combined not only with a historical-economic and a biographical element, but also—more interestingly in relation to the nature of this inquiry—with the religious aspect, as it is connected to an enhanced form of Christianization, as it follows. In D'Arras' version, the original nucleus of the plot is enriched with weddings, ceremonies, baptisms and sacred meetings; in other words, the medieval story involves a weakening of the pagan aspect to embrace a complete religious consolidation. Not only is the plot characterized with spiritual events, but Melusina herself becomes a bulwark of Christianity. In particular, the crucial moment of the encounter between the non-human and human realities, between Melusina and Reymund at the so-called *Fontaine de Soif*, Fountain of Thirst, reflects this crucial structural change, which is the result of a new cultural substrate. Melusina says:

Par Dieu, Remondin, je suiz, apréz Dieu, celle qui te puet plus aidier et avancier en ce mortel monde en tes adversitéz et ton malefice revertir en bien. [...] 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.³ (D'Arras 2003, p. 164)

D'Arras' version implies a strong Christianization of the character who explicitly acknowledges to have faith and to be a "vrai catholique", a true Catholic, as she strongly believes in the dogmatic values. Not only does she profess herself as a Christian, but after this religious declaration, during Reymund and Melusina's encounter, she provides him with clear-cut indications about what he precisely and carefully has to do:

Amis, dist la dame, je vous diray que vous feréz. Ne doubtez rien, mais aléz vous en droit a Poitiers et, quant vous y venréz, vous trouverez plusieurs qui seront venuz de la chasse qui vous demanderont nouvelles du conte, vostre seigneur, dictez: "Et comment, n'est il pas repairéz?" Ilz diront que non. Respondéz que vous ne le veistez depuis que la chasse commença a estre forte et que lors le perdistes en la forest de Colombiers comme plusieurs firent, et vous en esbahissiez comme les autres. Asséz tost apréz vendront les veneurs et de ses gens qui apporteront le conte mort en une lettierre. Et semblera a tous que la plaie soit faite des dens du porc et diront tuit que le senglier l'a mis mort et que le conte a le senglier occiz, et le tendront plusieurs a grant vaillance. La tristour commencera grant. La contesse, son filz Bertrans, sa fille Blanche, tuit grant et menu menront dueil. Faictes dueil comme les autres, vestéz le noir comme les autres. L'obsequie sera fait moult noble et le terme assennéz que les barons feront hommage au jeusne conte. Vous revendréz cy a moy le jour devant que Hommage se devra faire et vous me trouverez en ceste propre place. Et tenéz, mon amy, a nostre amour commencer, je vous donne ces deux verges d'or qui tiennent ensemble. Les pierres ont moult grant vertu: l'une, que cil a qui elle sera donnée par amour ne pourra mourir par cops d'armes tant que il l'ait sur lui; l'autre, qu'elle lui donrra victoire contre tous ses malveullans s'il a bonne querelle, soit en plaidoierie ou en meslee. Et vous en aléz seurement, mon amy, car vous ne vous avéz que faire de riens doubter.⁴ (D'Arras 2003, pp. 167–69)

She guides Reymund, she suggests him, she takes decisions and, in doing so, she absorbs another cultural aspect of the medieval system: she becomes, in a word, a *domna*. In the twelfth century, in the space of the court, this character had a specific function:

They live in the narrow space of a society frequented by few women and in which, especially during the long absences of the gentleman, only one woman exercises command and is simultaneously lady and educator: the *domna*. (Köhler 1976, p. 17).

In the court, the woman gave orders, suggestions and indications, and her role was to educate people around them. Melusina absorbs this trait and after the promise, she provides Reymund with clear-cut indications about his behavior and his actions and this aspect will be maintained in all the medieval versions, both in Coudrette, who in verse proposes a similar female representation, and in the German version of von Ringoltingen.

The story regularly proceeds: Melusina and Reymund get married, the wedding is characterized with a series of religious rituals and it is engraved with the birth of many children who contribute to the dynastic development of the House with a contingent reconfiguration of the original meaning. The narrative tear occurs when Reymund breaks the original promise and he spies on his wife during her weekly transformation into a snake:

Et regarde dedens et voit Melusigne qui estoit en une grant cuve de marbre ou il avoit degréz jusques au fons. Et estoit bien la grandeur de la cuve de .xv. piéz de roont tout autour en esquarrie et y ot alees tout autour de bien .v. piéz de large. Et la se baignoit Melusigne en l'estât que vous orrez cy apréz en la vray histoire. [...] Et voit Melusigne en la cuve, qui estoit jusques au nombril en figure de femme et pignoit ses cheveulx, et du nombril ena 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 l'eau tellement qu'elle la faisoit saillir jusques a la voulte de la chambre. Et quant Rémond la voit, si fu moult doulent. « Hay ! dist il, m'amour, or vous ay je trahie par le faulx enortement de mon frere et me suiz parjuréz envers vous. » Lors ot tel dueil a son cuer et telle tristee que cuer humain n'en pourrait plus porter. Il court en sa chambre et prent la cire d'une vieille lettre qu'il trouva et en estouppa le pertuis, puis s'en va en la sale ou il trouva son frere.⁵ (D'Arras 2003, p. 660)

Up to now, Melusina maintained the maternal archetype, which had also been culturally transformed: she is a wife, a wise *domna*, a mother, a symbol of dynastic power and a good administrator of family finances. At the same time, her original and pagan physical nature forcefully emerges: on the one hand, her serpent's tail embodies the atavistic quality connected to fertility, but, on the other hand, it also evokes her animal and diabolic nature, which is also expressed by the fact that all her sons have a monstrous physical aspect. In the narrative passage, D'Arras does not provide any other information about her. All the attention is on Reymund's reaction: he suffers, he regrets the committed action, he is in the grip of strong emotions and he is not able to contain them. The same pattern can be found both in the version of Coudrette where the author acknowledges that Reymund is «dolent de cuer» (Coudrette 1982, v. 3092), he suffers, and also in von Ringoltingen's text we can find the same identification. This helps to understand that the legend is so consolidated in the French and German medieval areas according to this fixed pattern and for centuries it will maintain this scheme.

The moment of the pact and the episode of the violation of the promise *condense* a series of cultural meanings that concern femininity and its close relationship with the Christian religion and with the accepted social system. The ancestral Great Mother, related to the power of Nature, as a cultural Celtic symbol, is now contextualized, historicized and Christianized, and she loses, or perhaps it is better to say, she transforms and hides her pagan semantic background. As Poirion acknowledges:

From the matriarchal imagination, element and nourishment of folklore, in which the marvelous tales of the twelfth century had attempted to absorb the power of men, a fairy thus returns to rise, the Mother Lusigna, heir of the lunar-Lucina and of every incarnation of Matrona. But the marvelous world reappears only in conjunction with the epic-historical world [...]. The juxtaposition of these two worlds was already a characteristic of the great prose novels of the thirteenth century, where the marvelous, as the antithesis of the heroic action destined to break the spell, necessarily slipped towards the sphere of the diabolical. In the novel of the late fourteenth century, the two elements combine more homogeneously, since the relationship of the marvelous with God has taken on a character of certainty. Once the smell of sulphur has disappeared, which is very embarrassing at a time when witches are increasingly under suspicion, the fairy can be integrated into a new system of meaning that puts mythical, genealogical and historical data on the same level to constitute, in a political fantasy framework, an almost allegorical literary composition. (Poirion 1988, p. 108)

Melusina becomes the mirror of the new cultural complex: she maintains her maternity traits, which are now developed in a dynastic sense, she maintains her transformative characterization which assumes an alchemic meaning, but, at the same time, she acquires new qualities deriving from the medieval substrate, thus consolidating herself in the following centuries. Only in the Romantic period, Melusina, who will respond to another cultural substrate, will be represented under another interpretative lens.

3. A Romantic *Melusina*

Melusina is so consolidated and her perception moves towards ancestral values and a specific historization which involves and deeply modifies her characterization. The progress of time implies a crucial semantic variation of the fairy which responds to cultural dynamics. If the medieval Melusina is so built and configured, the end of the *ancien régime* causes a new cognitive organization which also involves the principle of femininity. In the sixteenth century, Paracelsus wrote about fantastical female creatures in his *Treatise on Nymphs, Sylphs, Pygmies, Salamanders and on the Other Spirits*, which was published posthumously in 1566. He theorized four types of creatures, in addition to humans and animals, which possess four types of dwellings: aquatic, aerial, terrestrial and igneous in relation to the corresponding natural elements. In turn, influenced by Paracelsian thought, it is above all the Romantic poetry that feels a strong and almost magical fascination with these beautiful female figures. Both from a cultural and a universal perspective, German Romantic intellectuals feel the necessity to discover again the *Urbilder*, atavistic pictures, and to configure the relationship, even more openly, in relation to the human world. At the same time, however, as Rath asserts, in the history of the literary reception, some motifs of early Romanticism have been mistakenly assessed as genuine:

As well known, the early Romantics borrowed, accentuated and popularised key motifs from the *Empfindsamkeit*, which had long been considered genuine in the history of reception, be it the love-intoxicating moon and the magical night, the melancholic ruins or sublime mountain landscape, the fascination of the Gothic and the Middle Ages, monastic and maternal love, Venus eroticism or the heavenly love of the saints and their enlightened, art-loving interpreters such as Raphael, Lucas van Leyden or Dürer. (Rath 1997, p. 137)

In relation to the belief of *Wiederbelebung*, rebirth, which possesses a Schlegelian echo, Romantic intellectuals consider again medieval *topoi* and, at the same time, they re-read them in relation to the new cultural substrate. The fairytale rewriting of Melusina is inserted into this historical and literary context. Before Goethe's *neue Melusine* (1807–1808), Ludwig Tieck wrote the *Sehr wunderbare Historie von Melusina*, published in 1800, at the dawn of the new Napoleonic invasions. At this moment, the intellectual Novalis also writes *Christenheit oder Europa* in 1799: he considers religion as the tool that can contribute to create cohesion between the European territories. In particular, he writes:

Es waren schöne glänzende Zeiten, wo Europa ein christliches Land war, wo Eine Christenheit diesen menschlich gestalteten Welttheil bewohnte; Ein großes gemeinschaftliches Interesse verband die entlegensten Provinzen dieses weiten geistlichen Reich.⁶ (Novalis 2002, pp. 70–71)

In addition, later, he continues:

Die Christenheit muß wieder lebendig und wirksam werden, und sich wieder ein[e] sichtbare Kirche ohne Rücksicht auf Landesgränzen bilden, die alle nach dem Ueberirdischen durstige Seelen in ihren Schooß aufnimmt und gern Vermittlerin, der alten und neuen Welt.⁷ (Novalis 2002, pp. 126–27)

In this cultural and biographical context, Tieck, who was part of the Jena Circle with Novalis, rewrites Melusina. According to Saporiti:

At a first reading, Tieck's Melusine does not seem to diverge from the versions written by his predecessors, and in particular that of von Ringoltingen. His starting point was probably a recent edition, perhaps the *Buch der Liebe* (Book of Love) by Feierabend, which Tieck certainly knew. In fact, while the thematic core remains the same, Tieck does make changes with regard to both form and theme. He shortens and summarises the genealogical references—which are extensive in the medieval versions—by focusing on the characterisation of Melusine and on the symbolic humanity/animality relationship. (Saporiti 2020, p. 34)

Actually, if we look closer we can find a different characterization of the character which meets both the necessity expressed by Novalis in relation to the recovery of Christianity as a tool of cohesion and the cultural system of that time and, in particular, it is possible to read a crucial change that responds to the cultural work that Romantic intellectuals were going to carry out with regard to a cultural agnition. Melusina continues, indeed, to be presented as a wife, as a mother, she provides indications and information, but, at the same time she is now semanticized according to the cultural need of cultural reconstruction. Considering the encounter between Reymund and Melusina, the woman continues to profess her belonging to the religion but she adds other important elements:

Sie sagte: tröstet Euch nur und seid allerdings unbekümmert, denn ich bin eben diejenige, durch welche das in Erfüllung gehn muß, was Euer Herr Vetter kurz vor seinem Tode geweissagt hat: zweifelt auch nicht daran, daß ich eine gute Christin sei, wie ich denn in der That merke, daß Ihr daran zweifelt, denn ich glaube alles, was einem guten Christen zu glauben zukommt, als daß Christus für unser Heil gestorben und an das bittere Kreuz genagelt ist, daß er nach dreien Tagen auferstanden, item, daß er der eingeborne Sohn Gottes ist, und so weiter, gen Himmel gefahren, nebst allen Dingen, die zu unsrer heiligen Religion gehören. Darum vertraut mir nur, und Ihr sollt so weise, reich und mächtig werden, wie es noch keiner je in Eurem Geschlechte gewesen ist.⁸ (Tieck 1828, pp. 78–79)

Compared with the medieval versions, in this case, Tieck continues to emphasize Melusina's faith, as she repeats that she is "eine gute Christin", a good Christian, and she adds all the events that characterize the life of Christ and in which a real Christian has to dogmatically believe in, for example, His death and His resurrection. At the same time, the author enhances Melusina's Christian potential in relation to Novalis' ideas as he adds a fundamental element for the German poetics. She refers to believing in what belongs to "unsere heilige Religion", our sacred religion. Not only does Melusina openly and sincerely profess her Christianity, but, adding this sentence *ex novo*, Tieck recognises Christianity as a tool of cultural recognition, qualifying it as sacred and, above all, using the possessive adjective "unsere", our, to indicate a common ground of identification. By means of these words, Melusina continues to maintain the medieval characterization but, at the same time, she becomes a bulwark and a symbol of recognition. Additionally, throughout the narration, she continues to be configured as a wise wife and mother, fully aligning herself with the conventional representation. The real change occurs when Reymund does not respect the promise. Tieck describes the episode in these terms:

Als Reymund nun stand, und durch die Oeffnung schaute, verwunderte er sich über die maßen, denn er sah Melusina im Bade, wie sie von oben bis auf den Nabel ein schönes Weib sei, dann aber in den Schweif einer bunten gesprengten Schlange endigte, der azurblau war und mit Silberfarben darunter gesprengt, so daß diese Farben wunderschön in einander schimmerten. Das Zimmer war

eine tiefe Grotte, die Wände waren mit allerhand seltsamen Muscheln ausgeziert und ein Springbrunnen, in welchem sich Melusina befand, war in der Mitten. Von oben ergossen sich auch Wasserstrahlen und tröpfelten wie Perlen durch einander [...] ⁹ (Tieck 1828, p. 115)

First of all, we can find a differentiation in terms of space. It is no longer a simple bath located inside a room built specifically for the woman, but it is “eine tiefe Grotte”, a deep cave, which is characterized by totally natural elements, such as water, that is compared to pearls, and, at the same time, it is decorated by the hand of man, as emerges from the presence of a fountain in the center of the cave, the author also refers to strange shells. The choice of this space involves a series of reflections. Firstly, it responds to specific and contingent studies concerning the morphology of the Earth and the geology that both Herder and, in particular, Goethe had conducted over the previous decades:

The mysticism and cosmic symbolism that pervade the poetic composition, culminating in the image of the “veins” of the bowels of the mountains from which the earth is fertilized and enriched, echo in Goethe’s considerations about the stone—granite [in the hymn *Harzreise im Winter*], indicated by Herder as “the core of our earth”—which constitutes “the foundations of all our earth and on which all the other mountains are formed” and which sees the reunited “elements that are well known”, but without the “origin from fire as well as from water” being able to explain to us the “mysterious way” in which their union is accomplished. (Poggi 2000, p. 103)

From Goethe’s geological works it emerges how the chthonic space acquires a universal, cosmic, eschatological symbolic value. From this first perspective, it is undoubtedly emblematic that Tieck changes the setting and chooses the “deep cave”—the adjective is also symbolic—as the space in which Melusina, arcane symbol of nature, of fertility, of generation, of the feminine, and, therefore, of life, lives her atavistic, occult and mysterious process. The scene is totally re-organized in relation to the aesthetics of the time which implies a new interest towards the interiority of the Earth.

In the previous versions, the focus remained on Reymund; now, on the contrary, it is only and exclusively on the woman:

[...] Von oben ergossen sich auch Wasserstrahlen und tröpfelten wie Perlen durch einander bei welchem wunderbaren Getöse Melusina sang, indem sie eine Zitter in der Hand hielt:

Rauscht und weint ihr Wasserquellen

In der stillen Einsamkeit,

Die Erlösung ist noch weit,

Meine Thränen mehren eure Wellen.

Ach! wann wirst du, Trauer, enden,

Von mir nehmen meine Schmach?

Immer ist die Strafe wach,

Keiner kann das böse Verhängniß wenden.

Bei diesen Worten vergoß sie einen Strom von Thränen und Reymund war auf das innigste bewegt und erschüttert. Nun fiel ihm auch bei, wie er seinen Eid gebrochen und eine Untreue gegen seine tugendvolle Gemalin begangen habe, dabei konnte er ihre seltsame Verwandlung nicht begreifen und fürchte sich auch, daß nun sein Elend anfangen würde, da er seinen Schwur nicht gehalten, wie sie

ihm vor der Hochzeit prophezeit hatte, denn er glaubte, daß sie nach ihrer verborgenen Wissenschaft recht gut um seine Untreue wissen würde. Endlich aber verstopfte er die gemachte Oeffnung wieder mit Wachs, und ging im höchsten Zorne zu seinem Bruder zurück.¹⁰ (Tieck 1828, p. 115–16)

While the physical representation is actually the same, since Melusina is a woman and a serpent as well, Tieck changes not only, as seen, the physical space but also her characterization. As I have already pointed out, the previous version displays Melusina during her bath: in the medieval version, the attention of the author was totally on the *male* reaction: nothing was said about Melusina and her feelings. In this version, Tieck reproduces the same feeling of pain for Reymund, but at the same time he surprisingly focuses on Melusina and *her inner state*. If in the medieval versions, without distinction, the figure of Melusina is configured exclusively as the *object* of Reymund's anger and pain, here she becomes the *subject*; the focus remains on the subjectivity of the female character, staging an unprecedented Melusina, who now is not only a snake, but freely expresses her suffering for the original punishment which was inflicted on her by her mother Persine. Not only, as seen, Melusina, as a symbol generator of life, is inserted in this place that hides the cosmic balances, but here she also lives a process of profound individual and inner elaboration. Differently from the other versions, we hear the voice of the woman who trembles, complains, feels pain, the attention is not only on the conventional physical process she lives, but on her suffering subjectivity. Melusina is no longer just a cosmic symbol hidden in the bowels of the Earth, but she is also a woman who suffers her fate. It is also possible to find a connection about the representation of Melusina's subjectivity and the choice of the deep cave. Everything that is linked to the rock is configured, in fact, as a typical motif of Romantic poetry; in particular it is recognized by Pinna as the "image of unconscious interiority" (Pinna 2007, p. 50). As a consequence, the cave recalls a double meaning: it is connected to a universal meaning, but, at the same time, it recalls the dimension of subjectivity. If compared to the medieval versions, it is possible to consider another significant change. The end of Melusina's weekly transformation is defined according to a specific noun that pertains to the Christian sphere, that is, in relation to the "Erlösung", to salvation, redemption. What is relevant is that, as reported by the *Dictionary of the Brothers Grimm*, the term at the time had an exclusively religious meaning.¹¹ The fact that Tieck uses a religious term to designate Melusina's experience opens up further reflections as it focuses attention on the reason. To the extent that the classical and traditional conception of love implied elevation through the female figure, ironically, Melusina is no longer here the mediator of a redemption, of an *Erlösung*. The experience of love no longer determines the salvation of the other, but rather allows the opening towards subjectivity, its knowledge and a new awareness. Tieck overturns, in the name of his time, the traditional vision of the feminine, he subverts it, he ironizes it, he questions it precisely through the use of that key word: love allows interest in the female psyche in the name of a self-determination that comes from the Enlightenment. Although the use of the religious term can indicate a character who looks for the end of her pain, at the same time, the reader of the time could find a specific subversion since the noun does not indicate here the process of male elevation, but a femininity that looks at her own self for the first time, always through the experience of love, that is here reconfigured and refunctionalized. The tears, the pain, the trembling, *topoi* of the love experience as conventionally described, become in the contingency of the first Romanticism instruments for knowledge and, above all, the free expression of a feminine subjectivity. In the suggestive chthonic reality, not only are the cosmic forces that Melusina ancestrally embodies released, but the new power of *eros* is expressed, which here allows the free expression of a woman who is now a subject and no longer a mediator.

The romantic Melusina maintains those atavistic traits, but, at the same time, she develops new ones connected, in particular, to subjectivity. The moment of the break of the promise is so characterized by a new tendency that is the interest for subjectivity, which started with Rousseau's works. Melusina is now not only a wife, a mother, a dynastic symbol, but she is a woman who, for the first time, expresses herself.

If we consider the importance of femininity in the nineteenth century, it is inevitable to take into consideration another story, whose protagonist is a fantastical female creature who expresses her self-determination. *The Little Mermaid*, written by Hans Christian Andersen in 1837, only a few decades later, if compared to Tieck's *Melusina*, displays another narrative case of female agency and subjectivity. This reveals how in the European literary landscape of the nineteenth century, femininity starts to be perceived differently and it begins to undergo a more modern semanticization, which overturns passivity to stage more aware and active heroines.

4. Conclusions

Literature plays a pivotal role in shaping cultural characters that influence social views on gender. The idea of femininity, which has always fascinated the collective imagination under a variety of forms, changes in relation to time and it is a mirror of a specific period, it is a response of different cultural *inputs*, which are absorbed and condensed. By means of this short—and of course not exhaustive—literary *excursus* was possible to figure out *how* a female character undergoes a specific process of transfiguration and redefinition moving from different cultural systems. She starts to be presented as an ancestral and Celtic Great Mother, then the encounter with the Christian and medieval system implies her transformation in response to a dynastic complex. In particular, by means of this narrative reconstruction, it is possible to recognize five crucial semantic variations in the medieval representation and in the interpretation of the literary character:

Melusina's original fecundity acquires a dynastic meaning;

Her characterization focused on mutability and cyclicity is still maintained but it is now transfigured according to the power of alchemical forces;

1. She becomes the bulwark of Christianity and its dogmatic value system.
2. She is a *domna*.
3. Her original transformation oscillates between the ancestral meaning of fertility and the awful aspect of monstrosity, deriving from the new Christian complex as the serpent implies ambivalent meanings.

Melusina changes again during the First Romanticism when Tieck does not want to focus only on her physical weekly change, but on her inner feelings, expressing for the first time her subjectivity. In conclusion, this narrative example provides scholars with an example of literary shaping and it confirms how literature is a cognitive artifact that elaborates and re-elaborates, interprets and re-interprets characters and thematic cores throughout time and according to social changes.

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Notes

- ¹ For all the Italian and German bibliographic critical references, I directly report the English translation, which is mine. For the literary texts, I report the original quotations with the English translated version in the notes.

2 On the alleged existence of matriarchy, see Galli (1987, chap. 3, pp. 71–98).

3 “By God, Remondin, I am, after God, the one who can help you the most and advance you in this mortal world in your adversities and your evil turn into good. [...] Know also that I am not unaware that you suspect my actions and my words of coming from illusion or from the powers of hell, but I can assure you, I am on the contrary on the side of God and *believe in everything that a true Catholic must believe.*” The italics are mine.

4 “My friend, she said to him, I will tell you what you are going to do. Go without fear straight to Poitiers where, as soon as you arrive, you will find several men who, having returned from hunting, will ask you for news of the count, your lord, and you will tell them, “Is he dead?” They will say no. Answer that you have not seen him since the hunting season began to be strong and that then he went to the forest of Colombiers as many did, and you were astonished as the others. Soon enough afterward the hunters and his people will come and bring the dead count in a letter. And it will seem to everyone that the wound is made in the pig’s teeth and they will all say that the wild boar killed him and that the count killed the wild boar, and will offer him several times with great valour. The sadness will begin very quickly. The countess, her son Bertrans, her daughter Blanche, all great and small will mourn. Make mourning like the others, wear black like the others. The funeral will be made very noble and the term set that the barons will pay homage to the young count. You will sell to me the day before which Homage must be made and you will find me in this proper place. And here, my friend, to begin our love, I give you these two golden rods that hold together. The stones have very great virtue: one, that he to whom it is given out of love will not be able to die by the blow of arms as long as he has it on him; the other, that it will give him victory against all his ill-wishers if he has a good quarrel, whether in pleading or in a melee. And you will go there safely, my friend, because you have nothing to do with doubting.”

5 “He then looked inside and saw Melusine in a large marble basin well fifteen feet in circumference. Steps sloped down to the bottom and, all around, alleys at least five feet wide formed a square. This is where Melusine bathed, under the form you will learn beforehand in this true story [...] He saw Melusine in the basin: until her navel had the appearance of a woman and she combed her hair, but her whole body had the shape of a serpent’s tail, as thick as a cake of herrings and of extraordinary length, with which it whipped if violently the water of the basin as it burst kissed the wall of the hall. Looking at her thus, Reymund was overwhelmed with emotion: “Ah! my love, troubled by the evil counsel of my brother, I come to betray you and violate the ceremonial which I had sworn to you! No human heart could bear the pain and sorrow he feels at this instant. He rushes into his room, removes the wax that sealed an old letter and returns to close the hole in the door before regaining the hall where he finds his brother”.

6 “Those were beautiful, brilliant times when Europe was a Christian country, when one Christianity inhabited this humanly formed part of the world; a great common interest united the most remote provinces of this vast spiritual empire”.

7 “Christianity must become alive and effective again and form a visible church without regard to national borders, which will receive into its bosom all souls thirsting for the supernatural and will gladly act as a mediator between the old and the new world”.

8 “She said: just console yourselves and do not worry, for I am the one through whom what your cousin prophesied shortly before his death must come true: do not doubt that I am a good Christian, as I can see that you doubt it, for I believe everything that a good Christian should believe, such as that Christ died for our salvation and was nailed to the bitter cross, that he rose again after three days, item, that he is the only begotten Son of God, and so on, that he ascended into heaven, along with all the things that *belong to our holy religion.* Therefore, just trust me, and you will become wise, rich and powerful, as no one in your generation has ever been.” The italics are mine.

9 “When Reymund stood and looked through the opening, he was astonished beyond measure, for he saw Melusina in the bath, a beautiful woman from head to navel, but then ending in the tail of a colorful snake, which was azure blue and sprinkled with silver colors underneath, so that these colors shimmered miraculously into one another. The room was a deep cave, the walls were decorated with all kinds of strange shells and a fountain, in which Melusina was, was in the middle. Jets of water poured down from above and trickled through one another like pearls”.

10 [...] From above, jets of water poured out and trickled through one another like pearls, with a wonderful roar. Melusina sang, trembling: Rustling and weeping, you springs of water In the quiet solitude, *Redemption* is still far away, My tears increase your waves. Ah! when will you, sorrow, end, Take away my shame? The punishment is always awake, No one can avert the evil fate. With these words she shed a stream of tears and Reymund was deeply moved and shaken. Now he realized how he had broken his oath and been unfaithful to his virtuous wife, and he could not understand her strange transformation and was afraid that his misery would now begin, since he had not kept his oath, as she had prophesied to him before the wedding, for he believed that, with her hidden knowledge, she would know very well of his unfaithfulness. Finally, however, he plugged the opening with wax and returned to his brother in great anger.” The italics are mine.

11 See the voice “Erlösung” (*Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm* 2025).

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