

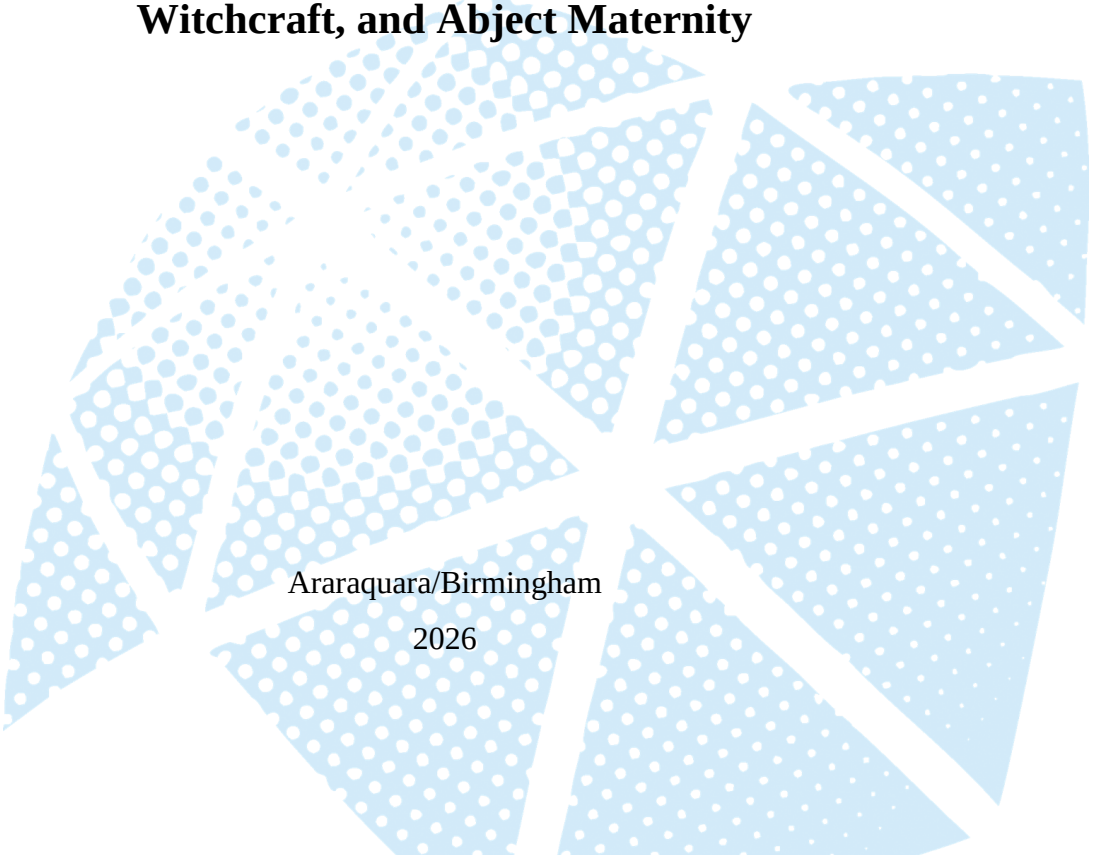
UNIVERSIDADE ESTADUAL PAULISTA – UNESP
Faculdade de Ciências e Letras – Campus Araraquara
UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM – UoB

GABRIELA CARLOS LUZ

**Monstrous Mothers in Medieval Romances: Women,
Witchcraft, and Abject Maternity**

Araraquara/Birmingham

2026



GABRIELA CARLOS LUZ

**Monstrous Mothers in Medieval Romances: Women, Witchcraft, and
Abject Maternity**

Thesis submitted under a joint supervision arrangement to São Paulo State University (UNESP), Faculty of Sciences and Letters, Araraquara, and the University of Birmingham, to obtain the degree of Doctor in Literary Studies (UNESP) and in English Literature (University of Birmingham/UoB)

Area of Concentration: Narrative Theory and Criticism

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Aparecido Donizete Rossi (UNESP)

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Victoria Flood (UoB)

Araraquara - Brazil
Birmingham – United Kingdom
2026

C284m	Luz, Gabriela Carlos Monstrous Mothers in Medieval Romances: Women, Witchcraft, and Abject Maternity / Gabriela Carlos Luz. – Araraquara/Birmingham, 2026 187 p. Tese (doutorado cotutela) - Universidade Estadual Paulista (UNESP), Faculdade de Ciências e Letras, Araraquara; University of Birmingham (UoB), Birmingham Orientador: Aparecido Donizete Rossi Orientadora: Victoria Flood 1. abjeção. 2. literatura medieval. 3. monstrosidade. 4. bruxaria. I. Título.
-------	---

POTENTIAL IMPACT OF THIS RESEARCH

This thesis is innovative in the field of Literary Studies and particularly in medieval literature by engaging with and discussing different medieval cultures and societies, as well as gender issues, more deeply than previously established by global literary criticism. It is currently one of the few works to establish connections between the medieval romance genre, treatises on witchcraft, and the implications of concerns surrounding the maternal body. The study offers new ways of reading medieval romances and presents social, political, and economic analyses derived from the narratives, while also addressing significant issues regarding the treatment of gender, foreigners, and the supernatural in the Middle Ages. Furthermore, the research was conducted under a joint supervision arrangement between the University of Birmingham and UNESP, integrating perspectives from both institutions and further strengthening Brazil's academic ties with foreign institutions.

IMPACTO POTENCIAL DESTA PESQUISA

A presente tese é inovadora na área de Estudos Literários e sobretudo na área de literatura medieval por estabelecer contato e discussões sobre diferentes culturas e sociedades medievais e questões de gênero mais profundamente do que estabelecidos anteriormente pela crítica literária mundial. Ela é, neste momento, um dos únicos trabalhos que estabelece ligações entre o gênero de romance medieval com tratados de bruxaria e as consequências de ansiedades ligadas ao corpo materno. O trabalho nova formas de ler romances medievais e análises sociais, políticas e econômicas que são demonstradas nas narrativas analisadas e ainda discute sobre questões importantes sobre o tratamento de gênero, estrangeiros e o sobrenatural na Idade Média. O trabalho foi realizado também durante um período de co-tutela entre a University of Birmingham e UNESP, trazendo potenciais conexões entre ambas as instituições e fortalecendo ainda mais os vínculos acadêmicos do Brasil com instituições estrangeiras.

GABRIELA CARLOS LUZ

**Monstrous Mothers in Medieval Romances: Women, Witchcraft, and Abject
Maternity**

Thesis submitted under a joint supervision arrangement to São Paulo State University (UNESP), Faculty of Sciences and Letters, Araraquara, and the University of Birmingham, to obtain the degree of Doctor in Literary Studies (UNESP) and in English Literature (University of Birmingham/UoB)
Area of Concentration: Narrative Theory and Criticism)

Defense date: 27/5/2026

Defense Committee:

Prof. Dr. Aparecido Donizete Rossi
UNESP – Faculdade de Ciências e Letras de Araraquara

Prof. Dr. Victoria Flood
University of Birmingham – United Kingdom

Prof. Dr. Sue Niebrzydowski
Bangor University – United Kingdom

Prof. Dr. Liz Herbert McAvoy
Swansea University – United Kingdom

Prof. Dr. Karin Volobuef
UNESP – Faculdade de Ciências e Letras de Araraquara

À minha mãe, Celeste, meu pai, Cesar e
meu irmão, Guilherme. Obrigada por
tudo.

Acknowledgments

The very beginning of this work started only a few days after my master's defence. I was advised by my supervisor Cido and the members of my panel, Dr Luciana de Campos and Dr Karin Volubuef, to consider working with monstrous mothers since they all saw how much I enjoyed talking about Grendel's mother in my dissertation about *Beowulf*. My main work was on the figure of the hero in the Old English text, but Grendel's mother found a special place in my heart – one that I thought other fictional mothers could join. After that, I felt inclined to start researching more on Middle English literature, a world that opened for me unexpectedly during the 2020 Covid Lockdown.

I began my contact with Dr Victoria Flood in 2021 when, she with such kindness, helped me develop what would become this thesis. After entering Unesp's Literary Studies PhD programme, I continued my research on monstrous maternity – a topic that continues to bring such joy and interest even after all these years. I was extremely happy to be able to visit the University of Birmingham in 2024 as a Visiting Researcher and later, with the help of my supervisors, Cido and Vicky, be able to start a co-awarded PhD between Unesp and UoB.

I am therefore forever indebted to the kindness and help of both Dr Cido Rossi and Dr Victoria Flood for their utmost care which has led me to work on this dream. They are, as I mention to everyone, the best supervisors one can ask for. From bureaucratic paperwork to the research itself, I never felt helpless or without guidance and to them, I offer my sincere thank you. I am also incredibly thankful to Dr Emily Wingfield, who has supervised me for many months and who was always such an amazing professional who I enjoyed discussing medieval romances with.

I also could not have completed this PhD without the help of the CAPES funding body¹ and the University of Birmingham's assistance throughout this project in order to achieve this co-awarded PhD. Therefore, I also would like to say thank you to all the institutions that helped me achieve this.

In the ever-changing conditions of the academic world currently, I would like to declare that my work was *not* made using any Generative AI tool and its corrections were either made by my supervisors' observations or mine. The only software used for

¹ O presente trabalho foi realizado com apoio da Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – Brasil (CAPES) – Código de Financiamento 001.

grammar corrections was Microsoft Word itself, Google Docs and *Turnitin Draft Coach*, which, by March 2026, had not implemented any generative AI tool as of yet.

Since this work was done during a Co-Awarded period between Unesp and UoB, I would also like to explain that the reference style used throughout the thesis was ABNT since my work must follow Unesp's rules of publication.²

Finally, I would like to say that I learned very quickly that no work is done completely alone and I am so grateful that I have amazing people in my life who have helped me go through all the good and the bad times.

I am forever thankful for the amazing friends I have made (in Brazil and in Europe) who have, not only supported me through the hard times that one inevitably passes through when trying to conclude a work of this size, but who have also shared so many days of laughter and joy, to which I could not live without. Many thanks to all of you who supported me and helped me either with kind words or funny jokes. I am grateful for all of you in my life.

Special thanks to my partner, Yann, whose support and love has been a grounding rock for me for the past years. We met when I was still trying to make friends so far away from home and your joy and kindness lifted me up so many times. Thank you for believing in me when I, myself, found it very hard to.

I am forever grateful to my family, especially my mom, Celeste, my father, Cesar and my brother, Guilherme. You all held my hand and helped me discover this amazing world even before I said my first words. I dedicate this work to you, who were the firsts to teach me about history and literature and who have listened, patiently, to me talking nonstop about all that I found interesting. I can never be thankful enough for all you did for me, but I hope you know that deep in my heart you are what I care about the most.

Lastly, many thanks to you, reader. I hope you enjoy hearing about monstrous mothers as much as I do.

² All the reference style information can be found here: <https://www.fclar.unesp.br/#!/biblioteca/apoio-aopesquisador/normas-para-publicacoes/normas-abnt/>

Abstract

This thesis examines monstrous mothers in Middle English and French romances from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Building on Julia Kristeva's conceptualisation of the abject female body, and more recent work on monstrosity and gender in medieval literature by scholars such as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Sarah Alison Miller, Jane Bonsall and Dana Oswald, my work details the extent to which literary texts mirrored, and sometimes directly engaged with, attitudes towards the female body found in medical and theological materials, and proceeds to argue that such literary texts reflect the development of wider cultural anxieties about magic, *maleficium* (harmful magic) and witchcraft. In each chapter, a thematic approach is taken to different aspects of monstrous maternity. Chapter One focuses on the dynasty-building monstrous maternal bodies of Mélusine in *The Noble History of Lusignan* and Cassiodorien in *Richard Coeur de Lion*. Chapter Two examines the mothers of Merlin, Sir Gowther and Alexander, each of whom have human bodies but whose (non-consensual) relationships with supernatural beings produce monstrous or exceptional offspring and are suggestive of anxieties concerning women's sexualised associations with demonic entities. Chapter Three focuses on the figure of the witch-stepmother who uses magic as a tool to gain access to inheritance and to dispute and disrupt dynastic succession, as narrated in *William of Palerne* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*. Chapter Four concentrates on Medea, exploring her evolving tradition as a "proto-witch" whose Otherness and connection to magic are symbolic of an incipient fear of female and female-coded forms of knowledge, understood to present a threat to patriarchal order. In each depiction of these monstrous mothers, the maternal body is portrayed as an unnatural "Other" whose biology, according to Aristotle and his medieval followers, is conceptualised as against nature. I argue that such portrayals can be read as evidence of wider late medieval cultural and political anxieties about gender, sexuality and race, as well as a fear of female authority that might be understood to anticipate the misogynistic positions of fifteenth century writings on witchcraft.

Keywords: abjection; medieval literature; monstrosity; witchcraft

Resumo

Esta tese examina mães monstruosas em romances do inglês médio e da França dos séculos XIV e XV. Partindo da conceitualização do corpo feminino como abjeto por Julia Kristeva e de trabalhos mais recentes sobre monstruosidade e gênero na literatura medieval, de estudiosos como Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Sarah Alison Miller, Jane Bonsall e Dana Oswald, meu trabalho detalha até que ponto os textos literários espelhavam, e por vezes dialogavam diretamente com, as atitudes em relação ao corpo feminino encontradas em materiais médicos e teológicos, e argumenta que tais textos literários refletem o desenvolvimento de ansiedades culturais mais amplas sobre magia, *maleficium* (magia nociva) e bruxaria. Em cada capítulo, adota-se uma abordagem temática para diferentes aspectos da maternidade monstruosa. O Capítulo Um concentra-se nos corpos maternos monstruosos que contribuíram para a construção de dinastias: o de Mélusine em *The Noble History of Lusignan* e o de Cassiodorien em *Richard Coeur de Lion*. O Capítulo Dois examina as mães de Merlin, Sir Gowther e Alexandre, cada uma com corpo humano, mas cujos relacionamentos (não consensuais) com seres sobrenaturais produzem descendentes monstruosos ou excepcionais e sugerem ansiedades relativas às associações sexualizadas das mulheres com entidades demoníacas. O Capítulo Três concentra-se na figura da madrasta bruxa que usa a magia como ferramenta para obter acesso à herança e para disputar e perturbar a sucessão dinástica, como narrado em *William of Palerne* e *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*. O Capítulo Quatro concentra-se na tradição de Medeia, explorando sua evolução como uma “proto-bruxa”, cuja alteridade e conexão com a magia são simbólicas de um medo incipiente do conhecimento feminino e das formas de conhecimento codificadas como femininas, entendidas como uma ameaça à ordem patriarcal. Em cada representação dessas mães monstruosas, o corpo materno é retratado como um “Outro” antinatural cuja biologia, segundo Aristóteles e seus seguidores medievais, é concebida como contrária à natureza. Eu argumento que tais representações podem ser lidas como evidência de ansiedades culturais e políticas mais amplas do final da Idade Média sobre gênero, sexualidade e raça, bem como um medo da autoridade feminina que poderia ser entendido como uma antecipação das posições misóginas dos escritos do século XV sobre bruxaria.

Palavras-chave: abjeção; literatura medieval; monstruosidade; bruxaria

Figure List

- | | |
|--|----|
| Figure 1 – L’Hystoire de Melusine (Paris: Alain Lotrian and Denis Janot, c. 1531-1532) | 63 |
| Figure 2 – Kynge Rycharde cuer du lyon [a metrical romance] (London : Wynkyn de Worde, c.1509) | 63 |

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	14
Mother as Monster.....	19
Monstrous Female Bodies: Scholarship	24
The Ideal Supernatural Mother: The Virgin Mary	28
Theories of the Female Body: Medieval Medical Texts	31
The thesis.....	38
Chapter One - The Monstrous Body: Abject maternity in <i>Mélusine</i> and <i>Richard Coeur de Lion</i>	41
The fairy mother Mélusine	45
The Christian Paradox and Paternal Transgressions	53
Blood and Breastmilk.....	57
Monstrous Maternity in Contrast: Mélusine's Curse and Cassiodorien's Nature	62
Cassiodorien and Mélusine.....	64
Chapter Two - The Demonic Pregnancy: The incubus in <i>Merlin</i>, <i>Alexander</i> and <i>Sir Gowther</i>	73
The Incubus	78
Shame as innocence.....	85
Demonic transgression and inheritance in <i>Sir Gowther</i>	87
The tradition of deceit in <i>Alexander</i>	92
(Supernatural) paternal inheritance in Middle English romances	94
Chapter Three - The Magical Stepmother: Supernatural Disputes and Transformations in <i>William of Palerne</i> and <i>The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle</i>	100
Blood(lines).....	105
Metamorphosis	107
Boundaries between the animal and the human in <i>William of Palerne</i>	111
The wild man and the hag.....	119
The Curse of Dame Ragnelle (a blessing in disguise?).....	121
Witchcraft, wildness and sovereignty.....	127
Chapter Four - The Proto-Witch Mother: Motherhood in the Medieval Medea Tradition	132
The magical tradition – Medea in earlier sources.....	134

Medieval Medeas and their heroine development	136
Medea in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries	137
Boccaccio.....	138
<i>Ovide Moralisé</i>	140
Exploring Medea as sorceress, mother and victim in the fourteenth and fifteenth century	146
Chaucer	146
Christine de Pizan.....	148
Gower	152
Late fourteenth and early fifteenth century	155
More Medea narratives	158
Changing attitudes on witchcraft during the Medieval Period.....	159
The Supernatural Mother(s)	164
Conclusion	169
Bibliography.....	173

Introduction

This thesis examines romances from fourteenth and fifteenth century England and France, featuring the figure of the monstrous mother. I read these in relation to the wider set of cultural anxieties surrounding the female body articulated in contemporary medical and theological texts, commonly understood as anticipating fifteenth-century theological discussions of witchcraft, which, I suggest, my literary examples similarly pre-empt. In my texts I identify a type of abject supernaturalism associated with motherhood, which, I argue, is crucial for our understanding of late medieval representations of magic and witchcraft, especially *maleficium* (harmful magic), in works of secular literature, most notably romance.

I follow critics such as Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (2000), Helen Cooper (2004), and Victoria Flood and Megan Leitch (2022) in interpreting romance as an expansive category that encompasses different secular genres or sub-genres with certain features generally (although by no means universally) in common, such as supernatural encounters, and an interest in adventure, love and marriage.³ The texts with which I am concerned include Arthurian and Alexander romances (the latter related to the martial *chanson de geste*), as well as *lais* (short single-episode romances), and works of classical reception that while they are not generally strictly categorised as romance share its interest in love and the supernatural.⁴ I approach the similarities between these narratives as “family resemblances”, as described by Helen Cooper (200, p. 8): an individual might not look exactly like their family members but similarities can be found. The genre therefore can suffer alterations without falling away from the same model.

The following chapters analyse how particular romances, or related fictional texts, deal with the question of the monstrous body and women’s supernatural affinities in four different, but connected, categories: In my discussion of *Mélusine ou La Noble Histoire de Lusignan* and *Richard Coeur de Lion*,⁵ more specifically the *Richard A* text, I study the hybrid, uncategorisable nature of supernatural mothers who are the founders of

³ See Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert’s *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*. London; New York: Routledge, 2000 (p. 1-38); Helen Cooper’s *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004 (p. 1-44) and Victoria Flood and Megan Leitch’s Introduction: Insular Romance in Translation: New Approaches. In: *Cultural Translations in Medieval Romance*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2022 (p. 1-20)

⁵ I write the fairy’s name with an acute accent (*Mélusine* instead of *Melusine*) in order to be as close as possible to the original French. Her name will appear without an accent when quoted by other authors and when I refer to the *Melusine* tradition. Additionally, I use the form of the title *Richard Coeur de Lion*. Other authors may use different forms.

dynasties; in *Merlin*, *Sir Gowther* and *Alexander*, I pay attention to what narratives involving demonic pregnancies might owe to medical and theological discussions of the female body and its supernatural potential; *William of Palerne* and the *Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* offer further insight into the repulsion expressed towards maternal bodies, as well as the suspicion that was attached to the figure of the stepmother; finally, medieval re-imaginings of the classical witch (or proto-witch) Medea are discussed as examples of the relationship between constructions of witchcraft and cultural alterity: the female foreigner who possesses more knowledge than those around her, a link that cycles back to the first chapter as this is also a point of interest in *Mélusine* and *Richard a.*

Most of the key texts discussed in this thesis were written or translated during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a period that Richard Kieckhefer (1976, p. 22-23) has associated with the emergence of some of the key features of witch belief, in particular an interest in diabolism:

The new obsession with diabolism was related to developments in the theological literature of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, which set forth all the elements of diabolism in great, pornographic detail. The first of these writings were brief treatises, or sections in judicial manuals; for the most part they were technical works, yet they evidently circulated widely among the people engaged in prosecution. They both symptomized and augmented the concern with witchcraft among the educated elite.

Although certainly less lurid, the literary corpus presented in this thesis shares this concern with (sometimes sexualised) demonic encounters and contamination and might be understood as in places analogous in its attitudes to early writings on women and witchcraft.

The idea of witchcraft as a harmful magic practiced in its majority by women emerged mostly in the fifteenth century, although it is an association that many of the romances studied here anticipate. Michael D. Bailey (2001, p. 976) explains this evolution:

Even at the end of the century, when the theological faculty of the University of Paris condemned a whole series of magical practices in 1398, the focus of the church was still firmly fixed on the magic of educated elites and not on the more widespread common practices that would later characterize witchcraft. Instead that concept appeared, in a recognizable form, only in the early decades of the fifteenth century, being codified for the first time in several sources written in the 1430s.

One of the fullest articulations of this association is found in the *Formicarius* (c. 1436), a treatise on magic which Bailey (2003, p. 91) states “helped to shape European thought on witchcraft for centuries to come.” The work was written by Johannes Nider, a German theologian who, in his fifth book of the *Formicarius*, wrote on witchcraft and demonic intervention. Nider categorised women through a dualistic principle as either close to the Virgin Mary or close to Eve. Bailey (2003, p. 106) explains Nider’s ideas on women:

Nider’s conviction that women were more inclined than men toward the numerous sins of witchcraft was not based on a purely negative view of female moral capacity. Rather, he presented a dichotomous picture of the female sex as either wholly good or entirely wicked, a view typical of clerics throughout the Middle Ages, and one especially common in late medieval preaching. In this view, when women failed to attain the highest purity, they sank into the basest carnality. They could, in short, be either the Virgin Mary or the sinful Eve, and in either case their moral value was tied almost exclusively to their sexuality. Throughout the Middle Ages women were considered to be more susceptible to the urgings of the flesh because, of course, they were held to be weaker than men at all levels, in body, mind, and spirit. This ideology was based as much on Aristotle and other classical authorities as on biblical and patristic precedents, and in the later medieval period it was developed particularly by Dominican theologians.

Among the Dominicans who developed this ideology were, perhaps most famously, the German inquisitors Jacobus Sprenger and Henricus Institoris, whose *Malleus Maleficarum* (c. 1486), which draws on Nider alongside a wealth of classical and medieval sources (including Aristotle, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas), describes women’s connection with the supernatural and offers instruction on the identification and arrest of witches.⁶ The *Malleus* is famous for treating the risk of sorcery as a very dangerous and tangible problem by imagining it as powerful as the religious incantations mentioned in the scriptures. Question One of the first part of the work deals with this idea and states that claiming that sorceresses (it is for the most part explicitly engaged with female maleficence) exist is a Catholic proposition, making those who deny their existence heretics. It contains a wealth of examples of the material harms worked by sorceresses, which it presents as concrete evidence of the reality of witchcraft, and details the spiritual, emotional, and physical qualities that make women especially susceptible to the influences of demons.

Although the *Formicarius* and the *Malleus* are by no means fully representative

⁶ For a summary of debates regarding the authorship of the *Malleus* see Christopher Mackay’s introduction of his translation *The Hammer of Witches - A Complete Translation of the Malleus Maleficarum*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

of the complexity of early theological and legal understandings of witchcraft, let alone the regional and historical specificity of witch prosecutions, they provide indicative examples of a deep-rooted misogynistic interest in women's bodies and, given the wide European reception of the *Malleus*, its influential applications.⁷

As I argue in this thesis, many of these associations are pre-empted by the medieval literary works with which I engage, although they also have a function that goes beyond misogyny alone. The abject maternal body was a tool by which authors explored social and political anxieties rooted in the role of the mother in dynastic inheritance, its realisation, and its disruption. The abject, as described by Julia Kristeva in her work *Powers of Horror* (1980) is an opposition of the self. It is the place where meaning collapses, and thus the abject needs to be expelled from the "I" or "myself" in order for the self to remain stable, coherent, and safe. Kristeva's first example (and one that will be discussed again later in this thesis) is food nausea, which she describes as "the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection" (2024, p. 3):

When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk—harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring—I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire; "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel it. But since the food is not an "other" for "me," who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself.

Taking the example of food nausea as a basis for understanding abjection: the abject is everything that does not respect borders and categories. I read the mothers studied in this thesis as embodiments of the abject for medieval authors and their audiences. In this thesis, I explain how these mothers are constructed as narrative objects that are at one point removed (or need to be removed) from the narrative since their

⁷ As Diane Purkiss (p. 8) notes: "[m]any inquisitors and secular courts disdained the *Malleus Maleficarum*, still the main source for the view [for many critics, erroneously] that witch-hunting was women-hunting; still others thought it ridiculously paranoid about male sexuality." (Purkiss, Diane). *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*. London: Routledge, 1996. However, as Walter Stephens (p. 495) writes: "More than anyone before or after him, Kramer [Institoris] gave system and theoretical legitimacy to the justifications of witch-hunting that had been circulating since the early 1400s. Thanks to his thoroughness and to the replicability guaranteed by the printing press, Kramer's [Institoris'] book ensured the development of a uniform and durable theory of oppression." (Stephens, Walter. *Witches who steal penises Impotence and illusion in Malleus maleficarum. Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, n. 28, 1998.)

conceptualization falls beyond the categories of “women” and/or “human”. They are not abject solely because many of them possess supernatural bodies or because they have contact with the supernatural. Rather, they are an amalgamation of cultural and gendered anxieties, a status that makes them too uncomfortable to continue to remain in the social world of the text. They need to be abjected so that order can be restored.

My thesis therefore reads the category of the monstrous mother in medieval fiction as an exploration of medieval bodily anxieties that anticipate later misogynistic ideas of women’s connection to witchcraft, but with a far wider social and political point of interest than is found in works of witch theory. Indeed, the authority of some of these supernatural women on occasion transcends, or at least destabilises, the antifeminist currents here at work. As Jane Bonsall (2025, p. 14) puts it: “Narratively, magic permits [...] power authority, knowledge, and abilities beyond the normal for women in medieval literature, not to mention medieval society.”

The important role romance might play in understanding changing attitudes towards women and magic during the later Middle Ages has seen critical attention from previous scholars. Bonsall’s (2025) is concerned with the close relationship between gender and the understanding of magic during this period. Similarly, there is important previous work on the relationship between theological, medical and literary representations of sex and reproduction. In her work on monstrous female bodies, Sarah Alison Miller (2010) has shown how medical and theological accounts of the biological processes of female bodies demonstrated the influence (usually negative) that women could have on the conception and gestation of a child, first and foremost in relation to anxieties surrounding the properties of menstrual blood.⁸ Dyan Elliot’s (1999) work on clerical ideas of pollution (mostly sexual) has similarly shown how these determined

⁸ “The specific concerns surrounding exposure to menstrual fluid expressed to varying degrees by Pseudo-Albertus and his commentators were certainly not novel. In the first century A.D., Pliny the Elder had described in his *Historia naturalis* the consequences of contact with menstrual fluid: it destroys crops, kills bees, dulls the surfaces of mirrors and the edges of steel, qualities that Commentator B repeats in DSM [*De Secretis Mulierum*]. According to Pliny, “nothing could be found that is more monstrous [*monstrificum*] than the monthly flux of women.” Six centuries later, Isidore of Seville echoed these words in his *Etymologies*. The corruption of human bodies by menses does not, however, appear in the classical and early-medieval encyclopedic tradition, nor in the medical tradition. Writers of gynaecology found no place for such subjects as fetal deformation or infection of the male member due to contact with menstrual fluid despite the comprehensive manner in which they treated the subject of menstruation. Most medical writers held that menstrual fluid could endanger health, but this capacity was understood quite narrowly: if the female body failed to purge itself of menstrual fluid, it would suffer, and not because menstrual fluid was contaminating *per se*, but because its retention further offset the already imbalanced physiological environment of the female body.” (Miller, Sarah Alison. *Medieval Monstrosity and The Female Body*, New York: Routledge, 2010, p. 81)

attitudes towards women's bodies and their transgressions of bodily boundaries through menstruation, pregnancy and birth.

Building on these discussions and other relevant critical works on monstrosity and female authority in medieval romances, I analyse overlapping theological and medical beliefs concerning women's health and discuss how these influenced romance texts. My own work focuses exclusively on maternal monstrosity and the power that the monstrous mother might exercise when her very biology threatens to upend familiar social, political and dynastic structures.

I bring a different approach and framework to each chapter in relation to the narratives explored. The material detailing maternal monstrosity in Middle English and French texts is so rich that it would be impossible to analyse it based on only one critical theory. I also work with a historiographical view of each text as societal changes (including shifting attitudes towards marriage and inheritance) are deeply influential on the works explored in this thesis, and the way in which maternity is read necessarily depends on often quite localised cultural contexts. However, I am consistently indebted to Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection and its intersection with, and medievalist application of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's 'Monster Theory' (detailed further below). I do not offer a fully trans-historical comparative study of romance and theological and legal writings on witchcraft but rather use selected examples of the latter that express distinct traditions of understanding of supernatural women and are suggestive of multi-generic continuities with significance for our understanding of the cultural and wider historical position of romance.

Mother as Monster

This thesis focuses on the representation of monstrous female bodies and their relationship to different aspects of maternity, including conception, pregnancy, birth and child-rearing. Throughout this thesis I refer to female bodies and biological processes, but like Dana Oswald (2024, p. 14) I "do not wish to suggest that this binary is either real or universal, even in the Middle Ages [...]". As Oswald writes:

Through thinking about the nature of bodies identified as female, we can make space in the scholarly tradition for a range identities and genders beyond the default of the idealised male form. However, bodies with female organs do not function in the same ways that bodies with male organs do, and often do not experience illness in the same ways that male bodies do. If treatments

presume that female bodies are faulty male bodies, then ‘health’ will be sought by suppressing female organs rather than facilitating their function.

I use medieval ideas, and textual suppressions, of bodies with “female organs” as the basis of my investigation, and like previous critics, in my analysis I understand the categories of woman and mother as cultural constructions, after Judith Butler.⁹ I follow Elizabeth L’Estrange (2008, p. 30-31) in understanding medieval maternity as a socially driven action based on cultural and sociological aspects, where “the idea of maternity as a social practice reveals how women’s bodies were appropriated for the socially-driven need to produce male heirs for the survival of dynastic families.” In royal and noble classes, a mother was thus not only the progenitor of a person but of an entire line and dynasty. As Kirsty Bolton (2026, p. 11-12) writes:

Not only do they [mothers] occupy and reimagine spaces that have been traditionally considered male domains, but mothers are literal and metaphorical builders, from the lineages and relationships that they create and build upon to acts of physical construction, presenting a model in which motherhood in romance is central to the construction of not just family and lineage, but of alliances, communities, cities, and nations.

Medieval history provides us with examples of both positive and negative mother-figures. Examples of the former include St. Helena (Constantine’s Christian mother), or Empress Matilda (who fought for King Henry II’s succession, her son). Examples of women described as “bad mothers” include Eleanor of Aquitaine the queen of France and England who led a rebellion against her husband, the Plantagenet king, Henry II.¹⁰ Medieval authors, especially in England, represented Eleanor as a scheming queen, focusing both on her gender and foreignness to the English court. As discussed in Chapter One, the legends associated with Eleanor may have had a particular influence on the *Melusine* tradition.

⁹ As Elizabeth L’Estrange observes: “In her seminal study on gender roles, *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler highlighted the “political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term women denotes a common identity”. Butler’s querying of the category of “women” thus requires critics to deconstruct their own attempts to recover “women’s” histories since the referent is itself a product of patriarchal hegemonic discourses. She claims that *women* even in the plural, has become a troublesome term [. . .] because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities”.” (L’Estrange, Elizabeth. *Holy Motherhood - Gender, Dynasty and Visual Culture in the Later Middle Ages*. Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2008, p. 30)

¹⁰ For more on the history of Eleanor’s participation in the Revolt of 1173-1174, see: A Queen’s Discontent and her sons’ thwarted ambitions, 1173-1174 In: *Eleanor of Aquitaine – Queen of France Queen of England*. Ralph V. Turner. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2009, p. 205- 230. More will be observed about Eleanor of Aquitaine in the *Chapter One - The Monstrous Body: Abject maternity in Mélusine and Richard Coeur de Lion*

Looking to the later Middle Ages, contemporary with most of my romances, other examples of historically infamous mothers can be found in Margaret Beaufort, a major political figure in the War of the Roses in the fifteenth century as well as Margaret of Anjou, the wife of Henry VI of England – both of whom attracted suspicion on account of their authority and their knowledge. These women were also literary patrons, and on occasion readers of romance. In Rebecca Lyons’ article “The Woodville Women, Eleanor Haute, and British Library Royal MS 14 E III” (2018), the author analyses four inscriptions in the manuscript that seem to have been written by the Woodville women and another one that might have been written by Eleanor Haute. The author discusses how reading the manuscript must have been a source of comfort for the women during a period of political turmoil but also describes how books were shared amongst family members, especially between women:

Locating the inscriptions at this specific juncture in the lives of their writers, within particular political contexts (the Ricardian usurpation) and geopolitical spaces (Westminster), has an important bearing on our analysis and understanding of the ways in which the book may have been used. The combined presence of the inscriptions raises some intriguing possibilities regarding the use, transmission, and sharing of secular literary objects within royal and courtly family circles. Manuscript owning, sharing, and reading emerge as a significant mechanism of community: a nexus around which familial activity can take place, even providing consolation and support in and between social networks of friends and family during a period of *extremis*. (p. 210)

Similarly, Jacquetta of Luxemburg, the mother of Yorkist queen Elizabeth Woodville, was another medieval mother who attracted suspicion and was even associated with rumours of witchcraft. A member of the Luxemburg dynasty who claimed descent from the fairy Mélusine, a manuscript of the romance has even been speculatively associated with her ownership.¹¹

The primary role of any woman in the Middle Ages (especially a royal or aristocratic woman) was to produce an heir in order to ensure the perpetuation of a family line. As Mark Whittow (2011, p. 57) writes of the Empress Matilda (wife of Henry V and mother of Henry II from the Plantagenet dynasty) and the authority she gained because of her children “[...] it is also the expression of a truism, that women were most powerful through their sons”. Procreation was as serious a business for men as it was for women. Katherine Park (2018, p. 153) explains:

¹¹ See Lydia Zeldenrust’s *The Mélusine Romance in Medieval Europe - Translation, Circulation, and Material Contexts*. Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2020 (p. 196-198)

Procreation lay at the heart of family life in medieval Europe. Unless bound by Christian vows of chastity, men and women defined themselves in large part by their ability to produce the children, especially the male children, on whom the survival of their families depended.

Supernatural mothers, be they witches, fairies or monsters, appear frequently in medieval romances where they indicate the exceptional qualities of their heirs or, conversely, their demonic tendencies. Ordinarily, the mother disappears from the narrative after giving birth as their work is considered “done”. Their supernatural influence, however, lingers throughout the texts as the child navigates their own remarkable adventures.

The matter of what differentiates a supernatural or monstrous mother from a human one is complex. Jane Bonsall (2025, p. 139-148) has argued that in a medieval context *all* maternity might be understood as monstrous, following Aristotelian thought which positioned the female body as unnaturally transgressive, read as a deviation from a male norm.¹² We might approach the word monster in relation to its Latin etymology (*monstrum* which is derived from the verb *monere*: a warning or a sign). As Isidore of Seville discusses in his seventh century *Etymologies* (2006, p. 244): “[...] omens (*monstrum*) derive their name from admonition (*monitus*), because in giving a sign they indicate (*demonstrare*) something, or else because they instantly show (*monstrare*) what may appear [...]”.¹³ The monster appears as a portent of danger. During the medieval period, the word evolved to signify something of a defective nature. John Block Friedman (2000, p. 111) details the etymology of the word throughout centuries, describing at what point the word “monster” would become associated with something that is “outside of nature”:

By the Carolingian period the word *monstrum* in the glossaries seems definitely to have been distinguished from other forms of prodigy as a zoological phenomenon. Thus, the eighth-century alphabetical *Affatim* collection-so named from its first word-explains that *monstrum* means “deformity of members.” Somewhat later, the *Elementorium* of Papias the Lombard (c. 1060) defines it as something “born outside of nature.”

¹² See the subchapter Medieval Monsters, Medieval Mothers (p. 139-148) in Bonsall, Jane. *Magic and Women in Medieval Romances*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2025

¹³ Isidore of Seville. *The Etymologies*. Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, Oliver Berghof (eds). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Originally: “Monstra vero a monitu dicta, quod aliquid significando demonstrent, sive quod statim monstrent quid appareat” (Isidore of Seville / Isidorus Hispalensis. *Etymologiarum sive Originum libri XX*. Lindsay, W. M. (ed). v. 2. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 36).

In the fourth century B.C., in his *De Generatione Animalium* (*Generation of Animals*) (1942, p. 419) Aristotle had already exemplified that: “[t]he account of the cause of monstrosities is very close and in a way similar to that of the cause of deformed animals, since a monstrosity is really a sort of deformity.”¹⁴ Therefore, it is interesting to note that in the same work Aristotle refers to the female sex as: “[...] weaker and colder in their nature; and we should look upon the female state as being as it were a deformity [...]”¹⁵ (p. 459 – 461, *my emphasis*). If deformity equals monstrosity and women are deformed, in an Aristotelian view all women are monstrous.

Aristotle’s discussion of the dualization of nature in the *Historia Animalium* (*History of Animals*) (discussed in Chapter Two) and other characteristics of the female body such as menstruation (also known as flux and/or menses), breastfeeding, childbirth and menopause render women monstrous. Through this lens, there is no clear distinction between monstrous mothers and human mothers since all mothers are monsters or have monstrous characteristics. Medieval scholars such as the thirteenth century Bishop of Paris, William of Auvergne, who discussed women’s connection to the demonic and supernatural, and whose writings influenced later witch theorists, was a follower of Aristotle. William describes the polluting properties of menstrual blood and its poisonous effects on people, mostly infants. Dyan Elliot (1999, p. 6) describes William as: “[...] one of the earliest scholastic writers to show intense interest in diabolism and witchcraft, align[ing] women and their polluting potential with the diabolical realm.” As Elliot (p. 9) notes, this connection persisted into the later Middle Ages, although authors were often ambivalent as to the precise nature and limits of this association and its wider implications. Their constructions are, she suggests, more obviously articulations of “repression and fear” rather than confident assertions of (assumed) biological realities:

This union between women and the demonic, itself the product of repression and fear, is never neatly deployed, even by those who testify most vociferously to its existence. Indeed, pivotal authors such as Peter Damian, William of Auvergne, and John Nider [*Formicarius*], who could justly be described as leading contributors to the tradition that advanced the link between women and the demonic in the high and later Middle Ages, seem least in control of the linkages and other effects their writings produce.

¹⁴ Aristotle. *Generation of Animals*. Jeffrey Henderson (ed). A. L. Peck (translator). Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 1942; Originally: “Propinqui autem sermones cause et similes modo aliquo sunt quique de monstris et qui de orbatis animalibus: et enim monstrum orbatio quedam est.” (Aristotle. *De generatione animalium*. Hendrik Joan Drossaart Lulofs (ed.) Guillelmi de Moerbeka (translator). Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965, p. 133)

¹⁵ “imbecilliora enim sunt et humidiora secundum naturam femenina, et oportet existimare femininitatem esse velut orbitatem naturalem.” (Aristotle, 1965, p. 146)

I suggest that we find similar examples of fear responses in the romances I analyse here, and at times, tales that might exceed the control of its teller and signify beyond misogynistic frameworks in place.

Monstrous Female Bodies: Scholarship

Like Miller (2010) and Bonsall (2025) I root my work in Julia Kristeva's (1980) theories on abjection, although applied specifically to the romance mother. Abjection, as I explain further in Chapter One, pertains to everything that disturbs or threatens the self and so needs to be expelled. The Latin etymology of the word "ab" – "ject" means to "cast out" something. Kristeva gives examples such as the sight of faecal matter or the corpse, as confrontations which threaten societal order. Abjection is a material confrontation, where borders and neat divisions collapse and one feels displaced from oneself. My work builds on the particular feeling of abjection pertaining to the maternal, which as Kristeva explains (2024, p. 78), relates to the fear of generative power as the mother is an ambiguous figure who has the capacity to give life, but who reminds us of death. Her bodily functions (menstrual blood, rupture of orifices and body transgressions), however, represent a dangerous unboundedness. Especially in cases of menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth, the very nature of woman as a defective man (Aristotle, again) is enough to consider her abject. As Kristeva explains (p. 4): "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite." Kristeva also gives the example of food nausea or the fear of death, that which we try to "expel" from ourselves, but which remains very much part of ourselves. The mother is also a part of the self to be excluded. Kristeva mentions the fear of the maternal (p. 55) as well as the fear of the feminine as "Other" (p. 59) and as a result, the fear of the archaic mother as the fear of generative power (p. 78):

Fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power. It is this power, a dreaded one, that patrilineal filiation has the burden of subduing. It is thus not surprising to see pollution rituals proliferating in societies where patrilineal power is poorly secured, as if the latter sought, by means of purification, a support against excessive matrilineality.

If the mother is abject, and therefore disturbs order, it is necessary to understand precisely what order is destabilised. As Angela Florschuetz (2014, p. 188) observes, female reproduction was seen as monstrous as it is a porous and fluid material which

makes the definition of boundaries unstable, “threatening social and symbolic order”:

Medieval understandings of the female body in general, and the female reproductive body in particular, share many key characteristic markers critics identify with the concept of monstrosity ... the female reproductive body was defined by its permeability and porosity, by seepage and fluidity, menstruation, and, in pregnancy, birth, and nursing, the transfer of material from one body to another, making the clear definition of stable boundaries and transitions between one body and another difficult, if not possible to determine. Likewise, the monster is characterized most notably by its disruption and blurring of categorical distinctions and boundaries, threatening social and symbolic order not only by its actions, but also by its very existence.

As explained previously, that which is seen as “outside of nature” will be considered not only abject but monstrous as well. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996) outlines seven features of monstrosity, many of which are exemplified in the material examined in this thesis.¹⁶ Cohen gives seven examples of how the monster is materialized in the literary narratives. To summarise these: 1) The monster is a cultural construction: it exists as a warning towards something; 2) The monster can have a corporeal or incorporeal body but is dangerous given its capacity to escape; 3) The monster cannot be categorized, it lives outside the cultural order (and if we connect this thought with Kristeva’s, it needs to be abjected); 4) The monster is different: this can be either in cultural, gendered, religious, political or physical aspects. However, the monster will always demonstrate a difference from what is considered the “norm”; 5) The monster polices borders. When we step outside the known the monster attacks; 6) There is both a repulsion and attraction towards the monster. Despite our need to abject the creature, we also envy its freedom from cultural norms and expectations and finally 7) The monster shifts our perspective of what we are. As Cohen describes, the monster makes us reevaluate our perception of race, gender, sexuality etc and also our preferences. By demonstrating our fear, the monster describes who we are.

In this thesis I ascribe to Cohen’s statement (1996, p. 5) that “Monsters must be examined within the intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural, and literary-historical) that generate them”. Similarly, like Cohen I approach the monster as “the Harbinger of Category Crisis”. The monster creates a crisis in categorisation; it is monstrous precisely because it is different from the moral and/or physical features held as norms by those in positions of power (again, I have in mind the Aristotelian understanding of woman as a point of deviation from man). A similar perspective is taken by Dana Oswald (2010), who

¹⁶ See Cohen, Jeffrey J. “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” In: *Monster Theory – Reading Culture*. Jeffrey J. Cohen (ed). Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p. 3-25

describes the difficulties of categorisation that might result in the monstrous, especially in relation to gender. Oswald (p. 5) argues that monstrosity is primarily a visual identifier. One must have physical differences to be considered “monstrous”. She argues that in medieval literature the human monster is usually one of three: “monsters of excess, monsters of lack, and hybrid monsters.” (p. 6). I explore how women’s monstrosity (marked variously by hybridity, excess, and lack) does not only pertain to physical differences (although this is an important aspect) but to the frustration of categorisation and a subsequent lack of understanding of women as fully, or at least understandably, human. Female inferiority, ambiguity and duality (discussed by Aristotle) becomes part of the abject order, as something necessary to be expelled from what is considered “normal”.

Attitudes towards the female body are also approached in my study in light of Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984, p. 24) ideas of the grotesque body: “The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming”. That is, a body that is open and unwieldy, excessive, overflowing and transgressive. In general terms, we might note the influence on medieval literature of concepts like the status of woman as a castrated man/*castratrice*, theories of the vagina dentata, and the aforementioned associations of the female body and its processes (e.g. menstruation, menopause, pregnancy) with pollution.¹⁷ We will see that the maternal (pregnant and post-partum) and post-menopausal female body is often presented as grotesque in late medieval romance, most notably, as discussed in Chapter Three, in the figure of Dame Ragnelle. As Bonsall (2025, p. 143-144) remarks: “In its cyclical transformations and varying physicality, the female body in the medieval imagination may be typified as grotesque... When this framework is applied to the monstrous bodies of the women in romance, therefore, both femininity and aberrance are jointly emphasized”. The maternal body was seen as abject and repulsive because it represented the vicissitudes and transgressions of the female body that goes from virginal and pure to impure.

In my engagement with perceptions of female bodily change and instability, my work is further informed by postcolonial theories of hybridity and alterity, including Edward Said’s notion of the colonial “Other”, and Homi Bhabha’s work on hybridity and the mixed cultural identities which result from postcolonial encounters. In my application

¹⁷ See Miller, Sarah Alison. *Medieval Monstrosity and the Female Body*. New York; London: Routledge, 2010 and foundational works on castration and/or the vagina dentata and female sexuality such as Horney, Karen. The Dread of Women. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*. v. 13. 1932. p. 348-60

of this, I am informed by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's (2000) discussion of the ways in which scholars of Medieval Studies ought to be alert to the engagement of medieval authors with categories such as race, nation, and geography, a call that has been answered in recent years by scholars such as Geraldine Heng, on whose influential work on race and gender I draw

I read cultural alterity in relation to bodily alterity: the Othered supernatural wife and mother as a kind of supernatural racemaking, as we find it in texts such as *Mélusine*, *Richard* and the Medea tradition. In this respect I am indebted to Cohen, Oswald, and others such as Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills (2003) and Debra Higgs Strickland (2003), who have drawn attention to the ways in which the medieval monstrous intersects with ideas of gender, sexuality and race, in the process exposing and challenging binaries and borders between the self and other, public and private, and inner and outer worlds. Bildhauer and Mills (2003, p. 8) provide a useful summary of the ways in which critics have, and continue to, productively approach the monsters of medieval literature as precursors to the colonial discourses with which Said was concerned:

Although monsters do not feature explicitly in Said's investigations, several scholars have implied that medieval monsters themselves might be comprehended as the products of an early colonialist mentality, a blueprint for the systematic creation of distinctions between territories, nations and peoples.

Strickland (2003, p. 8) has discussed the medieval monster especially as a non-Christian, used to "monstrify" "Saracens"¹⁸, Jews and anyone not part of the Christian faith: "For medieval Christians, then, monstrosity was a metaphor for unacceptability, both cultural and religious." Associations of this type are found from late antique and early medieval travelogues such as *De rebus in Oriente mirabilibus* (*Letter of Pharasmanes to Hadrian*) (c. fifth century) to *Mandeville's Travels* in the fourteenth century (Oswald, 2010), and are a feature, I suggest, of romances where the female and cultural Otherness converge.

Different from the already mentioned treatment of earlier maternal monstrosity, my work focuses in understanding the psychology behind the anxieties pertaining to the mother's body in the Middle Ages using romance narratives as examples since the horror generated by the figure of the mother in the characters analysed here evokes fears from the twelfth to the middle of the fifteenth century, long before theories on witchcraft

¹⁸ ¹⁸ I use the word "Saracen" as it is sometimes used in medieval romances but knowing full well that the term is not correct. As author Shokoofeh Rajabzadeh (2019) puts it, the use of the word Saracen is a racist term and should be avoided unless in direct quotations.

developed more clearly. By utilizing these narratives and comparing the social, economic and political aspects of their creation we can understand more clearly how the development of the fear of women and witchcraft in the late fifteenth century finds a precedent and counterpart in fictional narratives dealing with anxieties relating to the female body.

In the medieval period, there is such a thing as an ideal mother and maternity. My work explores how the characters analysed in my chosen narratives distance themselves from this ideal and this contribute to another category of mother altogether: the mother that cannot be categorized.

The Ideal Supernatural Mother: The Virgin Mary

The idea of motherhood in the Middle Ages was closely related to Christian teaching. As Clarissa Atkinson (1991, p. 4) explains it: “Motherhood in the medieval period was constructed by persons whose primary ideology was Christianity; Christian stories and moral teaching shaped their imaginative boundaries, their sense of self and world, and their social, legal, and domestic arrangements”. Christianity provided a model of the ideal mother in the Virgin Mary: the *theotokos* (Mother of God). She conceived Christ through the Holy Spirit without the taint of sexual sin, and she was herself conceived (by the formerly childless St Anne) in that way (the Immaculate Conception). In the later Middle Ages, motherhood was used as a metaphor to describe God, Jesus and the Church, and the clergy used the language of motherhood to describe their nurturing of human souls. Caroline Walker Bynum (1982, p. 17) describes the use of metaphors associated with feminine stereotypes used by both medieval female and male mystics, drawing on language used to describe Jesus: “[...] feminine metaphors, and in admiration for characteristics (e.g., tears, weakness, and mercy or “ethical irrationality”) that people of the period stereotyped as feminine.” The Bible also provided numerous other positive examples of motherhood including Hannah, Rachel, and Sarah. Set against these ideal mothers was the Bible’s first woman, and mother, Eve, who became a model for sinful or fallen women.

The establishment of the Virgin Mary as a model for women (and motherhood) was nevertheless something of a double-edged sword. Mary’s very status as a Virgin-mother was one beyond the reach of known female biology and this fed into the development of misogynistic ideas about women’s bodies. Whilst there of course exist a significant number of medieval texts which represent women in a positive light, and

others which take a challengingly ambivalent point of view, anxieties about women and their bodies nevertheless form a significant part of the period's literary output.

Mary's virginal body posed a challenge to real female bodies, whether maternal or post-menopausal, because, unlike theirs, it remained "physically and sexually bounded and unpenetrated," and was presumed not to bleed (menstruate). (Bildhauer, 2006, p. 126). While Mary's physicality was miraculous, she nonetheless remained a model of an ideal female body. Kirsty Bolton (2025) explains:

[...] Mary is positioned as a role model for Christian mothers, demonstrating physical nurture, affection, and education. Yet her divine conception of Jesus and painless childbirth separate her from the experience of the biological mothers who were supposed to emulate her serenity and succour. She is a biological mother, but her body is unmarked by the fact. She has created a child of her flesh, but that child is divine.¹⁹

Medieval theologians were no strangers to misogyny, well versed as they were in the writings of Plato, Socrates and Aristotle. Clarissa Atkinson (1991, p. 238) explains:

From Plato onward, male scientists and philosophers perceived and classified women as unlike themselves, therefore as not-men, with "different" reproductive organs and systems. Aristotle defined gender in terms of reproductive potential and identified femaleness itself with reproductive deficiency, the inability to generate. He believed that the male parent supplied form and energy to the fetus, the female only lifeless matter. Not all ancient and medieval thinkers agreed with him—Galen and his followers believed that each parent provided a "seed" for the new child—but Aristotelian biology had a profound effect on theoretical constructions of motherhood in the High Middle Ages, when Christian, Jewish, and Muslim philosophers struggled to integrate Aristotelian "nature" and divine revelation.

Aristotelian thought proposed that women were lacking, first in terms of heat, and so were described as cold and wet in contrast to men who were seen as warm and dry. Aristotle's theories of procreation argued that women contributed only formless matter (menstrual blood) which required shaping by a male "seed".²⁰ The Virgin Mary and her

¹⁹ Bolton, Kirsty. *Motherhood and Its Spaces in Medieval Romance*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2026.

²⁰ On the repulsion of menstrual blood, Maria Kathryn Tomlison (2021, p. 32) notes: "Menstrual blood is one of the bodily liquids which Kristeva considers when articulating her theory of abjection. Kristeva turns to Leviticus to explain why menstruation is taboo and a fear towards it has become deeply ingrained in the Judeo-Christian psyche. [...] The word 'abomination' underpins Kristeva's argument that the Bible characterises menstrual blood as repulsive and positions menstrual blood as something that provokes horror. This intense and heightened word depicts menstrual blood as something immoral or monstrous. Resonating with her theory that abjection constitutes a human rejection of female sexuality, Kristeva argues that menstruation is a reminder of our animality and thus threatens the sexual order. [...] Kristeva explains that, in order to maintain this clear sexual division, patriarchal society responds to the menstruating female body with repulsion, and therefore tries to keep the menstruating female body at a distance. As a result, women are expected to ensure their menstrual blood remains invisible."

conception of Christ were viewed as an exception to these interpretations. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, included a lengthy discussion in the third part of his *Summa Theologiae* of how the Virgin's body could continue to be immaculate even after giving birth to Christ.²¹ In the Fifth Article [III, Q. 31, Art. 5] of the *Summa*, Aquinas asks "Whether the Flesh of Christ Was Conceived of the Virgin's Purest Blood?". His answer, which focuses on the impurity of menstrual blood, represents the female body as polluted and repulsive:

Woman's semen is not apt for generation, but is something imperfect in the seminal order, which, on account of the imperfection of the female power, it has not been possible to bring to complete seminal perfection. Consequently this semen is not the necessary matter of conception; as the Philosopher [Aristotle] says (De Gener. Animal. i): wherefore there was none such in Christ's conception: all the more since, though it is imperfect in the seminal order, a certain concupiscence accompanies its emission, as also that of the male semen: whereas in that virginal conception there could be no concupiscence. Wherefore Damascene says (De Fide Orth. iii) that Christ's body was not conceived "seminally." *But the menstrual blood, the flow of which is subject to monthly periods, has a certain natural impurity of corruption: like other superfluities, which nature does not heed, and therefore expels.* Of such menstrual blood infected with corruption and repudiated by nature, the conception is not formed; but from a certain secretion of the pure blood which by a process of elimination is prepared for conception, being, as it were, more pure and more perfect than the rest of the blood. Nevertheless, it is tainted with the impurity of lust in the conception of other men: inasmuch as by sexual intercourse this blood is drawn to a place apt for conception. This, however, did not take place in Christ's conception: because this blood was brought together in the Virgin's womb and fashioned into a child by the operation of the Holy Ghost. Therefore is Christ's body said to be "formed of the most chaste and purest blood of the Virgin."

(my emphasis)

It is important to understand that misogyny and antifeminism played a considerable part in the understanding of women by men and by women themselves in the medieval period. As Anke Bernau (2011, p. 72) puts it: "The pervasive misogyny encountered in medieval writings, especially those that proliferated from the twelfth century onwards, had its roots in much older literary, philosophical, and religious traditions." Bernau mentions Aristotle, Ovid, Tertullian among others as responsible for these traditions. The author continues mentioning how this inevitably affected women's relations and "how they experienced and engaged with contemporary culture."

If we take a real-life example, Liz Herbert McAvoy (1997, p. 23-24) discusses the life of Margery Kempe, an English mystic from the late fourteenth century, a woman (and

²¹ See discussions on Questions 27 to 34 on Christ's conception: Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae*. The Fathers of the English Dominican Province (translators). Indiana: Christian Classics, 1981.

mother) deeply affected by the cult of the Virgin Mary and its impossible ideal. The author explains:

Margery was living and writing at a time when perfect motherhood had become an impossible ideal. The cult of the Virgin, so powerful in East Anglia where she was living and writing, had helped to reshape contemporary attitudes towards motherhood, making it on the one hand the highest ideal for a woman, but on the other forever condemning her because of the concupiscence it necessarily represented. The image of Eve forever lurked threateningly behind the image of the Virgin, leaving the mother in the unenviable position of embodying both Eve and Mary, each taking precedence over the other according to the patriarchal attitudes confronting her. Any attempt towards authority and autonomy on the part of a mother would first have to unravel the complex thread attaching her to both archetypes and either free herself from them, an impossible task in view of contemporary socio-religious attitudes, or reweave them according to the dictates of her own desire.

Medieval romances have interesting ways of dealing with the Virgin's impossible precedent. When Marian allusions appear in the texts analysed here, we see the representation of impossible bodies that continue to blur the categorisation of the female body, and, despite their Marian affinities, threaten abjection. For instance, Mélusine's hybrid form might be read in relation to the impossible body of the Virgin (discussed in Chapter One); and Merlin's demonic conception is overtly presented as a parody of the Annunciation (discussed in Chapter Two).

Theories of the Female Body: Medieval Medical Texts

Many ideas surrounding women's medicine, in particular concepts of feminine pollution, stem from classical philosophical traditions. In relation to this, I outline something more of the overlapping theological and medical discussions which shaped the understanding of the female body during the medieval period. I detail examples from three representative texts that I use as examples of medical and theological works that allow us to track something of the evolution of medieval ideas concerning the female body. They help us understand medieval concepts of women and their "polluting" bodies, which will serve as a basis for the understanding of choices made by romance authors engaged with these and related background concepts which by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries existed within the cultural mainstream.

According to Monica Green (2016, p. 173) medical writings are the best sources by which we can understand how pregnancy and birth were managed, assisted and

understood in the Middle Ages.²² The texts on which I draw, with this in mind, are: *The Trotula*, a medical compendium probably written by women in the twelfth century; and *De Secretis Mulierum* or *On the Secrets of Women*, written in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century which concerned itself with “women’s secrets” e.g. conception, menstruation etc.²³ Finally, I turn to the uses of medical-theological allusions in the *Malleus Maleficarum*.

The Trotula is an influential compendium of three texts written in the twelfth century in Salerno, Italy. The texts are concerned with women’s medicine and particularly, with menstruation. Green (2001, p. xi) writes in the Preface to her translation:

The Trotula [...] was indeed the most popular assembly of materials on women’s medicine from the late twelfth through the fifteenth centuries. Written in Latin and so able to circulate throughout western Europe where Latin served as the lingua franca of the educated elites, the *Trotula* had also by the fifteenth century been translated into most of the western European vernacular languages, in which form it reached an even wider audience.

Its texts include the *Conditions of Women*, an informative medical treatise that describes ailments suffered by women; *Treatments for Women*, a manual used by the Salernitans (Salerno’s population); and *Women’s Cosmetics*, which details how to aid skin afflictions or ways to improve one’s beauty. The texts were influenced by the Hippocratic tradition, coming from Greek texts written in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. and also the accounts of Soranus of Ephesus in the late first and second century A.D.²⁴ The Hippocratic tradition as well as Galenic medicine (referring to Galen of Pergamon in the first century A.D) treated menstruation not as a completely harmful process for the body but as a necessary purgation for women’s health.²⁵

Many contemporary superstitions connected to motherhood were concerned with pregnancy and the impact of the mother’s actions on the developing foetus. This is explained in *The Trotula* (2001, p. 95 – 97): “[...] when a woman is in the beginning of her pregnancy, care ought to be taken that nothing is named in front of her which she is not able to have, because if she sets her mind on it and it is not given to her, this occasions

²² “Medical writings are, at the moment, still our richest source for lore on how a pregnancy should be best managed, how birth should be assisted, and what procedures need to be followed should any mishap occur. For example, close analysis of the most widely disseminated ensemble of texts on women’s medicine, the so-called *Trotula* texts, shows great concern to make the female body reproductively successful.” (Green, Monica. *Making Motherhood in Medieval England - The Evidence from Medicine*. In: *Motherhood, Religion, and Society in Medieval Europe, 400-1400*. London: Routledge, 2016. p. 173-204)

²³ For discussion of the relationship between medical texts and medieval romance, see further Bonsall, Jane (2025, p. 159-164)

²⁴ Green, 2001, p. 15-16

²⁵ Green, 2001, p. 19

miscarriage.”²⁶ This particular superstition is related to the idea of the “mother’s mark” discussed in more detail in Chapter One. Put briefly, this theory proposed that the mother’s emotional or moral state might cause a physical impression on the child.²⁷ Other sections of *Trotula* focus on how to conceive, with examples including making a powder out of the testicles of a male pig or boar and drinking this with wine after menstruation, or on how *not* to conceive (a woman is to carry the nude flesh of a goat that never conceived upon her womb).²⁸ Explanations were given for infertility, including the suggestion that if a woman is unable to conceive this might be due to her being too “lean and thin” or “too fat” which would construct the orifice of the womb and not let the seed pass through.²⁹

Other writings pertinent to the anxieties surrounding medieval motherhood came from a variety of classical male authors. Texts such as the satirical thirteenth century Pseudo-Ovid’s *De Vetula* took as its focus the physical changes of women’s bodies. Its author distinguished between the *puella* (the virgin), a woman with an “intact” body, and the *vetula* (the old woman), a contrast that exemplifies the changes the female body goes through over time and the nature of sexual activity. A floral metaphor was used to explain this further: the virgin is the flower, the married woman bears the fruit, and the widow is the foliage (the author remarks that “[s]ome men prefer flowers, some, fruit, and others, foliage”). The work is largely ageist and misogynistic.³⁰ Summing up its presentation of two different forms of female body, Miller (2010, p.143-144) states:

When this monstrous body is a female body whose boundary violations are inextricable from the corporeal processes germane to reproduction, birth, and individuation, the effacement between matter and sign produces a paradigmatic uncanny reading-effect because the boundaries of the self are shaped and buttressed precisely within the margins of this division. The stability of the self depends on this fissure, and the monstrous female body is animated by measures that reinforce it: the transformation of female corporeality into text, the construction of sign systems that designate in female flesh and fluids disorder, pollution, and decay, the fetishization of female beauty and virginity, the demonization of the old and post-menopausal body, the manipulation of “women’s secrets.” These techniques are among those in operation in late-medieval texts grappling with the monstrous female body.

²⁶ Originally: “Nota quod quando mulier incipit inpregnari, cauendum est ne nominetur coram ipsa hoc quod non possit haberi, quod si postulauerit et non detur ei, dat occasionem abortiendi” (Green, 2001, p. 94-96)

²⁷ The concept of the mother’s mark is also discussed further by Angela Florschuetz in *Marking Maternity in the Middle English Romance - Mothers, Identity, and Contamination*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

²⁸ Green, 2001, p. 97

²⁹ Green, 2001, p. 95

³⁰ ‘On the Old Woman (*De Vetula*)’ In: *Appendix Ovidiana - Latin Poems Ascribed to Ovid in the Middle Ages*. Ralph Hexter; Laura Pfuntner; Justin Haynes (translators). Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 2020, p. 145, l. 110. Originally: “Eligit hic flores, hic fructus, illeque frondes.” (Ovid, 2020, p. 144, l. 110)

Miller uses the word “uncanny” to relate to the medieval perception of the female body primarily by male authors. The theory of the Uncanny (das Unheimlich) as developed by Freud in his 1919 essay relates to the fear and dread of seeing something familiar that is somehow strange. Barbara Creed (2007, p. 53) has used the categories issued by Freud to relate to the fear of the maternal and women bodies. As the author discusses, Freud’s Uncanny theory falls into three main categories:

- (i) - those things which relate to the notion of a double: a cyborg; twin; doppelganger; a multiplied object; a ghost or spirit; an involuntary repetition of an act. (ii) - castration anxieties expressed as a fear of the female genitals or of dismembered limbs, a severed head or hand, loss of the eyes, fear of going blind. (iii) - a feeling associated with a familiar/unfamiliar place, losing one’s way, womb phantasies, a haunted house.

Following Creed, in this thesis I am concerned with castration anxiety and fear of female genitals. Not only can this be observed in medieval literature as one of the main fears relating to mothers and women in general, but it also explains the obsession we find across my fictional narratives and medical texts with the vagina and reproductive processes. The vagina becomes an unfamiliar and (according to Aristotle) a deformed body part where the threshold between life and death is blurred. The gynaecological uncanny, however, is not interchangeable with the abject. The uncanny represents that which creates strangeness even though it is familiar (or known), whereas the abject needs to be expelled from the self to restore order. I will return to the question of the Uncanny and its relation to abjection in Chapter Two in discussion of the narratives of *Merlin* and *Alexander*.

Another key text presenting medical practices and ideas in relation to women’s bodies was *De Secretis Mulierum* (*On the Secrets of Women*) written in the late 13th or early fourteenth century, most probably by one of the followers of Albertus Magnus. The “women’s secrets” contained in the book range from a variety of subjects including astrology, reproduction, the development of foetuses, and women’s health. The author has a more philosophical approach than a medical one in the work. According to Helen Lemay (1992, p. 16), *De Secretis* was probably intended for a clerical audience. However it may have circulated through universities and teaching institutions in the beginning of the fourteenth century. The view of women offered is notably misogynistic. As Lemay (1992, p. 16) explains: “A strong subtext of the *Secrets* [...] is the evil nature of women

and the harm they can cause to their innocent victims: young children and their male consorts. Clearly, then, another purpose of this treatise is to malign the female sex [...]”.

One of its most important chapters is entitled “Concerning Monsters in Nature,” (*De monstro in natura*) where the author (1992, p. 112) explains how monsters (or errors in nature) are formed: “[...] monsters or errors in nature are those individuals of a certain species which in a certain part of their body are outside the bounds of the common course of the nature of the species, just as can be seen in men having only one foot or only one hand, etc.”³¹ The author explains that a lack of “matter” might cause a child to be incompletely formed. Matter in this case refers to the seed of the parents: the semen for men and menstruation blood or “menses” for women. Despite the matter being the conjunction of both seeds, the author (p. 114) explains how “the scarcity of matter is caused by the womb,” so blame is placed on the female partner. The author gives other reasons as to why monsters can be created besides the scarcity of matter, such as the womb being poorly disposed, or the development of a foetus negatively impacted by certain sexual positions, but the foregrounding of the womb lays most emphasis on the female role.³²

Astrological elements that could influence birth were also of concern since they could cause another type of medieval monster: a multiple birth (here twins):

Albert tells us that just as monstrous bodies are created, so are monstrous spirits. He gives the example of twins, one of whom had the power in his right side that no matter where he was carried, he opened all bars and closings. And the other had the power in his left side of closing all the locks that had been opened. (I am referring to the opening and closing of bars in the doors of houses.) The cause of this does not come from the matter, but from a special constellation of the heaven. But it does not derive from the constellation alone, but also from a special disposition of the matter to receive the impression, because active agents act only on matter that has been well prepared [...]
(Lemay, 1992, p. 117-118)

Multiple births and the dualization of nature in Chapter One, as discussed by Aristotle in *Historia Animalium*, is of particular significance for my understanding of the medical contexts of *Mélusine ou La Noble Histoire de Lusignan*, which features a triple birth from a fairy.

Although *De Secretis* was influential in the medieval period, its reception was not

³¹ Originally: “[...] monstra sive peccata in natura vocantur illa individua alicujus speciei, quae in aliqua parte corporis cursum communem illius speciei excedunt, sicut contingit videri in hominibus habentibus nisi unum pedem, vel tantum unam manum, & sic de aliis.” (Albertus Magnus (attributed). *De secretis mulierum. Item, de virtutibus herbarum, lapidum et animalium*. Amstelodami: Apud Henricum et Theodorum Boom, 1669.)

³² Lemay, 1992, p. 113-114

always positive. For instance, it was criticized by Christine de Pizan in *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1982, p. 22) for containing “lies” against women and for considering women to be defective versions of men:

“I know another small book in Latin, my lady, called the *Secreta mulierum*, The Secrets of Women, which discusses the constitution of their natural bodies and especially their great defects.” She replied, “You can see for yourself without further proof, this book was written carelessly and colored by hypocrisy, for if you have looked at it, you know that it is obviously a treatise composed of lies. Although some say that it was written by Aristotle, it is not believable that such a philosopher could be charged with such contrived lies. For since women can clearly know with proof that certain things which he treats are not at all true, but pure fabrications, they can also conclude that the other details which he handles are outright lies.”³³

Similarly, some of the romances I chose, resist such implications whilst maintaining a distance from the discussion of women’s sexuality, although, I argue, they nonetheless make use of aspects of these traditions. The way women (and mothers) are perceived in these romances is an amalgamation of social, political and cultural aspects grounded in earlier philosophical, theological and medical texts but also responsive to more immediate social and cultural, as well as wider generic, influences.

Perhaps the most extreme reception of these medical traditions is found in a category of text related to medieval understandings of women’s health, and, like romance, engaged with the relationship between women and magic: witch treatises. A key example of such a text is the *Malleus Maleficarum*. While the *Malleus* mentions that those of any sex can be found guilty of sorcery, it states that women are most likely to be found committing such sins against God, and that this has commonly been understood to be for three reasons (2009, p. 164). The first and the third are largely matters of faith and emotion: women are more superstitious than men and prone to believing in fantastical ideas, this way it was believed their faith was corrupted more easily; and women cannot keep secrets from each other and will try to seek revenge against one another using sorcery where they lack physical strength. The second reason is the most significant for my purposes: because of the flux (menstruation) women are of unstable temperament,

³³ Originally: “Je connais un autre petit livre en latin qu’on appelle Du Secret des femmes et qui maintient qu’elles sont frappées de grands défauts en leurs fonctions corporelles.” Elle me répondit : “L’expérience de ton propre corps nous dispensera d’autres preuves. Ce livre relève en effet de la plus haute fantaisie; c’est un véritable ramassis de mensonges, et pour qui l’a lu, il est manifeste qu’il n’y a dans ce traité rien de vrai. Et bien que certains disent qu’il est d’Aristote, l’on ne peut croire qu’un si grand philosophe soit permis de telles énormités. Mais parce que les femmes peuvent savoir par expérience que certaines choses dans ce livre n’ont aucune réalité et qu’elles sont de pures bêtises, elles peuvent en déduire que les autres points qu’il expose sont autant de mensonges patents.” (Christine de Pizan. *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*. Éric Hicks; Thérèse Moreau (eds). Paris: Stock, 2000, p. 53)

and are particularly vulnerable to the influences of spirits, both good and evil. The influence of evil spirits inspires terrible acts, including the sacrifice of infants (a key motif developed in the *Malleus* that informed later imaginings of the witches' sabbath):

There are others who give different reasons for why women are found to be superstitious in larger numbers than men, and they say that there are three reasons. The first is that they are prone to believing and because the demon basically seeks to corrupt the Faith, he assails them in particular. Hence Ecclesiasticus 19[:4]: "He who quickly believes is fickle in heart and will be made small." *The second reason is that on account of the tendency of their temperament towards flux they are by nature more easily impressed upon to receive revelations through the impression of the disembodied spirits, and when they use this temperament well, they are very good, but when they use it badly, they are worse.* The third reason is that they have loose tongues and can hardly conceal from their female companions the things that they know through evil art, and since they lack physical strength, they readily seek to avenge themselves secretly through acts of sorcery. Hence, "It will be more pleasing to stay with a lion and a snake than to live with an evil woman. All evil is small compared to the evil of a woman." [...] The following reason can likewise be added. *Since they are prone to flux, they can more quickly offer children to the demons, as in fact they do.*³⁴

(My emphasis)

The *Malleus* makes use of a much commented upon medical concern regarding the polluting properties of postmenopausal women (discussed further in Chapter Three in relation to *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*). After menopause the flux would be considered "retained" inside the body and therefore poisonous to others. It is explicitly declared (p. 113-114) that "when a soul is strongly impelled in the direction of evil, as happens to old women in particular, the sight of her is rendered poisonous and harmful in this manner, especially for children, who have tender bodies that are easily receptive of an impression."³⁵ This is one among the many medical contexts that finds a place in both medieval romance and witch theory. The fictional narratives I analyse often provide examples of scenarios later explained, with a mind to extra textual magical

³⁴ Originally: "Sunt et alij alias rationes assignantes, cur in maiore multitudine reperiantur femine superstitiose quam viri, et dicunt esse tres causas. Prima est: quia prone sunt ad credendum, et quia principaliter demon querit corrumpere fidem, ideo potius eas aggreditur, vnde et Ecclesiastici xix: "Qui cito credit, levis est corde et minorabitur." Secunda causa est quia a natura propter fluxibilitatem complexionis facillioris sunt impressionis ad reuelationes capiendas per impressionem separatorum spirituum, qua complexione etiam cum bene vtuntur, multum bone sunt, cum male, peiores sunt. Tertia causa, quia lubricam habent linguam et ea que mala arte sciunt eisa comparibus feminis vix celare possunt, seque occulte, cum vires non habeant, per maleficia vindicare querunt facilliter, vnde Ecclesiastici xxv (ut supra) "Commorari leoni et draconi plus placebit quam habitare cum muliere nequam. Brevis omnis malitia super malitiam mulieris." Item potest et addi: illec cum fluxibiles sunt, ideo citius pueros demonibus offerre possunt, sicut et faciunt." (Henricus Institoris; Jacobus Sprenger. *Malleus Maleficarum. The Latin Text and Introduction*. Christopher Mackay. (ed) v. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 236)

³⁵ Originally: "Sic igitur cum aliqua anima fuerit vehementer com mota ad malitiam, sicut maxime vetulus contingit, efficitur secundum modum predictum aspectus eius venenosus et noxius, et maxime pueris, qui habent corpus tenerum et de facili receptium impressionis." (Mackay, 2009, p. 236)

realities, in writings on witchcraft. As I aim to demonstrate in this thesis, the representation of monstrous maternity in the key romance texts explored in this work anticipates subsequent theories of witchcraft, especially in relation to women's bodies, supernatural encounters, and the operations of magic, witchcraft, and the fine line between the two.

The thesis

In the following chapters of this thesis, I interrogate the narrative presentation of monstrous maternity, reading my chosen romance texts alongside contemporary political, medical, and theological contexts. Some of the characters are based on real-life women, but in these instances the boundaries between fact and fiction are deliberately blurred. Key tropes developed and repeated include women's doubleness, hybridity, and mutability; demonic pregnancies; and mother's involvement in the growth and sometimes the closure of dynastic lines. We will also encounter examples of women from the loathly lady tradition who mirror anxieties both about women's access to knowledge and about the post-menopausal body.

Within my chosen narratives, the mother figure is marked by doubleness: on one hand she is the founder of dynastic lines and creator of life; on the other she is an amalgamation of confusion and pollution, a changing body that defiles and transgresses the male order. The mother's body is a space of fear and disorientation; what is natural to it (openings, orifices, blood, and milk) is seen as abject to the male patriarchal order. Moreover, bodily transgressions (e.g. childbirth, menstruation etc), necessary for the creation of life, are taken as evidence of duplicity, distortion and deception.

Mothers appear widely across the medieval romance tradition, as do women linked to ideas of magic and the supernatural. In this thesis, I concentrate on a selection of texts which, between them, focus on different aspects of monstrous maternity. I approach my material thematically, under the following headings: The Monstrous Body, The Demonic Pregnancy, The Magical Stepmother and The Proto-Witch Mother. I examine both Middle English material, and the French material to which it is related. My corpus comprises: *Mélusine*, *Richard Coeur de Lion*, *Merlin*, *Sir Gowther*, *Alexander (Fragment A)*, *William of Palerne*, and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, as well as representations of Medea in Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate: works of classical

reception which I understand as thematically aligned with romance.³⁶

My first chapter analyses the characters of Mélusine in *The Noble History of Lusignan* and Cassiodorien in *Richard Coeur de Lion*, both founders of distinguished dynasties (the houses of Lusignan and Plantagenet), and as such mothers of their own particular offspring and an entire lineage. They also possess the hybrid body, or positionality, characteristic of the medieval monster. As Frederika Bain (2017, p. 35) argues, hybridity of this type often functions as a misogynistic indicator of duality in women. In their dual form (or in the case of Mélusine, triple form: fay, woman and serpent) these bodies surpass the boundaries of the natural. I argue that the authority granted to the dynastic supernatural mother is her greatest source of power in the narrative, and that this is directly connected to the difficulties she presents in terms of her categorisation. Much of the fear the monstrous mother inspires stems from a fear of a female power that transcends male authority and classification.

In Chapter Two, I study mothers who have human bodies but whose relationships with supernatural entities (unions which produce remarkable offspring) rest on a wider narrative association of women's sexuality with the supernatural. My focal characters are the mothers of Alexander, Merlin and Sir Gowther. These mothers have a relationship (always non-consensual) with a demonic or fairy (quasi-demonic) figure, giving birth to a child who embodies demonic (or supernatural) qualities and is thus representative of the fear of demonic interference in reproduction. By exploring the repercussions of this relationship, both the power imbalance, the non-consensual act, the supernatural nature of the relationship, and the subsequent demonization of the mother herself in the romance, I discuss how this particular representation of gendered Otherness and abjection establishes a distinctive perception of supernatural maternity.

My third chapter considers the supernatural stepmother. She may not be the mother who generates the narratives' offspring, but she is the one who controls them. The stepmother is especially important when her narrative foil is another woman, such as in the case of *William of Palerne*, *The Marriage of Sir Gawain* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*. Here I detect concerns about end of dynastic lines and disputes of dynastic inheritance, as well as (in *Ragnelle*) anxieties about the postmenopausal female body. Across this material we see the relationship of supernatural

³⁶ For discussion of the relationship between classical reception and Middle English romance see Bridges, Venetia. 'Trojan Trash? The Seege or Batayle of Troye and the Learning of 'Popular' Romance', In: *Cultural Translations in Medieval Romance*. Victoria Flood; Megan Leitch (eds). Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2022, p. 153-172.

(step)mothers to societal fears concerning second marriages and related economic anxieties. Here, we see a dialogue between Kristeva and Butler, where the idea of the essential mother collapse into the culturally constructed mother (the stepmother).

In my final chapter, I discuss the Medea tradition as a case study of the “Proto-witch” mother: a character with magical abilities referred to as enchantress or sorceress who exemplifies a male fear of female authority and knowledge, thereby becoming abject. Whilst Medea is not described as a witch, I argue that her presentation anticipates changing attitudes towards witchcraft in the fifteenth century, and a fear of Otherness which is both gendered and cultural and is found also in the texts discussed in Chapter One.

In this thesis I will explore the construction of maternal characters in medieval romances and discuss their narrative characteristics as these relate to anxieties surrounding bodily transformation, hybridity and transgressions which are at once felt throughout the Middle Ages and highly historically specific in their individual textual manifestations. By focusing on mother characters and the construction of anxieties surrounding the maternal body, this thesis argues that romances from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries anticipate aspects of witch theories and discussions seen in treatises written in the fifteenth century. While I do not mean to suggest that romance was an active influence on later theological works about diabolism and witchcraft, both romance and treatise share a distinct set of anxieties around women’s perceived Otherness, bodily pollution, and the threat female authority presents to patriarchal order.

Chapter One
The Monstrous Body:
Abject maternity in *Mélusine* and *Richard Coeur de Lion*

This chapter focuses on the hybrid bodies and progeny of two monstrous mothers. It explores the presentation of supernatural maternity in Jean d'Arras's *Mélusine* (1392-1394) and the A-text of the Middle English romance *Richard Coeur de Lion* (fourteenth / fifteenth century; dating discussed further below). The correspondences between these romances reveal a set of anxieties related to pregnancy and bodily transgression shared by English and French authors writing in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The physical, psychological, and moral presentation of each of the two marvellous women here detailed is suggestive not only of the far-reaching influence of medieval medical and folkloric understandings of motherhood and pregnancy, but also their political applications, not least concerning foreign-born royal or aristocratic wives. Both texts have common Latin sources (discussed below), and at least one critic (Flood, 2024) has argued that the demon mother narrative of *Richard Coeur de Lion* can be considered a distinctive “reversioning” of the *Mélusine* legend. In my discussions of *Mélusine*, I focus on the French version of the romance as I am concerned with the most immediate geographical and dynastic aspects of the development of *Mélusine*.

Mélusine is an account of a woman who is half fairy and half human, who, after being cursed by her mother to become half woman and half serpent every Saturday must marry a Christian man who swears not to see her on Saturday, and, if he were to do so, must not chastise her for what he sees. After giving the man many children (each one with physical characteristics that symbolize the mother's otherness), the woman is betrayed and shamed by her husband and turns into a flying serpent. Cassiodorien, in *Richard*, is an eastern princess who marries an English king and gives him children but becomes the focus of suspicion after members of the court notice how the queen never attends mass. She is forced to witness the elevation of the host, reveals herself as a demonic creature, and flies away taking her daughter with her.

My approach in this chapter is informed primarily by Julia Kristeva's (1980) understanding of abjection as concerns the maternal body. Abjection, according to Kristeva, is that which is culturally rejected from the self, be it something symbolic or literal, such as fluids, excrement, or blood.³⁷ The word itself means to “cast out”

³⁷ Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024, p. 13

something (“ab”-“ject”). The author explains that abjection is everything that threatens the self and needs to be expelled to maintain order. Abjection is sometimes only considered what is “unclean”, such as excrement or bodily fluids but the author explains that the meaning of the word goes beyond that: abjection is all that poses a threat to the already established order.

I relate the meaning of the abject, as explored in this thesis, to maternity, a topic also observed by the author. Kristeva, drawing on Louis-Ferdinand Céline, depicts a specific model of maternal abjection in which the mother, as a giver of life, is a representative of death as well. She states (2024, p. 162): “The mother gives us life but without infinity.” This framework can be used to explain, from a social point of view, how mothers are revered at the same time as they are shamed and rejected. In the romances examined in this chapter, magical creatures that potentially signify demonic origins and spiritual danger are crucial in the endorsement of their sons as powerful kings and conquerors and provide dynastic authorisation. They possess bodies that cannot be categorised – a monstrous hybridity that gives them an authority that threatens the existing (male) order and thereby makes them abject, even as they birth a new generation of (male) rulers.

The mothers explored in this chapter can also be understood in relation to ideas of postcolonial hybridity, as discussed by Homi Bhabha (2004). Bhabha suggests the fear of hybridity is rooted in its power to reveal the limitations of colonial authority, frustrating attempts at classification: “Hybridity represents that ambivalent ‘turn’ of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification – a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority.” (2004, p. 162). This fear is apparent in both texts, since both mothers explored in this chapter are foreigners to their new court, turning them not only into bodily hybrids but into cultural hybrids as well.

As Caroline Walker Bynum (2001, p. 30) details, a hybrid is a double being, an entity of parts, two or more. It is an inherently visual form, a way of making two-ness, and the simultaneity of two-ness, visible. Mélusine and Cassiodorien’s hybrid nature stems from their foreign origins: Mélusine of Albanie (generally translated as Scotland, as I do here, although one critic has read this as a reference to the medieval kingdom of Albania) is part woman, part fairy and part serpent, and Cassiodorien of Antioch is a Muslim-coded princess capable of transforming herself into a flying creature when

presented with the Eucharist.³⁸ Their transgressions of bodily and geographical containment (both leave the kingdom of their birth to begin a new dynastic line) are representative of cultural anxiety and categorisation of the Other as monstrous, and by being feminine creatures, their geographical alterity is increased by their gender. I read the mothers examined in this chapter as monstrous beings used by medieval authors to make sense of points of difference: in this context, the woman and the foreigner. The abject mother is the personification of cultural anxieties of this type precisely because maternity is in some way informed by a doubleness and/or a state of hybridity, for, as discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, from an Aristotelian perspective femininity is itself monstrous.

Both central female characters are the founders of their dynastic line. This fact both underlines a mother's necessity for a child's conception but also raises issues of paternal inheritance and thus Aristotelian and Galenic theories of the male and female seed. Aristotle posits the semen as the principal generator of an organism. For him, the female body is the producer of the matter (the menstrual blood), and it is the male seed that produces the animation (the spirit) necessary for the creation of life.³⁹ The female seed, however, would seem to be particularly significant in *Mélusine*. After all, the text's author, Jean d'Arras, was obliged to explain how the Lusignan line stood in direct inheritance from its marvellous fairy ancestor. Therefore, he invoked the Galenic discourse of the two-seed theory, where the mother is seen to be as much responsible for the conception of the child as the father. Peggy McCracken (2003, p. 90) discusses the anxiety of monstrous descent (pertaining to the mother's blood) and the threat of the mother's contribution to the lineage. The author uses *Mélusine* as an example since the narrative details concerning about what the mother's blood (or seed) means in relation to (male) dynastic succession:

Stories that include false rumors of monstrous births represent the mother's contribution to lineage as a threat to the father's bloodline, or, in the *Mélusine*

³⁸ For a discussion of 'Albanie' as Albania, see Burns, E. Jane. "A Snake-Tailed Woman - Hybridity and Dynasty in the Roman de Mélusine". In: *From Beasts to Souls: Gender and Embodiment in Medieval Europe*. Burns, Jane E.; McCracken, Peggy (eds.). University of Notre Dame Press, 2013.

³⁹ "Aristotle himself had argued against the existence of a female seed precisely because its existence made parthenogenesis possible." (Elliot, Dyan. *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999, p. 57); "Now male and female differ in respect of their logos, in that the power or faculty possessed by the one differs from that possessed by the other; but they differ also to bodily sense, in respect of certain physical parts. They differ in their logos, because the male is that which has the power to generate in another (as was stated above), while the female is that which can generate in itself, i.e., it is that out of which the generated offspring, which is present in the generator comes into being." (Aristotle. *Generation of Animals*. Jeffrey Henderson (ed). A. L. Peck (translator). Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 1942, p. 11-13)

story, as a threat to the father's seed, his *germe*. In these stories mother's blood explains something about descent or about lineage. And the concern about the value of a mother's blood is part of an anxious negotiation of the rhetoric of parental ties and parental privilege. Or to put this another way, stories about monstrous birth debate the figural or explanatory value of mother's blood.

Placing the mother in the foreground of dynastic history could be used to good effect, as in Scotland's tracing of its origins to the Egyptian princess, Scota, and her Greek husband, Gaythelos (Wingfield, 2013, p. 10), but ideas of matrilineal descent could also prove problematic in instances where mothers offer less than ideal models for the future. As Patrick Geary (2006, p. 21) discusses, by giving a dynasty a clear origin through a woman, masculine authority loses its power:

And women in genealogies tended to be particularly problematic: whence came they? If the *origo* was constructed as descended from a common male ancestor, then the women on whom the genealogy of males began were necessarily alien and thus possibly threatening to the identity of the *stirps* or *gens*. But if the *gens* took its origin from a woman, or if a ruler could only base his legitimacy on descent from an illustrious lineage through a woman, then to what extent could the representation of the past serve as model for the future?

These anxieties were compounded by the monstrous instability of the maternal body as we find this in medieval theories of conception engaged with foetal malformation. For example, *De Secretis Mulierum* (*On the Secrets of Women*), a late thirteenth/early fourteenth century study on the bodies of women, contended that the overall health of the child from their conception to their birth could be influenced by factors such as planet alignment or nature. However, internal factors, such as the menses and the displacement of the womb, could corrupt the foetus.⁴⁰ The alterity of women's bodies and their specific pollutions (menstruation, childbirth, menopause, etc), was also connected to understandings of the ways in which supernatural influence could meddle with women's imaginations and by extension the health of the impressionable foetus. The writings of Aristotle and later Thomas Aquinas viewed women as inferior to men and therefore more susceptible to demonic or supernatural interventions (ideas which were later reused in the *Malleus Maleficarum*). The evolution of these medical and theological concepts contributed to what Mary C. Flannery calls "shamefastness", a feeling of hypervigilance towards one's body practiced by women to maintain their honour, a practice that I suggest informs the behaviour of these two romance mothers.⁴¹

⁴⁰ See chapter II: On the Formation of the Fetus and Chapter XI: Concerning a Defect of the Womb In: *Women's Secrets A Translation of De Secretis Mulierum by Albertus Magnus*. Helen R. Lemay (translator). Albany: University of New York Press, 1992

⁴¹ "Shamefastness is not an emotion, but is rather a disposition towards and susceptibility to shame: a state of vigilance that simultaneously guards one against shame and makes one more sensitive to it. Medieval

The mothers in these romances have to navigate shame when their alterity is exposed: Mélusine is shamed by Raymondin on account of her hybrid body and “mother marked” offspring, and Cassiodorien is shamed by King Henry’s court for not going to mass and consuming the Eucharist (revealing herself as a demon and inspiring horror and abjection). I suggest that they are also implicitly shamed for being foreigners, a detail that racializes the mother figure, and links, as mentioned above, to post-colonial theories of hybridity.⁴² Kristeva writes that the abject “does not respect borders, positions, rules.” (p. 4), inspiring a fear “elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory.” (p. 6). Even as dynastic mothers, revealed as abject, the hybrids Mélusine and Cassiodorien are not, in the final instance, recognised as “kin”.

The fairy mother Mélusine

The medieval fairy, as explained by James Wade (2011), is an ambiguous being, neither angelic nor demonic, coming from the Otherworld, a place which does not follow human laws, either physical or sociological. Corinne Saunders (2010) writes:

The faery rewrites classical notions of gods and daimons in the idea of beings with supernatural powers, and draws too on legends of the Germanic and Celtic gods, as well as on folk beliefs in a range of supernatural creatures, often associated with the natural world – in particular spirits of the air or elves. [...] The world of faery is a conventional feature of romance: it presents a parallel sphere of marvellous adventure and is often the provenance of enchanters and enchantresses, and of magical objects. It is literally the otherworld, tangential, a place into which anyone may step by chance, the inhabitants of which may stray into the human world.

Wade (2011, p. 1) suggests that “authors used fairies to explore issues and achieve narrative effects that could not be accomplished in any other way.” This includes, I suggest, dynastic authorisation. Mélusine, the serpentine fairy of Poitevin folklore, appears as the legendary ancestor of the house of Lusignan from the fourteenth century onwards, framing the family’s claim to territorial holdings in central France and across the Low Countries, the Mediterranean, and Armenia. Her story was told across several

literature reveals shamefastness to be a mandatory matter of practice for honourable women, something to be interiorized through reflection and mindfulness, and exteriorized through specific conventional gestures and behaviours.” (Flannery, Mary C. *Practising shame - Female honour in later medieval England*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020, p. 3)

⁴² Dana Oswald (2010, p. 116) comments on the problems of bodily transformations and anxieties around miscegenation which can be also found in John Mandeville’s *Travels* (a work that also features supernatural women and magical pregnancies): “The gendered monsters of one of the most popular travel narratives of the period, *Mandeville’s Travels*, represent a new kind of threat to English identity and to the body: the danger of transformation, invisibility, and the miscegenation that results from these new bodily states.”

centuries, and in different countries, with texts mostly associated with, and/or patronised by, royal and aristocratic families who claimed to be descendants. There were English, French, Spanish, Dutch and German versions of the character, and each version had particularities relating to the local culture. As Lydia Zeldenrust (2020, p. 2) notes:

From the beginning, the story of Mélusine has been a popular read. The earliest text to give this half-serpent lady the name ‘Mélusine’ was Jean d’Arras’s *Mélusine* or *La noble histoire de Lusignan* (HM), created around 1393. Less than a decade later – in 1401 – Jean’s prose romance was rewritten as a poem entitled the *Roman de Parthenay* (RP) by Coudrette. If the dates and number of surviving manuscripts are anything to go by – fifteen manuscripts and fragments for the HM, twenty for the RP – both versions had a continuing appeal with fifteenth- and sixteenth-century audiences. However, Mélusine’s popularity did not limit itself to the French versions alone, as the romance was also translated into several other languages.

John, the Duke of Berry, son of King John II of France commissioned the earliest version of the romance from Jean d’Arras and claimed to be a descendant of the house of Lusignan through his mother, Bonne of Luxembourg. As Jean d’Arras (2012, p. 19) states in the prologue:

[...] I beseech His High Dignity that I may achieve it to His glory and praise, and to the satisfaction of my exalted, powerful, and respected lord, Jean, son of the King of France, Duke of Berry and of Auvergne, Count of Poitou and of Auvergne. I have based this story on the true chronicles I have received, both from him and from the Count of Salisbury in England, and on several other books that have come to light.⁴³

Not much is known of Jean d’Arras’ biography, beyond his acquaintance with two famous literary patrons of the time as he explains in his work’s prologue (alongside the Duke of Berry, he names John Montagu, 3rd Earl of Salisbury). His text is an example of a genealogical or ancestral romance, narratives commonly commissioned by nobles to attest that their family descended from supernatural or divine beings through whom they claimed authority. The narrative was most immediately designed to demonstrate the right

⁴³ Originally: “Et pour ce au commencement de ceste hystoire je, cognoicent que je ne soye pas digne de lui requerir, supplie a sa haulte dignité que ceste hystoire je puisse achever a sa gloire et louenge et au plaisir de mon treshault, puissant et redoubté seigneur Jehan, filz de roy de France, duc de Berry et d’Ouvergne, conte de Poictou et d’ Auvergne, laquelle hystoire j’ay commencé selon les vrayes coroniquez que j’ai trovéz tant de lui comme du conte de Salbery en Angleterre, et plusieurs livres qui ont esté trovéz par ce que sa noble serour Marie, fille de Jehan, roy de France, duchesse de Bar, marquise du Pont, avoit supplié d’avoir la dicte hystoire a mon dessus dit seigneur, son treschier et amé frere, lyquelz a tant faict qu’il en a sceu au plus prez de la droite verité qu’il a peu.” (Jean d’Arras, Jean, *Mélusine, ou, La Noble histoire de Lusignan: roman du XIVE siècle traduction, présentation et notes par Jean-Jacques Vincensini*. Lettres Gothiques. Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2003, p. 110-112)

of the house of Lusignan to rule over newly conquered territory in Poitou, regained from the English during the Hundred Years' War.

Works exploring the meeting and eventual pregnancy of a fairy destined to become the ancestor of royal or noble lines can also be seen in early Latin works concerned with fairy folklore, such as Walter Map's *De nugis curialium* (*Courtiers' Trifles*; twelfth century) and Gervais of Tilbury's *Otia Imperialia* (*Recreation for an Emperor*; thirteenth century). As Victoria Flood (2024, p. 52-53) details, in *De nugis*, Map tells the story of Eadric Wild: "[...] who returning from a hunting trip passes through a forest and encounters a group of superhumanly large dancing ladies at a banqueting house (fata – fates or fairies). He rapes and eventually marries one of the fairies having children with her." In the *Otia*, Gervais recounts the tale of the Castle of L'Éparvier, which is remarkably similar not only to *Mélusine* but to the Cassiodorien narrative in the *Richard* romance discussed below.⁴⁴ As Laurence Harf-Lancner (1984, p. 83) notes, Gervais appears to make direct use of Provençal folklore and is likely to have been a direct source for Jean d'Arras. *Mélusine* attests the fairy as the progenitor of the royal line of the house of Lusignan and thus establishes the political and cultural setting for the noble house in the province of Poitou.

"The Melusinian scheme", as found in Latin sources, analogues, Jean d'Arras's narrative and subsequent romances, have been defined by Harf-Lancner (1984, p. 113) as follows:

- I. The encounter of the mortal and the fairy
 1. The hero leaves home alone or finds himself separated from his companions during a hunting party.
 2. He goes deep into the forest and arrives at a clearing, often near a watering hole.
 3. He discovers a wonderfully beautiful woman, alone, who seems to be waiting for him.
- II. The pact
 4. The young woman welcomes the hero's passionate declarations or confesses her love to him herself.
 5. She agrees to marry him or offers him her hand
 6. She sets a condition for their union: he must commit to respecting a taboo, the transgression of which would immediately put an end to their life together. The young man takes the requested oath.
 7. The marriage is celebrated; the married couple enjoys several years of opulence and happiness. They have beautiful children.
- III. The violation of the pact.
 8. An envious person persuades the hero to transgress the taboo, or the hero makes the fatal decision himself.
 9. The human husband transgresses the prohibition.
 10. He thus highlights the fairy nature of his wife.

⁴⁴Gervaise of Tilbury. *Otia Imperialia: Recreation for an Emperor*. S.E. Banks; J. W. Binns (translators). Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 665

11. The fairy disappears.
12. The children remain with their father. The fairy sometimes takes her daughters with her, but there is always a son left for the unfortunate hero, and the fairy's descendants among men are thus assured. The fairy sometimes shows herself to her children or descendants, to care for them or come to their aid.
13. The human husband loses with his wife the prosperity she had brought as a dowry. ⁴⁵

(my translation)

Jean d'Arras's *Mélusine* narrates the birth of a marvellous woman, the daughter of a fairy, who is cursed by her mother to become half-woman half-serpent every Saturday. The romance begins with the story of Elinas, the king of Scotland, and the fairy Presine, who met at a fountain in the middle of the woods. Before marriage, Presine tells Elinas that he must never see her in childbed, to which he agrees. When Presine gives birth to three daughters (Mélusine, Melior and Palestine), Elinas' first son from a prior relationship, Mataquas, advises his father to see the children, thus making him break the vow made to his wife and violate the sacred space of confinement. Presine departs with the children to the land of Avalon, where they grow up. The mother tells the daughters of their father's betrayal, and when they are fifteen, Mélusine, the oldest, devises a plan to murder Elinas as vengeance for what he did to their mother. They imprison Elinas in a mountain and leave him to die. Presine learns of the patricide afterwards, cursing the daughters to different destinies. Mélusine is cursed to change form every Saturday, becoming half serpent. She will need to marry a man who agrees never to see her bathing

⁴⁵ Originally : "I. La rencontre du mortel et de la fée

1. Le héros part de chez lui, seul, ou se trouve séparé de ses compagnons au cours d'une partie de chasse.
2. Il s'enfonce dans la forêt et parvient dans une clairière, souvent près d'un point d'eau.
3. Il découvre une femme merveilleusement belle, seule, qui semble l'attendre.
- I. Le pacte
4. La jeune femme accueille favorablement les déclarations enflammées du héros, ou lui avoue elle-même son amour.
5. Elle accepte de l'épouser ou lui offre sa main
6. Elle pose une condition à leur union : il doit s'engager à respecter un interdit, dont la transgression mettrait aussitôt fin à leur vie commune. Le jeune homme prête le serment demandé.
7. Le mariage est célébré ; les jeunes époux connaissent plusieurs années d'opulence et de bonheur. Ils ont de beaux enfants.
- II. La violation du pacte
8. Un envieux persuade le héros de transgresser l'interdit, ou le héros prend de lui-même la fatale décision.
9. L'époux humain transgresse l'interdit.
10. Il met ainsi en évidence la nature féerique de sa femme.
11. La fée disparaît.
12. Les enfants demeurent auprès de leur père. La fée entraîne parfois ses filles avec elle, mais toujours il reste un fils au malheureux héros, et la descendance de la fée parmi les hommes est ainsi assurée. La fée se montre parfois à ses enfants ou à ses descendants, pour les soigner ou leur venir en aide.
13. L'époux humain perd avec sa femme la prospérité qu'elle avait apportée en dot." (Harf-Lancner, 1984, p. 113)

on Saturdays, or she will never reach the kingdom of heaven, mirroring the vow made to her mother. Years later, a nobleman called Raymondin is hunting in the woods and accidentally kills his uncle. Wandering through the woods, he finds a fountain and sees Mélusine, who tells him she will solve his problems if he promises to marry her and never see her on Saturdays. Raymondin agrees, and after their marriage, the fairy builds the fortress of Lusignan. Mélusine and Raymondin have many children, and all their sons (except the last two) bear some kind of distinguishing physical mark. For instance, one of the sons has large ears, one has tusks in his mouth, and one is even a demonic child named Horrible. As the years pass, Raymondin keeps his promise until he is advised by his brother, the Count of Forez, of a suspicion that Mélusine hides every Saturday because she is engaged in carnal sin with another man.

This resembles the advice Mataquas gives Elinas to break Presine's vows. The advisor is always someone related to the man/human but not to the fairy. Their actions may have an additional (or actual) political intent since the removal of the fairy, and of her offspring from the line of succession, would open space for Mataquas or for the Count of Forez to become the new leader of the house or dynasty. The suspicion leaves Raymond⁴⁶ concerned, making him break his promise never to see his wife on a Saturday. Raymond looks at an opening through the door and sees Mélusine bathing in her cursed form:

Through the aperture Raymond could see everything in the room, including Melusine in the basin. Here, combing her hair, was a woman who from the navel down took the form of a massive serpent's tail, extremely long and as thick as a herring keg, and splashing the water so hard that it splattered the vaulting of the chamber.⁴⁷

(2012, p. 181).

A reimagining of David's spying upon Bathsheba, the scene can be read as highly sexualized if we regard Mélusine's serpentine form as the type of vulnerable state that we find in medieval literary representations of sexual voyeurism. As E. Jane Burns (1993, p. 109) discusses:

⁴⁶ After the birth of their first grandson, Hervé, Raymondin's name does not use the diminutive form anymore and starts being mentioned as Raymond. I believe Jean d'Arras uses this change to reflect on Raymond's maturity throughout the narrative as king, father and grandfather.

⁴⁷ "En ceste partie nous dist l'ystoire que tant vira et revira Remond l'espee qu'il fist un pertuis en l'uis par ou il pot adviser tout ce qui estoit dedens la chambre. Et voit Melusigne en la cuve, qui estoit jusques au nombril en' figure de femme et pignoit ses cheveulx, et du nombril en aval estoit en forme de la queue d'un serpent, aussi grosse comme une tonne ou on met harenc et longue faisoit saillir durement, et debatoit de sa coue l'eaue tellement qu'elle la jusques a la voulte de la chambre." (Jean d'Arras, 2003, p. 660)

The fetishized bodies of romance heroines are typically frozen in descriptions of isolated body parts, descriptions that most often descend from an initial focus on the woman's hair to a sustained look at the face and its features, passing quickly past the neck and chest to glimpse the hands and hips.

Madeline Harrison Caviness (2001, p. 2) details how "Christian culture reiterated many warnings against the dangers of looking at voluptuous women". The concern was chiefly with the effect of the woman's beauty upon the man, rather than the man's intrusion upon the woman. In the bathing scene in *Mélusine*, Raymond's gaze brings light to the monstrous body of his wife, and indeed, it is she who is here now most in danger of a permanent physical transformation.

Raymond instantly regrets breaking her trust but believes Mélusine is not aware of his treason: "[...] Raymond assumed she was unaware of what had happened. He was mistaken, for she knew everything; but since he had revealed it to no one, she pardoned him and gave no sign of it." (2012, p. 183).⁴⁸ The pardon is perhaps unexpected since the promise has been broken; however, the covenant between husband and wife may be stronger than in Presine's case. Raymond's betrayal is not enough to cause Mélusine to leave; rather, his subsequent shaming and sharing of the information is. Indeed, the problem is not Mélusine's monstrous body, but Raymond's public advertising of it. The problem of Raymond's transgression, as explained by E. Jane Burns (2013, p. 206):

The source of ethical infraction here is not Mélusine's seductive body or even her animalistic body. In fact, the problem it is not with her body at all (even though she has a tail) [...] Mélusine's bath is presented as a private locus of a hybrid woman's playful enjoyment, not sexualized indulgence or adulterous deception, as Raymond feared. The problem articulated in the Roman de Mélusine lies more squarely with Raymond's transgression [...]

Notably, the shaming of Mélusine happens not upon the visualization of her body but on account of her defence of her son. A few days after the betrayal, Geoffroy, Mélusine's son, learns that his brother Fromont decided to join the abbey of Maillezais to become a monk and is furious that his brother decided to join a religious order without his permission. Cursing the monks, Geoffroy decides to set the abbey on fire with all the monks inside, including his brother. When news of his violent deed reaches his father, Raymond becomes distressed, and Mélusine tries to comfort him by stating it was the will of God to punish those monks for their "lax and dissolute" ways (2012, p. 190). Raymond

⁴⁸ "Et quant Remond oit qu'elle ne lui parle de rien, si cuide qu'elle ne sache rien de ce fait. Mais pour neant le cuide, car elle scet bien tout, mais pour ce qu'il ne l'ot descouvert a nullui, elle s'en souffry et n'en monstra semblant." (Jean d'Arras, 2003, p. 664-666)

does not agree with her defence and proceeds to curse Mélusine for all that has happened. Raymond also curses his sons, saying they all have strange marks. Geoffroy's acts provoke Raymond to shame Mélusine and make public her hybrid form. Raymond reveals Mélusine's secret before the court, causing her to swoon after being seized with intense grief from his words:

“Ah! you deceitful serpent, by God, you and your deeds are nothing but phantoms, nor will any heir you have borne ever come to a good end! How can those who perished in agony have their lives restored to them, including your own son who had found solace in religion? Fromont was the only good being to issue from you. Now he has been destroyed through the malice of the devil, for anyone who is overcome by wrath acts at the behest of the princes of hell. That's obviously why Geoffroy committed such a dastardly, colossal, hideous crime, immolating his own brother and all those monks, none of whom deserved to die!” These words filled Melusine's heart with such pain that she collapsed in a swoon and remained unconscious for half an hour, during which no breath or pulse could be detected in her. Now Raymond was even more desperate than before; his rage had abated, but he was so consumed by grief that he almost went mad. He sorely regretted the harsh words he had spoken, but now there was nothing to be done; it was too late.⁴⁹

(p. 191)

The shaming of Mélusine is what causes her to leave Lusignan; she however, gives instructions before leaving regarding the care of her last two sons, Remonnet and Thierry. Mélusine also orders the killing of her son Horrible as the child has proved himself to be demonic. Mélusine then leaps from one of the windows and leaves Lusignan but not before transforming herself into her final draconic form:

[...] she metamorphosed into a massive dragon some fifteen feet in length. [...] In her dragon form she circled the fortress three times, and each time she flew past the window she uttered such an excruciating, desolate cry that everyone wept for pity, knowing that she was leaving under constraint and against her will. Then she disappeared in the direction of Lusignan, letting out such rueful shrieking and strident cries that wherever she passed it seemed as if lightning and thunder were about to split the sky. Thus Melusine departed toward Lusignan in the guise of a dragon, flying through the air, but not so high that the people below could not see her clearly and hear her from even farther away, and they were terrified by the spectacle and by her plaintive cries. She circled the town three times, crying out pathetically and shrieking her wild laments with a shrill female voice. Everyone up in the fortress and the townsfolk below were utterly confused to hear a lady's voice issuing from the mouth of a dragon. After circling the fortress three times, she perched on the Poitevin

⁴⁹ “Hee, tresfaulx serpente, par Dieu, ne toy ne tes fais ne sont que fantosme ne ja hoir que tu ayes porté ne vendra a bon chief en la fin. Comment raront les vies ceulx qui sont ars en grief misere ne ton filz qui s'estoit renduz au crucefix ? Il n'avoit yssi de toy plus de bien que Fromont. Or est destruit par l'art demoniacle, car tous ceulx qui sont forcennéz de yre sont ou commandement des princes d'enfer et par ce fi st Gieffroy le grant et horrible et hideux forfait d'ardoir son frere et les moines, qui mort ne avoient point desservie.” Quant Melusigne ouy ce mot, si ot tel doulour ou cuer qu'elle chey pasmee. Et fu bien demy heure qu'elle ne rendy ne que on ne senty en elle poux ne alaine. Lors fu Remond plus courrouciéz que devant et fu reffroidiez de son yre, et fist tel dueil que par pou qu'il ne se affouloit.” (Jean d'Arras, 2003, 692-694)

Tower, but so heavily and with such a violent commotion that those inside thought the whole fortress was falling asunder, and all the stones in the edifice began to shake. And then, very soon, she was gone, and they never found out what had become of her.⁵⁰

(Jean d'Arras, 2012, p.194-195).

The rest of the romance deals with Raymond's self-inflicted exile and the continuation of the adventures of Mélusine's sons. The mother only returns to Lusignan to care for Remonnet and Thierry (at this point, only the nursemaids can see her) or as an omen every time a member of the dynasty is about to die, or the fortress of Lusignan is to change hands.

The transformations of Mélusine's body are, as discussed by Kevin Brownlee (1996) representative of three transgressions in the narrative.⁵¹ The first transgression is caused by her father's death and her mother's subsequent curse. The second transgression happens when Raymond, breaking his oath, sees her half-woman-half-serpent body. The third and final transgression is occasioned again by Raymond who, by shaming her, forces her transformation into the flying serpent. The shaming of Mélusine is important for the discussion of motherhood since she is not only shamed for being monstrous but for being a mother as well: for Geoffroy's crimes and the mother's mark her sons bear.

Mélusine combines a perception of the fairy's simultaneous cultural Otherness and Christian faith with medical and folkloric perceptions of the mother's marks, breastfeeding, and maternal inheritance, as key, interconnected components of its dynastic vision. The mutations of the fairy's body operate in relation to the moral and even political transgressions that structure the romance, founded largely on the uneasy responses of other characters to the fairy's bodily transformations. By creating an interplay between the folklore motif of the fairy mother and political narratives, *Mélusine* presents the maternal body both as a site of corruption and transgression which is,

⁵⁰ "Et lors fist un moult douloureux plaint et un moult grief souspir, puis sault en l'air et laisse la fenestre et trespasse le vergier, et lors se mue en une serpente grant et grosse et longue de la longueur de .xv. piéz. [...] Lors a fait la dame, en guise de serpente comme j'ay dit dessus, trois tours environ la forteresse et a chascune foiz qu'elle passoit devant la fenestre, elle gectoit un cry si merueilleux et si douloureux que chascun en plouroit de pitié. Et appercevoit on bien qu'elle se partoît enviz du lieu et qu'elle s'en partoît par contraincte. Et adont print son chemin vers Lusegnen, menant si grant escroiz et si grant enfrente qu'il sembloit, partout ou elle passoit, que la foldre et la tempeste y deust cheoir. Ainsi comme je vous ay dit, s'en va Melusigne en guise de serpente vers Lusegnen, volant parmy l'air et non pas si hault que les gens du pays ne la veissent bien. Et l'oïuoient encores de plus loing, car elle s'en vient tel. doulour menant et faisant si grant escroiz que c'estoit grant hideur a veoir et a l'ouir. Et en estoient les gens du pays tous esbahiz. Et tant ala qu'elle vint a Lusegnen et l'avironna trois tours, et crioit moult piteusement, et resse et de la ville furent tous esbahiz et ne sgorent que penser, car ilz voient la figure d'une serpente et oïent la voix d'une dame qui yssoit de lui." (Jean d'Arras, 2003, p. 704 - 706)

⁵¹ Brownlee, Kevin. "Mélusine's Hybrid Body and the Poetics of Metamorphosis" In: *Mélusine of Lusignan: Founding Fiction in Late Medieval France*. Maddox, Donald; Sturm-Maddox, Sara. (eds). The University of Georgia Press, 1996, pp. 76 - 99

nonetheless, instrumental in subsequent dynastic expansion, both generationally and geographically.

The Christian Paradox and Paternal Transgressions

In the medieval period, fairies were directly associated by some authors with demons. As explained by Richard Firth Green (2016, p. 2): “[...] the default position of the clerical elite when it came to fairyland was one of unrelieved antagonism [...] and the official record is the story of an ever-increasing demonization of fairies and infernalization of fairyland throughout the course of the Middle Ages.” Yet in the case of Mélusine, it seems that fairy nature is treated more sympathetically, as fairies are capable of Christian belief and practice. In the prologue, Jean d’Arras asks the reader to consider fairy marvels as acts of God: “According to Aristotle, the rational creature of God should realize that invisible things, according to the distinctions among the entities created here below, attest to Him by their nature and manifestations.” (2012, p. 20).⁵² Accordingly, after Raymond first meets Mélusine, she insists that she is not a demonic entity and that she is capable of Christian belief:

I am on God’s side and believe everything a true Catholic must believe. And know for sure that without my help and advice you cannot succeed in what you undertake; whereas if you do believe in me, with God’s help all that your lord foresaw shall come to pass, and even more, for I shall make you the greatest and most lordly man of your entire lineage, and the most powerful!⁵³
(2012, p. 33)

As Lydia Zeldenrust (2020, p. 21) observes, Mélusine’s “hybridity is not necessarily in conflict with her Christian nature”. Indeed, as Jane Bonsall (2025) has argued, Mélusine’s Christianity and her hybridity might be seen as a holy paradox, reminiscent of the impossible body of the Virgin Mary, the ideal mother. Mary’s pregnancy was not considered abject like human pregnancies. According to Lucy M. Allen-Goss, the “ordinary” pregnant body, seen as polluted, constitutes grounds for shaming women whereas Mary’s body, as *theotokos*, is not seen as polluting, therefore,

⁵² “La creature de Dieu raisonnable doit entendre, selon que dit Aristote que des choses invisibles, selon la distinction des choses qu’il a faictes ca jus, et que par leur presence de leur estre et nature le certifie [...]” (Jean d’Arras, 2003, p. 114)

⁵³ “[...] je suiz de par Dieu et croy en tout quanque vraye catholique doit croire. Et saiches de certain que sans moi ne mon conseil tu ne pués venir a chief de t’emprise, et se tu me veulz croire, toutes les paroles que tes sires te dist te seront, a l’aide de Dieu, achevees, et plus qu’il ne t’en dist, car je te feray le plus seignoury et le plus grant qui oncques feust en ton lignaige et le plus puissant terrien.” (Jean d’Arras, 2003, p. 164)

not shameful.⁵⁴ Mélusine shares certain similarities with Mary, in that she is a marvellous woman with a body that works differently from that of ordinary women, and yet her relationship to this model remains complex.

Tania Colwell (2003, p. 190) suggests the narrative was influenced by the cult of the Virgin Mary and her presentation as the ideal mother, nurse, teacher, wife, etc, all of which roles Mélusine plays within her family in Lusignan. Mélusine represents an ideal motherhood in her treatment of her children, given that “Medieval women were often charged simply with the moral education of their children, since fathers, tutors, and members of other courts were generally entrusted with the military and pragmatic training of their sons.” (2003, p. 190). Yet despite the Virgin Mary being a supernatural mother, “[...] any assessment of Mélusine as an ideal mother is ostensibly challenged by the supernatural, monstrous status of the heroine.” (2003, p. 194).

Her human, rather than Marian, potential, is however significant within the narrative. Presine makes it clear that the power of Elinas’ seed (being human) would have drawn Mélusine and her sisters closer to human nature and, potentially, to salvation, making her leave the ways of fairies. She also states that if her husband respects the promise, she will die a natural death, thus becoming entirely mortal and so possessing the capacity to achieve a state of heavenly grace:

The power of your father’s seed would eventually have drawn you and your sisters toward his human nature, and you would soon have left behind the ways of nymphs and fairies forever. But I proclaim that henceforth every Saturday you shall become a serpent from the navel down. If, however, you find a man who wishes to marry you and will promise never to look upon you or seek you out on Saturday and never to speak of this to anyone, you shall live out your life as a mortal woman and die naturally.⁵⁵

(2012, p. 25)

This is paralleled after Raymondin breaks his promise and Mélusine has to live with the consequences:

Alas, if only you had not betrayed me, I would have been redeemed, exempted from pain and torment, and I would have lived out the full course of a mortal woman’s lifetime and died naturally. I would have received all the sacraments, and been buried in the Church of Our Lady in Lusignan, and every year mass

⁵⁴ Allen-Gross, Lucy M. Marian Maternity and Dysfunctional Pregnancy in the N-Town Nativity and the Digby Mary Magdalene. *Exemplaria*, v. 37, n. 2, 2025, p. 160

⁵⁵ “La vertu du germe de ton pere, toy et les autres, eust attrait a sa nature humaine et eussies esté briefment hors des meurs nimphes et faees sans y retourner. Mais, desormais, je te donne le don que tu seras tous les samedis serpente du nombril en aval. Mais se tu treuves homme qui te veulle prendre a espouse que il te convenance que jamais le samedi ne te verra, non qu’il te descuevre ne ne le die a personne’, tu vivras cours naturel comme femme naturelle et mourras naturellement, et non contretant de toy ystra noble lignie moult grant et qui feront de grans et haultes prouesses.” (Jean d’Arras, 2003, p. 134-136)

would have been celebrated in my memory. Now you have cast me back into the dark abyss of penance that had held me hostage for so long on account of one misdeed. And now I must endure and suffer it until Judgment Day, all because of your betrayal.⁵⁶

(p. 191-192)

Mélusine's paternal inheritance is foregrounded throughout the narrative since the romance begins with the description of her father, Elinas, who breaks the fairy taboo set by Mélusine's mother Presine, establishing Mélusine's story as a cycle of material and corporeal transgressions. Jean d'Arras (2012, p. 21) mentions in the prologue this sort of fairy taboo set by Presine and later Mélusine is not a novelty and that fairies usually always ask their lovers to make promises to them:

[...] the so-called fairies assume the form of very beautiful women, and that several men have married them, after making promises the women made them swear to: that their husbands would never see them naked; that they would not try to find out what became of them on Saturdays; or that, if they had children, their husbands would never see them in childbed.⁵⁷

The arbitrariness of the fairy taboo is a familiar romance trope,⁵⁸ but as James Wade (2011, p. 16) notes, Presine's has a particular underlying social logic or significance. While it "incorporates immediate and inordinately arbitrary consequences", Presine's demand that her husband not see her in childbed is "a taboo that picks up on the ritual uncleanliness of women in childbed". During the time after a child was born, known as the "laying-in period," a woman would be surrounded only by other women who would help her with the new function as a mother. Men were forbidden from entering the bedchamber at this time. Angela Florschuetz (2014, p. 8-9) notes: "For while there is a sense that the lying-in room is dangerous to men and masculinity, there is also a strong intimation of privilege associated with the lying-in room, a privilege men are neither

⁵⁶ "Las, mon amy, se tu ne m'eusses fausee je estoye gectee et exemptee de paine et de tourment. Et eusse vescu cours naturel comme femme naturelle et feusse morte naturellement et eu tous mes sacremens, et eusse esté ensevelie et enterree en l'eglise de Nostre Dame de Lusegnen, et eust on fait mon unniversaire bien et deuement. Or me ras tu embatue en la penance obscure ou j'avoye longtemps esté par ma mesaventure et ainsi la me fauldra porter et souffrir jusques au jour du Jugement et par ta faulsete." (2003, p. 694-696)

⁵⁷ "[...] Et dit encores que les dictes faees se mettoient en forme de tresbelles femmes, et en ont plusieurs hommes prinses pour moilliers, parmy aucunes convenances qu'elles leur faisoient jurer, les uns qu'ils ne les verroient jamais nues, les autres que le samedy n'enquerroient qu'elles seroient devenues; aucunes, si elles avoient enfans, que leurs maris ne les verroient jamais en leur gesine." (Jean d'Arras, 2003, p. 116)

⁵⁸ "A range of texts, including works like *Lanval* and *Melusine*, feature otherworld beings who impose taboos on their actual-world lovers. These taboos may seem random but, from the point of view of sustaining narrative interest, they make sense. A realm of completely unfettered sexual experience is not as interesting as a world where actions have consequences, and a plot needs complications to justify its existence." (Byrne, Aisling. *Otherworlds: Fantasy & History in the Medieval World*. Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 44)

invited nor welcome to share”. The prohibition speaks to a fear of pollution and, in some cases, even fear of supernatural causes since, at the time of pregnancy and labour, the woman was believed to be more susceptible to possessions by spirits. Florschuetz (2014, p. 20-21), commenting on the ritual of “churching” where, pregnant or postpartum women, would return to the church after being away from it during their pregnancy, states:

During the time of her confinement, a pregnant or postpartum woman was figuratively expelled from the Christian community as a sexual contaminant, refused admittance into sacred space, whether the church or (in some parishes) consecrated ground, and refused administration of holy rites. Still filled with the “bodily fluids of lustful generation,” the woman’s womb became doubly contaminated, by the presence of both the salacious liquids of intercourse and the menstrual material forming the matter of the unborn child and staining the sheets at birth. The humoral imbalances and sexual contamination related to childbirth necessitated churching and, in some cases, exorcism, as the pregnant woman was believed to be particularly vulnerable to demonic possession.

Another reason why Elinas was to be kept away from the bedchamber may relate to the specific nature of a triplet birth. Not only were twins or triplets considered unnatural, the appearance of multiple births in medieval literature is also a shameful detail, an indicator of infidelity, as it is seen in Marie de France’s *Lay La Freine*, where an adulterous mother gives birth to twins. It may be that this is what Mataquas expected Elinas to find, and suspect. The triplets in *Mélusine*, however, are symbols rather (or additionally) of alterity and hybridity. As Gabrielle M. Spiegel (1996, p. 104) suggests, Mélusine being a triplet already puts her into a monstrous category:

For Aristotle, twins are monstrous for two reasons. First because of their rarity, since Aristotle defines a monstrosity as that which belongs to the class of “things contrary to nature,” although it is contrary not to Nature in her entirety but only to Nature in the generality of cases. Twins are natural, therefore, in that they occur, if infrequently, in the natural course of human reproduction. But they are “monstrous” (second reason) in that they constitute anomalies not only by virtue of their rarity but because like, indeed, all animals that occupy more than one zoological category (seals, sea anemones, hermit crabs, ostriches, etc.) – they are said, in Aristotelian terms, to dualize. Twins “dualize” by confounding the categories animal/human.

If by Aristotelian rules twins dualize nature, then Presine’s daughters will triplicate it. Mélusine indeed assumes the triple forms of woman, serpent, and dragon.

Blood and Breastmilk

After Raymondin and Mélusine marry, she begins building the Lusignan fortress and their dynasty. The couple have ten children in total. Jean d'Arras's narrative turns its attention to the sons' adventures, crusades, and missions. When they grow up and become knights and kings, the children's most immediately notable features are their physicality. Each of Mélusine's sons inherits their mother's supernatural blood and are distinguished by physical features narrated in detail by Jean d'Arras.

Their firstborn son is Urian: "One of his eyes was red and the other dark. [...] He had the biggest ears anyone had ever seen on an infant; as he grew, they became as large as the handles of a winnowing basket." (2012, p. 48).⁵⁹ Urian later becomes the king of Cyprus. Eudes, follows as the second son who "[a]lthough one of his ears was immeasurably larger than the other, his limbs were all extremely handsome and well formed." (p. 69-70).⁶⁰ He grows to become Count of the Marche. The third son is Guyon, the future king of Armenia: "[...] he did have one eye higher than the other" (p. 70).⁶¹ The fourth son is Antoine, who later becomes the Duke of Luxembourg: "He was a large, well-formed specimen, but was born with a lion's paw birthmark on his left cheek, which before he was eight years old grew fur and sharp nails, causing him to be much feared." (p. 70).⁶² Renaud is the fifth son, and his description states that "[h]e had only one eye, but he could see extraordinarily well with it, things such as inbound ships and objects on land at a distance of some twenty-one leagues, which was three times farther than anyone else could see." (p. 70).⁶³ Renaud becomes the king of Bohemia.

Mélusine's sixth son, named Geoffroy, later becomes the more controversial. Initially we are told: "Because he was born with one tooth that jutted out of his mouth more than an inch, he was called Big-Tooth." (p. 71).⁶⁴ The seventh son is Fromont, who becomes a monk and is eventually killed by Geoffroy. Fromont's descriptions state that

⁵⁹ "Il fu baptisiéz et ot a nom Urien et saichiéz qu'il avoit les plus grans oreilles qui oncques feussent veues sur enfant, et au parcroistre, elles furent aussi grandes comme les manevelles d'un van." (Jean d'Arras, 2003, p. 218)

⁶⁰ "Et ot l'une oreille plus grande que l'autre sans comparoison, mais de tous membres il estoit beaulx a grant devise et bien forméz [...]" (p. 288)

⁶¹ "[...] il ot un ceil plus hault que l'autre." (p. 290)

⁶² "Grant fu et bien forméz de tous membres, mais il apporta en la senestre joe une pate de lyon et, ains que il eust .viii. ans, elle fu velue et les ongles trenchans." (p. 292)

⁶³ "Nul plus bel enfant ne pouoit on veoir, mais il n'apporta que un ceil sur terre, mais il en veoit si cler qu'il veoit venir par mer les nefes ou par terre autres choses, de trois veues, qui montent xxi. lieues." (p. 292-294)

⁶⁴ "Et apporta sur terre une dent qui lui yssoit hors de la bouche plus d'un pousse et fu nomméz Gieffoy au Grant Dent." (p. 294)

he “was quite handsome, despite a small spot on his nose covered with a tuft of hair, like the hide of a mole.” (p. 71).⁶⁵

The eighth son is Horrible: “He was monstrously large, had three eyes, one of them on his forehead, and was so wicked and cruel that before the age of four, he had killed two of his nurses.” (p. 71).⁶⁶ As mentioned above, Fromont and Horrible are the two sons that are killed in the narrative (one by his brother and the other at the order of Mélusine).

Mélusine and Raymondin have two more sons, Remonnet and Thierry, whose physical descriptions are not given. Remonnet will become the Count of Forez and Thierry the Lord of Parthenay.

Mélusine seems to have nursed all her sons, to which influence medieval audiences might have ascribed the children’s marks. Indeed, their physical marks relate to the medieval idea of the “mother’s mark.” As Florschuetz (2014, p. xv) summarises:

Classical and medieval medical texts refer to a biological phenomenon known as the “mother’s mark,” in which the evidence of a pregnant woman’s connection to her unborn child becomes visibly manifest upon her child’s body. The mother’s mark comes into being as a result of the mother’s state of mind either at the moment of conception or at some point during pregnancy. Made up of and nourished by its mother’s menstrual material, a substance increasingly treated as poisonous and corrupting from the thirteenth century on, the unborn child was seen as susceptible during pregnancy to the influence transmitted through this medium, and to some extent after birth through the medium of breast milk.

As stated by the same author, “the mother’s mark writes upon the child’s body the unruly and unpredictable content of his mother’s mind and emotions.” (p. xv). This is likely the reason Jean d’Arras focuses so much on the nursing aspect in the narrative. The children all have traces of the supernatural despite Mélusine being half human and despite their father being a human as well. Mélusine views nursing of the infants as a necessity, so much so that even her abandonment of Lusignan cannot keep her away from breastfeeding her youngest surviving children. It is even stated (2012, p. 71) that “Melusine nurtured her children until the first, Urian, was seventeen years old”.⁶⁷ This sounds excessive even in the medieval period. However, it seems that the author gives

⁶⁵ “[...] qui fu asséz beaulx, mais il ot sur le néz une petite tache velue comme la pel d’une taulpe ou d’un fouant.” (p. 294)

⁶⁶ “[...] a la .xi. annee apporta un filz, le .viii., grant a merveille. Cil apporta trois yeux sur terre, de quoy ly uns fu ou front, et fu si crueulx et si mauvais qu’il occist, ains qu’il eust quatre ans, deux de ses nourrices.” (p. 295)

⁶⁷ “Or nous dit la vraye histoire que tant nourry Melusine ses enfans que Uriens, premier, ot .xvii. ans.” (2003, p. 294)

more emphasis on the nursing of the children since, Mélusine as a fairy, can pass through her fantastical nature to her sons as they develop. Why Urian seems to be the only one nursed this much must have to do with him being the first-born son and therefore, more in need of the strength to inherit the kingdom. This is an idea that can be corroborated by seeing how medieval medical texts were concerned with the health of the foetus which was based on what the menses and other fluids from the woman's body would do to the yet-unborn child. For instance, menstruation, as Monica Green (2013, p. 19) explains in her edition of *The Trotula*: "[...] in Hippocratic and Galenic gynecology menstruation was a necessary purgation, needed to keep the whole female organism healthy". In a healthy woman, the menses could stop due to pregnancy or lactation, with it being thought that: "[...] the excess matter—now no longer deemed “waste”—either went to nourish the child in utero or was converted into milk." (p. 20) So the quality of the lactation was also a crucial element for the health of the baby. Isidore of Seville explained that lactation would be formed by the blood that had not been used during the nurturing of the child in the womb and would eventually come back to the body, whitened by the mother's virtue to nurture the child again.⁶⁸

The Trotula (2013, p. 71) suggested that one reason why women experience menstruation is due to the coldness of the woman's body: "[...] the heat and the dryness, should rule the man, who is the stronger and more worthy person, while the weaker ones, that is to say the coldness and humidity, should rule the weaker [person], that is the woman".⁶⁹ Menstruation was thought to be necessary to purge the “colder” aspect of the female body:

Because there is not enough heat in women to dry up the bad and superfluous humors which are in them, nor is their weakness able to tolerate sufficient labor so that Nature might expel [the excess] to the outside through sweat as [it does] in men, Nature established a certain purgation especially for women, that is, the menses, to temper their poverty of heat.⁷⁰

(p. 73)

With reference to lactation, *The Trotula* (2013, p. 111) discusses the importance of choosing the correct wet nurse since her milk needs to benefit the child:

⁶⁸ Wood, Charles. “The Doctor's Dilemma: Sin Salvation and the Menstrual Cycle” *Speculum*, v. 56, n. 4, 1981, p. 719.

⁶⁹ Originally: “[...] caliditas et siccitas, uiro tamquam fortiori et dignio ri persone, debiliores, scilicet frigiditas et humiditas, utpote debiliori, scilicet mulieri, dominarentur.” (Green, 2013, p. 70)

⁷⁰ “Quoniam igitur in mulieribus non tantus habundat calor ut prauos humores et superfluos qui in eis sunt sufficiat desiccare, nec tantum laborem ualeat earum debilitas tolerare ut per sudorem ualeat ad exteriora expellere natura sicut in uiris, propter hoc ad caloris ipsarum pauperiem temperandam quandam purgationem precipuam eis destinauit natura, scilicet menstrua.” (Green, 2013, p. 72)

A wet nurse ought to be young, having a clear color, a woman who has redness mixed with white, who is not too close to her last birth nor too far removed from it either, who is not blemished, nor who has breasts that are flabby or too large, a woman who has a large and ample chest, and who is a little bit fat. [...] She should not eat salty or spicy or pungent things, nor those things in which heat is strong, nor styptic things, nor leeks or onions, nor the rest of those spices which are added to foods for flavoring, such as pepper, garlic, garden rocket, but above all garlic. Also, let her avoid anxiety and let her beware provoking her own menses. And if her milk is diminished, let porridges made of bean flour and likewise of rice, and wheat bread and milk and sugar be given to her to drink, by which things the milk is augmented, and let a little fennel seed be mixed in. If, on the other hand, her milk becomes thick, let her nutriment be made subtle, and so let her be compelled to work. In addition, vinegary syrup, and light wine ought to be given to her. If the milk becomes thin, let her nutriments be thick and strong, and let her get more sleep. If the bowel of the child is loose, let constipating things be given to the nurse.⁷¹

Wet nurses are mentioned in significant passages of the romance: Horrible kills two of them, and wet nurses are the only people able to see Mélusine when she comes to embrace her young sons after leaving Lusignan:

Melusine came every evening to visit her children, holding them as she sat before the fire and comforting them as best she could; the wet nurses saw her clearly, but dared not say a word about it. The two children thrived, and grew so strong that everyone marveled.⁷²

(2012, p. 195)

Mélusine tells Raymond that she will nurse her sons in this way before she leaves, saying: “I, too, shall care for them, although you must not hold out any hope that after I leave here—very soon now—you might ever see me again in the form of a woman.” (2012, p. 193).⁷³ Despite having wet nurses, Mélusine *chooses* to nurse her children. From this, we can infer the value Jean d’Arras puts in the nursing period in the romance. Also,

⁷¹ Originally: “Nutricem oportet esse iuuenem, clarum colorem habentem, que cum albedine ruborem habeat admixtum, que non sit partui uicina neque multum remota, nec maculosa, neque infirmas mamillas habeat, neque nimisgrossas, pectus grossum et amplum, pinguis mediocriter sit. [...] Non comedat salsa neque accuta nec acetosa, nec ea in quibus fortis est caliditas, neque stiptica, neque porros, neque cepas, neque ceteras species que admiscetur cibariis pro sapore, ut piper, allium, erucam, et precipue alium. Vitet etiam sollicitudinem et menstruorum prouocationem sibi caueat. Et si lac minuatur, pultes de farina fabarum et similiter rizi, et de pane simule et de lacte et zuccara facte dentur ei ad sorbendum, quibus lac augmentetur, et parum seminis feniculi sit admixtum. Si uero lac eius fuerit grossum, nutrimentum eius est subtiliandum et ita cogatur laborare. Cui insuper dandus est siropus acetosus et uinum subtile Si uero lac fuerit subtile, nutrimenta eius sint grossa et fortia, et sompnis utatur longioribus. Si uero uenter pueri solutus sit, dentur nutrici que constipant.” (Green, 2013, p. 110)

⁷² “Et sachiez que Melusigne venoit tous les soirs visiter ses enfans, et les tenoit au feu et les aisoit de tout son pouoir. Et la veoient bien les nourices qui mot n’osoient dire. Et admendoient et croissoient les deux enfans si fort que chascun s’en donnoit merueille.” (p. 708)

⁷³ “Faictes les bien nourrir, et aussi sachiez que je m’en-prendray garde, combien que je ne veuille pas que vous ayéz esperance nulle que moy de cy partie, laquelle chose sera bien brief, vous me voiéz jamais en forme femmenine.” (p. 698)

relating to the Aristotelian and Galenic theories of paternity, Mélusine has Elinas's seed; however, because Raymond has broken the taboo, her father's seed is emphatically not dominant (she is no longer human in any sense apart from, it seems, this curious breastfeeding), making it relevant the fact that she chooses to nurse the children. The fairy/human hybrid suggests a more transformative body, one that has powers besides the blood that goes through her sons. Thus, she is more difficult to categorise. Is she fairy, human or an amalgamation of both?

Florschuetz (2014, p. 41-42) notes the importance of the source of milk for the child, including medieval Christian prohibitions against the use of Jewish wetnurses for Christian children:

In addition to class inconsistency between nurslings and nurses, authorities were also concerned about religious divisions between wetnurse and infant, leading to Pope Honorius III's prohibition against the employment of Jewish nurses for Christian babies. The belief that "good milk produces good progeny and bad milk bad progeny" made the quality of a woman's milk crucial to the health of a young child, particularly because of the malleable physical and moral qualities of the very young. Medical discourse suggested that, at least in the case of malleable and vulnerable infants, one was what one ate, and therefore the choice of a nurse was of critical importance.

Perceptions of a difference between good milk and bad, or, in the romance, the milk of marvellous and non-marvellous mothers might explain Remonnet and Thierry's lack of physical markings. Presumably, given her departure from the fortress, Mélusine will have nursed them less than her first children, so the blood they received from their entirely human wet nurses made them not carry the Otherness of the mother. This would not explain, however, the monstrosity found in Horrible, who bears the mother's mark, but who has a different morality than his siblings.

While her sons' physical features are directly ascribed to Mélusine's influence, they do not appear to possess a hybrid status in any meaningful sense. Jane H. M. Taylor (1996, p. 176) considers these marks to be "blocks": supernatural elements and schemata that seem to have been omitted by some reason in order to not let them take on their full power: "I am struck by this instance of blocking as confirmation that this is a romance that, as a whole, is reluctant to exploit its own narrative potential, especially as this potential relates to the supernatural." In other words, the narrative seems to allow certain elements of the supernatural but occlude others. Furthermore, Caroline Walker Bynum (2001, p. 93) suggests, in relation to Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialium*, that children of fairy women are in fact understood as "fully human, not hybrids", which is certainly the case with Mélusine and her sisters before the curse. Despite being children of a fairy, they

only become fairy themselves when the curse is put upon them. The same applies to Mélusine's children. The suppressed supernatural elements are nonetheless meaningful: the sons' descriptions serve to indicate their fairy descent, which is here (Horrible excepted) ennobling without suggesting any especially pronounced alterity on their parts. Indeed, the primary locus of difference in the text is the maternal body of Mélusine.

Monstrous Maternity in Contrast: Mélusine's Curse and Cassiodorien's Nature

We come now to the second monstrous mother of this chapter: Cassiodorien, the fictional mother of Richard the Lionheart in the anonymous Middle English romance *Richard Coeur de Lion* (fourteenth/fifteenth century). This text is also known as *Richard a* and is related to an earlier variant termed *Richard b*, from which the more marvellous content found in *A* is absent. Because of its difficulty in dating, *Richard a* is considered by most scholars to be a late fourteenth or early fifteenth narrative. The version of *Richard a* includes a fairy mother narrative and survives in manuscripts from the fifteenth century onwards. *Richard b* has its earliest version in the fourteenth century but this contains no fairy mother narrative. These variants were categorised by Karl Brunner (1913) in *Richard Lowenherz*.⁷⁴ Flood (2024, p. 216-217) suggests a possible relationship between *Mélusine* and *Richard a* in part on account of this dating:

Richard a survives in two manuscripts: Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College Library, MS 175/96 (in which the beginning of the text is lost), produced around 1400 in Lincolnshire; and the mid-fifteenth-century London, British Library, Additional MS 31042 (also known as the London Thornton Manuscript); alongside two early printed editions by Wynkyn de Worde, likely publisher of the English prose *Mélusine*. It post-dates another version of *Richard (b)*, which was composed before 1330 when it was integrated in Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Advocates MS 19.2.1 (the Auchinleck manuscript). *Richard b* omits the supernatural mother narrative, as well as other lurid elements of *Richard a*, including Richard's much-commented-upon anthropophagy. *Richard b* has generally been understood to be closer to a chronicle, while *Richard a* has been commonly regarded as romance. This binary designation, however, blunts the discursive uncertainties of the *a*-text. *Richard a* shares a number of affinities with the *Mélusine* tradition, not least its relationship to common Latin historical *mirabilia*, reimagined in line with the discursive conventions of romance.

There is further evidence for a potential relationship between *Richard a* and *Mélusine* as understood by early readers (or rather, printers) of the texts. There are two

⁷⁴ Brunner, Karl. *Der mittellenglische Versroman über Richard Löwenherz: kritische Ausgabe nach allen Handschriften mit Einleitung, Anmerkungen und deutscher Übersetzung*. Wien and Leipzig: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1913

early prints of the romances, *Mélusine* (c. 1531-1532) and *Richard a* (c. 1509), which share one very similar woodcut design.



Similarities between the two early prints of the *Mélusine* (left) and *Richard* (right) romance.

(Fig. 1: *L'Histoire de Melusine* (Paris: Alain Lotrian and Denis Janot, c. 1531-1532) and Fig. 2: *Kynge Rycharde cuer du lyon* [a metrical romance] (London: Wynkyn de Worde, c.1509))

The woodcuts in question feature two knights jousting with one another in an open field with a fountain in the background. The fountain is a crucial element in *Mélusine*'s story. It is where the meetings between Elinas and Presine, as well as Raymondin and *Mélusine*, occur. It is also the location of the fortress of Lusignan and *Mélusine*'s bath. Although there is no reference to such a location in *Richard a*, its appearance here is strongly suggestive of an influence of a woodcut design from another work, for which the most obvious candidate is *Mélusine*. Woodcuts were commonly exchanged, and used almost as stock images, in early print, and as Lydia Zeldenrust (2020) has traced in her study on the topic, we find woodcuts in common between printers of *Mélusine* from across continental Europe in the context of a flourishing cross-border reception history. I suggest that early prints of *Richard a* might be read in relation to this wider set of influences, and the potential use of a *Mélusine* image for inspiration in an early print of *Richard* establishes a visual parallel to echo the verbal ones discussed in the rest of this chapter.

Cassiodorien and Mélusine

Richard a tells the history of Richard I, the Lionheart (1157-1199). Historically, Richard was the son of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Henry II. The queen in the romance is called Cassiodorien, a mysterious princess from Antioch who transforms herself into (or reveals her nature as) a flying creature when confronted with the sacrament. This is a variation on a narrative listed by Harf-Lancner (p. 392) among the Latin sources or analogues, found in Gerald of Wales' early thirteenth-century *De principis instructione* detailing a female ancestor of the Plantagenets who, when confronted with the religious sacrament of the consecration of the Eucharist was revealed to be a demon. *Richard a* reimagines this demon as Eleanor. I suggest that we might understand Cassiodorien not only as a demonic ancestor after this tradition but as a variant of the roughly contemporary romance fairy Mélusine, whose sons, like Richard, are similarly associated with crusading activities, and whose characteristics are similarly rooted in earlier representations of Eleanor of Aquitaine. Daniel Power (2005, p. 129) notes, "the connection between Melusine and Eleanor, her fellow Poitevin, has long been made [...]". Mélusine shares a geographical relationship with the famous queen since the Comté of Poitou, which includes Poitiers and Parthenay, was part of the Duchy of Aquitaine. I will consider further ways in which the Mélusine legend might be read in relation to *Richard a*.

Richard a's Cassiodorien is the daughter of Corbaryng, the king of Antioch, both of whom are presented as of Muslim descent or Muslim-coded.⁷⁵ As Victoria Flood (2024, p. 226) discusses:

The association of Richard with a Muslim mother, while pure fiction, may have a precedent in a rumour associated with Eleanor, which appears to have first emerged in a thirteenth-century continental context: Eleanor as the lover of Saladin (Yusuf ibn Ayyub ibn Shadi). Cassodorien would appear to take this perception of Eleanor's sexual, and cultural, difference one step further: she herself is (pseudo-)Islamicised. Yet her cultural context and positioning remain ambiguous.

As a magical woman/creature, Cassiodorien provides Richard with a fantastical genealogy, which becomes the explanation for his greatness. Richard's magical origins also align him with prior heroes mentioned at the beginning of the romance, such as

⁷⁵ On Cassiodorien's father Corbaryng, Geraldine Heng (2003, p. 343, note 29) explains: "'Cassodorien's' father's name, 'Corbaryng,' is an echo from the First Crusade, since Karbuqa, the atabeg of Mosul whose army ringed crusader-occupied Antioch before the city was fully won by the Latins, is variously referred to in eyewitness Latin chronicles as 'Corbaras' (Raymond d'Aguiliers), 'Curbaram' (the *Gesta Francorum*), and so forth. By making 'Cassodorien' the daughter of 'Corbaryng,' RCL is able to intimate, perhaps, that Saracens are linked to Jews in a kind of filial and familial relationship."

Achilles and Alexander.⁷⁶ Suzanne Conklin Akbari (2005, p. 201) states that the attribution of Antioch as Cassiodorien's homeland gives Richard an exotic nature whilst giving him a birthright to the east. She argues that Richard's success in conquering eastern lands derives from his mother, through whom he "lays claim to both supernatural powers and legitimate descent from the former Saracen rulers of Antioch and its region." Cassiodorien's status as a "Saracen" princess is important for our understanding of her alterity and Otherness in the narrative.⁷⁷ As a demonic mother she is abject not simply because she is an "uncategorisable" woman, but as an eastern princess, she poses a threat to Christian order and male authority.

Richard a might be approached as a culturally relocated retelling of the Mélusine legend, engaged with supernatural dynastic beginnings. Cassiodorien is arguably not simply a reimagining of Eleanor of Aquitaine but of Mélusine too. The historic Eleanor may also have been the inspiration for this type of mother/monster character in medieval literature, one with certain recognisable features. A crucial trait is the woman's status as a foreigner to the land of the dynasties they built, as Cassiodorien comes from the eastern kingdom of Antioch and Mélusine from Scotland and the western Otherworld of Avalon. Another trait the two share, one which I read in relation to their foreignness, is that they are both exposed and publicly shamed for their supernatural (for which we might read cultural) alterity: the queen Cassiodorien is forced to stay at mass and see the Eucharist, and the fairy Mélusine is publicly rejected by her husband after the crime of her son. Both queens are responsible for birthing a new and powerful chapter for the dynasty of which they are (or will become) a part of: Cassiodorien as the mother of Richard Lionheart and Mélusine as the founder of the Lusignan line. This is a chapter marked in both cases by crusades to eastern territories.

Richard a was composed roughly two hundred years after Eleanor's death, although it corresponds to earlier legends of the queen. Daniel Power (2005, p. 116) states that "[...] after her death some Normans appear to have preserved her memory in

⁷⁶ "Of Rowelond and of Olyver,
And of every doseper;
Of Alisaundre and Charlemayn,
Of Kyng Arthour and of Gawayn,
How they were knyghtes goode and curteys;
Of Turpyn and Oger Daneys.
Of Troy men rede in ryme,
What werre ther was in olde tyme;
Of Ector and of Achylles [...]"
(*Richard a*, 2015, l. 11-19)

interesting and suggestive ways.”, including stories of both Eleanor’s beauty and her potential association with the demonic. We might note, for example, a narrative of Eleanor’s disrobing that circulated soon after her death and was copied in manuscripts into the late thirteenth century. The account is found in the *Chronique rimée* of Philippe Mouskes, a French writer of the thirteenth century. It was supposed to refute the belief of the queen as a demon, but the details provided may lie behind the demonic appearance of Eleanor in the *Richard a* text:

At Saint-Jean, she took her rest one evening; and when she came to disrobe, she said to them: ‘Look, lords, is my body not worthy and lovely? The king said that I was a devil, and that in all senses I was deformed and unseemly.’ They replied: ‘Lady, no, you are not! There is no one so noble in this kingdom. You have come amongst good lords, and so you shall shortly have a rich and worthy lord, lady: make do with your own lands until then and wait.’ “By my head!” the queen said, ‘My heart yields to your advice.’⁷⁸

(*Chronique rimée de Philippe Mouskes*, trans. Daniel Power 2005, p. 129-130)

Of this episode, Power (p. 128) asks: “Why, though, did she need to prove that she was not a devil? The scene may simply have been intended to refute malicious accusations that stained her memory in the decades following her death.” The author refers to a scene in the *Récits d’un ménestrel de Reims* (1260) which narrates that Louis VII needed to divorce his wife for being a devil and for trying to marry a Muslim man (influenced by the rumour that Eleanor had an affair with Saladin), two apparently connected states of being and desires. These accounts may have inspired the reimagining of Eleanor by the *Richard a*-author as the Muslim-coded princess, Cassiodorien. Beyond this connection with Islam, Eleanor was famous for being a foreign queen who endured hostility from the English court, as Ralph V. Turner (2011, p. 131) notes concerning Eleanor’s time in England: “Eleanor, living in the midst of foreigners withholding from her the admiration accorded their earlier queens and whose language she never learned to speak, may have faced her days in England with some foreboding.”

Different perspectives appear in *Richard a* and *Mélusine* concerning the way in which the mother is both needed and rejected at the same time. The queen in *Richard a* is remarkable for her escape from mass during the consecration of the Eucharist. If we apply Kristeva’s theory of abjection to Cassiodorien, we might note that to Cassiodorien

⁷⁸ “A St.-Jéhan évangéliste / Prist une vesprée sa giste. / Et quant vint à son desfublar, / Si leur a dit: ‘Voiies, signar, / Dont n’est mis cors prou délitables: / Lou rés digat q’ère déables, / Et q’eu ère riens à tos sens / Malostruge et non cubinens.’ Il respondent: ‘Dosne, vous non, / Non ac tant gente en ic roïon, / Vengue iestes à bon signor, / S’aurés signar à poi de jor / Ric et prout, dosne, et vous estas / Soubre le vostre et atendas.’ — ‘Par mon cap, ce dist la roïne, / Mis corages à vous s’acline.’ / Or vous dirai le voir sans falle / Dont li rois le clama déable.” (Mouskés, 1838: 244-45).

the Eucharist itself is abject. s. There is an interesting point of connection with Kristeva's idea of abjection as food nausea: "But since the food is not an "other" for "me," who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself." (2024, p. 3). Yet the Eucharist is not supposed to be seen just as food, but the body of Christ. By abjecting the God of the Christians, Cassiodorien is more than a monster, she is a heretic, or even a demon. Cassiodorien's demonism offers a necessary past for Richard to overcome, that is – to abject. Nicola McDonald (2004, p. 140) sees this turn of events as the explanation for Richard's heritage, necessitating a narrative of exorcism: "Cassiodorien has a touch of the diabolical; and [...] she passes this on to her son. *Richard* is in effect a narrative of exorcism: an account of how Richard successfully purges himself of his devilish inheritance."

Richard needs to exorcise his demonic side to become a great king, but his Eastern heritage remains important in territorial terms. If Richard is a Christian European ruler, his having a demon mother who is coded as a Muslim becomes a point of tension, but it is justified by the territory Richard seeks to conquer. In *Mélusine*, the fairy herself is the patron of her sons' eastern adventures, providing them with ships and provisions. When Mélusine's sons ask to leave on crusading activities Raymond leaves the decision up to the fairy: "My dear lady, if you think this is a good idea, then do as you see fit." (Jean d'Arras, 2012, p. 73).⁷⁹ When Mélusine gives her blessing for their mission, the children "gratefully and humbly knelt before her" (p. 73): it is she who determines the eastern destinies of her children.⁸⁰ Christian missions to the holy land were important aspects of knighthood in the medieval period, especially for aristocratic sons, but in *Mélusine* they are fundamental to dynastic expansion, securing Cyprus and Armenia for the house. Cassiodorien holds a similar promise, although her endorsement is genealogical rather than practical.

This is not to say that the two narratives are identical. Cassiodorien's aversion to the Eucharist contrasts sharply with Mélusine's insistence on her Catholic faith. Yet both women, as foreign hybrids, are marked by Otherness. The inheritance and negotiation of some aspect of this alterity is as much an interest in *Richard a* as it is in *Mélusine*. *Richard a* states that the king and queen had three children: two boys and one girl: "Chyldren they

⁷⁹ "Par foy, dame, se il vous semble que ce soit chose qui soit bonne a faire, si en faictes a vostre volenté." (Jean d'Arras, 2003, p. 300)

⁸⁰ "Adont s'en vont les deux enfans agenouillier et l'en remercient humblement." (Jean d'Arras, 2003, p. 303)

hadden hem bytwene, / Twoo knaves and a mayde” (*Richard a*, p. 27, l. 198-199). Cassiodorien flees from the church only with her daughter, but tries to take one of the boys, John, with her although he falls and breaks his leg (presumably a joke at the unpopular King John’s expense):

Sche took here doughtyr in here hond,
And Johan her sone she wolde not wonde,
Out of the rofe she gan her dyght,
Openly, before all theyr syght.
Johan fell frome her in that stonde,
And brake his thygh on the grounde;
And with her doughter she fled her waye,
That never after she was isey

(*Richard a*, p. 28, l. 227- 234).

It is Richard, however, who is most obviously heir to Cassiodorien’s supernaturalism: in the *Richard a* text, Richard is seen as a demonic king and even called a “devyl” (*Richard a*, p. 47, l.1112), for his behaviour at certain key moments such as his eating of the lion’s heart or the cannibalism episode. Indeed, just as Richard’s demonic mother is unable to receive the Eucharist so do these two key episodes relating to Richard have to do with eating: he devours the heart of a lion and eats the flesh of his “Saracen” enemies. The first incident happens when the king of Aлемayne (Germany) sets a lion to kill Richard, but the lion is defeated and Richard eats its heart, thus earning his sobriquet:

The kyng wonderyd and sayde skeet:
“Iwis, as I undyrstonde can,
This is a devyl, and no man,
That has my stronge lyoun slawe,
The herte out of hys body drawe,
And has it eeten with good wylle

(*Richard a*, p. 47, l.1110-1115).

In the second scene, Richard falls ill in Acre and asks for pork, which no one can find. His cook then finds a fat “Saracen” and cooks his flesh for Richard, who later learns he has eaten the body of the Muslim man and continues to do so throughout the narrative:

“What devyl is this?” the kyng cryde,
And gan to lawghe as he were wood.
“What? Is Sarezynys flesch thus good,
And nevere erst I nought wyste?”

(*Richard a*, p. 93, l. 3214-3217).

Richard’s anthropophagic act and his eating of the lion’s heart have been discussed by Nicola McDonald (2004, p. 133) not as “isolated or aberrant incidents of dietary transgression”; rather, she suggests that “they are embedded in a narrative that is acutely aware of the practical and symbolic function of food and whose alimentary code,

oscillating between the competing demands of fast and feast, is resolutely pragmatic". Food works in these episodes as a symbol of the Eucharist as well, the act Richard's mother could not complete. McDonald (2004, p. 140) states that "Richard's anthropophagy derives meaning from (and disturbs our understanding of) not only the conventions of late medieval cuisine, but a blatantly literal eucharistic theology". In a sense the son is also literally, and metaphorically, consuming and appropriating his mother's line. By creating this symbolic bridge between the non-consumed Eucharist by the mother and the finalized cannibalism by the son in the narrative, Cassiodorien becomes the blueprint for her offspring's powerful nature as a king. What is more, Richard becomes a paradox, himself in some ways analogous to Mélusine: a demonic Christian king.

A comparison between *Richard a* and *Mélusine* reveals similarities that point towards a shared concern with the influence of women on dynastic lineage. Both romances are concerned with the genealogy of an important line, in which a supernatural mother is understood to be directly responsible for the prowess, and conversely the demonic affinities, of her offspring. There are notable parallels between Richard and Mélusine's son Geoffroy. Both Geoffroy and Richard are the sons of magical mothers, and both commit horrible crimes, although in Richard's case they appear to seem justifiable to the author (Geoffroy kills Christians and Richard kills Muslims). Richard will conquer the east from where his mother comes, while Geoffroy conquers Northumberland, part of Mélusine's ancestral territory and the site of her father's tomb in the Brumblerio mountain. The mothers in both *Richard a* and *Mélusine* thus provide context for their children's conquests as well as (and situated in a close relationship with) their violence.

However, much more sympathy is given to Mélusine, who is cursed by her fairy mother and is later a victim of this curse when Raymond breaks her trust. The author of *Richard a*, conversely, reveals the demonic nature of the queen when she faints before the sacrament. The queen's words following the swoon are interesting:

Beorn the elevacyoun,
The qwene fel in swowne adon.
The folk wondryd and were adrad.
Into a chambyr sche was lad,
Sche seyde, 'For I am thus ishent:
I dar nevere see no sacrement.'"

(*Richard a*, p. 27, 189-194).

Cassiodorien here uses the word “ishent,” meaning shamed or disgraced, a term with social and emotional implications.⁸¹ This is a particularly interesting word choice given that Cassiodorien’s physiological process (the faint) echoes that of her counterpart Mélusine, who faints when shamed by her husband. Mélusine’s swoon is described at length as the extreme effects of public shaming. She is overwhelmed by grief from all that has happened: “These words filled Melusine’s heart with such pain that she collapsed in a swoon and remained unconscious for half an hour, during which no breath or pulse could be detected in her.” (Jean d’Arras, 2012, p. 191).⁸² In both romances, the mother’s supernatural transformation and flight, abjection from the narrative, occurs after the shaming scene and following her fainting. Both Mélusine and Cassiodorien are foreigners with transformative bodies that defy categorization as humans and/or women. They are abjected at the point in the narrative when their bodies, or at least the supernatural workings of their bodies (whether in relation to eucharistic consumption in Cassiodorien’s case or reproduction in Mélusine’s) are made public. Their corporeal differences, and the lack of order they threaten, demand their removal. Yet their bodies are not the only aspects that render them monstrous. As Cohen (1996, p. 7) puts it: “Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual.” Excluding the economic (both are royal) Mélusine and Cassiodorien possess all these differences.

The fathers in both romances provide the children with royal or noble status, yet more importantly, they are also (uncomplicatedly) Christians. The children’s remarkable qualities come mainly from their supernatural (non or complexly Christian) mother. As important as she may be, there comes a point in the text where both mothers are rejected and are transformed back into their “original” or cursed selves – when their job in the narrative, and dynastically, is done. This rejection, however, is particularly acute in **these** two texts given the status of both mothers as foreigners. The act of shaming their bodies is suggestive not only of a perception of female alterity, to be rejected from the now masculine line, but also a cultural alterity that is suppressed.

The relationship between flight and female supernaturalism is not limited to these medieval romances and has a notable place in later writings on witchcraft. Belief in the

⁸¹ S.v. “shenden, v.,” 1(a) - Middle English Dictionary: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary> Access 17 Sep 2024.

⁸² “Quant Melusine ouy ce mot, si ot tel doulour ou cuer qu’elle chey pasmee. Et fu bien demy heure qu’elle ne rendy ne que on ne senty en elle poux ne alaine.” (Jean d’Arras, 2003, p. 694)

witch's flight emerged in the early fifteenth century but has much earlier antecedents. As Hans Peter Broedel (2005, p. 102) notes, there is a long tradition that appears across medieval sources, of women who would fly away from home at night and ride in the air with the goddess Diana or other pagan (or demonic) spirits:

Scattered throughout a variety of medieval sources are tantalizing hints of a widespread tradition about the fantastic nocturnal escapades of women and female spirits. According to the disapproving accounts of churchmen, some women believed that they secretly left their homes at night to attend the court of a goddess or spirit, often identified as Diana, and rode with her on lengthy processions, traveling great distances in the blink of an eye.

The belief in the night flight was condemned in the “*canon Episcopi*”, a text written around the tenth century which discusses prohibited pagan and folk beliefs. It appears subsequently in Gratian's *Corpus Juris Canonici* (twelfth century), and from there in later works of canon law. Despite its rejection in canon law, the night flight was later discussed by Gervais of Tilbury as a real phenomenon which, according to Broedel (2005, p. 104) and Victoria Flood (2024, p. 199) anticipates the discussion of the flight as a real event in the *Malleus Maleficarum* three centuries later.⁸³ Mélusine and Cassiodorien's flight may well have a direct relationship to these earlier narratives, not least as Gervais is one of Jean d'Arras's sources engaged with a very early belief in wicked women in flight.

This correspondence aside, however, the characterisation of the mothers discussed in this chapter is distinct to a particular late medieval romance tradition engaged with the relationship between maternity and the supernatural, although suggestive of the influence of wider cultural attitudes towards pregnancy, breastfeeding and questions of maternal inheritance.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the ways in which the supernatural mother's body was categorized as a place of supernatural transgression and anxiety. Both mothers are foreigners and magical, are publicly shamed by their husbands, and have their bodies exposed as inhuman and therefore, taboo. Despite the fact that these mothers serve the

⁸³ *The Hammer of Witches - A Complete Translation of the Malleus Maleficarum*. Christopher S. Mackay (translator). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 93-100

political demands of the narrative (they found dynasties and create the conditions for their children's greatness), they nevertheless are rendered abject by their bodies. This representation goes beyond strangeness and dread, and beyond the Freudian Uncanny too: the mothers need to be expelled from the narrative once their body is made public since their presence erodes all possible ideas of order and nature in their respective courts.

In both works the foreignness of the mother accentuates her Otherness (beyond the alterity of her gender) and becomes the source of a supernatural potential within their male offspring, although often the children remain more recognisably human than their mothers. The supernatural maternal body, hybrid and marked by an Otherness understood in geographical, physiological, and even spiritual terms, articulates anxieties surrounding transgressions of bodily, and even cultural or geographical, borders.

Chapter Two

The Demonic Pregnancy: The *incubus* in *Merlin*, *Alexander* and *Sir Gowther*

Building on the discussion of supernatural maternity analysed previously, this chapter explores cases where although the mother is human the child she conceives is not: a body of material engaged with fears and theories of demonic conception. I focus on the romances of *Merlin*, *Sir Gowther*, and the *Alexander* tradition, where the hero's origins are traced to a union, often non-consensual, between a woman and a demonic or supernatural being (e.g. a sorcerer or a fairy knight). In exploring the influence of the "demonic seed" of the father on the child's temperament, I will demonstrate how such texts might be viewed as romance re-imaginings of Aristotle's one-seed theory and engage with medieval ideas of demonic progeneration that pre-empt debates on this in fifteenth century witch theory. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Aristotle's one-seed theory in *De Generatione Animalium* (fourth century B.C.) was used by medical authors to argue that only the male partner supplied the form (generative seed) in conception; the female body provided only shapeless matter. Although Galenic medicine proposed that women provided generative material too, Aristotelian theory appears to dominate in the accounts of demonic fathers traced in this chapter. At times, this is part of the narrative background, explaining a mortal woman's supernatural pregnancy and the remarkable, albeit morally dubious, nature of her offspring. On other occasions, the father's seed is seen as less obviously determinative, as in the case of *Merlin*, where the child transcends his father's biological influence.

My chosen romances feature cases of sexual violence that affect maidens visited by demons or other types of supernatural beings. These "visits" produce an unplanned child who is usually a son. Belief in the male seed alone producing a male heir is connected to wider socio-political anxieties, and on occasion romances engaged with this reflect contemporary concerns relating to inheritance and issues of paternity in the late Middle Ages. The conception of sons rather than daughters is important because, I argue, it relates to the Aristotelian theory that the male seed is more dominant than the female, therefore, the children would inherit their father's traits, including his sex. As magical heirs, the sons in the narratives examined here are powerful individuals whose strength is explained by their supernatural origin narrative. Nevertheless, this chapter does not focus solely on the fathers as the progenitors of demonic births but how the conceptions occur

and bring great costs to the mothers. These women navigate rape, shame, and forced pregnancy.

This chapter focuses on the mothers and the consequences of their demonic pregnancy. I consider three medieval narratives in which a woman becomes pregnant by a supernatural being. I examine how the pregnancy and birth of the magical child are constructed by medieval authors who were influenced by theological and medical discussions surrounding the pregnant body and demonic influence as well as sexual transgression and paternal inheritance. The mothers themselves are not monstrous, but their union with an incubus demon (non-consensual, most of the time) makes them the bearers of supernatural heirs: Merlin, Alexander and Sir Gowther all display signs of great strength, aggressive violence or magical abilities that reveal their remarkable paternity. Nonetheless these texts are still engaged with suspicions relating to women's reproductive capabilities to and the moral or spiritual implications of their potential relationship to supernatural forces, for as Dyan Elliott (1999, p. 56) observes "Woman's reproductive capacity rendered her [...] ripe for uncanny insemination".

Medieval authors gave much importance to the conception of children and development of the foetus, theorising whether they could be affected by supernatural forces. Different from supernatural births that originated from supernatural mothers, the romances discussed in this chapter present the mother as a vessel of a demonic and human union. Peggy McCracken (2003, p. x) states: "Stories about women accused of giving birth to a monstrous child question what a mother brings to lineage and defines a mother's suspect contribution to conception in terms of corrupted blood.". Similarly, Angela Florschuetz (2014, p. xviii) notes that: "[t]he maternal body in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries simultaneously threatened instability, shame, and disaster while promising continuity, regeneration, and even salvation." As already discussed in the previous chapter, the idea of the "mother's mark" was present in medieval perceptions as a visible link between child and mother. Yet, in the cases discussed below, it is not the mother who will pass on supernatural characteristics to her children but the father. In contrast to *Mélusine* and *Richard a*, the mothers in these narratives act more as vessels for the magical offspring, a detail that for many medieval authors would seem to indicate women's frailty and susceptibility to demonic intervention.

According to Walter Stephens (2003, p. 16):

The possibility of having unmistakable contact with demons through sex was anything but unproblematic between 1400 and 1700. Sex with demons was a highly complex idea. It had evolved very slowly within the literate culture

since about 1150, and it had to overcome philosophical, physiological, and theological objections of tremendous weight and variety.

Much of what late medieval writers understood concerning women's relation with the devil and demonic intervention comes from authors such as Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), who perceived women as inferior to men and therefore more susceptible to sin.⁸⁴ This position proved to be influential in concepts of demonic seduction as articulated in later works like the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Writing on Eve's seduction by the serpent, Institoris and Sprenger detail her creation from the crooked rib of Adam. The *Malleus* gives a related explanation of the word "femina" which describes women as possessing less faith than men, and so more vulnerable to demonic impressions: "For the word '*femina*' [the Latin word for woman] is spoken as 'fe' and 'minus,' because she has and keeps less [Latin '*minus*'] faith [Latin '*fidem*']".⁸⁵ (*The Malleus Maleficarum*, 2009, p. 165). Even the purest of women are vulnerable to demonic deception. The authors reflect "that since the Devil's intent and appetite are greater in tempting the good than the evil [...] he makes greater efforts to lead astray all the holiest virgins and girls."⁸⁶ (p. 277).

As the *Malleus* (p. 127) explains, the word incubus comes "from the verb 'incubare' ['to lie upon'], that is, to commit sexual misconduct. For they are often wicked to women and achieve intercourse with them."⁸⁷ Institoris and Sprenger insist that it is not for sexual pleasure that the incubus impregnates women since they are airy spirits and therefore feel no sexual pleasure, but their reason for wanting to beget children with human women is mostly to make humans inclined to more faults (p. 127). More generally, the *Malleus* is deeply engaged with the corporeal realities of demonic births. Question Three of the First Part of the text (p. 121) argues "that it is a Catholic proposition to claim that humans can be begotten by incubus and succubus demons".⁸⁸ Drawing on Thomas Aquinas's theory that incubi were incapable of producing sperm and must instead harvest

⁸⁴ See Aquinas discussion "On The Production of the Woman (Four Articles)" part of the *Summa Theologiae*: "As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from defect in the active force or from some material indisposition, or even from some external influence; such as that of a south wind, which is moist, as the Philosopher [Aristotle] observes." (Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae*. The Fathers of the English Dominican Province (translators). Indiana: Christian Classics, 1981.)

⁸⁵ Originally: "Dicitur enim femina 'fe' et 'minus,' quia semper minorem habet et seruat fidem" (Mackay, 2009, p. 286-287)

⁸⁶ "quod sicut intentio et appetitus diaboli maior est ad tentandum bonos quam malos, [...] ita et diabolus sanctiores quasque virgines et puellas magis seducere conatur." (Mackay, 2009, p. 391)

⁸⁷ "Latine incubi appellantur, unde et incubi dicuntur ab incubando, hoc est, stuprando. Sepe enim improbi existunt etiam mulieribus et earum peragunt concubitum" (Mackay, 2009, p. 249)

⁸⁸ "quod sit catholicum asserere quod per incubos et succubos demones possint homines procreari." (Mackay, 2009, p. 243)

it from human men, the *Malleus* explains how demons do not possess organic bodies, that is: their constitution is air. Therefore, they must always first reap the seed from one human (in the form of a succubus) to then put it later in another human (in the form of an incubus). They are also not able to give birth to a body since only an organic body with a soul has the power to give life.⁸⁹ This is the same question which, although less fully theologically engaged, appears to have animated the romances with which I am concerned.

Since rape and violation are central to much of the material examined here, this chapter also deals with the matter of consent and agency over women's bodies in medieval text and culture. Such topics have been explored previously by Corinne Saunders (2001), who has demonstrated both the cultural and legal complexities of attitudes towards rape, and how rape and abduction often become narrative drivers for plots about honour and chivalric identity. Carissa M. Harris (2022) has also discussed the presence of rape narratives in medieval lyrics and pastourelles, which illustrate dynamics of power and consent.⁹⁰ I have found useful what Hannah Piercy (2023) refers to as "resistance of love", moments in medieval literature where characters actively resist being drawn into normative romantic or sexual relationships. Such resistances are not just plot points but rather they interrogate the expectations surrounding love and desire in medieval society.

The narratives presented here portray instances of rape involving different degrees of consent and coercion. The mother either suffers direct rape (*Merlin*) or indirect (Olympias is deceived by Nectanabus that Ammon will be the father of her child while he impregnates her; and Sir Gowther's mother is deceived by a demon who takes the form of her husband).

Augustine of Hippo (fourth century) suggested that there should be no crime perceived in the person who suffers rape and therefore, no guilt as well.⁹¹ He drew on

⁸⁹ Mackay, 2009, p. 122

⁹⁰ "Pastourelles and related lyrics are useful for tracing medieval representations of survivor speech because they center on the threat of sexual violence between individuals with unequal levels of social power." (Harris, 2022, p. 47)

⁹¹ "Our reasoning is clear in support of the statement that when a body is forced to yield though the pledge of chastity remains no whit vitiated by any consent to evil, the crime belongs only to the man who lay with her perforce and not to the woman who, though forced, consented by no act of will to his lying with her." (Augustine of Hippo. *City of God, Book I, Chapter 19*. George E. McCracken (translator). Loeb Classical Library 411. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957, p. 83; Originally: "An forte huic perspicuae rationi, qua dicimus corpore oppresso nequaquam proposito castitatis ulla in malum consensione mutato illius tantum esse flagitium, qui opprimens concubuerit, non illius, quae oppressa concumbenti nulla voluntate consenserit" (Augustine of Hippo, 1957, p. 82)

the example of the fifth century B.C. Roman tale of Lucretia, a woman who, after being raped by Tarquin, killed herself to regain her honour. Different attitudes are espoused in later medieval material, where authors believed: “[...] the sexual relationship between the woman and the incubus was represented as consensual, giving rise to a binding agreement not unlike the pact imputed to the sorcerer and the devil.” (Elliot, 1999, p. 54). The incubus, a demonic entity capable of impregnating women, explained below, evidences anxieties concerning not only corporeal corruption but spiritual as well.

Cases of demonic births in Middle English and French narratives written or translated between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries offer interpretations of sexual violence with connotations for understanding of the human maternal and the demonic paternal body. According to Thomist philosophy and related medical writings concerned with supernatural impregnation, the demon itself was not the sole transgressor in the event of demonic pregnancy. The two-seed theory would require that both partners felt pleasure during the sexual act. This creates the implication that if a woman was raped but conceived a child, this would mean that she felt pleasure during the act and her consent was given.⁹² This was reformulated afterwards as even some earlier theorists, such as Augustine, were very much against this idea and would defend that a woman would continue a virgin even after being violated.⁹³ Yet even these interpretations did not stop the belief that the woman was also responsible for the action since the maternal body was already associated with supernatural transgressions and pollution, which made her the perfect vessel for the demonic seed.

I explore my chosen romances in relation to the authors’ engagements with ideas surrounding male and female seed, based on Aristotelian or Galenic medicine. This is applied in explicit relation to representations of a female susceptibility to supernatural and demonic intervention in some respects in common with and pre-empting the demonology of later witch theorists.

⁹² “The “two-seed” theory of sex and reproduction held that both a male and a female seed were necessary for conception. Conception, then, could not take place unless both the man and the woman ejaculated, thus requiring them both to feel pleasure. This doctrine would have benefited married women, whose husbands would need to make sure their wives felt pleasure and ejaculated (probably what they meant by this was what we could call orgasm) in order to conceive. However, it had a negative effect in terms of rape law. Any woman who conceived was deemed to have consented to intercourse, since she must have received pleasure from it.” (Karras, Ruth Mazo. *Sexuality in Medieval Europe - Doing Unto Others*. New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 61)

⁹³ “[Augustine’s] defence of rape victims’ chastity (which accompanies his condemnation of Lucretia’s suicide) crucially affirmed the power of the soul and the will to preserve chastity even if the body was forcibly violated.” (Piercy, Hannah. *Resistance to Love in Medieval English Romance – Negotiating Consent, Gender and Desire*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2023, p. 12)

The Incubus

The conception of Merlin is one of the earliest instances of a demonic pregnancy in the medieval romance tradition. It first appears in Latin in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (known as *De Gestis Britonum*, c. 1138). The author also wrote two other works concerned with Merlin: the *Prophetiae Merlini* (included in *De Gestis*) and the *Vita Merlini*.⁹⁴

In *De Gestis*, the British king Vortigern's men search for a fatherless child as a blood sacrifice to stabilise the king's falling tower in Snowdonia. In Carmarthen, Merlin is presented as a candidate for this when a boy named Dinatibus taunts him for not knowing who his father is. Merlin's mother is then questioned about his conception, revealing that a man with magical abilities appeared and impregnated her during his visits to her convent cell:

‘Upon your soul and mine, my lord king, I knew no man who begot this child of me. One thing, however, I do know, that when my companions and I were in our cells, someone resembling a handsome young man used to appear to me very often, holding me tight in his arms and kissing me. After remaining with me for a while, he would suddenly disappear from my sight. Often he would talk to me without appearing, while I sat alone. He visited me in this way for a long time and often made love to me in the form of a man, leaving me with a child in my womb. In your wisdom, you should know, my lord, that in no other way have I known a man who could have been this youth's father’.⁹⁵

(Geoffrey of Monmouth, 2007, p. 138)

Upon learning about this, Maugantius (one of King Vortigern's wise men) explains that a type of demonic spirit could have been the one that impregnated the woman. This entity, he says, is explained by Apuleius in *De Deo Socratis* (a second century treatise on demons): “[...] between the moon and the earth there live spirits whom we call incubi. They are part human, part angel, and take on human form at will and sleep

⁹⁴ Henley, Georgia; Smith, Joshua Byron (eds). *A Companion to Geoffrey of Monmouth*. Boston: Brill, 2020, pp. 1-3

⁹⁵ Originally: “Vivit anima tua et uiuit anima mea, domine mi rex, quia neminem agnouit qui illum in me generauerit. Vnum autem scio, quod cum essem inter consocias meas in thalamis nostris apparebat michi quidam in specie pulcherrimi iuuenis et saepissime amplectens me strictis brachiis deosculabatur. Et cum aliquantulum mecum moram fecisset, subito euanescebat ita ut nichil ex eo uiderem. Multociens quoque alloquebatur dum secreto sederem nec usquam comparebat. Cumque me diu in hunc modum frequentasset, coiuuit mecum in specie hominis saepius atque grauidam in aluo deseruit. Sciat prudentia tua, domine mi, quod aliter uirum non agnouit qui iuuenem istum genuerit’.” (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain - An Edition and Translation of the De gestis Britonum* [Historia Regum Britanniae]. Michael D. Reeve (ed) Neil Wright (translator). Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007, p. 139)

with women.” (Geoffrey of Monmouth, 2007, p. 139).⁹⁶ Geoffrey’s text nevertheless remains ambiguous as to whether Merlin’s father is an incubus or not, since Vortigern’s wise men are not presented as credible authorities. Geoffrey of Monmouth also does not give any account of this parentage in the later life of Merlin, the *Vita Merlini*.

The word used for the demonic father in Geoffrey’s *De Gestis* is “incubus” and this became the term most used in subsequent retellings of Merlin’s conception. I will be using the terms “demonic” and “incubus” interchangeably throughout this chapter; however, it is necessary to understand where this term comes from and what it signifies. The origin of the term incubus is closely associated with the Greek word *ephialtes*, as explained by Maaïke Van der Lugt (2001, p. 181): “The word ‘ephialtes’ comes “from a Greek verb meaning ‘to jump onto someone or something’, and which was thus a close relative of the Latin incubus, from the verb ‘to lie on something or someone.’”. According to Dyan Elliot (1999, p. 52) some medieval authors believed: “Both woman’s sexual capacity and her breadth of imagination made her the perfect partner for the demon incubus — a figure that had been a part of orthodox tradition from the patristic period.” (p. 52). These theories would have come from scholars such as St. Augustine of Hippo (354 - 430),⁹⁷ Isidore of Seville (c. 560 - 636), and later reworkings of these in the writings of William of Auvergne (c.1180 - 1249), who had already discussed the relationship between women and demons long before these romances were written.

While the extent of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s influence on the legend of Merlin and the incubus is vast, later authors introduced new material.⁹⁸ Variations on the legend

⁹⁶ “[...] inter lunam et terram habitant spiritus quos incubos daemones appellamus. Hii partim habent naturam hominum, partim uero angelorum, et cum uolunt assumunt sibi humanas figuras et cum mulieribus coeunt.” (Geoffrey of Monmouth, 2007, p. 139).

⁹⁷ Augustine notes common reports of incubi: “Moreover, there is a very widespread report, corroborated by many people either through their own experience or through accounts of others of indubitably good faith who have had the experience, that Silvans and Pans, who are commonly called incubi, often misbehaved towards women and succeeded in accomplishing their lustful desire to have intercourse with them. And the tradition that certain demons, termed Dusii by the Gauls, constantly attempt and perpetrate this foulness is so widely and so well attested that it would seem impudent to deny it.” Originally: “Et quoniam creberrima fama est, multique se expertos vel ab eis qui experti essent, de quorum fide dubitandum non esset, audisse confirmant, Silvanos et Panes, quos vulgo incubos vocant, improbos saepe extitisse mulieribus et earum appetisse ac peregissee concubi tum, et quosdam daemones, quos Dusios Galli nuncupant, adsidue hanc immunditiam et temptare et efficere plures talesque adseverant ut hoc negare inpudentiae videatur [...]” (Augustine of Hippo. *City of God*. Loeb Classical Library 414, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966, p. 548–551.)

⁹⁸ Alongside the Merlinian material discussed in this chapter, we might also note the reimagining of the incubus legend in Latin and French accounts of Albina, a text which circulated as a prequel to the *Historia*, where the daughters of the king of Greece plot to kill their husbands but before they can execute their plan they are exiled to Britain, then called Albion, and after being seduced by incubi they all give birth to the race of giants mentioned in Book I of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia*. (See further [on the Anglo-Norman version of the legend] Brerenton, Georgine E. *Des Grants Geanz: An Anglo-Norman Poem*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1937, p. 19-20)

begin with Robert de Boron's late twelfth century *Merlin*, which was subsequently integrated into the French Vulgate cycle in the thirteenth century. This was then translated into Middle English in the mid-fifteenth century as the prose *Merlin*, which survives in a single complete version in Cambridge University Library, MS Ff. 3. 11.⁹⁹

In my analysis of Merlin's conception, I work with both the French and English traditions. For the French text, I use Oskar H. Sommer's edition of the *Lestoire de Merlin* (and Nigel Bryant's translation into English), and for the Middle English translation, I use Henry B. Wheatley's edition.¹⁰⁰ Some episodes from the French and Middle English cannot be read synchronously with each other since the Middle English version is an adaptation of the original French Vulgate; therefore, I will mention when these cases occur and present their differences.

Both versions of *Merlin* begin with a council of demons who, enraged by the events following the Crucifixion, the apocryphal Harrowing of Hell, carefully orchestrate a plan to create a demonic counterpart to Christ. The demons decide amongst themselves to impregnate a woman who can bear this child, which is a kind of demonic inversion of the Annunciation. They send down a demon capable of this, in a type of demonic reimagining or parody of Gabriel, the angel of the Annunciation, who heralds Mary's pregnancy. In Julia Kristeva's essay "Stabat Mater" (1985), the author explores how Marian ideology can become a paradox in itself. As the author explains, in our western civilization, the "representation of femininity is subsumed under maternity." (p. 133) That is, the idealized version of motherhood is the idealized relationship between a mother and her child, a form of "primary narcissism", as the author puts it. When the church uses Mary to describe the ideal mother, it simultaneously glorifies and erases motherhood. (p. 133-136). As discussed in my Introduction, no woman can compare to the idealized version of being a mother *and* a virgin. In *Merlin* this paradoxical ideal gives way to a demonic re-interpretation of the Virgin birth.

⁹⁹ On the genealogy of the *Merlin* texts: Victoria Flood (2024, p. 193) explains in "Wonder and Wonder Working in Middle English Romance: The Prose Merlin", how the *Prose Merlin* is a very close translation of an earlier French text found in the Merlin section of the *Old French Vulgate Cycle (Lancelot-Grail)* from the early thirteenth century and also takes its Merlinian material from the prose of Robert de Boron in the twelfth century. The Middle English *Merlin*, on the other hand, is believed to date from the mid-fifteenth century, predating Malory's work by decades and making it, according to John Conlee (1998), "the earliest piece of Arthurian literature written in English prose."

¹⁰⁰ *The Vulgate Version of The Arthurian Romances Edited from Manuscripts in the British Museum – L'estoire de Merlin*. H. Oskar Sommer (ed.) v. 2. New York: AMS Press, 1969
Merlin and the Grail - Joseph of Arimathea - Merlin - Perceval. The Trilogy of Arthurian Romances attributed to Robert de Boron. Nigel Bryant (translator). Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001
 Wheatley, Henry Benjamin (ed.) *Merlin: or, the early history of King Arthur: a prose romance*, London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner, & Co., 1899

We can see a clear interest in the mechanics of supernatural conception across the different versions of the narrative. In the Middle English version of the *Prose Merlin*, one demon claims, “I have power for to sowe seede in woman, and make her conceyve, and I have oon that doth all that euer I wille.” (Wheatley, 1899, p. 3). In the French Vulgate, the demons claim they need to take the form of a man to impregnate a woman.¹⁰¹ In Robert de Boron’s *Merlin*, similarly, the demons have one among their number capable of “making seed” (Robert de Boron, 2001, p. 46). All the versions send forth one of the demons who can impregnate a woman, but in the *Prose Merlin* the demon’s form is less obviously corporeal: we are told “their repair is in the air”.¹⁰² The aspect of living in the air comes directly from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s account, which took inspiration from the teachings of Augustine, who in *De Civitate Dei* (early fifth century) rejected Apuleius’s understanding of the divinity of incubi, but explained that there were many accounts of incubi engaging in sexual activities with women, although without lust given that demons possessed bodies made of air.¹⁰³

In all of *Merlin*’s versions, the demons go to a woman, the wife of a farmer who has three daughters and one son. They kill his livestock, his son, and his wife. The man is struck with so much grief that he dies, leaving his three daughters for the demons to pursue. One of the sisters is judged for adultery, and another falls into prostitution, all under the influence of demons. The third sister is helped by a holy hermit who becomes her confessor so as not to fall into the devil’s tricks and helps her ward off the evil spirits for a while. One day, she is discovered weeping by the demons and forgets her protections, such as crossing herself before going to bed. She is impregnated by one of the demons during this time. The French and English versions describe the same events happening:

¹⁰¹ Original French Vulgate version : “Lors dist li vns ie nai mie pooir de concevoir ne de faire semence en feme . Mais se iou en auoie pooir ie le poroie bien faire . Car ie sai vne feme qui fait a deuse quanque ie voel . & entre nous fait il a tel qui bien puet prendre samblance domme & habiter a feme mais quil le face al plus priueement quil puet . & ensi ont enpris quil engendront . j . homme qui aprendra les autres . de tourment & del pooir al anemi de tourment & del pooir al anemi” (Sommer, 1969, p. 4)

¹⁰² (Wheatley, 1899, p. 20)

¹⁰³ “Hence I dare not make any definite statement on the question whether some spirits endowed with bodies consisting of the element air—an element that, even when merely stirred by a fan, is felt by the body with its sense of touch—are also able to experience such lust and so have intercourse in such a way as they can with women who feel the sensation of it.” (Augustine of Hippo. *City of God, Book XV, Chapter 23*. George E. McCracken (translator). Loeb Classical Library 411. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957, p. 549-551. Originally: “non hinc aliquid audeo definire, utrum aliqui spiritus elemento aerio corporati (nam hoc elementum, etiam cum agitur flabello, sensu corporis tactuque sentitur) possint hanc etiam pati libidinem ut, quo modo possunt, sentientibus feminis misceantur.” (Augustine of Hippo, 1957, p. 548-550); For discussion of the relationship between Geoffrey of Monmouth, Augustine, and Apuleius, see Victoria Flood (2024).

And when the feende sye that she hadde foryete that the holy man hadde taught her, he thought that she stode owte of goddes grace, and of her maister; “and now might I well put oure man in hir.” And this feende, that hadde power to make woman conceyve, was all redy, and lay by hir, while she was slepyng [...]¹⁰⁴

(Wheatley, 1899, p. 9-10)

Merlin’s mother confesses to having been impregnated by an evil spirit, but she is not believed: “The holy man lestned well to all hir confession, but he yaf no grete credence to that she seide, for he herde neuer be-fore of no soche thyng” (Wheatley, 1899, p. 11).¹⁰⁵ Her confession seems a sort of demonic subversion of the Annunciation, since, after all, Merlin is supposed to be the Anti-Christ. Her pregnancy, unlike the Virgin Mary’s, is not exalted. It is then decided that Merlin’s mother will be put on trial after the birth of the child, while she waits for it in a tower with two other women.

When the child is born, he is named Merlin after the woman’s father and so given a human name rather than any indication of demonic parentage. However, his magical abilities are clear: he grows quicker than a human child, has the hairy body of a demon, and starts speaking as a very young baby, frightening his mother. Merlin’s hairiness may suggest Robert’s familiarity with Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies*, where incubi are also known as the “hairy ones”, associated with satyrs and fauns.¹⁰⁶ Merlin is revealed as a rough and coarse baby, in physique and/or manner, from the moment he is born: “[...] they sye hym more roughe than other childeren that they had seyne [...]" (Wheatley, 1899, p. 14).¹⁰⁷ As with Mélusine’s children, the children of fantastical or magical beings

¹⁰⁴ “Icis diables auoit pooir de conceuoir & de gisir o feme . Lors fu tous aparellies & iut o lui en son dormant carnelment si conchut . & quant ce fu fait si sesuella la damoisele . & en lesuellier quele fist li souint del preudome si se segna & dist . sainte marie dame que est ce que mest auenu . ie sui empirie de ce que iestoie quant ie me couchai . bele glorieuse mere dieu deproies vostre cier fil que il gart lame de moi & le cors desfende” (Sommer, 1969, p. 9)

¹⁰⁵ “Quant li preudoms lot bien escoute si li dist . tu es toute plaine de dyables & diable conuersent en toi . comment te confesserai ie ne comment te chargeral ie penitance de ce que tu me dis . Car onques mais feme ne fu despucelee quele ne seust bien de qui . ou au mains quele ne ueist lomme qui le despuce- loit . Et tu me-veus faire a croire que ceste meruelle test auenue .” (Sommer, 1969, p. 10)

¹⁰⁶ “‘Hairy ones’ (*Pilosus*, i.e. a satyr) are called *Panitae* in Greek, and ‘incubuses’ (*incubus*) in Latin, or Inui, from copulating (*inire*) indiscriminately with animals. Hence also *incubi* are so called from ‘lying upon’ (*incumbere*, ppl. *incubitus*), that is, violating, for often they are shameless towards women, and manage to lie with them. The Gauls call these demons *Dusii*, because they carry out this foulness continually (*adsidue*).” (Isidore of Seville. *The Etymologies*. Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, Oliver Berghof (eds). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 190).

Originally: “*Pilosi, qui Graece Panitae, Latine Incubi appellantur, sive Inui ab ineundi oassim cuni animalibus. Vnde et Incubi dicuntur ab incumbendo, hoc est stuprando. Saepe enim inprobi existunt etiam mulieribus, et earum peragunt concubitum: quos daemones Galli Dusios vocant, quia adsidue hanc peragunt immunditiam.*” (Isidore of Seville / Isidorus Hispalensis. *Etymologiarum sive Originum libri XX*. Lindsay, W. M. (ed). v. 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 342)

¹⁰⁷ “Et quant ele le uit si se segna & dist . chis enfes me fait grant paor . & les autres femes dient & nous en auons tel paor que a grant paine le poons nous tenir . & ele lor dist . auales le aual si commandes quil soit bautisies . ”(Sommer, 1969, p. 12-13)

can exhibit their supernatural parentage through their physiology and behaviour. The Uncanny can be seen here as Merlin has all the traits a child should have but it is still an unfamiliar creature given his magical abilities which terrify all around him, including his own mother.

Merlin, even as a physically monstrous child, decides to help his mother in the trial she faces for adultery. During it, Merlin taunts the judges, claiming to know more about their past than themselves, using a particular case of the main judge whose mother had lain with a parson, claiming another father for her child for many years. The judge decides not to condemn Merlin's mother to be burned, as he would not condemn his mother. Through this act she is grateful, and the child grows closer to Blaise (the mother's confessor), who teaches him about Christianity. Merlin's mother is afterwards sent to retire in a community of nuns, where Merlin later appears to ask for her blessing to go to foreign lands. Merlin's unnamed mother's story is one of religious resilience, and satire plays a good part in Merlin's perception of the judges, as all societal expectations are put into the spotlight simply as performative. His mother is also the reason why he does not have a demonic personality. As the child explains, the plan for the demons to make him Anti-Christ does not work given his mother's strong faith: "yef they hadden putt me in an euell woman I sholde haue hadde no power to have knowen what god had I be; therfore leve that I sey vnto the." (Wheatley, 1899, p. 22).¹⁰⁸

In Merlin's mother's case, as told by Merlin himself, the devil that made her conceive is understood to be an incubus. The Latin term is used in *De Gestis* and remains the same in English, although it is changed to "anemi" in the French versions, meaning "enemy", the devil. The text includes a lengthy description of why Merlin is capable of the gift of prophecy: "[...] quod Merlyn, "hat alle shrewed hertys gon in alle their afferes, as well the euell as the gode, euen as thow hast herde me sey that I was conceyved of the deuell, so haste thow herde me sey that god hath yove me mynde to knowe thynges that be to come;" (Wheatley, 1899, p. 22). As specified above in *De Gestis*, Maugantius only mentions that the devil impregnated Merlin's mother. In the *Lestoire de Merlin*, however, Merlin describes the demon as one that "repairent en lair" ("lives in the air"): "I would have you know that I am the son of a devil who deceived my mother. He was one of a kind of demon called Hequibedes, who inhabit the air."¹⁰⁹ And he bequeathed to me the

¹⁰⁸ The equivalent scene in Old French is: "Car la boine uie de ma mere lor nuist moult." (Sommer, 1969, p. 18)

¹⁰⁹ Jane Bliss (2008, p. 202) comments in *Naming and Namelessness in Medieval Romance* about the apparent scribal misspelling of the word relating to Merlin's father: "Several manuscripts have trouble with this word or name (though all have the syntactical paradox, that he 'has' the name but 'are' in the air):

power and intelligence to know everything that has been said and done [...]” (Robert de Boron, 2001, p. 60).¹¹⁰

Late medieval theologians such as William of Auvergne and Thomas Aquinas, further to Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei*, similarly understood demons to be incorporeal, making them unable to participate in the sexual act unless to impregnate the victim with a demonic seed. Therefore, the sexual proclivity of demons is clear: the act is done solely with the intention of creating an heir. Indeed, it was understood more broadly that demons did not feel the need to have sex with humans to fulfil any sexual desire, but to impregnate women for their malicious plans. The vision of the demon lover was mostly seen as a way to corrupt the human rather than to experience any sort of orgasmic pleasure.

The incorporeality of the demon is significant for Merlin’s story since the act of conception does not come from demonic lust for a human woman, or indeed lust on the part of the woman, but rather because of a plan devised to cause the coming of the Anti-Christ. Merlin’s demon father is, therefore, only an instrument of a demonic plan. This is important to consider, as there are cases in other romances, such as *Sir Degaré*, where a “love” narrative is constructed of a fairy knight falling in love with the human he impregnates. Although compelling similarities can be seen between impregnation caused by demons and impregnation caused by fairy knights, demonic pregnancies are only made to fulfil the demon’s apocalyptic plan whereas the fairy can give way to a love narrative.

The fact that Merlin’s mother remained a Christian and nurtured her child within Christianity ensured that her son would not enact the demon’s plans. The personality and behaviour of the parents was a major influence on the foetus in the medieval period according to Van der Lugt (2018, p. 180):

The health of offspring was nevertheless an issue for scholastic physicians and philosophers and an increasing worry for lay audiences. There was ample room in theories of procreation for human intervention, with generation, not heredity, as the central concept. The seed or seeds were thought to determine the children’s characteristics, yet every child was the fruit of a myriad causes, including the quality of the air and astral influences. Women, especially, were believed to guide generation through many other channels, such as the shape of the womb, level of activity, food intake and imagination. More research is needed, but it seems that in the flourishing later medieval literature on generation, ‘women’s secrets’ and good living, producing healthy children was less a matter of marriage selection than of environment and behaviour before, after and especially during conception.

variants read ‘equibedes’, ‘ici bedes’, ‘equipedes’ (horse-feet), and ‘esquibedes’.” In this context, the word appears to be functioning as a synonym for ‘incubus’, given as a personal name.

¹¹⁰ Originally: “Mais pour dieu & por tonor & por ce que ie te puisse descouper vers le pueple & toi & ta mere di moi sil te plaist qui tes peres est . & il respont iou le dirai plus por tamor que par ta force . Ie uoel que tu saces & croies que ie sui fils a . j . anemi qui engigna ma mere . & saces que tel maniere danemi ont a non esquibedes & repairent en lair.” (Sommer, 1969, p. 17)

Therefore, Merlin's mother is capable of offering salvation to her son through her behaviour.

Shame as innocence

As mentioned above, Merlin's mother is shamed by others for the supernatural pregnancy since initially, no one believes she does not know who laid with her, and they see this as an indicative of sexual promiscuity. Demonic pregnancies usually come from rape which allowed authors to navigate the issue of a Christian woman accepting a supernatural partner.

The rape narrative, as Corinne Saunders (2001) discusses, was not unusual for a medieval audience, and rather than just creating an intense moment in the narrative, rape tales were also used in discussions concerning violent crimes and their punishments.¹¹¹ As previously mentioned, one of the most famous rape narrative examples is the story of Lucretia, a Roman legend of a woman raped by Tarquin, the son of the king of Rome. After the event, Lucretia tells of the rape to her father and her husband. This episode has some differences between different Roman retellings; however, the end of the narrative remains the same. Lucretia commits suicide to free herself from shame and guilt, but also as a way of propelling her protectors to act against her assailant.¹¹²

Lucretia's legend must have already been well known by medieval audiences, given Aquinas' influence in medieval literature and how the narrative was discussed by Augustine in *De Civitate Dei*. Lucretia's tale was retold by Christine de Pizan, Geoffrey Chaucer, and John Gower in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The narrative gave fuel to discussions surrounding the validity of women's claims against rape. It can, given the importance of the discussion and the subsequent appearance in later texts because of its popularity, have informed Robert de Boron's text in the thirteenth century. Corinne Saunders (2001, p. 159) discusses:

¹¹¹ "Yet to study medieval discourse in contemporary terms is problematic; these terms immediately draw attention to the oppression of women, but also necessarily place the past as unenlightened by contrast to the politically correct present. This broad-brush approach is dangerously reductive, in that it ignores the fact that rape was not simply accepted or dismissed as trivial in the Middle Ages, but rather was the subject of a lively, often politicised, dialogue, which could be acutely sympathetic to women as well as misogynistic." (Saunders, 2001, p. 14)

¹¹² The most famous versions of the *Rape of Lucretia* were by the authors Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Livy and Cassius Dio.

While the combination of personal tragedy and political history rendered the Lucretia story a powerful one for later tellers, other aspects of it were more problematic. It was profoundly difficult for later, Christian thinkers to reconcile the alien morality of the legend, based on a public code of shame and honour, with the doctrines of guilt, chastity and the sanctity of life. For Augustine, the story offered a dangerous example to the virtuous women of his own society who had suffered rape by invading barbarians. His questioning of Lucretia's innocence and of the validity of her suicide opened a debate that was to endure for many centuries.

Merlin's mother does not meet the same fate as Lucretia, and the *Merlin* texts appear to foster wider discussion on rape and shame, drawing on misogynistic conclusions the characters and audience would have of a woman pregnant with no apparent child's father. Both texts deal primarily with the shame of rape as well as with the consequences of said actions towards the violated woman. As already discussed, Augustine would engage with the text by affirming that Lucretia's honour was not diminished after her rape, and we see Robert de Boron's (and that of the subsequent authors and translators of *Merlin*), engagement with rape narratives in a similar way. Merlin's mother, a Christian, despite feeling shame for what has happened, knows her accounts to be true and that her body was violated, but her honour remains clear.

The mother's shame concerning the nature of her offspring or the nature of her partner is a repeated motif in the narratives studied throughout this thesis. As the previous chapter focused on bodily shame in Mélusine and Cassiodorien, the shame produced by the demonic pregnancy reveals how the anxieties towards women's bodies were not only corporeal but spiritual as well. As Mary C. Flannery (2012, p. 167) observes, in Middle English romance "the ability to feel shame is a mark of female honor and chastity."¹¹³ The impregnation of Merlin's mother therefore invites the reader to think about shamefastness, as explained in Chapter One.¹¹⁴ Merlin's mother challenges the idea of shamefastness by being a victim of an act that cannot be traced back to her. Even though she practises and feels shame presented by her behaviour around others, the reality of her

¹¹³ "The Middle English word 'shame' retains the definitions of its Old English predecessors: as well as describing dishonor itself, it can refer either to the emotion resulting from an awareness of dishonor or disgrace, or to the anticipation of dishonor, the potential for disgrace to be experienced." (Flannery, Mary C. The Concept of Shame in Late-Medieval English Literature. *Literature Compass*, 9/2, 2012, p. 166)

¹¹⁴ "A strong sense of shame, often termed shamefastness in Middle English, was necessitated in part by the unsettlingly embodied nature of female honour, proof of which was thought to reside in those parts of women's bodies which usually remained safely hidden, but which were also most closely bound up with women's allegedly undisciplined, sinful natures. And while the medieval consensus was that a woman's honour was determined primarily by her sexual continence, the difficulty of ensuring or proving a woman's chastity rendered female honour elusive and uncertain. By practising shamefastness, women might practise habits of mind and body that, by interiorizing and exteriorizing a strong sense of shame, could both preserve their chastity and communicate it to others." (Flannery, Mary C. *Practising Shame - Female honour in later medieval England*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020, p. 35)

ordeal distances her from the guilt of her sexuality. Her shame diminishes even more when her son is able to retell the story to all the judges and abolishes any culpability she could have in the demonic pregnancy, which does not change the guilt she is made to feel when she first appears pregnant. Shame is then, as I argue, here used as indicative of innocence.

Demonic transgression and inheritance in *Sir Gowther*

Sir Gowther is an analogue to the Merlin legend, and the two characters are treated in this romance as half-brothers: “This chyld within hur was non odor / Bot eyvon Malyon halfe brodur” (*Sir Gowther*, 1973, p. 150, l. 94-95). This connection between them does not appear in the original French version of the narrative titled *Robert le Diable* which according to Laura A. Hibbard (1960, p. 49), was first written in the twelfth century and identified Robert as the son of the Duke and Duchess of Normandy. It is a version of the Wish-Child folktale trope, where a child is born between the union of a woman and an Otherworld being.¹¹⁵ The Middle English version appeared much later, in the fifteenth century, as *Sir Gowther*, which survives in two manuscripts.¹¹⁶

The medieval audience for whom *Gowther* was written, was already familiar with the demonic parentage of Merlin, so, by placing the two as children of the same demon, Gowther becomes predisposed to greatness much like his brother Merlin. However, there are major differences, since the personalities of these two characters diverge. By characterising Gowther as a truly demonic child because of his paternity, the narrative differs from that of *Merlin* and evidences ideas on the fecundation of the demonic seed aligned with Thomas of Aquinas’ perspectives on the pregnancy of demons which post-date Robert de Boron and the beginnings of the earlier Merlin tradition. Despite Gowther’s mother not displaying any signs of heretical behaviour, her son grows to become a demon like his father.

Gowther is the offspring of a disguise-rape where the demon takes the form of the Duke of Austria in order to sleep with the duke’s wife and promise her a child, a scene

¹¹⁵ “The Wish-Child or Wonder-Child folk-tales seem to have influenced the beginning of the legend. They tell of a marvellous child born from the union of a mortal woman with an Otherworld being — a theme of immemorial fairy lore, frankly pagan and unmoral, — or of a child born through the instrumentality of a supernatural being to whom he is thereby promised.” (Hibbard, Laura. *Medieval Romance in England - A study of the sources and analogues of the non-cyclic metrical romances*. New York: Burt Franklin, 1960, p. 52-53)

¹¹⁶ The romance appears in British Library, MS Royal 17.B.XLIII (second half of the fifteenth century) and National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 19.3.1 (1475-1500), with some pages missing from its beginning.

that is too similar with the Uther and Igerne rape scene in the Vulgate Cycle to not be an intentional borrowing of the Arthurian tradition. Corinne Saunders (2001, p. 223) in *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* writes:

In naming Merlin, the poet of *Sir Gowther* evokes a romance tradition where the fearful figure of the incubus becomes part of a web of supernatural associations more fascinating than destructive, which surrounds the legendary golden age of chivalry. *Sir Gowther*, however, depicts a different and more disturbing phenomenon: here the devil appears in the likeness of the lady's husband, a transformation that is perhaps intended to recall the conception of Arthur, when Merlin causes Uther to appear as Ygraine's husband Gorlois.

Gowther's narrative emphasises his supernatural conception and birth in order to explain the aggressive personality that the child will possess. However, unlike Merlin, Gowther does not gain the ability to see the past and the future. Instead, this child is born with violent predispositions. Gowther's father is also mentioned to be "shaggy" – a description given to Merlin as a baby: "A felturd fende he start up son" (*Sir Gowther*, 1973, p. 150, l. 71). The association of hair and demons is very prevalent in medieval romances, and it expands to the idea of the "Wild Man". As Richard Bernheimer (1952, p. 15) explains, Merlin lives as an outcast in the woods, having cut off ties with society. This applies to Gowther as well, who, upon learning of his demonic origins, will become a wild man figure, although being kept in the court of the emperor of Almayne (Germany).

Although we can link the hairy physical descriptions of the demonic children with the association of hair and demons ascribed by Isidore of Seville (mentioned above), we might also associate the details of their physicality with Mélusine's sons analysed in the previous chapter. Their odd physical attributes (considered deformities) were a significant aspect of supernatural births and an association with otherworldly beings. Yet different theories of conception are very likely at work here. While the *Merlin* and *Gowther* authors seem to be engaging with Aristotle's one-seed theory (giving more importance to the father's than the mother's contribution to the foetus), the *Mélusine* text deals mostly with the Galenic two-seed theory where the mother is seen as a progenitor whose attributes will be passed to the children.

Before his birth, Gowther's mother was married to the Duke of Estryke (Austria), but the couple remained childless after ten years of marriage. The wife is blamed by the husband for being barren and for "wasting the time" of the duke:

Ther joy began to tyne.
To is ladé sone com he seyn,
'Y tro thou be sum baryn,

Hit is gud that we twyn;
 Y do bot wast my tyme on the,
 Eireles mon owere londys bee-'
 For gretying he com not blyn."

(*Sir Gowther*, 1973, p. 149, l. 51-57)

Asking God for a son, the wife's prayers are answered when she is seduced by the duke in an orchard not knowing she is being deceived since the figure of the duke is in fact a demon in disguise who reveals himself to the lady after conception:

In hur orchard apou a day
 Ho meyt a mon, tho sothe to say,
 That hur of luffe besoght;
 As lyke hur lorde as he myght be-
 He leyd hur down undur a tre,
 With hur is wyll he wroghtth."

(*Sir Gowther*, 1973, p. 150, l. 64-69)

To hide the demonic conception, the lady tells her husband that an angel of God will bless her with a son after her prayers, therefore they should try to conceive again. Like the conception of Merlin, this is a reimagining of the Annunciation. They both make love, and when she later reveals her pregnancy, the duke remains unaware that the child was conceived by a demon.

When the child is born, he starts to exhibit signs of violence in his first years. He kills nine wet-nurses: ("Be twelfe monethys was gon/ Nyne norsus had he slon/ Of ladys feyr and fre")¹¹⁷; and tears off his mother's nipple when she tries to breastfeed him ("His modur fell a fowle unhappe, / Apou a day bad hym tho pappe, / He snaffulld to hit soo, worried at / He rofe tho hed fro tho brest; tore, nipple / Scho fell backward and cald a prest, / To chambur fled hym fro").¹¹⁸ Incapable of dealing with his son's violent nature, the duke dies of grief when his son is fifteen, and his mother flees from the kingdom. Gowther takes his father's place as duke and continues his reign of terror in the land which includes burning down a monastery. An older man calls him the son of the devil which causes him to question his birth:

An olde erle of that cuntre
 Unto tho duke then rydys hee,
 And seyd, 'Syr, why dose thou soo?
 We howpe thou come never of Cryston stryn,
 Bot art sum fendys son, we weyn,
 That werkus hus this woo;
 Thou dose never gud, bot ey tho ylle:

¹¹⁷ *Sir Gowther*, 1973, p. 151, l. 115-117

¹¹⁸ *Sir Gowther*, 1973, p. 151, l. 124-129

We hope thou be full syb tho deyll—

(*Sir Gowther*, 1973, p. 151, l. 115-117)

Upon learning he is indeed the son of a demon, Gowther tries to repent and asks the Pope for punishment for his violent acts. The narrative takes a moralising turn in which Gowther is humiliated, serving as a jester in the court of the Emperor of Almayne (Germany), and living with (and as) dogs.

The Emperor of Almayne fights a “Saracen” army after not allowing his daughter to marry a sultan, and Gowther participates in the battle; however, he startles the princess, causing her to die after falling from a tower. At her funeral, the Pope is called, but God grants life to the maiden again, demonstrating that Gowther is forgiven, and the two get married. Gowther returns to his kingdom to marry his mother to the former Duke of Austria and then returns to Almayne to rule as a pious and just king.

For a medieval audience, an important issue in the romance would concern inheritance since Gowther is not the duke’s son but a demon’s. The textual representation of these anxieties, using a demon as a pertinent discussion of paternal inheritance disputes, is a narrative tool that enables the author to consider the problem of how an unnatural pregnancy could cause problems not only within the biological sphere but in the social and political as well. Gowther inherits the duke’s kingdom although he would have a bigger claim to the demon’s dynasty. The reason why this is not a more prevalent problem has to do with the fact that the narrative uses a different perspective of demonic inheritance and potentially assumes that, even though Gowther’s mother was impregnated by a demon, the seed was ultimately human, making the situation less dire.

The *Gowther* narrative might even be seen as a Thomist representation of the Merlin legend, as it intersects in some ways with Aquinas’ perspectives on demonic pregnancy. As previously discussed, the fact that the seed is not entirely demonic but that it was carried by a demon from a man makes the child completely human:

Still if some are occasionally begotten from demons, it is not from the seed of such demons, nor from their assumed bodies, but from the seed of men taken for the purpose; as when the demon assumes first the form of a woman, and afterwards of a man; just as they take the seed of other things for other generating purposes, as Augustine says (*De Trin.* iii), so that the person born is not the child of a demon, but of a man.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Originally: “Si tamen ex coitu daemonum aliqui interdum nascuntur, hoc non est per semen ab eis decusum, aut a corporibus assumptis, sed per semen alicuius hominis ad hoc acceptum, utpote quod idem daemon qui est succubus ad virum, fiat incubus ad mulierem, sicut et aliarum rerum semina assumunt ad aliquarum rerum generationem, ut Augustinus dicit, III *De Trin.*; ut sic ille qui nascitur non sit filius daemonis, sed illius hominis cuius est semen acceptum.” (Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae*. The Latin Library, <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/aquinas/q1.51.shtml> Access 28 Mar. 2026.)

(Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1981, First Part, Question 51)

As discussed above, this theory remained influential into the late fifteenth century, when the authors of the *Malleus* (2009, p. 132) noted:

[...] in the begetting of such [demonic] offspring, only the aspect of movement in location is ascribed to the demons but not the begetting itself, which takes its start not from the virtue of the demon or of the body assumed by him, but from the virtue of the man whose seed it was. Therefore, the child begotten is not the demon's but the other man's.¹²⁰

The influence of this concept was clearly felt beyond theological texts. Gowther's demonic personality is essentially destroyed when he learns of his paternity causing him to abdicate his devilish side. This, I argue, would not be possible if the author was not engaging with the Thomist idea that the demon seed was firstly collected from a human. It is this that makes Gowther capable of redemption.

The development of magical children differs between *Merlin* and *Gowther*. Merlin, while the son of a demon, resists this influence on account of being taught by Blaise and because of his mother's strong Christian faith. However, the Christian faith and innocence of Gowther's mother are not enough to contain her son's demonic inheritance. It seems that the *Gowther*-author uses a different approach from the issues of demonic paternity, stating that it doesn't matter how Christian a mother can be, the child will retain the father's demonic force. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1999, p. 120), drawing on Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic notion of "the Name of the Father" (nom du père), describes the mechanics of aristocratic inheritance in medieval "identity romances" which, like *Gowther*, depict the revelation of a hero's parentage:

[...] these identity romances often trace how young men mature into their proper name through a series of adventures — and, "as it turns out," the adult identity into which they wander exactly coincides with a family name that may have been hidden from them until that point. Even when (or especially when) romance heroes do not know who their father is, their movement into adulthood is dictated nonetheless by the ghostly agency that the Name of the Father embodies in its narrative determinacy.

This "narrative determinacy" is only countered by the presence of another, unknown but human, father, whose seed dominates.

¹²⁰ Originally: "[...] quod demonibus attribuitur in talium generatione illud tantum quod est motus localis, non autem ipsa generatio cuius principium non est virtus demonis aut corporis ab eo assumpti, sed virtus illius cuius semen fuit, unde et genitus non demonis sed alicuius hominis filius est." (Mackay, 2009, p. 254)

In both *Gowther* and *Merlin* the demonic pregnancy is resolved by Christianity, but what of works that deal with classical and non-Christian inspiration? The legend of Alexander the Great is such a case, concerned not with demons and incubi but with supernatural beings and pagan sorcery. The issue of Alexander the Great's supernatural heritage dates back centuries and, as I will argue, may have inspired other works already discussed in this chapter.

The tradition of deceit in *Alexander*

The *Alexander* tradition is a long one dating back to classical Greek and Latin sources. The medieval canon is also extensive, given the number of accounts written on the Macedonian king throughout the centuries. Richard Stoneman (2012) gives a comprehensive chronology that shows the main Alexander legend recordings started appearing as far back as 100 B.C.¹²¹

The medieval Alexander narrative tradition is far too great to give a comprehensive list of manuscripts and translations: Venetia Bridges (2018, p. 3 - 4) comments that by the time Chaucer mentions accounts of Alexander in the *Canterbury Tales*, the story was “so commune / That every wight that hath discrecioun / Hath herd somewhat or al of his fortune”. The narrative of “the Macedonian's history itself has become a cliché.”¹²²

There is no original version of the legend of Alexander, as the text was adapted from multiple narratives, letters, and mentions of Alexander throughout history. For the medieval narratives, however, the main source seems to have come from the *Historia de Preliis*, a significant work written sometime in the tenth century by Leo the Archpriest that was translated into Latin and with three versions (recensions) added, named J1, J2 and J3, with the first recension mentioning Alexander's magical birth. Each version expanded the story more than the previous one. As this study focuses primarily on the French and Middle English traditions of magical conceptions, these are the versions I will mainly be exploring.

The most renowned French version of the romance, *Roman d'Alexandre*, dates around the year 1180, and it was ascribed to Alexandre de Paris, a Norman poet. The

¹²¹ Stoneman, Richard. *Legends of Alexander the Great*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2012, p. xxix - xxx

¹²² Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Riverside Chaucer*. Larry D. Benson (ed). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008, p. 250. l. 2631-2633

French *Roman* became so popular, it was translated into Middle English.¹²³ There are also Anglo-Norman traditions that demonstrate how the Alexander texts were present in the British Isles before the Middle English translation I am using for this study. The first Middle English translations probably dated from the thirteenth century, as Venetia Bridges (2018, p. 196) notes:

From the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, however, the renewed composition of English-language material may start to alter this transnational literary-cultural situation. The Middle English romance *Kyng Alisaunder* was probably composed at this moment, and during the second half of the fourteenth century it is joined by several other Alexander texts (*Alexander A*, *Alexander B*, and *Alexander C*).

Since Alexander's conception is the focus of this section, I will be analysing *Fragment A*, written around 1340, seeing that this is the fragment that narrates his birth in detail in Middle English.¹²⁴

In both the French and the Middle English narrative, Queen Olympias, Alexander's mother, and King Philip's wife, is visited by Nectanabus, a wizard king from Egypt, who uses his magic to confirm that Philip plans to leave the queen, as it has been revealed that she will carry a child that is not his. To calm the queen, Nectanabus states that while she sleeps, a god will visit to impregnate her. Nectanabus then transforms into the god Ammon and has sexual relations with the queen for three nights (he also uses the form of a dragon and himself) always assuming the appearance of a god who will bring a child to the kingdom, an outcome to which the queen consents.

¹²³ This is also not the first iteration in the French language of the text, as Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox (2002, p. 3-4) explain in the introduction to *The Medieval French Alexander*: "Within the full context of the medieval French Alexander, the twelfth century stands out as the powerfully formative period. From the beginning to the end of the century, a number of texts in verse develop the basic elements of the legend and add new ones. The earliest of these, dating from near the beginning of the century, is a Franco-Provençal work by Albéric de Pisançon of which only the opening survives, a fragment of 105 octosyllables in fifteen monorhymed *laisses* depicting the hero's *enfances*. Albéric's poem was subsequently adapted in a decasyllabic Poitevin *Roman d'Alexandre*, also portraying only the *enfances* (ca. 1160), followed, during the 1170s, by three dodecasyllabic works unknown in their original states: *Le Roman du Fierre de Gadres*, an account, attributed to Eustache, of a raid on Gaza [...]; an *Alixandre en Orient* by Lambert le Tort of Châteaudun; and an anonymous *Mort Alixandre*. The Poitevin *enfances* and the latter two works were amalgamated into a composite *Roman d'Alixandre*. Late in the century, Alexandre de Paris drew substantially upon these earlier works in order to elaborate a massive dodecasyllabic poem of some 16,000 verses in monorhymed *laisses* treating the comprehensive biography of the hero in four "branches.""

¹²⁴ The original manuscript holding Fragment A is located at Oxford, Bodleian Library, Greaves MS 60 (c. 1600) and the version used for citation in this chapter was edited by Walter W. Skeat in 1881: *The Romance of William of Palerne: (otherwise known as The Romance of "William and the Werwolf") Translated from the French at the Command of Sir Humphrey de Bohun, about A.D. 1350; To which is added a fragment of the Alliterative Romance of Alisaunder: translated from the Latin by the Same author, about A.D. 1340;* Walter W. Skeat (ed.) London: Early English Text Society, by N. Trubner & Co., 60, Paternoster Row, 1881

The problem with Alexander's birth begins with Philip's anger at knowing that the child will not be his, but the anger is dispelled when the omens for the greatness of his son's success are revealed by "his enchauntior cheefe", Phillip's trusted advisor.¹²⁵ Phillip dreams about the queen being impregnated by Ammon and having his seal (a lion's head, the zodiac, and a sword) present in her vagina. The king's counsellors offer advice that the lion's head represents that the child will be feared; the zodiac represents that he will conquer the East, and the sword symbolises that he will be strong in battle and thus become Philip's protector:

Hee lay by þat lady, his liking hee wrought,
 And, whan his deede so deerne doone was in haste,
 Amiddes hur membre too maken it close
 Hee sawe hym sowen a seme by seeming of sweuen,
 And with a gaie golde ring hee gan it asele.
 A ston stiked þerein stoutlich igraue:
 Þe cast of þe sonne-course was corue þerin;
 A litle lioness hed lovelich ishape,
 With a swith faire swerd sweetelich imaked,
 Was isett on þe sell þe seme all amiddes.

(*Fragment A*, 1881, p. 203, l. 825 - 834)

The "sealing" of the queen's vagina refers to Aristotle's one seed theory as it seems the author makes it clear the stamping of her member signifies authority over what it guards. Just like a letter being sent as a diplomatic document, Olympias' vagina becomes the symbol that her pregnancy has an "owner". Relating back to Freud's theory of the Uncanny and the fear of women's castrated body it seems that the seal in the vagina can also be a type of sealing of women's greatest weapon. With her vagina sealed, Olympias cannot castrate any man around her.

(Supernatural) paternal inheritance in Middle English romances

The anxieties associated with the queen's vulnerable position and physicality align the text conceptually with *Sir Gowther*, which in this respect may, I suggest, have been influenced by the Alexander tradition. The queen receives a prophecy that she will be abandoned by her husband. Olympias asks Nectanabus: "'Maister,' saide þat menskfull, 'mee likes too knowe / What Philip my free lorde, þat fairest of londe, / Wil wirch by mee; for weies mee tolde / Hee wyll forsake mee soone and seeche hym a neew / Whan hee is cumme too þis kith, too kithe mee sorowe.'" (*Fragment A*, 1881, p. 197, l. 651 -

¹²⁵ (*Fragment A*, 1881, p. 203, l. 841)

655). Olympias is afraid upon hearing that Phillip plans to leave her after he is told at a temple by the god Ammon that she would have a child that is not his:

þe bern shall not bee ðine bolde þo þou seeme,
But geten of a-nooþer gome in þat gaye burde.”
þen was þe King carefull & kest for wrath
For too bring pat beurde in baile for euer.
Menne tolde this tydyng too þe true Queene,
þefore hur lyked þat lud his lore too knowe.

(Fragment A, 1881, p. 198, l. 669 - 674)

Nectanabus, at this point, seems to be luring the queen into believing that she needs to conceive in order to remain queen. Her pregnancy is then mandated to occur as Olympias has nothing else to give to the king but his heir. Nectanabus advises that the king will be forced to take her back, even though he knows that the son is not his. When Olympias asks who would be so bold to force him to do this, the sorcerer answers “A God þat is gracious” (p. 198, l. 688). The same fear occurs in *Sir Gowther*, where, as previously discussed, the duke’s wife prays to God to be given a son so as not to upset her husband.

Alexander’s supernatural conception certainly seems to have influenced other medieval accounts of remarkable pregnancies. For example, John S. P. Tatlock (1950, p. 318) has suggested that Alexander legends influenced Geoffrey of Monmouth’s account of the conception of Arthur:

The Alexander birth-story is [near to that of] Arthur’s in that [...] the Marvel is due to a skilled man and not to a god, and that an earthly king meets the lady accidentally, and falls in love at once; it differs from the two in that the wife, though regarded as innocent, believes that she is forgatherng with a divinity, not with her husband.

All narratives explored in this chapter feature some sort of sexual assault that happens to the mother of the magical child. Merlin’s mother is asleep when the incubus visits her; Olympias is lied to by Nectanabus, who claims Ammon will be the father of her child, and a demon deceives Gowther’s mother appearing as her husband. Drawing on Hannah Piercy’s discussion on several rape narratives in this period (concerning either a threat of rape or the rape itself), this type of violence is not unusual, appearing in many narratives such as *The Wife of Bath*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*¹²⁶, and *Blanchardyn and Eglantine*, etc. The author explains (2023, p. 15):

¹²⁶ The Lady tells Gawain he would be strong enough to take her by force if he wished, although she offers herself enthusiastically: “þe ar stif innoghe to constrayne wyth strenkþe, ȝif yow lykez, / ȝif any were so vilanous þat yow devaye wolde.” J.R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon (eds.) *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967, p. 42, l.1496–1497

Aside from rape, there are a multitude of other instances involving sexual violence more broadly defined: Arthur and Alexander are conceived in acts that, at least in some versions of their stories, are deceptive if not actually rape itself, while other romance characters are pressured, coerced, tricked, and even blackmailed into sexual relationships against their will.

The cases in this chapter deal primarily with examples of demonic insemination through a supernatural character, which brings forth offspring who will be fuelled by a superior power. The children born out of these cases are meant to be powerful individuals, and the demonic/supernatural pregnancy their mothers endure is justified when their offspring fulfil their great destinies. These narratives, however, also betray anxieties about rightful inheritance, dynastic lines, and concerning fertility.

In these romances supernatural rape is used primarily as a pretext to join human and supernatural lineages without transgressing what Christian doctrines would deem acceptable in the medieval period.¹²⁷ Save for *Alexander*, the rape of Merlin and Sir Gowther's mothers is used as a narrative device for medieval audiences to accept how the child comes from a supernatural seed, and the mother is not to be blamed for being impregnated.

The tradition of rape by a supernatural being (as well as abduction and deceit) in Middle English narratives is an extensive one. The main romances I discuss in this chapter are not a comprehensive list of cases of supernatural or demonic pregnancies. I here introduce one more example in order to expand on the sort of expectation audiences would have regarding demonic or supernatural encounters of this type, not least as these relate to the genre conventions of romance. *Sir Degaré* is an early fourteenth century romance in which a woman is raped by a fairy knight and becomes pregnant with his son. Nicolas Jacobs (1995, p. 1) comments that *Sir Degaré* "[...] has possibly the longest recorded textual tradition of any Middle English text." The narrative can be found in many manuscripts in different compilations.¹²⁸ I would like to pay close attention to the version found in the Auchinleck manuscript since the text is accompanied by other rape narratives

¹²⁷ "Like other propositions of this period that implied portentous moral consequences — a list ranging from the commission of sin to contracts like matrimony or vassalage and well beyond — the sexual relationship between the woman and the incubus was represented as consensual, giving rise to a binding agreement not unlike the pact imputed to the sorcerer and the devil. Of course, a potential face-saving strategy would be for the woman to deny having given her consent, as this would remove all possible culpability." (Elliot, 1999, p. 54)

¹²⁸ Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 19.2.1 (Auchinleck) (fourteenth century); London, British Library, MS Egerton 2862 (late fourteenth century); Cambridge University Library, MS Ff.2.38 (fifteenth century); Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson F.34 (late fifteenth century); Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 261 (1564); London, British Library, MS Additional 27879 (c. 1650)

as well, including *Arthour and Merlin*, which details the events around Arthur's conception, and the tale of *Sir Orfeo*, which does not involve rape but an abduction very close to it. Corinne Saunders (2001, p. 288) comments: "We can contrast *Sir Degaré* and *Sir Gowther* with a third Breton lay, *Sir Orfeo*, which explores not otherworldly rape but abduction." The presence of narratives that contain similar scenes in this manuscript evidences the circulation of this motif in Middle English romances which, as in this case, sometimes substituted a demonic partner for a fairy one.

Sir Degaré's story also follows narrative trajectories of a magical birth: Degaré's mother is a princess whose father will only let her marry the knight who defeats him in a tournament. The princess, however, is raped by a magical knight when she and her entourage get lost in a forest. When the knight finds her lost, he is described as a man of noble and elegant appearance: "His visage was feir his bodi ech weies; / Of countenance rízt curteis, Wel farende legges, fot and honed; / Þer nas non in þe kynges londe / More apert man, þan was he." (Sir Degaré, 1995, p. 14).

The knight disappears with the promise that the princess is now pregnant with his child (much like the demon in *Sir Gowther*); however, he gives his own sword as a gift to his unborn son. The princess fears her pregnancy will be discovered and seeing that her father forbade her to marry anyone, she grows concerned that people would think her child comes from an incestuous relationship. Asking one of her ladies-in-waiting for help, the child is born in secret and left by his mother near a hermit's house with gold and gloves that would only fit her – a medieval plot device used to identify his mother, later in the narrative. The man who finds the baby names him Degaré and, at ten years old, instructs him to look for his family.

After many years, Degaré learns about a royal tournament and how he can marry the princess if he defeats the king. He is victorious and becomes engaged to the princess, not knowing she is his mother. On the wedding night, Degaré remembers the gloves and asks his new wife to put them on, revealing their kin. The princess confesses the magical pregnancy to the king and presents the fairy knight's sword to her son, setting Degaré in search of his true father.

Afterwards, he encounters a magical knight in the forest who challenges him and the two fight: "Lo swich au[e]nture he gan betide: / Þe sone aȝein þe fader gan ride, / And noiþer ne knew oþer no wízt!" (Sir Degaré, 1995, p. 276). The knight recognises Degaré's sword as his and reveals himself as his father. Both return to the kingdom, and the marriage to his mother is annulled so she can marry the fairy knight. Degaré marries a maiden he rescued from another castle, and the romance ends seemingly with a happy

ending, although we are not sure what Degaré's mother feels about marrying her attacker.

The text uses several familiar romance tropes, mainly focusing on character recognition: The glove from Degaré's mother will only fit her, and his father has the tip of the sword, necessary for the family to be reunited. The romance also features a supernatural partner who is much more welcomed than is normally seen in cases of magical pregnancy, considering he is a fairy knight and not a demon. The fact that he is not an incubus, such as Merlin and Gowther's father, does not give Degaré prophetic powers or violent tendencies, but it gives him a justification for adventure, as well as his status as a remarkably accomplished knight.

Consent and Abjection

When impregnated by a demonic or fairy creature (even without consent), the importance given to the mother's authority in the birth is necessary to move the narrative forward, as she will be the bearer of this new, powerful offspring. Even though these mothers are not necessarily presented in the narrative as monstrous, their pregnancy might be, and while carrying their children, they become part of the same supernatural category as their demonic or fairy partners. Medieval authors strip away the consent from these women primarily as a form of Christian justification (or godlike explanation in the case of *Alexander*), but also since women's agency is a powerful narrative detail that would not allow them to become the vessels for demonic pregnancies.

Following Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's discussion of the monster, the fathers analysed in this chapter follow monstrous characteristics concerned especially with their physicality and morality. However, the mothers might become monsters as well in the sense that through their supernatural pregnancy they become uncategorisable, human and yet not so human:

This refusal to participate in the classificatory "order of things" is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions.

(Cohen, 1996, p. 6)

The demonic pregnancies in this chapter can be read as medieval implications that women are the doorway to chaos and instability within the natural and patriarchal order of things. It is up to their offspring to correct this mistake by "abjecting" the mother and

re-establishing the “natural” world. However, whilst Cohen refers to deviance from gender as a monstrosity (women who trespass the borders of their gender), the mothers in this chapter are monstrous mostly because they do not commit any violation. Rather, they are the ones violated, and their bodies simply do what medieval authors consider women were born to do: have children. Despite them abiding by every law found in the medieval conception of women, they still cannot escape the curse and monstrosity of being a woman.

Conclusion

In the end, all the mothers are “abjected” in one way or another. They disappear from the narrative or are suppressed when their work (of making monstrous or remarkable offspring) is no longer needed. Merlin and Gowther’s mothers are not even named in the text and are only referred to as “the wife” or “the mother”. Olympias is likewise suppressed in the narrative since, after Alexander’s birth, the continuation of her story is no longer necessary.

Supernatural pregnancies, especially demonic cases, are representative of medieval engagement with quasi-medicalised theological texts that identify women’s bodies as vessels for the supernatural. The anxiety seen in these texts might be read as early precursors to the sexual anxieties that Broedel (2005, p. 179) has identified in the *Malleus*:

To Institoris and Sprenger, notions of “witches” and “witchcraft” served to reify, in the form of a wholly corrupt female body, the threats and the anxieties posed by human sexuality. Categorizing witches as embodiments of sinful female sexuality provided the authors with a useful means to control the unbridled sexuality of women that led to misfortune and disaster.

Pregnancy, abject by itself, was also a cause of concern to medieval authors as it exposes the vulnerability of women’s potential openness to the supernatural. Such abject physicality can, as we find in the *Prose Merlin*, even threaten to bring about the end of the world.

Chapter Three
The Magical Stepmother:
Supernatural Disputes and Transformations in *William of Palerne* and *The*
Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle

Besides the monstrous mother's body and the demonic father's seed, another type of parent is also relevant to the study of supernatural parenthood in Middle English and French romances: the stepmother. My analysis in this chapter suggests that in medieval romance the supernaturalised stepmother is associated with disruptions to patrilineal inheritance, the transference of property from fathers to first-born sons. The texts I am concerned with are the Middle English translation of *Guillaume de Palerne*, read alongside its Old French source, and the Middle English romances about the Arthurian knight Gawain and Dame Ragnelle. In these narratives, the disruption of inheritance is achieved through the supernatural metamorphosis or exile of the eldest son, and in the Gawain romances the daughter's as well. In these texts, representations of bodily transformation (whether by human-animal metamorphosis or a premature old age) are suggestive of authorial engagement with medical or quasi-medical texts such as Aristotle's *De Generatione Animalium* or Pseudo-Albert's *De secretis mulierum*.

In these romances the stepmother is a figure of female authority and point of connection to the supernatural, who presents a dangerous threat to the order of the dynasty or lineage she marries into. By vilifying the stepmother, medieval authors "abject" her presence from the very patriarchal order that she makes vulnerable. In this chapter I analyse medieval romances that position the supernatural stepmother as a threat to the dynasty and even to life itself since she is able to cause, or at least threaten, the end of lineages by turning her stepchildren into monstrosities.

Curiously given the prevalence of postmedieval associations of the supernatural stepmother with the figure of the hag (as we find, for example, in early modern fairy tales), this most disordered and threatening of medieval bodies is generally not associated with the body of the stepmother herself, although, as we shall see, she still might wield the disruptive power of the postmenopausal body in the curses she places on her stepchildren.¹²⁹ Further, this absence of is not to say that the stepmother of medieval romance

¹²⁹ For more on the history of fairy tales see Warner, Marina, *Once Upon a Time – A Short History of Fairy Tale*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014 and Zipes, Jack (ed). *The Golden Age of Folk and Fairy Tales – From the Brothers Grimm to Andrew Lang*. Indianapolis/Cambridge, The Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 2013

is not constructed in relation to misogynistic stereotypes, in particular, she exemplifies a female lust for power and/or wealth). In the texts discussed in this chapter, the figure of the stepmother is used to express socio-economic anxieties regarding the destruction of assets, bloodlines and dynastic power.

Notably, when the stepmother is present in a narrative, she is generally never in the foreground of the text. As a secondary character, she is sometimes only mentioned but mostly without a voice. When she does appear, she is never intended to be the focus. The narrative interest is focused primarily on her stepchildren, who are the ones that receive the curse she imposes. Her presence, however, threatens the characters as the responsible power for the torments that afflict the narrative. In these cases, she will work as a tool in the narrative, having a specific function which is a point of interest beyond her characterisation.

This point of interest would have been intriguing for early readers of these texts, both aristocratic and bourgeois. We might think of Humphrey de Bohun, the patron responsible for requesting a translation into Middle English of *Guillaume* titled *William of Palerne*¹³⁰, as well as the readers discussed by Victoria Flood and Megan G. Leitch, drawn from other social strata, not least the emergent medieval bourgeoisie, who enthusiastically engaged with the aristocratic values and conventions in these romances, just as they too became interested in questions of land ownership and inheritance explored in these tales.¹³¹

In these romances, the stepmother does not choose to kill the children she inherits in the marriage, but rather, transforms them. Her justification for the curse is the genealogical closure of the dynasty she is now marrying into. She can either attempt to relocate the inheritance to her children instead of her husband's first born (as we see in *William*) or to claim the inheritance to herself (what appears to happen in the Gawain romance) by eliminating the rightful heirs of her husband's lineage: Ragnelle and her brother Sir Gromer. Her quest for authority will include a supernatural transformation. I therefore argue that witchcraft becomes the instrument for the metamorphosis of the stepchildren's bodies which leads to her change in status as well. Witchcraft leads to social transformation. This is, however, only a temporary change in the social order of

¹³⁰ "The mid-fourteenth-century Middle English translation [of *Guillaume*] [...] was composed, as the translator (himself called William) tells us, for a grandson of Edward I, Humphrey de Bohun, sixth earl of Hereford, who died in 1361." Cooper, Helen. "Women and Werewolves: William of Palerne in Three Cultures" In: *Cultural Translations in Medieval Romance*. Victoria Flood; Megan G. Leitch (eds). Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2022, p. 85

¹³¹ Flood, Victoria; Leitch, Megan G. (eds). Introduction: Insular Romance in Translation: New Approaches. In: *Cultural Translations in Medieval Romance*. Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2022, p. 8

the texts, and as Russel A. Peck (2007) notes, we might associate the stepmother character with what Greimas calls a *destinateur*, the character who will provoke the action of the narrative,¹³² leading to the restoration of patriarchal order.

This chapter focuses on the figure of the stepmother and the traits that often illustrate the anxieties medieval authors felt towards the sometimes-inevitable construction of blended families and new guardians for their descendants. It was common for children to lose one of their parents before adulthood from problems such as disease and complications in childbirth among young women.¹³³ Since the responsibility of raising children would fall on women, if a man became a widower, he would have not only a justification but an obligation to find a new wife. Indeed, as Sandy Feinstein (2011, p. 24) mentions about occurrences such as the Black Death, a high death rate among younger people during the second half of the fourteenth century sometimes occasioned marriages between older men and younger women or vice-versa:

Changes in population affected marriage patterns for both men and women. With the plague decimating the young while sparing the old, the age gap was accentuated and the availability of suitable matches strained. The result was older men being affianced to much younger women—the theme of many a fabliaux—as well as parents arranging marriages between their sons and much older women.

This historical context speaks directly to the blended families of the Ragnelle tradition: Ragnelle's marriage to Gawain might parallel that of the young stepmother and Ragnelle's father, here gender swapped. What is more prominent in cases of new marriages in medieval romance narratives is the introduction of the young wife as the new mother of the house. The new wife, however, could in many cases not be very keen on sharing her newfound earnings from a new husband with his children. As marriage would grant status and protection, if her husband happened to die, all his estate would be inherited by his kin, most likely the older sons. By not accepting this, the stepmother

¹³² “Although the stepmother does not appear until the end of the tale, she is the principal determinant, what might be called (with apologies to Greimas) the *destinateur* of the story, the “why” behind the loathly hag’s circumstance.” (Peck, Russel A. *Folklore and Powerful Women in Gower’s “Tale of Florent”* In: *The English “Loathly Lady” Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*. Elizabeth S. Passmore; Susan Carter (eds). Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007, p. 113)

¹³³ “The historian Georges Minois’ statistics on the effects of disease, especially the plague, are useful for understanding the changing social demographics. Minois has concluded that ‘killer epidemics of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and the plague in particular, tended to single out children and young adults, leaving a momentary imbalance between age groups in favour of old age.’ [...] Moreover, the usual culprit for early death among women, namely childbirth, has also recently been reconsidered. According to historian Pat Thane, getting to age 20 was the challenge; those who did, notably women, were more likely to live past fifty or sixty.” (Feinstein, Sandy. *Longevity and the Loathly Ladies in Three Medieval Romances*. *Arthuriana*, v.21, n. 3, 2011, p. 25)

becomes a threat to individual families and entire dynasties. Notably, Ragnelle describes her stepmother as a “youngue lady” (1995, l. 177) in *The Marriage of Sir Gawain* (another version of *The Wedding*, explained below), presumably with her own familial ambitions; and Alphonse’s stepmother in *William*, despite being described as a “worchipful ladi”, is described as having learned witchcraft in “3oupe” (youth), perhaps indicating she is not able to conceive more children with the king, leading her primary concern to be the inheritance of her one and only son.

As already mentioned, the stepmother uses her powers with the intention of transforming her stepchildren and thus ends their ability to continue their dynasties, therefore, by turning a young woman into an old one or a man into a beast, her plan is fulfilled and her authority affirmed.

In this chapter, I focus firstly on the text of *William of Palerne*, a fourteenth century English translation of the twelfth century Old French romance *Guillaume de Palerne*. In this text, the wife of the king of Spain fears that her own son will not inherit the throne since the king already had a first-born son from a previous marriage. She curses the king’s son, Alphonse, and turns him into a werewolf. Another supernatural stepmother is found in the romances *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* as well as *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, both fourteenth century poems with the same plot line (although *The Marriage* is missing some sections beyond reconstruction in the *Percy Folio*). This romance narrative, following an older and disfigured woman who turns into a beautiful lady when given her sovereignty, was so popular at the time that corresponding versions of it appear in Gower’s *Tale of Florent* in *Confessio Amantis* and Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale* in *The Canterbury Tales*.¹³⁴ Although these are unlikely to have been directly influenced by Ragnelle’s story, the motif of the loathly lady tale was very prominent at this time in Europe especially reflecting attitudes towards older women in the Middle Ages.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Some iterations of the Loathly Lady Tale did not seem to feel the need to include the stepmother as a reason for the heroine’s transformation. She is completely removed from Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath Tale*, for instance, but still is mentioned in Gower’s *Tale of Florent*.

¹³⁵ For more on loathly lady tales and their relationship to possible background Arthurian traditions see chapters: Biebel-Stanley, Elizabeth M. Sovereignty through the Lady: “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” and the Queenship of Anne of Bohemia; Carter, Susan. A Hymenation of Hags; Peck, Russel A. Folklore and Powerful Women in Gower’s “Tale of Florent” In: Passmore, Elizabeth S.; Carter, Susan (eds). *The English “Loathly Lady” Tales - Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007. Also see: Feinstein, Sandy. Longevity and the Loathly Ladies in Three Medieval Romances. *Arthuriana*, v.21, n. 3, 2011.

My interpretation of the stepmother's curse both in *The Wedding* and *The Marriage* is not focused on the figure of the stepmother herself, but on Dame Ragnelle's appearance and behaviour, which conveys medieval anxieties surrounding post-menopausal women and the infertile bride. The text is more broadly interested in disruptions of primogeniture, as we see Ragnelle's brother, the wild knight Sir Gromer, fighting for his lands which are ultimately given to his sister after her marriage to Gawain. Therefore, both the stepmother's curse, and Ragnelle's subsequent role in its breaking, disrupt primogeniture.

William of Palerne explores this idea through a similar supernatural curse, in this case, lycanthropy, and both sets of metamorphoses have a similar point of interest when considering a threatened dynastic ending. In my analysis of this, I look towards Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* as well as recent scholarship engaged in eco-criticism in order to understand the interplay between magic and wildness at work in these romances, and their gendered connotations. Fundamental to this is the concept of sovereignty, which is crucial in various senses, both medieval and modern, to my analysis.

Sovereignty, in the political sense of the word, is authority granted to an individual. This authority could exist in the sphere of the state as judicial order or politics, but as we shall see, that is not necessarily the only definition of the word, and we find it in the context of personal relationships and marriage, for King Arthur learns in the *Wedding* that sovereignty is precisely "Whate wemen love best". This is in many ways true for the stepmothers in my chosen texts, who search for their sovereign power in the new social order they seek to create.

In narratives that contrast the natural world with the civilized one, we see sovereignty challenged and re-organized. As Agamben (2017, p. 17) puts it, sovereignty is a paradox which "consists in the fact the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order." If, Agamben maintains, sovereignty is the presence of authority in the exception, then the search for sovereignty will need to join the natural world and the "human" world. As Peggy McCracken (2017, p. 1) states: "[...] literary texts use human-animal encounters to explore the legitimacy of authority and dominion over others. When animals and humans meet, sovereignty comes to the fore." It seems that for a medieval audience, whether the texts focus on state authority or the authority of oneself, the presence of wildness presents a profound challenge, and it is here that we can locate the stepmother's power in all three of these textual traditions.

By analysing the differences and similarities between these supernatural stepmothers, I focus primarily on bodily anxieties seen in the transformations of these

characters: men turned into beasts and women turned into hags. I also pay special attention to the representation of witchcraft alongside the use of supernatural conjurations and incantations that these stepmother characters seem to be well-versed in, as the means by which the stepchild is transformed or made wild and (temporarily) disinherited. Magic matters in this respect as a way of writing about and conceptualising metamorphoses both physical and social.

Blood(lines)

When analysing why the stepmother becomes a villainous figure in these romances, a few considerations need to be made on the construction of this character. It was not uncommon for a young widow to need to remarry due to the unexpected death of her husband. The problem would arise if the new wife of a man already had children, as this could mean the disinheritance of the older children from his previous marriage. Lyndan Warner (2016, p. 484), working with Western European sources from c. 1400 onwards, discusses how the introduction of a stepmother in a family would cause confusion towards inheritance disputes, especially if she was younger than the children. Even though the author mentions what was likely to happen during the early modern period, this can be seen in medieval writings, by seeing the examples studied in this chapter, how the stepmother, whether medieval or early modern, represents the fear of property loss:

Stepchildren might dread the arrival of a stepmother because she was often younger than her husband, closer in age to his children and therefore much more likely to delay or block an inheritance if as a widow she had use of her husband's property. Moreover, the stepmother and her husband might prove fertile, producing half-siblings and potential rivals for a father's attention and estate.

Alcuin Blamires (2010, p. 109) discusses how, since the genealogical configuration was heavily focused on the male during the Middle Ages, this meant that female members of the family had less agency and protection in case a rupture or movement were to happen in the family tree. Although we might note literary exceptions to this, such as *Mélusine*, medieval genealogy was generally focused on the male, also

referred to as a “patrilineal agnatic mode”, meaning that the lineage would always be traced by the male, thus making women less important in the ancestry pedigree.¹³⁶

Marrying into a new powerful family could mean nothing to a woman if her lineage did not inherit from the dynasty. Blamires (2010, p. 110) continues: “Women who married into the maternal line, and daughters who married out of the maternal line, were often treated as secondary [...]”. A way to reverse this problem was thus to ensure that her heir would be part of the dynastic line, which would give her security. This, I suggest, is most likely what motivates the curses of stepmothers in characters such as the werewolf in *William of Palerne* or Sir Gromer Somer Joure in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, analysed below.

For real life examples of how people (especially women) engaged with inheritance, land, and second marriage in the Middle Ages, we might look to *The Paston Letters*, a collection of correspondences between members of the Paston family in Norfolk between 1422 and 1509. A major figure in this correspondence is Agnes Paston, the family matriarch who wrote constantly to her son to discuss marriage proposals and property problems. In one letter Agnes tells her son she is interested in helping his sister, her daughter to marry a potential suitor but makes it very clear that “I fonde her never so wyllly to noon as sche is to hym, zyf it be so that his londe stande cleer.” (1904, v. II, letter 93).¹³⁷ The fact that his land/title needs to be “cleer” (clear) shows how prominent it was for marriages to be financial and economic discussions. Agnes is also concerned in the letters that if her daughter marries someone in a second marriage, the suitor’s existing children from the first marriage will likely complicate matters of inheritance. In letter 94, Elizabeth Clere, cousin of the Pastons, writes to John Paston that his mother was discussing how a potential match between her daughter and a man named Stephen Scrope would be since Scrope already had a daughter from a previous marriage. She writes:

Cosyn, I lete zow wete that Scrope hath be in this cuntre to se my cosyn zoure sustyr, and he hath spoken with my cosyn zoure moder, and sche desyreth of hym that he schuld schewe zow the endentures mad be twen the knyght that hath his dowter and hym, whethir that Skrop, if he were married and fortunied to have children, if tho children schuld enheryte his lond, or his dowter, the wheche is married.

¹³⁶ “In the evolution of medieval genealogy, the dominance of a patrilineal agnatic mode (tracing lineage back through the male line, and focused on the male succession to lordship and land) meant that quite commonly fewer women were identified by name, or even by kin status, in cases where pedigrees of ancestry were compiled.” (Blamires, Alcuin. May in January’s Tree: Genealogical Configuration in the *Merchant’s Tale*. *The Chaucer Review*, v. 45, 2010, p. 109)

¹³⁷ Gairdner, James. *The Paston Letters. Ad 1422-1509*. London: Chatto & Windus; Exeter: James G. Commin, v. II, 1904.

She later writes that “[...]Scrop seith to me if he be married, and have a sone an eyre, his dowter that is married schal have of his liflode L. marke and no more [...]” showcasing how, ultimately, the first concern seen in literature regarding stepparents is economic, as the stepmother is a threat to the landed authority and economic power of the children of her new marriage. Another concern, in different contexts, is related to age. In some cases, as the ones I analyse in this chapter, the stepmother is a young lady or married young to a man who already had a previous marriage. However, her age may not be of any concern to the narrative, but what will cause her dispute is the fact that she might have already had children. If she already had them, the economic aspect of her threat increases as she will not only try to end the lineage that belongs to the children of her new husband, but she will also try to relocate the inheritance which would fall to her own family and the birth of new heirs. This is a major plot factor in *William*. The most important reasoning behind her choices has to do with a genealogical end, which, in a medieval context, seems to be the only case as her motivation is mostly economic and not motiveless cruelty.

The *William* narrative is the oldest in this chapter (with the original French being written around 1194-1197), and it features the most descriptions given to the stepmother’s enchantment, as well as featuring her character more prominently. The stepmother as a character appears to have been watered down (as well as her magic) in *The Wedding* and *The Marriage*, which are later narratives, although probably based on earlier or contemporary traditions of the loathly lady narrative.¹³⁸ The stepmother starts to become more of an obstacle to be conquered than an actual character in the Arthurian romances. In either case, the explanation for the stepmother’s curse is one of monetary value: if the children of her new husband continue to exist as they are, her future as a sovereign is vulnerable. Still, the solution to her problem is never to kill her stepchildren but to make sure they will not be able to produce heirs. The narratives present her magic as an instrument for a change to the dynastic order, via supernatural bodily transformation.

Metamorphosis

¹³⁸ There are other iterations of this tale which comes from different sources such of Irish and Nordic origin, although this is probably a case of internal tales independently arising. For more information on the origin of the Loathly Lady Tales in English, Welsh and Irish origin see: Bollard, John K. Sovereignty and the Loathly Lady in English Welsh and Irish, *Leeds Studies in English*, n. 17, 1986, p. 41-59

The romances I engage with in this chapter all deal with some sort of transformation imposed on the stepchildren. Firstly, we have Alphonse, the son of the king of Spain, who is transformed into a werewolf in *William of Palerne* by his stepmother, a princess of Portugal, who is knowledgeable in witchcraft and necromancy. Similarly, in *The Marriage of Sir Gawain* and in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, the stepdaughter, Ragnelle, is transformed into a Loathly Lady, a repulsive hag, and her brother, Sir Gromer Somer Joure, a character who is associated with the figure of the churl, seems to have been cast into the woods as a mysterious knight, stripped of his authority.

In medieval writings on magic, metamorphosis was often associated with female magic workers. We find this particularly in Augustine's account of the deceptive magic of Circe (a woman scorned), who made the hero Ulysses' men believe themselves to be beasts. This example animated later medieval authors writing on magic, and one of the questions posed by the *Malleus Maleficarum* (2009, p. 201) is "Whether sorceresses work on humans by turning them into the shapes of beasts through the art of conjuring."¹³⁹ Institoris follows Augustine's idea that this illusion is tied to the threat presented by magical women and concludes (p. 204), that when the sorceress transformed Ulysses' companions into beasts: "[t]his was feigned with acts of illusion through conjuring rather than being brought to pass in reality, when she altered the fantasies of the men."¹⁴⁰ The texts analysed in this chapter pre-empt this concept of sorcery and make a similar gendered association with this deceptive magic, understood to be worked by women especially.

Transformation narratives generally appear in medieval literature in relation to human-animal transformations. *Bisclavret* by Marie de France has another case of a man cursed as a werewolf, and as already mentioned in Chapter Two, Mélusine also has a transformed animal body (rather than a hybrid one) in her final draconic form. Intentional transformations occur as well, such is the case in another one of Marie de France's *lais*, *Yonec*, where a knight transforms himself into a bird. However, transformations, especially those into animals, are usually imposed rather than disguises.

As discussed by Caroline Walker Bynum (2001, p. 94 - 95), werewolf narratives in the medieval period have a different approach than the ones from antiquity. In the cases

¹³⁹ Originally: "An malefice operantur circa homines in bestiales formas prestigiosa arte illos transmutando" (Mackay, 2009, p. 321)

¹⁴⁰ "[...] quod magicis prestigijs potius fingeatur quam in rerum veritate completeretur, alterando fantasias hominum." (Mackay, 2009, p. 324)

of *William* or *Bisclavret*, the werewolves are not villainous creatures of violent animals but victims of magic who gain the sympathy of the readers:

Werewolf stories have, of course, a long tradition in Europe. [...] Ferocious, hairy, dripping with blood, a devourer of human beings, the werewolf of Pliny, Ovid and Petronius is, like the werewolf of modern TV and folk story, an emblem of the periodic eruption of the bestial from within the human. In contrast, the werewolves that emerge quite suddenly and numerous around 1200 in entertainment literature (especially the works of Gervais and Gerald), in theological discussion (especially William of Auvergne's *De universo*), and in romance (*Bisclavret*, *Mélion*, *Guillaume de Palerne*, *Arthur and Gorlagon*) are what scholars have called "sympathetic" werewolves — victims who are changed into wolves, usually by evil women, but who retain the "intelligence and memory" of rational human beings." Hence several modern scholars see these werewolves as "fake" werewolves and argue that the earlier werewolf tradition of a constitutionally double being (that is, a being alternately human, then animal, by its very nature) remains as only a vestige in the two brief stories told by Gervais of Tilbury and the opening lines of Marie de France's *Bisclavret*.

An important source on metamorphosis often cited by medieval authors contemporary with *Guillaume* was Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass*. The medieval reception of Apuleius' narrative was extensive given it was reworked in different poems and narratives (such as Nigel of Canterbury's *Speculum stultorum* or the anonymous *Asinarius*) throughout the Middle Ages.¹⁴¹ The work was written in the late second century AD. In it, the author tells the story of Lucius, who is mistakenly transformed, after a spell gone wrong, into an ass instead of an owl by a witch. Before his transformation, he asks how he would be able to return to his human body (1996, p. 139-141):

But I almost forgot to ask: what have I to say or do in order to strip off those feathers and return to my old self again?"
 "As far as that is concerned, you need have no fear," she replied. "My mistress has shown me in detail what can transmute all these shapes back into human form. But do not think she did this out of kindness. No, it was so that I could help her with restorative medicine when she comes home. Just look what small and cheap little herbs it takes to produce so mighty an effect: 'Suspend a pinch of anise and laurel leaves in spring water; administer as lotion and potion.'"¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ For more on the different medieval versions of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* see: Carver, Robert H. *The Medieval Ass: Re-Evaluating the Reception of Apuleius in the High Middle Ages*. In: *The Afterlife of Apuleius*, Florence Bistagne, Careole Boidin, Rahaele Mouren (eds) London: University of London Press, 2011, p. 1-26

¹⁴² Originally: "Sed, quod sciscitari paene praeterivi, quo dicto factove rursum exutis pinnulis illis ad meum redibo Lucium?" "Bono animo es, quod ad huius rei curam pertinet" ait. "Nam mihi domina singula monstravit quae possunt rursus in facies hominum tales figuras reformare. Nec istud factum putes ulla benivolentia, sed ut ei redeunti medela salubri possem subsistere. Specta denique quam parvis quamque futilibus tanta res procuretur herbulis: anethi modicum cum lauri foliis immissum rori (Apuleius. *Metamorphoses (The Golden Ass)*, Volume I: Books 1-6. Edited and translated by J. Arthur Hanson. Loeb Classical Library 44. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 138)

Augustine of Hippo, another important source for late medieval writings and understandings of metamorphosis, was very familiar with Apuleius as he mentions him extensively in his *De Civitate Dei* (*City of God*). Book VIII and IX have the most references to the Latin author. However it is whilst talking about the case of demonic transformations that Augustine cites the text (1960, p. 423): “That is what Apuleius, in the work entitled *The Golden Ass*, reported, or pretended, had happened to him: having taken a potion he became an ass, without losing his human intelligence.”¹⁴³ As we find in *The Golden Ass* (1996, p. 141), when Lucius is transformed by a witch, her spell goes wrong and whilst he is transformed into an ass his mind is still clear as a human:

Helplessly I examined every part of my body and saw that I was not a bird, but an ass. I wanted to complain about what Photis had done, but I lacked human gestures as well as words. Still, I did the only thing I could: I hung my lower lip, looked askance at her with moist eyes, and berated her in silence.¹⁴⁴

Medieval audiences were also acquainted with the narrative, which in turn made it a popular source of inspiration for later medieval texts regarding animal transformations. The lucidity of those transformed into beasts becomes an important subject in such stories, as it is what helps the animal regain their human sovereignty.

Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* had an even greater literary reception in the Middle Ages than *The Golden Ass* (Apuleius’ work was heavily influenced by Ovid’s). It was translated into many languages, including the French *Ovide Moralisé* (a Middle French adaptation of *Metamorphosis*, composed at the beginning of the fourteenth century). Ovid’s work was very influential during the later Middle Ages, and much of its contents were translated and reutilised in lais and narratives from the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries.¹⁴⁵ The medieval reception of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* and the substantial amount of transformation tales in French narratives, which, as mentioned before, are mostly

¹⁴³ Originally: “ec tamen in eis mentem fieri bestialem, sed rationalem humanamque servari, sicut Apuleius in libris quos asini aurei titulo inscripsit sibi ipsi accidisse, ut accepto veneno humano animo permanente asinus fieret, aut indicavit aut finxit.” (Augustine of Hippo. *City of God*. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957, p. 422)

¹⁴⁴ “Ac dum salutis inopia cuncta corporis mei considerans non avem me sed asinum video, querens de facto Photidis, sed iam humano gestu simul et voce privatus, quod solum poteram, postrema deiecta labia, umidis tamen oculis obliquum respiciens ad illam tacitus expostulabam. (Apuleius, 1996, p. 140)”

¹⁴⁵ “The fourteenth century translation and allegoresis of the *Metamorphoses*, the anonymously authored *Ovide moralisé*, quickly became the source through which later medieval authors knew Ovid’s poem: the work of Guillaume de Machaut, Jean Froissart, and Christine de Pizan shows these ingenious authors refracting Ovidian motifs through the lenses of the *Rose* and the *Ovide moralisé*.” (Griffin, Miranda. *Transforming Tales - Rewriting Metamorphosis in Medieval French Literature*, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 13)

focused on human and animal boundaries and their transgressions, helps us understand how important these were for medieval understandings of magic.

Boundaries between the animal and the human in *William of Palerne*

William of Palerne survives in one copy, Cambridge, King's College, MS 13, written around 1360-75, a translation from the Old French romance *Guillaume de Palerne*, (c.1194-97). The translation from the French into Middle English was commissioned by Humphrey de Bohun, 6th Earl of Hereford.¹⁴⁶

The text narrates the story of William, the son of King Embrons of Apulia, who, as a baby, is rescued by a werewolf after his guardians tried to kill him. The baby is eventually found in a forest by a shepherd, but the wolf continues to take care of him as he grows. The emperor of Rome finds the boy and decides to take him to court, where Melior, the emperor's daughter, falls in love with him. She asks for the help of her maiden, Alexandrine, who uses magic to make William dream about Melior, and they fall in love. Their romance is threatened after the Duke of Saxony wages a war against the emperor, and after the duke is captured by William, the emperor of Greece asks for Melior to marry his son, Partenedon, to which the emperor of Rome agrees. William and Melior flee to the forest and survive there, with the werewolf bringing them food and caring for them both.

When King Embrons of Apulia dies, his wife is under siege in Palermo by the king of Spain for rejecting his son Braundinis to marry her daughter Florence. The queen's father is the Emperor of Greece, but it seems as if his help will not come in time. William, not knowing he is at the court of his mother and sister, hides with Melior in the garden and at night, the queen has visions. She asks for guidance from her priest and enlists the help of William and Melior.

William fights against the Spanish army and captures Braundinis. When the king comes to pay respects for the queen after the war, the werewolf bows to him and the king

¹⁴⁶ The modern versions I use are G.H.V. Bunt's edition (Bunt, G.H.V. *William of Palerne – an alliterative romance*. Groningen: Bouma's Boekhuis, 1985) for the Middle English, and I also use Alexandre Micha's version for the French (Micha, Alexandre. *Guillaume de Palerne – Roman du XIII siècle*. Genève: Droz, 1990). There is no possibility of comparing line by line between the two versions, given that both texts are very different (The Middle English text has 5540 lines, and the French has 9667 in total). However, I have focused on the main chapters and situations for the purpose of giving the comparative version in French to the quotes in Middle English. It is also important to note that some quotations do overlap with each other in French, and some phrases are only used in the Middle English version. Not all quotations are present in the French version and vice versa; therefore, if a quotation is not given in a specific language, it is because no correspondence is present.

of Spain tells the story of his lost son. He mentions how Alphonse was cursed by his stepmother, a princess of Portugal (named Brande in the Old French text), to become a werewolf as a way to make her son become king. William demands the queen be brought to court to undo the enchantment, and she is almost killed by the werewolf but bows in repentance. When Alphonse turns human again, he reveals to all how William is the queen of Palermo's son. The emperor of Rome, Alexandrine and the Greek army are all gathered with the court. William marries Melior, Alphonse marries Florence and Alexandrine marries Braundinis. Alphonse is crowned king of Spain, and after the emperor of Rome dies, William is named his successor.

William of Palerne focuses greatly on the curse given by Alphonse's stepmother and the reasons as to why she chose to turn him into a werewolf. The text narrates in detail how the enchantment was made by the queen of Spain using witchcraft and necromancy:

Werwolf was he non wox of kinde,
ac komen was he of kun þat kud was ful nobul;
for þe kud king of Spayne was kindely his fader.
He gat him, as God ȝaf grace on his ferst wyve,
and at þe burþ of þat barn þe bold lady deyde.
Sippen þat kud king so bi his conseyl wrout,
anoþer wif þat he wedded a worchipful ladi,
þe princes donȝter of Portingale to prove þe soþe.
But lelliche þat ladi in ȝouþe hadde lerned miche schame,
for al þe werk of wicchecraft wel ynouȝ che couȝþe,
nede nadde ȝhe namore of nigramauncy to lere.
Of coninge of wicchecraft wel ynouȝ ȝhe couȝde;
and Braunde was þat bold quene of burnes yclepud.¹⁴⁷
(Bunt, 1985, p. 128-129, l.109 - 121)

¹⁴⁷ Originally: "Li leus warox dont je vos di
N'iert mie beste par nature,
Si com raconte l'escriture;
Ançois eert hom et fix a roi,
Et sai vos bien dire por coi,
Com li avint et qui li fist.
Si com l'estoire le nos dist,
Il estoit fix le roi d'Espaigne
De sa feme la premeraine.
De lui estoit morte sa mere;
Feme reprist li roi ses pere,
Fille le roi de Portingal.
Molt sot la dame engien et mal;
Sorceries et ingremance
Avoit molt apris de s'enfance.
Bien sai que Brande fu nomee.
De molt de gens estoit loee." (Micha, 1990, p. 46-47, l. 274-290)

We can see that the English translation comes close to what the French text describes as “Sorceries et ingremance” (1990, p. 47, l. 287) as the magic used in the curse. The English texts describe it as “wiccheecraft” making it clear that the stepmother is a witch, a terminology I discuss below and throughout the next chapter. The queen is therefore referred to in the text as Alphonse’s “kursed stepmoder” (Bunt, 1985, p. 129, l. 146), a title she gets for her use of magic for nefarious reasons. Alexandrine, Melior’s maiden, also uses magic on William, but the consequences of her enchantment are not as serious or “cursed” as that of the queen. It is not the use of magic that makes the woman into an antagonist, but the ends for which this magic was used.

In the case of Alphonse’s stepmother, the first time the enchantment is described it is in the form of an ointment. The appearance of an ointment looks very similar to the French source and may be suggestive of the influence of *The Golden Ass*:

But truly tizt hadde þat queen take hire to rede
to bring þat barn in bale bottles for ever,
þat he ne schuld wiztli in þis world never weld reaunme.
A noynement anon sche made of so gret strengþe,
bi enchainmens of charmes - þat evel chaunche hire tide,
þat whan þat woman perwi[b] hadde þat worli child
ones wel anointed, þe child we al abowte,
he wex to a werewolf wiztly þerafter,
al þe making of man so mysse hadde 3he schaped.
Ac his witt welt he after as wel tofore,
but lelly oþer likenes þat longep to mankynne,
but a wilde werewolf, ne walt he never after.¹⁴⁸

(Bunt, 1985, p. 129, 133-144)

¹⁴⁸ “De son signor avoit .I. fil,
Biau damoiseil, franc et gentil ;
Brandins ot non, ce dist l’escris,
D’eage joules et petis.
Oies que fist la male feme :
Vit que issi faitement regne ;
De son fillastre a tele envie
N’en portera, s’el puet, la vie,
Ou en tel point le metera
Jamais roiaume ne tenra.
D’un oingnement li oint le cors
Qui tant estoit poissans et fors;
Tant par estoit de grant vertu,
Si tost com l’enfes oins en fu,
Son estre et sa samblance mue
Que leus devint et beste mue.
Leus fu warox de maintenant ;
Ce que de lui fu aparant
A tout perdu, son essiënt.
Volt s’enfuïr isnelement.
Car tres bien set, se or est pris,
N’escapera ne soit ocis.” (Micha, 1990, p. 47-48, l. 291-312)

The previous enchantment is later retold by the king of Spain, who explains how his first wife died during the child's birth: "But mi wif, as God wold, and as we schul alle, / deied at þe deliveraunce of mi dere sone."¹⁴⁹ (Bunt, 1985, p. 239, l. 4079-4080). The king explains how he took a new wife who was lovely and courteous: "Þan bitid þat time I toke anoþer wif, / a ful loveli lady lettered at þe best, / corteys and covenabul & lettered at þe best, / and comen was of gret kin & koynt hireselve."¹⁵⁰ (Bunt, 1985, p. 240, 4087-4090). The reason given for the enchantment is, as the king mentions, a dispute of power and inheritance. The queen turns Alphonse into a werewolf out of fear he would be the one to succeed his father on the throne and not her own son:

But þan my wif wickedli on þise wise þouȝt,
 þat myn elder son min eritage schul have,
 and kepe þe kingdom after me, as kinde skil it wold;
 and strived stifli with hireself as stepmoderes wol alle,
 bi what wise sche miȝt best þat bold barn spille,
 to do so þat here sone after mi dessece
 miȝte rejoische þat reaume as riȝt eir bi kinde.¹⁵¹
 (Bunt, 1985, p. 240, l. 4096 – 4102)

An interesting repetition that we see in the text refers to what "stepmoderes wol alle". This is repeated a few lines above when the narrator explains about the curse for the first time: "Þan studied sche stifly, as stepmoderes wol alle, / to do dernly a despit to here stepchilderen; / feþli among foure schore unneþe findestow on gode!" (Bunt, 1985, p. 129, l. 130-132). It seems that stepmothers were already recognised as antagonists in the medieval period. During the king's telling of how the curse was made, he refers to what his wife did as "enchantment" and "charmes" with no description of an ointment given. After saying that his wife told him the boy had drowned, the king now believes that the werewolf is his lost son:

and as me haþ be told of trewe men of my reaume,

¹⁴⁹ "Ains que ençainte fust de moi; / Et quant ce vint a son termine / Que dut enfanter la roïne / Morte fu de la delivrance." (Micha, 1990, p. 254, l. 7288-7291)

¹⁵⁰ "En cel termine et en cel an / Dont je vos di, repris oissor, / Une dame de grant valor, / Sage a merveille et bien letree / Et de roial lignie nee." (Micha, 1990, p. 255, l. 7302-7306)

¹⁵¹ "Icest danzel me dona Diex
 Que vos veés devant vos iex.
 Quant ma moillier vit son fil né,
 N'ot pas le mien en grant cherté :
 Vit, se mes fix ainsnés vivoit,
 Li siens pas règne ne tenroit.
 Tant fist ses sors et ses poisons,
 Caraudes et conjurisons
 Que leus garox mes fix devint." (Micha, 1990, p. 255, l. 7307-7315)

with charmes & enchantmens sche chaun[g]led my sone
 In-to a wilde werwolf; & wel now ich it leve,
 þat þis buxum best be þat ilk selue
 þat my wif with hire wiles ever dede me leve,
 whan i hire touched swiche tales as me told were,
 þat it was fanteme and fals and for hate saide;
 and swor grimli gret oþes bi al fat God wrouȝt,
 þat mi semli sone was in þe see sonken,
 as he passed out to pleie priveli him one.¹⁵²

(Bunt, 1985, p. 240, l. 4103 – 4118)

When the queen is asked to turn Alphonse back into a human again, more details are added to the enchantment. This time, she goes alone into a chamber with him and uses a ring that has protection against witchcraft and binds it in a red silk around the wolf's neck, and, after reading from a book, he is turned into a man:

þan stint sche no lenger, but boutte stryfe went
 into a choys chaumber þe clerli was peynted,
 þat non went hire with but þe werwolf alone.
 þan rauȝt sche forþ a ring, a riche and a nobul;
 þe ston þat þeron was stizt was of so stif vertu,
 þat never man upon mold miȝt it him on have,
 ne schuld he with wiccheecraft be wicched nevermore,
 ne persche with no poysoun, ne purliche envenomed,
 ne wrongli schuld he wive þat it in wold hadde.
 þat riche ring ful redily with a red silk þrede
 þe quen bond als bliue aboute þe wolwes necke.
 seþe feiþli of a forcer a fair bok sche rauȝt,
 & radde þeron redli riȝt a long while,
 so þat sche made him to man in þat mene while,
 as fair, as fetys and als freli schapen,
 as any man upon mold miȝt on devise.¹⁵³

¹⁵² “Li siens pas regne ne tenroit.

Tant fist ses sors et ses poisons,

Caraudes et conjurisons

Que leus garox mes fix devint.

Ainc plus ne seuç que il devint.

Ensi me disent mi lige home,

Li mix vaillant et plus preudome,

Mais ainc n'en voit .I. tot seul croire,

Car ma moiller me fist acroire

Qu'il le disoient par envie

Com cil qui ne l'amoient mie,

Ains dist noies ert en la mer.

Ainques nus hom nel pot trover.

Querre le fis après maint jor

Et demenai molt grant dolor,

Que tout me deçut et trahi.

Ensi com vos avés oï

Perdi mon fil par ma moiller.” (Micha, 1990, p. 255-256, l. 7312-7329)

¹⁵³ “Et la roïne, dame Brande,

N'i veut metre plus lonc sejour.

En une chambre peinte a flor

[...]

N'i ot que h et lui tot sol.

Adont a trait .I. anel d'or

The queen asks for forgiveness from Alphonse, who was about to kill her as a werewolf. Hence, the repentance was the queen's way to save herself from her stepson's wrath. Nevertheless, the text shows remorse in her words as she confesses the transformation happened out of her fear that her son would not become king:

'Swete Alphouns,' sche seide, "mi semli lorde,
I have brouzt here þi bote to bring þe of sorwe.
Sone schal þe puple se þi semli face
in manhede and in minde as it out to bene.
I have þe gretli agelt, to God ich am aknowe,
for redili þe to reve þi riȝt eritage ;
þat þis man, min owne sone, miȝt it have hadde
feibly after þi fader, ich forschop þe þanne
in þise wise to a werwolf and wend þe to spille ;
but God wold nouȝt þat þou were lorne.¹⁵⁴

Qui plus valoit d'un grant tresor,
Que la pierre si boine estoit,
Cil qui l'anel sor lui avoit
Jamais ne fust ensorcerés
Ne engigniés ne enganés,
Ne de venin ne de puison
Nel peüst ja grever nus hom,
Jeter de plait ne forvoier,
Ne fortraire de sa moiller,
Ne qui le voit ja en cel jor
Ne puet descroistre de s'ounor.
L'anel qui fu de tel vertu
Li a la dame au col pendu
A .I. filet vermeil de soie.
Molt en maine li leus grant joie
De ce que la dame li fait.
Dont a la dame .I. livre trait,
Tant a porlit et conjuré,
La vassal a deffaituré
Et tot remis en sa samblance.
Cil qui senti sa delivrance,
Quant il s'escoust, s'est devenus
Li plus biax hom, mais tos fu nus,
Qui adont fust, mien essiënt
Fors Guillaume tant seulement;
N'en sai fors lui plus metre fors." (Micha, 1990, p. 268-270, l. 7726-7757)
¹⁵⁴ "Biāx sire Anphons, dit la roïne,
Avec moi ai ci la mecine
Dont vos serés trestos garis.
Damoisiax, sire, chiers amis,
Bien sai sans faille ce es tu :
Bien t'ai del tot reconneü.
Ci sui por toi garir venue
Et toi geter de ceste mue
Qui tant longement t'a covert.
Mais or verrons tot en apert,
Ançois que je fenisse m'uevre,
Quel beste ceste piāx acuevre.
Voirs est, ne le voel mais celer,

Miranda Griffin (2010) explores animal and hybrid transformation in three medieval romances. Two of which (*Bisclavret* and *Melion*) have men who are transformed into werewolves; however, different from Alphonse, these transformations do not come from curses imposed on them. In *Bisclavret*, the transformation is natural as the man explains to his wife he is turned into a werewolf some days of the month and in *Melion*, the man possesses a magic ring that is capable of turning him into an animal. Both men are deceived by their wives, who, by taking away their human clothes, make their transformation back into humans impossible. This seems to be a reference to the Genesis narrative in which Adam and Eve clothe themselves after being expelled from paradise. In this sense, clothes equal humanity or, simply, the civilised society. However, even away from this, their humanity is never lost. The beasts do not act as beasts, which Griffin (2010, p. 140) associates with medieval anxieties towards the human and animal. In other words, the transformation will expose the monstrous side of the court and the human.¹⁵⁵

William offers a variation on this. The stepmother becomes the real monster rather than her transformed stepson as it happens with the wife in *Bisclavret* who is also more monstrous than her werewolf husband. The narratives are always dealing with ideas of scheming and subterfuge of women. As Cristina Noacco states: “behind the metamorphoses of the knight into a werewolf, look for the woman” (my translation).¹⁵⁶

It is important to note that his transformation is not caused by a demonic entity, and he is not a demon himself, which, in turn, makes his wish to turn back into human the more significant as Alphonse does not use any of his powers as a werewolf to dominate or attack others, but rather to save a child he knew was being deceived by his kin as he also was. Therefore, Alphonse needs more than his clothes as a way to get back to his original form. To this end, his transformation is not an anxiety related to the

Que por mon fil aïreter
Et toi tolir ton signorage
Te fis fuïr com leus boschage.
Diex ne te velt laisser perir

Revenus es par son plaisir.” (Micha, 1990, p. 267, l. 7681-7698)

¹⁵⁵ Griffin, Miranda. The Beastly and the Courtly in Medieval Tales of Transformation: *Bisclavret*, *Melion* and *Mélusine*, In: *The Beautiful and the Monstrous: Essays in French Literature, Thought and Culture*, Amaleena Damlé and Aurélie L’Hostis (eds), Peter Lang Publishing Inc. 2010, p. 140

¹⁵⁶ “Derrière les métamorphoses du chevalier en loup-garou, cherchez la femme.” (Noacco, Cristina. *La métamorphose dans la littérature française des XIIe et XIIIe siècles*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008, p. 108)

boundaries between the animal and the human world. Alphonse's transformation has a more complex political reasoning behind it.

The main idea behind the stepmother's curse in these romances is either to finish a dynastic line or to realign one towards her interests. In *William of Palerne*, the latter occurs. Queen Brande is afraid that her son will not inherit the kingdom as Alphonse is the king's firstborn. The queen chooses to transform him into a werewolf for seemingly two reasons. Firstly, as a werewolf, Alphonse cannot inherit the title of King, and she can give the excuse that the boy drowned, as the body will never be recovered. Secondly, as a werewolf, Alphonse will not be able to have heirs (not human ones, at least), which is satisfactory in her quest to make Braundinis, her son, king in his place.

The narrative of *William*, as well as *Bisclavret* and *Melion* present misogynistic views of female dishonesty. The stepmother and the wives of the transformed men are interested in what they can gain when the transformation occurs (the wives are faithless and want another man by their side). Queen Brande, as the Middle English translator states, exhibits a typical behaviour for stepmothers who "all" wish to destroy their stepchildren's interests and claims to inheritance. Cristina Noacco (2008) explains:

The person responsible for the hero's imprisonment in the instinctive part of his human nature (*Bisclavret*, *Mélion*, *Arthur* and *Gorlagon*) or for the transformation of man into an animal for his own ends (*Guillaume de Palerne*) is always a female figure, who should be related to the processes used to produce or prolong the effect of metamorphosis. The motif easily passes from the fantastic to the marvelous and to magic, even to witchcraft. This way, the metamorphosis into a werewolf warns men against the fragility and cunning of women, even against their hypocrisy.¹⁵⁷

(my translation)

In the narrative, however, Queen Brande is not simply seen as a jealous stepmother, but the author emphasises (both in French and Middle English) she has a vast knowledge of letters and magic that display her intellectual prowess necessary to try to disrupt the line of succession. The association of female characters with witchcraft is something I discuss further below, but her use of magic to transform Alphonse into a werewolf is important from a psychological perspective as lupine characters of medieval

¹⁵⁷ "Car la responsable de l'emprisonnement du héros dans la part instinctive de sa nature humaine (*Bisclavret*, *Mélion*, *Arthur* et *Gorlagon*) ou de la transformation de l'homme en animal à ses propres fins (*Guillaume de Palerne*) est toujours une figure féminine, qu'il convient de mettre en relation avec les procédés utilisés pour produire ou prolonger l'effet d'enmorphose. Le motif passe facilement du fantastique au merveilleux et à la magie, voire à la sorcellerie. Ainsi décrite, la métamorphose en loup-garou met en garde les hommes contre la fragilité et la ruse des femmes, voire contre leur hypocrisie." (Noacco, Cristina. *La métamorphose dans la littérature française des XIIe et XIIIe siècles*. Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2008)

romances offer a more sympathetic vision of the transformed werewolf. Curtis Runstedler (2019, p. 64) discusses how “[t]hese werewolves of the medieval romance lead audiences and readers to reassess the traditional werewolf and envisage a more sympathetic creature who is individualised and responsive to social and moral values.” Also, discussed by Karl Steel (2023, p. 2), the majority of these sympathetic werewolf tales “insists on the human core of their animals”. Steel touches upon how the intelligent beast would be considered a horror to a theologian such as Aquinas or Augustine, who view rationality as a solely human characteristic.

The werewolf in romances such as *William* or Marie de France’s *Bisclavret* complicates the relationship between human and animal because he describes that animals can have rational thought as well. In the case of *William*, the fact Alphonse is a human trapped inside a wolf’s body complicates this relationship even more.

The werewolf is therefore not an intimidating figure but, in the aforementioned *lais* and *William*, he remains courteous as the rightful heir to the dynasty. The imposed solitude on the transformed men is seen as part of the plan to take control over their sovereignty. As exiled members of society, they have no power to counter the stepmother’s designs. This is another representation of medieval anxiety towards feminine authority, which here can push powerful men to the outskirts of their community. In this respect Alphonse’s fate is not dissimilar to that of Sir Gromer Somer Joure, another medieval character whose forced solitude acts might be read in relation to his stepmother’s circumnavigation of his inheritance.

The wild man and the hag

I now turn to the figure of Dame Ragnelle and her brother Gromer in my two chosen Loathly Lady tales. Both texts are found in unique copies: *The Marriage of Sir Gawain* (British Library Additional MS 27879) also known as *The Percy Folio* from the sixteenth century and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain* (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS 11951) from the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century.¹⁵⁸ Both romances follow a similar narrative, with *The Marriage* being significantly shorter due to many pages being lost. In both narratives, Arthur and his men are hunting through the woods when a mysterious knight named Sir Gromer Somer Joure, furious about having his lands stolen from him and given to Gawain, challenges Arthur to answer the question “Whate wemen love best”

¹⁵⁸ The modern editions for both narratives used in this chapter are taken from *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, Thomas Hahn (ed.) Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995

(1995, p. 49, l. 91) and return in one year's time or face death by the hands of the knight. When the king returns to Carlisle, Gawain decides to help his uncle find the answer, and they go around the kingdom asking the question to multiple people and writing their answers. King Arthur ventures once more into the woods and there finds Dame Ragnelle, who wants to help him win the challenge.

When seeing her for the first time, Arthur is surprised at Ragnelle's ugliness: "Kyng Arthoure rode forthe on the other day / Into Yngleswod as hys gate laye, / And ther he mett with a Lady. / She was as ungoodly a creature / As evere man sawe, withoute mesure. / Kyng Arthure mervaylyd securly." (1995, p. 53, l. 225 – 230). She tells him she has the answer to the question but will only share if Arthur agrees for her to marry Gawain. Feeling hopeless, Arthur asks Gawain to marry the lady with the intention to obtain the answer. When Arthur and Gawain agree to the marriage, Ragnelle reveals to the king that what women most desire is sovereignty. It is revealed that she is Sir Gromer's sister.

During the wedding night, Gawain goes to the bedroom to consummate the marriage but sees a beautiful woman instead of the "disfigured" Ragnelle. She then says that her beauty will endure only half a day and asks Gawain to choose when her beauty will be permanent. Gawain can have her beautiful during the day when all will be able to look at the couple, but she will return to her loathly appearance at night, or he can choose to have her beautiful at night in bed, but she will continue ugly during the day. Gawain gives her the choice as to which time of the day she believes is best, and thus, by giving her the power to choose, which in this case means her sovereignty, the curse is lifted completely, and she remains beautiful forever. At the end of both narratives, Ragnelle shares how the curse was put on her by her father's young wife, who used enchantment and necromancy to curse her stepchildren. There is no specific reasoning given in the text as to why the stepmother produced the curse. As discussed above, the most probable cause is the end of the children's bloodlines as we find in *William*, seeing that as an exiled monstrous knight, Sir Gromer is incapable to take control of his dynasty and as a post-menopausal woman, Ragnelle is incapable of producing heirs.

The brother of Dame Ragnelle, in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and in *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, does not undergo a full body transformation like Alphonse, but is also cursed to become a type of folkloric figure only found in the natural world. By becoming this otherworldly character, Sir Gromer fights for his sovereignty,

as his inheritance is circumvented twice: once by his stepmother and again by his sister at the end of the narrative.¹⁵⁹

Gromer is described as a “quaynt grome” (1995, p. 48, l.50), and the word may mean something related to “magical” or “supernatural” according to the Middle English Dictionary.¹⁶⁰ He is still a noble knight even though his place now is Inglewood Forest instead of the court. Gromer, as a paradoxically chivalric churl, fluctuates between nobility and wildness, becoming a point of contact between the civilized world and the untamed, much like Alphonse in *William*. Indeed, Sir Gromer and Alphonse both experience a metamorphosis that casts them outside society. In Gromer’s case, the metamorphosis has mostly to do with his location: he does not become a wild animal but his new space as churl of the forest is also a form of dynastic closure. However, he still fights for lands and authority even as he is placed outside the civilized world of the court, making him not entirely wild but, like Alphonse, a character in hope of restoration which here, never comes.

The Curse of Dame Ragnelle (a blessing in disguise?)

In *The Marriage of Sir Gawain* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, the figure of the loathly lady takes the centre of the narrative as Dame Ragnelle. I argue that Ragnelle’s appearance is closely linked to medieval imaginings of post-menopausal women. Her curse takes the form of a repulsive body and behaviours, vicissitudes not only representative of a misogynistic horror at the aging female body, but also the very practical way that the stepmother finds to put a definitive end to the bloodline of Ragnelle and her brother. The post-menopausal body in the romance is a reminder that no more heirs can be produced for that dynasty. Indeed, the repulsiveness of Ragnelle is abject to all who see her because it is a threat to the order of Arthur’s court. For Gawain will not be able to have heirs with her, putting an end to his line, arguably, a possibility much more horrifying than her aging body itself. The stepmother may not only be a threat towards power and land, but the fact she transforms her stepdaughter into a hag speaks to medieval anxieties regarding genealogy and a vein of medicalised antifeminism.

¹⁵⁹ See Forste-Grupp, Sheryl L. A Woman Circumvents the Laws of Primogeniture in *The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell*. *Studies in Philology*, v.99, n. 2, 2002

¹⁶⁰ *S.v. quaint, adj., 3(a)* - The Middle English Compendium, publication of the University of Michigan Library featuring the Middle English Dictionary: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary> Access 30 Sept 2025.

I turn now to the descriptions given of Ragnelle as the connection between the loathly lady and postmenopausal women is important to understand how the text deals with monstrous aspects in appearance and how this relates to the function of the stepmother's curse as it is associated explicitly to female abjection. Ragnelle's descriptions when Arthur first sees her are filled with details concerning her ugliness:

Her face was red, her nose snotyd withalle,
 Her mowithe wyde, her tethe yalowe overe alle,
 With bleryd eyen gretter then a balle.
 Her mowithe was nott to lak:
 Her tethe hyng overe her lyppes,
 Her chekys syde as wemens hippes.
 A lute she bare upon her bak;
 Her nek long and therto greatt;
 Her here cloteryd on an hepe;
 In the sholders she was a yard brode.
 Hangyng pappys to be an hors lode,
 And lyke a barelle she was made.
 And to reherse the fowlnesse of that Lady,
 Ther is no tung may telle, securly;
 Of lothynesse inowghe she had.

(*The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, 1995, p. 53, l. 231 – 245)

Described as having a “fowlnesse” (p. 53, l. 243) which comes from her red cheeks, wide mouth, yellow teeth hanging from her lips, long neck and lump on her back, these details identify her as an older woman. As we find in treatments of postmenopausal women in medieval medical writings, Ragnelle's transformation is explicitly engaged with ideas of life and conception, or rather, their denial.¹⁶¹ Menstruation was seen as necessary for the health of the body: the elimination of blood once a month was understood as a way of purging the body of its poison and making women healthy. This would change once a woman reached menopausal age, and no more blood would be purged, creating the idea that the poison would be retained inside the body, an example that appears in Ragnelle's toxic eyes “With bleryd eyen gretter then a balle.” (1995, p. 53, l. 233).¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ For examples on medical engagement of older menopausal women see *The Trotula - A Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine*. Monica H. Green (editor and translator). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2001 pp. 73 and 133

¹⁶² “Menstruation, in medical thought, was considered to be the purgation that women needed to cleanse their bodies from excess moisture; from a religious perspective, menstruation was the curse given to women after the Fall. The conception of menstrual blood as a venomous substance, although it had its followers in antiquity, does not seem to develop strongly in medical thought until the end of the thirteenth century, overlapping with a lively tradition of Salernitan origin which saw the properties of menstruation in a positive light, functioning as the way women's bodies developed to stay healthy.” (Salmón, Fernando; Cabré, Monsterrat. Fascinating women the evil eye in medical scholasticism. In: *Medicine from the black death to the French disease*. Roger French, Jon Arrizabalaga, Andrew Cunningham and Luis García-Ballester (eds), Routledge, 2019, p. 62-63)

A clear example of the types of medical traditions in relation to which we might read the romance's description of Ragnelle is found in *De vetula* ("On Old Women"), written in the thirteenth century by an author claiming to be Ovid.¹⁶³ The text is a comedic narrative (much like Ragnelle's descriptions) where the author tells of a story where he thought a young virgin was waiting for him in a room, but as he embraced her, he saw her body was that of an older woman, which he finds revolting. As Sarah Alison Miller explains (2010, p. 12): "*De vetula* is also about reading and misreading the vicissitudes of body boundaries". The transgression of the body here is the idea of becoming older and losing the aspects which are associated with health and beauty.

De vetula begins with the author describing how an old woman was the reason why he changed his ideas about love: "Ovidius Naso [...] describes the manner of his life when he was devoted to love, why he changed [...] He gave to his book the title and name "On the Old Woman" after the woman who had caused his change."¹⁶⁴ (2020, p. 137, l. 1 - 9). The text elaborates on the ideas of change, especially bodily change as it goes from young to old. For instance, the author pays a lot of attention to describe the young body of his lover as "the charm and ornament of maidenly flower, the unique glory of the female sex, who so flourished, adorned with Nature's and Grace's gifts [...]"¹⁶⁵ (p. 209, l. 203 - 207) and the old body of the woman he has lain with (unwittingly) in a more repulsive manner:

An aged retinue of body parts betrayed her as an old woman: her sinewy neck, the sharp tips of her shoulder blades, her rocky chest, her breasts sagging down from her hide—not full but as empty and flabby as shepherds' bags—her belly furrowed as if by a plow, buttocks dried up and skinny, rough legs, and swollen knee, stiffer than adamant.¹⁶⁶

(p. 229, l. 501 - 507)

This description is very similar to what we find in the *Wedding*, especially pertaining to Ragnelle's neck and shoulders: "Her nek long and therto greatt; / Her here

¹⁶³ *Appendix Ovidiana - Latin Poems Ascribed to Ovid in the Middle Ages*. Ralph Hexter; Laura Pfuntnier; Justin Haynes (translators). Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 2020

¹⁶⁴ Originally "Ovidius Naso, Peligni ruris alumnus, certus ab exilio se iam non posse reverti et quaerens utcumque sibi solacia librum edidit hunc, in eo describens, quis modus ipsi vivendi fuerat tunc, quando vacabat amori, qua re mutavit et quo modo postea vixit quidve intendebat, simul ac ab amore vacavit; imposuitque suo titulum nomenque libello "De vetula" pro qua fuerat mutatio facta" (*De Vetula*, 2020, p. 136, l. 1 - 9)

¹⁶⁵ "virginei floris decor et decus, unica sexus gloria feminei, quae naturalibus et quae gratuitis dotata bonis florebat" (p. 208, l. 203 - 205)

¹⁶⁶ "Accusant vetulam membrorum turba senilis, collum nervosum, scapularum cuspis acuta, saxosum pectus, laxatum pellibus uber, — non uber, sed tam vacuum quam molle, velut sunt bursae pastorum — venter sulcatus aratro, arentes clunes macredine, crudaque crura inflatumque genu vincens adamanta rigore" (p. 228, l. 501 - 507)

cloteryd on an hepe; / In the sholders she was a yard brode.” (1995, p. 53, l. 238-240). *De vetula* was read by and inspired many medieval authors, with its comedic style and descriptions of old age, and it is certainly possible that the *Wedding*-author was familiar with this, or its wider tradition.

The author of *De vetula* decides to give up on love after this encounter and the fact that his lover is sent to a different land married to another man. When she comes back, years later, had already given birth to multiple children the author describes her as “broken” and how she was “worn out” by childbirth.¹⁶⁷

De vetula is not engaged with the toxicity of the aging body, although the fear of postmenopausal women was associated explicitly with classical ideas, from authors such as Pliny the Elder, of retained menstrual blood as toxic.¹⁶⁸ During the menopause, it was believed that the blood would be retained inside women’s body which would cause them to be poisonous themselves. As explained by Sue Niebrzydowski (2011, p. 8): “The physical effects of this point in a woman’s life cycle cannot be related to a comparable moment in that of a man’s. Poised between fertility and sterility, [...] the menopausal woman was rendered dangerous by this liminal moment.”

This finds a particular supernaturalised development into the fifteenth century in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, where the inquisitors ask if it would be possible for a demon to work without a sorcerer or the other way around. The text mentions the case of older women being able to give the evil eye to others, which comes from the venomousness of their menses having stopped, as the flow of blood is necessary for human health (2009, p. 113-114):

¹⁶⁷ “I took pleasure in remembering what she had been; although now broken” (p. 241) / “Quod fuerat, meminisse iuvat, quantique fuisset integra, fracta docet.” (p. 240, l. 670-669) / “But truly, after she had been with her spouse for about twenty years and was worn out by frequent childbirth, and her figure had already felt the costs of bearing children” (p. 233) / “At vero, postquam viginti circiter annos cum sponso fuerat partuque effeta frequenti et sua iam facies dispendia parturiendi senserat” (p. 232, l. 563-566)

¹⁶⁸ “A tradition already recorded by Pliny the Elder, and well known in the Middle Ages, held that menstrual blood was so toxic that it had the ability to sour new wine, dull the surfaces of mirrors, kill bees, and rust iron and bronze. Older women who still menstruated were even more dangerous, as is explained in a French translation of the *De Secretis Mulierum* (‘On the Secrets of Women’), a late thirteenth century text attributed falsely to Albertus Magnus: ‘If old women who still have their periods, and certain others who do not have them regularly, look at children lying in the cradle, they transmit to them venom through their glance’. This is assumed to occur because these imperfectly or sporadically menstruating women, who today would be understood as perimenopausal (experiencing some of the symptoms of menopause yet who still menstruate), can no longer properly eliminate the superfluous menstrual blood from their bodies and this waste turns toxic. The *Liber de Sinthomatibus Mulierum* (‘Book on the Conditions of Women’), one of the three texts comprising the thirteenth century *Medieval Compendium of Women’s Medicine* or *Trotula* that also included *De Curis Mulierum* (‘On Treatments for Women’) and *De Ornatu Mulierum* (‘On Women’s Cosmetics’), concluded that between the ages of fourteen and thirty five to sixty, a woman should be menstruating regularly if she is to remain healthy.” (Niebrzydowski, Sue, 2011, p. 8)

For the eyes infect the adjoining air for a predetermined distance, in the same way that when mirrors are new and pure, they attract some impurity from the sight of a menstruating woman, as Aristotle says in the book *Sleep and Wakefulness*. In this way, then, when a soul is strongly impelled in the direction of evil, as happens to old women in particular, the sight of her is rendered poisonous and harmful in this manner, especially for children, who have tender bodies that are easily receptive of an impression. Yet, he adds that it is also possible that by God's permission or as a result of some hidden deed the ill-will of demons, with whom fortune-telling old women have some agreement, works with them to produce this effect.¹⁶⁹

The *Malleus* has many references to old women being instruments in demonic persuasion and deceit. There are, for instance, accounts of young maidens being deceived by older women with associations to sorcery and demonic forces¹⁷⁰ or the case of a bishop, who having fallen ill, asks an old woman what he should do to regain his strength and is told by her that another sorcerer must be afflicted by the same sorcery that was given to him in order to be healthy again.¹⁷¹

Ragnelle's descriptions also indicate that, like these later witches, she is a physical threat to Gawain. The lady is later described in Arthur's court as having "two tethe on every syde / As borys tuskes, I wolle nott hyde, / Of lengthe a large handfulle." (1995, p. 62, l. 548 – 550). Her tusks (which appear to be drawing on the idea of the *vagina dentata*), snotty nose and yellow teeth are not all the reason why she is left alone.

¹⁶⁹ Originally: "Oculi enim inficiunt aerem continuum vsque ad determinatum spacium, per quem modum specula, si sint noua et pura, contrahunt quandam impuritatem ex aspectu mulieris menstruate, vt Aristoteles dicit in libro *De Somno et Vigilia*. Sic igitur cum aliqua anima fuerit vehementer commota ad malitiam, sicut maxime vetulis contingit, efficitur secundum modum predictum aspectus eius venenosus et noxius, et maxime pueris, qui habent corpus tenerum et de facili receptiuum impressionis." Subdit tamen, quod possibile est etiam quod dei permissione vel ex aliquo occulto facto cooperetur ad hoc malignitas demonum cum quibus sortilege vetule pactum aliquod habent." (Mackay, 2009, p. 236)

¹⁷⁰ "A certain young woman who was a devout maiden was importuned by an old woman to go upstairs with her to a room, because there were some very handsome young men in it. After she agreed, they went up together with the old woman leading the way. She enjoined the young woman not to protect herself with the Sign of the Cross, and although she agreed, she secretly did protect herself with it. The result of this was that when the maiden went up, she did not see anyone, because the demons there were unable to show their presence in assumed bodies to the maiden. With a curse the old woman said to the maiden, "Get out in the name of the devils! Why did you cross yourself?" (Mackay, 2009, p. 312) Originally: "Nam iuuencula quedam et virgo deuota sollicitata festiuo die ab vna vetula vt secum per gradus ad cameram ascenderet, eo quod certi iuuenes pulcerrimi ibidem essent inclusi, et dum illa annueret, ascendentibus similiter vetula precedente iniunxit iuuencule ne se signo crucis muniret, et licet illa annuisset, occulte tamen signo illo muniuit, qua ex re conjtigat vt dum ascendisset et virgo neminem conspexisset, eo quod demones ibidem existentes suam presentiam in assumptis corporibus illi virgini nequibant ostendere, vetula maledicendo virgini dixit: "Vadas in nomine omnium diabolorum! Cur te signasti?" (Mackay, 2009, p. 420)

¹⁷¹ "When the Bishop asked what it was the he had to agree to in order to regain his health, which was his greatest desire, the old woman responded, "Well, this illness has happened to you through sorcery, and the only way for you to be freed is through another act of sorcery, so that the sorceress who inflicted it on you will be infected with this very illness of yours." (Mackay, 2009, p.403-404) Originally: "Episcopus vero quidnam foret cui adquisceret pro recuperanda sanitate quam summe affectabat vbi inquirat, vetula respondit: "Ecce! Hec infirmitas maleficio vobis accidit, et non nisi per aliud maleficio liberari poteritis, vt videlicet ipsa malefica que vobis intulit moriatur et eadem vestra infirmitate inficiatur." (Mackay, 2009, p. 497)

Ragnelle's behaviour whilst eating makes all who are present too disgusted to be seated next to or make contact with Gawain's bride. Queen Guinevere suggests that the wedding be done privately, but the bride insists on an open wedding for all to see: "'I wol be weddyd alle openly, / For with the Kyng suche covenant made I. / I putt you oute of dowte, / I wolde nott to churche tylle Highe Masse tyme / And in the open halle I wolde dyne, / In myddys of alle the rowte.'" (1995, p. 63, l. 575-580). While Ragnelle's body is not here explicitly stated as venomous, her descriptions give way to anxieties concerning bodily fluids and contagion which would mostly come from elderly women since, as previously discussed, the retention of their menses would make their bodies unhealthy.

The horror of Ragnelle's body has much to do with her animalistic characteristics also, which intersect with medieval medical writings on menopause. The womb was seen as an independent organ inside the body that could move around as if it were a wild beast, and older women were considered to have an untamed beast inside them following the cessation of their *menses*. I suggest this detail, if we assume that this was known to the *Wedding*-author, might be read analogously to the wildness with which Ragnelle's brother, Sir Gromer, is cursed. The comparison of the womb to a wild animal is found in medieval medical texts, such as the work of Gilbert of England (c.1180-1250), who in *Compendium medicinae* had compared the womb to a wild beast:

As for pain of the womb after birth: Pain of the womb happens often due to a premature miscarriage; for [the womb] suffers from the loss of that which delights it, because its nature is to propagate its kind. Therefore, it is moved like a wild beast (*ad modum fere slivestris*) searching for its missing fetus. For the womb delights most in embracing, holding onto and nourishing it.¹⁷²
(2024, p. 302)

This early literature on the womb shows that it was believed that the organ would have kinetic abilities (such as the ability to move throughout the body) in a way that was compared to a monster or an animal.¹⁷³

Yet Ragnelle's transformation, for all its horrors, is a blessing in disguise. As a post-menopausal woman, she is freed from any societal behaviours that women had to abide by to be considered "desirable". When the stepmother turns Ragnelle into a hag,

¹⁷² No accessible Latin edition.

¹⁷³ "The vast scholarship on *hysteria* and on *hysterike pnix* (suffocation of the womb) has shown that in this early literature the womb was often understood to have monstrous and kinetic abilities, at times even to act like an actual animal living within the body." (Cohen- Hanegbia, Naama; Erezb, Guy. The womb as a wild mother beast. *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies*, 15, 2024, p. 304)

her curse may as well have backfired, since, whilst trying to take away her stepdaughter's inheritance, the stepmother gave Ragnelle authority. Niebrzydowski (2011, p. 24) discusses how, after around forty years of age, women would start to gain more authority within their communities since, with the prestige of age, they would be seen as more knowledgeable. This can walk side by side with the aforementioned fear of older women's fascination, where medieval authors could see older women as poisonous but could not deny their knowledge. We might also consider this Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's (1996, p. 16-20) understanding of the desire towards the monster, despite its repulsiveness. The monster is free from any expectation imposed on us and is therefore capable of engaging with any desire considered taboo to us (or to Arthur's court). As a monster, Ragnelle perhaps more authority than she does as a beautiful woman.

Nonetheless, after Ragnelle gains her "sovereignty" and gives Gawain an heir, she is explicitly killed off in the narrative, exemplifying how, to a medieval author, a woman's primary function was the birth of heirs. After this, she can disappear. It is then perhaps understandable why the stepmothers focus so much on their inheritance in the narrative. They are trying, through magic, to gain the authority that is denied to them through marriage, and in the end remains denied to Ragnelle herself.

Witchcraft, wildness and sovereignty

Agamben used Marie de France's *Bisclavret* as his medieval example in regard to his discussion between nature and politics: the animal world versus the human world. A very important detail in these tales regarding metamorphosis is the lucidity of the transformed. In other words, the werewolf is not completely wild. Agamben mentions how the king gets closer to the beast since he shows signs of intelligence.¹⁷⁴ This is similar to the aforementioned *Golden Ass*, and it appears throughout the *William* narrative. The transformed still retain their humanity and display it through their behaviour towards other sovereigns (species and individuals) as well. The same cannot be said of Ragnelle, who in her hag state, distances herself even more to the civilized world. Sovereignty appears to have a different meaning between men and women. Alphonse needs his

¹⁷⁴ "The special proximity of werewolf and sovereign too is ultimately shown in the story. One day (so the lay tells), the king goes hunting in the forest in which Bisclavret lives, and the dogs find the wolf-man as soon as they are let loose. But as soon as Bisclavret sees the sovereign, he runs toward him and grabs hold of his stirrup, licking his legs and his feet as if he were imploring the king's mercy. Amazed at the beast's humanity ("this animal has wits and intelligence / . . . I will give my peace to the beast / and for today I will hunt no more"), the king brings him to live with him, and they become inseparable." (Agamben, Giorgio. *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, Stanford University Press, 2017, p. 91)

inheritance as heir to the king. Ragnelle only wants the ability to choose. Their wild yet human characteristics describe how magic is used as an instrument of authority clarification.

By being a “humanized” werewolf, Alphonse is able to regain his inheritance and challenge the political situation put into place by the arrival of the stepmother. This leads us to wonder: is the same happening to Ragnelle? Does her transformation mirror her sovereignty as well? As Sheryl Forste-Grupp (2002, p. 116) has discussed, by becoming a hag, an older woman who does not have to abide societal norms, Ragnelle achieves a particular type of sovereignty, in a non-normative, even abject, body.¹⁷⁵

With her hag body, Ragnelle shares not just the wildness of Gromer but the wildness of the werewolf in *William of Palerne*. Although Alphonse still acts courteously as a prince even in the form of a werewolf,¹⁷⁶ while Ragnelle acts so outrageously that even in a human form she is seen as a wild animal, the two transformations have a similar function in relation to the romance’s supernaturalised barriers to inheritance and genealogical continuation. Notably, the stepmother’s curse, like that in *William*, sent both Ragnelle and her brother to the forest, apart from human civilization. In the same way that animality is associated with the loss of sovereignty (Ragnelle possesses tusks), Sir Gromer, the churl who lives in the forest or Alphonse’s lycanthropy are configurations of disinheritance. In this manner, the quest for sovereignty is not only undertaken by the stepmother but by her transformed stepchildren as well.

As mentioned above, one of the main justifications for the stepmother’s “villainous” characteristic is her search for economic power, in other words, her sovereignty. In the romances studied in this chapter, the stepmothers marry as “youngue” ladies who are either already widowed or in their first marriage. Either way, the problem comes when marrying into a house that already holds heirs. This threatens the sovereignty of the stepmother (and even worse of her children, if she has any) as the heirs of the dynasty she has married into will not be giving her any inheritance after the passing of her husband. Marriage was already an important part of a woman’s future as it would give her stability and security within her society. However, if she happened to marry someone who already had children, her stability would be jeopardised because her stepchildren would be the heirs of her husband’s state and land. If she also happened to have children

¹⁷⁵ Forste-Grupp, Sheryl L. A Woman Circumvents the Laws of Primogeniture in The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell. *Studies in Philology*, v.99, n. 2, 2002, p. 116

¹⁷⁶ Griffin, Miranda. The Beastly and the Courtly in Medieval Tales of Transformation: Bisclavret, Melion and Mélusine, In: *The Beautiful and the Monstrous: Essays in French Literature, Thought and Culture*, Amaleena Damlé and Aurélie L’Hostis (eds.), Bern: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2010, p. 140

of her own, they would be “robbed” of their inheritance, as this would go to her husband’s firstborns.

The Loathly Lady tales have mostly always to do either with women’s sovereignty or with sovereignty of the land. The Lady searches for her sovereignty, given to her by the hero of the story; however, the stepmother has the same concern. As already mentioned, the curses put on the stepchildren are a way of maintaining her power in the house, a fact that is threatened by the presence of her husband’s heirs. By the transformation curse, the stepmother is able to diminish the risk of losing her husband’s state if the children are out of the picture. Thus, her sovereignty is ensured.

Nonetheless, these tales do not work only with women’s sovereignty as others are also concerned with the same concept (Sir Gromer is angry with Arthur as he has given his lands to Gawain,¹⁷⁷ and Gawain needs to marry Ragnelle so that Arthur doesn’t die¹⁷⁸). Sir Gromer and Arthur’s sovereignty are also compromised, with Arthur’s taking of Gromer’s lands and Gromer’s direct challenge to the king.

When Ragnelle gains power to the land and earns her sovereignty, her stepmother and her brother, Sir Gromer, have both been circumvented. For when she marries Gawain (who had already received Gromer’s lands) Ragnelle denies her brother’s inheritance since her son will be now the rightful heir of the dynasty. Sheryl L. Forste-Grupp (2002, p. 122) has raised the different possibility that by marrying Gawain, Ragnelle potentially secures further favours and lands for Gromer, although the text gives no hint of this and this position remains purely speculative:

She marries Sir Gawain, the knight who holds her family’s lands, and he gives her sovereignty over himself and all his goods, thereby breaking her enchantment. She secures for herself through her son Gyngolen those same family lands. Finally, she safeguards her son’s inheritance by asking Arthur “To be a good lord to Sir Gromer, iwysse, / Of that to you he hathe offendyd” (812-13). By instigating a reconciliation between Gromer and Arthur, she assures that her brother will be fully integrated into Arthur’s court -perhaps even being awarded new estates-and will not contest her son’s inheritance of their family’s patrimony.

There is, of course, another tool, distinct from marriage, that a woman uses to secure, or at least to attempt to secure, sovereignty in the romances: witchcraft. The use

¹⁷⁷ “Thou hast me done wrong many a yere / And wofully I shall quytte the here; / I hold thy lyfe days nyghe done. / Thou hast gevin my landes in certain / With greatt wrong unto Sir Gawen.” (*The Wedding of Sir Gawain*, l. 55-59)

¹⁷⁸ “Ther I mett with a knyght in his araye, / And serteyn wordes to me he gan sayn / And chargyd me I shold hym nott bewrayne; / Hys councele must I kepe therfore, / Or els I am forswore.” (*The Wedding of Sir Gawain*, l. 144-148)

of magic in all three texts acts as a tool for the witch stepmother to achieve her needs. She is understood in both *William* and the *Wedding* as skilled in necromancy. In *William of Palerne* (Bunt, 1995, p. 128, l. 117-120) we read: “But lelliche þat ladi in zouþe hadde lerned miche schame, / for al þe werk of wiccheecraft wel ynouȝ che couȝþe, / nede nadde ȝhe namore of nigramauncy to lere. / Of coninge of witchcraft wel ynouȝ ȝhe couȝde; [...]”¹⁷⁹ and in *The Wedding* (1995, p. 66, l. 691-693): “For I was shapen by nygramancy, / With my stepdame, God have on her mercy, / And by enchauntement; [...]”. (*The Marriage* (1995, p. 368, l. 179-180) does not detail what type of magic was used by the stepmother only that “[s]hee witched me, being a faire young lady, / To the greene forrest to dwell [...]”)

I pay attention to the naming of the magic used in the narratives, as they are examples of the place of harmful magic or *maleficium* in the late medieval imagination. All narratives presented here mention necromancy, which, according to Michael D. Bailey (2003, p. 36): “was an elite art involving complex rituals and invocations”. Necromancy, unlike witchcraft, was performed with the invocation of demonic entities, knowledge that seems to be essential to the stepmothers and their transformation curses. As a concept, necromancy is a more refined type of magic used in rituals and only by learned and experienced sorcerers, a fact that makes it clear how knowledgeable the stepmothers are. This is particularly pronounced in *William* where we read that the stepmother is proficient not only in “enchainmens of charmes” (Bunt, 1995, p. 129, l. 137; the original French mentions “conjurations”) but also possesses a spell book, by the reading of which the curse is broken: “seþe feiþli of a forcer a fair bok sche rauȝt, / & radde þeron redli riȝt a long while, / so þat sche made him to man [...]” (Bunt, 1995, p. 249, l. 4432 - 4434). Her access to this knowledge is precisely what causes her to be viewed as dangerous. As I explain in the next chapter, concerning the Proto-witch Medea, the use of “learned magic” is mostly associated with men.¹⁸⁰ The fact that these women are able to practice necromancy makes them more dangerous than other categories of supernatural women.

By the time Johannes Nider wrote the *Formicarius*, features of clerical necromancy were integrated into accounts of witchcraft, specifically as concerns the demonic pact of the female witch. As Bailey (2003, p. 30) explains:

¹⁷⁹ “Molt sot la dame engien et mal; / Sorceries et ingremance / Avoit molt apris de s'enfance.” (Micha, 1990, p. 47 l. 286-288)

¹⁸⁰ Broedel, Hans Peter. *The Malleus Maleficarum and the construction of witchcraft - Theology and popular belief*. Manchester University Press, 2005, p. 174

Just like learned necromancers, Nider was convinced, witches performed their evil magic through the agency of demons with whom they had entered into pacts. He had already made this point clear in the *Formicarius* by the time he declared explicitly that witches and necromancers were basically identical.

We cannot assume, however, that this was the association intended in *William of Palerne*, although the concepts there at work are surely part of the cultural pre-history that informed the contentions of Nider's period. The term used in the original French "ingremance" most obviously refers to a source of black magic (or *maleficium*) rather than a sophisticated ritualistic practice. Nevertheless, the magic is present in both narratives as extremely powerful, characteristic of the threatening knowledge of the stepmother.

Conclusion

The romances analysed in this chapter all deal with how sovereignty can be obtained through witchcraft and transformation, therefore, a metamorphosis is always necessary. As a figure that brings forth transformative challenges, the stepmother is a character who becomes an instrument of distortion not least as we might regard here as an embodiment of social change. A new woman in the household will transform the dynasty one way or another, a situation literalised through the actual transformations she affects in her stepchildren.

The stepmother is significant when thinking about literary discussions of inheritance and dynastic disputes as well as perception of magic and witchcraft used by women, becoming a focus of both female agency and misogyny. In this respect she has a great deal in common with the first figure discussed in the next chapter: the Proto-witch Medea.

Chapter Four

The Proto-Witch Mother: Motherhood in the Medieval Medea Tradition

As discussed in the previous chapters, characters such as Dame Ragnelle and Alphonse's stepmothers are skilful witches and/or enchantresses who use their knowledge of magic, charms, enchantments and necromancy to bring an end to their stepchildren's lineage and gain power over the family they marry into. In these romances, the stepmothers appear to foster no love or care for their stepchildren, rather acting especially in the interest of securing their own inheritance (or that of their children) by joining a new family. In a similar vein, the character of the supernatural (but human) proto-witch mother examined in this chapter (in this case, a mother related by blood to her children, with supernatural abilities) can impose curses or commit violent acts against her children, but she does so less for reasons of disrupted inheritance and instead to assert agency, albeit violently and macabrely.

This chapter focuses primarily on the figure of the Colchian princess Medea, who, after being betrayed by Jason, her husband, murders their two children in an act commonly interpreted as revenge but also a counterintuitive form of protection. Medea, much like the stepmothers in *The Marriage*, *The Wedding* and *William of Palerne*, is skilled in sorcery and necromancy and uses her knowledge and understanding of magic and the supernatural both to aid or curse others.

Medea, the proto-witch, a term I explain below, complements many of the other mother figures examined previously. Most of her attributes are shared by the monstrous mother, the demonic figure and the stepmothers, especially in relation to the supernatural or unknown world. She maintains a connection with Otherness and actively engages with magic to further her aims in matters related to her offspring. As we will see, she can use her knowledge to either grant blessings or curse her children, even to kill them. Medea's attributes combine those of all of the mothers examined previously. Her changing representation from the classical to medieval period is, furthermore, especially important in helping us to capture the evolution of ideas of magic and embryonic fears of witchcraft. Medea is also part of the investigation in abject maternity as, after the murder of her children, she is literally "abjected" to the heavens by the Gods and cast out of her society: a forcible ejection from the narrative via flight that might even remind us of Mélusine and Cassiodorien. Like the supernatural women of Chapter One, Medea is an Other both by

geographical and gender definitions, a detail I use to explain the fear and repulsiveness that lead her to become a monstrous mother.

In the previous chapter, I analysed the figure of the stepmother in two main texts: *William of Palerne* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*. Both stepmothers in these narratives made use of enchantments and necromancy with the purpose of transforming their stepchildren and gaining power over their family dynasty. The term “enchantment”, as used by other Middle English authors (as was discussed in the previous chapter), referred to knowledge and use of magic powers not relating solely to witchcraft. These women might be classified as enchantresses, but their character construction as stepmothers takes a socio-economic direction not seen in other witch-like mothers. Medea, the supernatural mother is not searching for the closure of the dynasty she marries into since she knows her heirs will inherit her state. She can, however, end her dynasty by killing her children. As Ruth Morse writes (1996, p. 10-11), the Medea tradition “reveals central anxieties about loyalty and betrayal, inheritance and power, legitimacy, and, perhaps above all, about the place of the cunning intelligence of women who are unscrupulous as well as knowledgeable.”

This chapter examines the representations of Medea that evolved following the dramatic traditions of Euripides and Eumelus and Latin narrative sources including Ovid and Seneca, until the medieval period where her story is retold by focusing either more clearly on her witchcraft or in her violence towards her children. The earlier sources from the Greek and Latin Antiquity later inspired medieval translations and adaptations such the Guido delle Colonne’s *Historia destructionis Troiae* and John Lydgate’s English translation of that work, *The Troy Book*.¹⁸¹ The French moralised adaptation of Ovid titled *Ovide Moralisé*, Boccaccio’s *De Mulieribus Claris* (*On Famous Women*) and Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women* were important recreations of Medea as a proto-witch. In the following analysis, I also examine how Christine de Pizan, a fifteenth-century Italian born French court poet, documented Medea’s personality in her *Book of the City of Ladies*. I

¹⁸¹ The Medea tradition is extensive. Since this thesis is not solely about Medea, I have had to be selective in my choice of primary material for discussion. From antiquity: Euripides; Eumelus; Hesiod’s *Theogony*; Apollonius Rhodius’ *Argonautica* and Ovid (*Heroides* and *Metamorphoses*) and Seneca from the Latin Sources. From the medieval period: Benoît de Sainte-Maure’s *Le Roman de Troie* (twelfth century); Guido delle Colonne’s late thirteenth-century *Historia destructionis Troiae*; the fourteenth-century *Ovide moralisé*; Boccaccio’s works (fourteenth century): *De claris mulieribus*, *Genealogia deorum gentilium*, *De casibus virorum illustrium*; Chaucer’s (fourteenth century) *Legend of Good Women*, *The Book of the Duchess*, *The Man of Law Tale*; Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* (fourteenth century); Christine de Pizan’s (late fourteenth and fifteenth century) *Mutability of Fortune*, *Book of the City of Ladies*, *Épître d’Othéa*; John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* (fourteenth century); William Caxton’s Middle English translation of Raoul Lefèvre’s *Histoire de Jason and Recueil des Histoires de Troye* (fifteenth century) and finally Lydgate’s *Troy Book* (fifteenth century).

further pay attention to her treatment as a proto-witch in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, which describes in detail her witchcraft and enchantments. Medea is constructed by Gower as a type of goddess who is willing to bend laws to aid her lover. However, after her subsequent betrayal by Jason, the leader of the Argonauts, she is portrayed more sympathetically than in the classical tradition.¹⁸² This is partly because of proto-feminist reflections during the Middle Ages and partly because her devotion to love causes her to be interpreted as if she were a medieval heroine. In addition to discussing this aspect of her evolution, I will suggest that shifts in Medea's character relate to the expansion of writings on the supernatural, and eventually witchcraft theories, between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries.

I argue that Medea is constructed as a proto-witch and a dangerous (and abject) woman and mother for reasons concerning her sexuality, her foreignness and her knowledge: all causes of medieval anxieties that stem from the perception of woman as Other.

The magical tradition – Medea in earlier sources

Our knowledge of Medea stems from Greek and Latin literature, with her character having appeared firstly in Hesiod's *Theogony* (eighth century B.C.). However, she gained fame mostly from Euripides' eponymous play (c. 431 B.C.) and Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica* (third century B.C.). Later treatments of her legend include Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 A.D.) and *Heroides* (date unclear, probably 16 A.D.) as well as Seneca's theatrical version of Medea, written sometime in the first century A.D. In most of these narratives, Medea is the princess of the Isle of Colchis who falls in love with Jason, the leader of the Argonauts, upon his arrival to her land. She helps the hero in his task to win the Golden Fleece, a matter that irritates her father. Medea flees the island with Jason, promising to help him in his missions and to help rejuvenate his elderly father. Both enjoy a loving period together in which they have children, but when Jason betrays

¹⁸² See Russel T. Peck Volume 3: Introduction of the *Confessio Amantis*, where the author explains how Gower's sources were mainly Benoît's *Roman de Troie* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: "Gower's adaptation is based on two well-known literary sources: 1) Benoît's *Roman de Troie*, the main plot of which Gower adheres to in the first 680 lines of the poem (the story of the golden fleece, the secret marriage of Jason and Medea, and his victorious return from Colchos to Greece); and 2) the first four hundred lines of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Book 7, from which Gower takes the basic guidelines for the last three hundred lines of his tale and its concluding events, namely, his account of Medea's rejuvenation by magic of Jason's decrepit father Eson at a great price to her own physical beauty, Jason's subsequent breach of his marriage vow as he abandons Medea for Creusa, and Medea's erasure of the effects of the broken contract by the murder of his sons in retaliation." Gower, John. *Confessio Amantis - Book 5*. Russell A. Peck (ed.) Andrew Galloway (translator), Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2005

Medea to marry Creusa (named Glauce in some narratives), the princess of Corinth and King Creon's daughter, she kills their children, putting an end to his bloodline, and escapes with the support of her grandfather, the god Helios, and his flying chariot.

Some early differences can be observed across the classical narratives. For instance, the poet Eumelus (late seventh or sixth century) states that Medea buried her children at the shrine of Hera to try to make them immortal, linking the infanticide to the children's protection rather than vengeance.¹⁸³ According to Corinne Saunders (2010, p. 23), this aspect of Medea's narrative may have a background in folktales and an ancient Corinthian cult of dead children.¹⁸⁴ Her origins may also come from the worship of the goddess Hera, as well as a relation with the Lamia figure who would prey on children.¹⁸⁵ Despite such variations, Medea was mostly always seen as a powerful woman who used her knowledge of magic and the supernatural to aid Jason, whilst the final stages of her narrative explores how she uses violence to bring revenge on her unfaithful husband. Medea is therefore a character that inspires both fear and imagination. As Ruth Morse (1996, p. 21) notes on the etymology of Medea's name:

There are associations which disappear once the poem is removed from the Greek language, since the pervasive ideas of 'craft' which are associated with Medea appear to be part of her name, 'metis' and 'Medea'. That is, in Greek the word 'Medea'; sounds like 'intelligence', 'knowledge', 'cunning'.

Therefore, Medea's knowledge and practice of magic, her craft, is a crucial aspect in the development of her narrative(s) and one of the reasons why she becomes abject in

¹⁸³ "So because of her Jason was king at Corinth. Medea had children, but as each one was born she would take it into the shrine of Hera and bury it, in the belief that they would be made immortal." (*Greek Epic Fragments: From the Seventh to the Fifth Centuries B.C.* Martin L. West (translator). Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 243)

¹⁸⁴ See Abbenes, Jelle. Pausanias in Corinth: Burying Medea's Children. *Mnemosyne*. n. 68. 2015, p. 570-571: "According to the first tradition, reported by the 2nd-1st century B.C. grammarian Parmeniscus, the Corinthian women wanted to kill Medea's fourteen (!) children, as they did not want to be governed by foreigners. The children escaped to the sanctuary of Hera Akraia and sat as suppliants on her altar. When the Corinthians nevertheless murdered them, they were visited by a plague and many people perished. On their request for a solution, the oracle in Delphi instructed them to expiate their guilt by sending seven boys and girls of Corinth's most distinguished families each year to the sanctuary of Hera. There they were to remain for a year, appeasing with sacrifices the wrath of Medea's children and the goddess herself."

¹⁸⁵ "Folk belief and literature offered powerful models of practitioners of magic, often with innate supernatural powers and sometimes connected with the gods: Medea, Circe and the witch or *strix*, sometimes presented as human, sometimes as a monstrous figure linked to the screech-owl, and frequently left ambiguous. In these beings, the violent forces of desire and hatred are taken to an extreme. Medea's origins are uncertain, partly rooted in a Corinthian cult of dead children, which is linked by the Greek poet Eumelos to the Argo. Johnston suggests that the figure originates in folk-lore, and is related to notions of a child-killing demon or Lamia figure, who may find her origins in a nurturing goddess: 'displaced by Hera ... she became the mythic elaboration of a demonic force against which Akraian Hera was expected to protect her worshipers – she was a mother who had lost her children, and who thus became, after her death, a "reproductive demon".' (Saunders, Corinne. *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*. Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010, p. 22-23)

the text. Despite being a foreigner (already Othered by Jason and the Argonauts), Medea is a woman with an extensive supernatural knowledge which renders her an inconsistency amongst all.

In the previous chapter, I showed how representations of stepmothers became linked to matters of inheritance. The Medea narratives focus on the importance and destruction of dynastic continuation. Medea's actions are carefully planned and in killing her children she brings about the ultimate fall for a Greek or ancient hero: the destruction of his house and consequently his memory.¹⁸⁶ The classical traditions provide the basis for medieval adaptations of Medea's story. The medieval period, however, creates a new and more humanized Medea who is mostly a tragic heroine, despite traces of her abjection still being present in the narratives.

Medieval Medeas and their heroine development

In the medieval period, Medea appears in early French texts based on classical narratives (*romans d'antiquité*) such as Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Le Roman de Troie* (twelfth century). Additional retellings of her story include Guido delle Colonne's late thirteenth century Latin *Historia destructionis Troiae* (itself based on Sainte-Maure's work), and the fourteenth century *Ovide moralisé*, the first French retelling of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Medea also played a significant part in texts contributing to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries *querelle des femmes* tradition, such as Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus* and Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies*. Middle English texts responding to the classical tradition but additionally drawing on earlier medieval sources include most notably, Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (both late fourteenth century) and Lydgate's early fifteenth century *Troy Book*.

How Medea, and particularly how her association with the supernatural is depicted in these texts varies considerably, with some narrators taking a far more sympathetic approach than others. Significant emphasis is placed on Medea as a foreign princess; she is an Other in terms of geographical and cultural origin, and because of her knowledge on magic and the supernatural is not shared or fully understood by the men around her. Her magic helps Jason with the tasks he must complete to gain the Golden Fleece and later, at his plea, she uses it to rejuvenate his father. She is subsequently

¹⁸⁶ See Jean Pierre Vernant's Essay on A "Beautiful Death" and the Disfigured Corpse in Homeric Epic in *Mortals and Immortals - Collected Essays*. Froma I. Zeitlin (ed.). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 50-74

betrayed by Jason, which leads her to kill his heirs, her own children. Her killing of the children does not appear in all texts analysed in this chapter, as some writers decided to give a more compassionate ending to her and emphasise her identity as a woman betrayed by her lover. By omitting the killing of the children (and of other victims of her rage), it seems that these writers were essentially concerned with ideas of betrayal more in line with the courtly love tradition.¹⁸⁷ As I explain below, the changing ideas surrounding witchcraft and magic during the medieval period may have influenced how Medea's magic was presented.

Medea in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries

Benoît de Sainte-Maure, a twelfth-century French court poet, wrote significantly on Troy's history, producing *Le Roman de Troie* which depicted the events in the Trojan War. One of his chapters is dedicated to Jason and Medea's love story, but it limits its retelling of the children's murder and Jason's betrayal. The author simply mentions how Medea was later abandoned by Jason who received a powerful punishment from the Gods.¹⁸⁸ The author, however, describes how Medea is fully engaged with witchcraft and necromancy as a powerful sorceress:

She was a maiden of very great learning, skilled in and master of the magic arts and necromancy; she could conjure and practise sorcery. She had applied herself to studying these arts in such a way that she was extremely wise and learned. While still a child, she had learned everything about astronomy and necromancy by heart and had such command of these arts and spells that she could turn bright day into dark night. If she wished, you would appear to be flying through the air. She made rivers flow upstream and was exceptionally knowledgeable.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ The courtly love tradition is better represented by the "tests" true lovers need to engage with in order to prove their true love to their partners. Medea's narrative in the Middle Ages focuses more on the love and suffering of the characters than the history of vengeance. For more on the tradition see Damien Boquet and Piroska Nagy's *Medieval Sensibilities: A History of Emotions in the Middle Ages*. Robert Shaw (translator). Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018 (p. 109-113) and William M. Reddy's *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan, 900-1200 CE*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012 (p. 168-220)

¹⁸⁸ "When he departed, Jason took his beloved with him. That was an act of great folly on Medea's part. She loved the vassal passionately and left her kin for him, as well as her father, her mother and her people. Afterwards, things turned out very badly for her because, as my author says, he later abandoned her, thus committing a very shameful act. She had saved him from death, so he ought not to have forsaken her after that. He shamefully deceived her, which distresses me because he was false to his word in a disgraceful way. All the gods were angry with him and their vengeance on him was terrible. I shall say no more on this matter, nor do I wish to do so, for I have a very long tale to tell." (Benoît de Sainte-Maure. *The Roman de Troie*. Glyn S. Burgess; Douglas Kelly (translators). Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2017, p. 69)

¹⁸⁹ Originally "Trop ert celé de grant saveir:

Mout sot d'engin e de maistrie,
De conjure e de sorcerie;
Es arz ot tant s'entente mise
Que trop par ert sage e aprise;

Here, Sainte-Maure emphasizes repeatedly Medea's knowledge and understanding of magic and its development from a very young age, almost as if it was a natural talent present from birth. Sainte-Maure's work inspired Guido delle Colonne to publish his Latin *Historia Destructionis Troiae* using *Le Roman de Troie* as a main source.¹⁹⁰ The author gives a simpler retelling of Ovid's myth by mentioning Medea's magic (Guido delle Colonne, 1936, p. 15-16) focusing especially on her knowledge of necromancy and ability to control the weather, which is taken directly from *Le Roman de Troie*:

Erat enim Oetis regis filia, Medea nomine, virgo nimium speciosa, patrivnica et sola futura heres in regno. [...] Set eius margarite scientia ex qua potius prepollebat erat ilia ars mathematica, que per uires et modos exorcizationum nigromanticos lucem uertebat in tenebras, subito uentos inducebat et pluuias, corruscationes et grandines, et timidos terremotus.¹⁹¹

As described by the author, Medea is knowledgeable and well versed in the arts which allow her to control the weather and different natural powers. In his narrative, Guido does not focus on the killing of the children; he instead presents Medea as the one who dies. His work was influential to subsequent retellings of the same myth by other medieval writers as I explain below.

Boccaccio

In the fourteenth century, continuing the medieval interest in the Matter of Troy and inspired by Petrarch's *De viris illustribus* (*Lives of Famous Men*), the Italian born

Astronomie e nigromance
Sot tote par cuer dès enfance;
D'arz saveit tant e de conjure
De cler jor feist nuit obscure; S'ele vousist, ço fust viaire
Que volisseiz par mi cel aire;
Les eves faiseit corre ariere:

Scientose ert de grant maniere." (Benoît de Sainte-Maure. *Le Roman de Troie*. Léopold Constans (ed). Tome I. Paris: Librairie de Firmin Didot, 1904, p. 62, l. 1204-1216)

¹⁹⁰ Prose narrative about the destruction of Troy, written originally in Latin in the thirteenth century. See Guido de Columnis. *Historia Destructionis Troiae*. Nathaniel E. Griffin (ed.). Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1936, p. xi-xvii. Griffin, Nathaniel Edwards. Introduction. In: *Guido de Columnis. Historia Destructionis Troiae*. Cambridge: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1936

¹⁹¹ "She was the daughter of King Oetis, named Medea, a very beautiful virgin, paternal and the only future heir to the kingdom. [...] But her pearly knowledge, from which she rather excelled, was the mathematical art, which by means of the powers and methods of necromantic exorcisms turned light into darkness, suddenly induced winds and rains, lightning and hail, and fearful earthquakes." (*my translation*)

writer Giovanni Boccaccio wrote his own version of *De viris* but this time focusing on famous women: *De Mulieribus Claris* (*On Famous Women*). Medea makes an appearance in the work and is referred by the author as “beautiful and by far the cleverest of witches (*malefici*).”¹⁹²

Beyond Boccaccio, most versions of her narrative simply say she is “knowledgeable” or refer to her as an enchantress. Boccaccio’s original Latin describes her as “*formosa satis et maleficiorum longe doctissima*”.¹⁹³ As I consider in more detail below, the word “malefici” was related specifically to witchcraft (especially harmful magic) and is generally translated as the English word “witches”, as we find in Virginia Brown’s edition, from which I here quote. However, other translations offer different interpretations. For instance, Guido A. Guarino’s translation reads “She was quite beautiful and by far the best trained woman in evil-doing”.¹⁹⁴

In the rest of Boccaccio’s text, Medea’s story becomes more of a cautionary tale, not against witchcraft per se, but of women’s incorrigible need for love, a fact that leads them to fall in love with men who will betray them and make them suffer. Boccaccio describes her as shameful for this reason:

Certainly, if powerful Medea had closed her eyes or turned them elsewhere when she first raised them longingly to Jason, her father’s reign would have been of greater duration as would have been her brother’s life, and her virginal honor would have remained unbroken. All these things were lost because of the shamelessness of her eyes.

(2003, p. 39)

On Famous Women was translated into Middle English in the mid-fifteenth century by an anonymous author who was mostly faithful to Boccaccio’s writing but added new information (such as the rejuvenation of Aeson, which Boccaccio glosses over).¹⁹⁵ This version repeats the call to women to be mindful of their shameful nature as this is what brought Medea to her downfall as well as the end of her father’s reign and the death of her young brother.¹⁹⁶ The author mentions her blood connection with Circe (“of

¹⁹² Brown Virginia. Introduction. In: Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Famous Women*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 37

¹⁹³ Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Ioannis Boccatii de Certaldo insigne opus de Claris Mulieribus*. Bern: Excudebat Mathias Apiarius, 1539, p. xii.

¹⁹⁴ Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Concerning Famous Women*. Guido A. Guarino (translator). New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963, p. 35

¹⁹⁵ See *On Famous Women: The Middle English Translation of Boccaccio’s De Mulieribus Claris Edited from London, British Library, MS Additional 10304*. Janet Cowen (ed). Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2015

¹⁹⁶ “Take hede, all virgyns, and wythdrawe your sight
From lascyuyous and wanton zomnge personys!
Be not famylyer, nowdir be daye ner nyght,

Cyrces consanguynyte”¹⁹⁷) as she is the sister of Aeetes, Medea’s father.¹⁹⁸ The word “witch” is not used to refer to her in the Middle English translation, but it is again explained that she has detailed knowledge of herbs, charms, the weather and “crafte of enchauntry” (l. 1307).¹⁹⁹

Medea is also mentioned in Boccaccio’s *Genealogia deorum gentilium* (*On the Genealogy of the Gods of the Gentiles*) and *De casibus virorum illustrium* (*On the Fates of Famous Men*) - texts that were used as sources for the treatment of Medea in later writings. One of these was the popular French version of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, known as the *Ovide Moralisé*.

Ovide Moralisé

The *Moralisé*, written by an anonymous French author sometime in the fourteenth century, took inspiration from many of the sources already discussed in this chapter such as Euripedes’ *Medea*, Guido’s *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, as well of course, from the work that gave the text its name: Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.²⁰⁰ The story is extended after Medea’s killing of her sons and escape with the Golden Chariot, to depict Medea’s life after the murder of the children. Here, she is married to the king of Athens and tries to poison his son, but this is discovered before the plan is completed and Medea disappears again, never to be seen. I here pay attention to Medea’s use of enchantments which are heavily described throughout the text. She is much more characterized as a supernatural

For certesly it shall repent ȝow onys!
 If this Medea had so doon, that now goon ys,
 Hir dader reame and hir brodyrs life,
 And she, had bene wythouten brekk or stryfe.” (2015, p. 39, l. 1380-1386)

¹⁹⁷ (2015, p. 39, l. 1290)

¹⁹⁸ For more on the relationship of Medea and Circe see Yarnall, Judith. Chapter Four: Legacy of Allegory In: *Transformations of Circe – The History of an Enchantress*. Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994, p. 79-98

¹⁹⁹ “In all the virtue and strengthe that is in herbys

She was expert, few men so wele.
 She cowed also with syngynge of charmys
 The heuenly bodyes trouble many a sele,
 Reyse grete wyndys that men might fele,
 And whan she wold, she skye beynge clere,
 Sodenly a tempeste make appere.
 Rynnyng waters she wold make stond styll,
 And turne their cowrs euen contrary,
 Confect venymys and poysons at hir wyll,
 Fyres to go and bren sodely,
 Ferr or neere, by crafte of enchauntry.” (2015, p. 27, l. 1296-1307)

²⁰⁰ As Joel Feimer states: “Ovide Moralisé contains the most complete portrait of Medea among the mediaeval narrations of her story.” (Feimer, Joel N. *Medea in Ovid’s Metamorphoses and the Ovide Moralisé: Translation as Transmission. Florilegium*, v. 8, 1986, p. 40)

woman than a mother in this narrative since there is only one mention of the sons: exactly when she kills them. The *Moralisé* gives a lot of detail as to how her incantations and charms are made. She firstly helps Jason to win the Golden Fleece by helping him with the task her father gives to the Argonauts of taming fire-breathing bulls: “Medea immediately gave him herbs full of enchantment and taught him what to do with them.” (*Ovide Moralisé*, 2023, p. 526).²⁰¹

The author of the *Moralisé*, much like Sainte-Maure, Guido, Boccaccio and later Lydgate, claims that Medea should have felt shame upon meeting Jason, since the inevitable destruction of the house of Colchis was occasioned because Medea was shameless. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* the princess has an internal monologue in which she discusses if she should give in to love and abandon her father’s kingdom to be with Jason:

In vain, Medea, do you fight. Some god or other is opposing you; I wonder if this is not what is called love, or at least something like this. For why do the mandates of my father seem too harsh. They certainly are too harsh. Why do I fear lest he perish whom I have but now seen for the first time? What is the cause of all this fear? Come, thrust from your maiden breast these flames that you feel, if you can, unhappy girl. Ah, if I could, I should be more myself. But some strange power holds me down against my will. Desire persuades me one way, reason another. I see the better and approve it, but I follow the worse.²⁰²
(1956, p. 343)

The same event happens in the *Moralisé*:

“In truth, if I could behave more wisely, I would, but I cannot. I exert myself in vain. New love forces me to obey its will and loathe my own. I see the good and choose the evil, for I know well that I am falling for him. This is the work of love, which is driving me out of my mind. Wretch, poor me, I’m so foolish! It is great folly and great rashness for a maiden, a king’s daughter, to place her heart with a foreigner. But he is a guest, and why do I love him? I could find a lover in this land, if I deigned to seek one and take him as lord, if he pleases me, without going off to another land where I would know no one. What do I want with him then?”²⁰³

²⁰¹ Originally: “Medea li done erroment
Herbes plaines d’enchantement

Si li aprent qui’il en doit faire.” (*Ovide Moralisé*, 1931, p. 27-28, l. 539-541)

²⁰² ““frustra, Medea, repugnas: nescio quis deus obstat,” ait, “mirumque, nisi hoc est, aut aliquid certe simile huic, quod amare vocatur. nam cur iussa patris nimium mihi dura videntur? sunt quoque dura nimis! cur, quem modo denique vidi, ne pereat, timeo? quae tanti causa timoris? excute virgineo conceptas pectore flammās, si potes, infelix! si possem, sanior essem! sed trahit invitam nova vis, aliudque cupido, mens aliud suadet: video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor.” (Ovid, 1956, p. 342)

²⁰³ “— Se je peüsse, voirement
Je ouvraisse plus sagement,
Mais je ne puis; en vain m’efforce.
Nouvele amour me fet par force
A sa volenté obeïr,
Et la moie me fet haïr.
Je voi le bien et le mal prens,

Ovid (1956, p. 343-345) challenges her words in his narrative, “Why do you, a royal maiden, burn for a stranger, and think upon marriage with a foreign world?”²⁰⁴, ironically, so, given that Medea in turn becomes the stranger who is taken to Jason’s land and forced to assimilate into their culture.

Later, in the *Moralisé*, Medea is begged by Jason to rejuvenate his father. In order to make sure her enchantments will work, Medea prays to the gods, in particular Hecate, the goddess of magic: “Now may the goddess of enchantment, the goddess of triple form, come to my aid with her instructions, guiding and informing me so that I can successfully rejuvenate old Aeson with the art of my enchantment.” (*Ovide Moralisé*, 2023, p. 530).²⁰⁵ The narrative makes it clear that Medea is treated favourably by the gods since she is part of the pantheon of gods through her family line. She gets her wishes fulfilled after her prayers and enchantments: “That chariot that I see approaching, drawn by those flying serpents, and those stars shining brightly, make me believe that my request will come true and that you will give me this gift.” (*Ovide Moralisé*, 2023, p. 531).²⁰⁶ She is carried by the chariot with flying serpents (or dragons) many times during her preparation for the spells and is eventually saved by it after the killing of her and Jason’s sons.²⁰⁷ Many of

Et si sai bien que je m’esprens.
 Ce fet amour, qui si -m’afole.
 Chetive, lasse, tant sui foie!
 C’est grant folie et grant desroi.
 Quant pucele, fille de roi.
 Met son cuer en un home estrainge.
 Mes hostes est, et pourquoi l’aim ge?
 Je puis trouver en ceste terre mi, se je l’i deigne querre
 Et prendre a seignor, s’il m’agree,
 Sans aler en autre contrée,
 Ou je ne connoistray nullui.
 Qu’ai je donc à faire de lui?” (1931, p. 23, l. 343-362)

²⁰⁴ In the original Latin: “quid in hospite, regia virgo, ureris et thalamos alieni concipis orbis?” (1956, p. 342-344.)

²⁰⁵ “Or m’en aït par son commant
 La deesse d'enchantement,
 La deesse de trible forme,
 Qui si m’entroduise et enforme
 Que je puisse à bon chief venir
 Dou viel Heson reniouvenir
 Par l'art de mon enchantement” (*Ovide Moralisé*, 1931, p. 36, l. 885 - 891)

²⁰⁶ “Cil chars que voi par l’air venir,
 Que cil serpent volant conduisent,
 Et ces estoiles qui cler luisent
 Me font certainement acroire
 Que ma requeste sera voire
 Et que vous cest don me donrez.” (*Ovide Moralisé*, 1931, p. 38, l. 982 - 987)

²⁰⁷ For the reference of flying serpents see *Chapter One – The Monstrous Body* where Mélusine is also referred to as a flying serpent which has been translated into the Middle English as “dragon”.

the narratives describe her as the granddaughter of the sun-God Helios, but this detail is omitted in the *Moralisé*, perhaps because of its association with pagan legends. Medea, however, is never seen as a Christian and remains associated with the Greek pantheon and part of a supernatural dynasty.

Much attention is given in the *Moralisé* to Medea's enchantments and to the use of ingredients such as spices, parts of animals and natural elements such as the moon, the stars and the wind:

Medea placed everything she had been able to amass in a cauldron to boil: herbs of various kinds; lots of roots; lots of flowers from the fields of Thessaly and elsewhere, and many other various spices; stones from India and Persia; sand from the great sea; heart, liver, and gall and feathers from a screech-owl; a stag's gizzard and liver and the head of a crow; all the entrails from a werewolf; and lunar mist. She combined all these things in one.²⁰⁸

(*Ovide Moralisé*, 2023, p. 532)

The emphasis on spices, stones and faraway lands where she gathers her resources contributes again to the exoticization or Othering of Medea, where emphasis falls on her foreignness and association with the east, as with Cassiodorien (discussed in Chapter Two). There is a play on the boundaries between human and animals in this aspect of the narrative: the descriptions of wild animals and supernatural beings add to Medea's Otherness and act not only as a representation of her as a foreigner and witch but also as a woman. Medea is "Other" by blood and by gender. The association of her with animals, further emphasized in subsequent narratives as we shall see, additionally works to dehumanize her, as with depictions of loathly lady figures such as Dame Ragnelle, examined in the previous chapter.

After her betrayal by Jason, who chooses to marry Creusa, the princess of Corinth, Medea's anger leads her to firstly create a spell to kill the princess when she wears a

²⁰⁸ "Quant qu'elle onques pot amasser
Mist bouillir en une chaudière:
Herbes de diverse maniere.
Maintes racines, maintes flors
Des prez de Thesale et d'aillors
Et mainte autre espice diverse;
Des pierres d'Inde et de Perse,
Et dou sablon de la grant mer;
Dou cuer, dou foie et de l'amer
Et des plumes de la fresoie;
Dou cerf le gesier et le foie
Et la teste de la cornaille;
Dou leu garous toute 'l'entraille.
Et des brumees de la lune.
Toutes ces choses mist en une." (*Ovide Moralisé*, 1931, p. 39-40, l.1032 -1046)

gifted cursed gown and, finally, to kill her sons, Jason's heirs. This is the only time the children are mentioned in the *Moralisé*:

Now the hate that Jason bore Medea was doubled, and she could not be reconciled to him. And when Medea knew in truth that she could not be at peace with him, she went mad with anger and rage. Her rage ravaged her to the point that, out of spite for Jason, she killed the two children – her very own – because they looked like their father. Then she set her house ablaze, and fled, flying through the air.²⁰⁹

(*Ovide Moralisé*, 2023, p. 538)

The author states that Medea kills the sons because they “looked like their father”, but Medea's plans are also related with the genealogical end of more than one dynasty. By killing Jason's heirs and his bride she destroys his dynasty and the dynasty of the house of Corinth, a detail seen in the metaphorical sense when the author mentions that Medea “set her [hers and Jason's] house ablaze”. The most common explanation for Medea's action is traditionally that she is a vengeful wife. However, inheritance disputes play a significant part in this. Creusa from Corinth, as Jason's new wife, would become responsible for the household and its legitimate heirs which Medea could see as a threat to her sons since Creusa would probably ensure her own children (and not Medea's) would become the possessors of Jason's inheritance. What lengths Creusa would take to make this attainable is probably Medea's worst fear. According to Ruth Morse (1996, p. 152), the killing of the children is the only appeal Medea can make towards Jason:

In Antiquity when Jason repudiates his foreign bride he breaks his oath, but not the law. Marriage is a contract, not a sacrament; his behaviour may be shabby and dishonest, but it is not, in his eyes or those of his prospective father-in-law, wrong. If Creon banishes Medea, he is within his rights [...] because he perceives her as a danger to his kingship. She is without recourse either to law or to her human kin, and can only appeal to Jason's debt to her.

Another cause, and/or consequence, of Medea's actions is a desire to reclaim her agency. This is observable in the continuation of the *Moralisé* when Medea tries to kill

²⁰⁹ “Ore est doublée la haine
Que Jason avoit vers Medee.
A lui ne pot estre acordee,
Et quant Medea sot de voir
Qu'el ne porroit sa pais avoir.
D'ire et de rage forsena.
Sa rage tant la demena,
Que deus enfans, qui sien estaient,
Pour ce que lor pere sambloient
Ocist en despit de Jason,
Puis mist en flambe sa meson,
Si s'enfuï par l'air volant.” (*Ovide Moralisé*, 1931, p. 50, l. 1484 - 1495)

Theseus, her stepson, in order to secure herself (and in some versions her son, Medus)²¹⁰ the inheritance of the kingdom of Athens:

His father, who had not seen him in a long time, did not recognize him, and Theseus did not reveal his identity to him. This would turn out very badly for him. Medea recognized him well, as she had seen him several times. She was grieved by his arrival. She came to her husband, and told him that this was a spy who had come to spy on him and his kingdom, and that all this might cause him great harm. "You'd be wise to believe me: kill him in secret, and I'll give you the means. If he drank and consumed a potion blended for him, his heart would immediately burst: he would never see another day. Give him the potion to drink! I'll go prepare the beverage." The father said: "Give it here." The drink was prepared. The king handed his son his potion. Theseus was unaware of the deception: he took the goblet with the poison, and lifted the drink to his lips. He would have drunk it without delay, when the king – from the hilt of the sword that the young man wore at his side – recognized his son. Thus Medea's treason and deception were unmasked: by her cunning, she had made the father give his son the drink in order to poison him. The king seized the goblet. He poured out the poison with the wine, and then greeted his dear son. And Medea fled, concealed in a dark cloud, never to be seen again.²¹¹

²¹⁰ Medus is mentioned by Boccaccio (2003, p. 38)

²¹¹ "Ses peres l'a mesconneü,
 Qui de lonc temps ne lot veü,
 N'il ne se fist connoistre à lui.
 Torner li dut ia grant anui.
 Bien l'a Medea conneü,
 Que pluisours fois l'avoit veü.
 Dolente fu de sa venue.
 A son mari s'en est venue,
 Si li dist que c'iert une espie,
 Qui lui et son roiaume espie.
 Si li puet torner a damage.
 „Creez moi, si ferez que sage
 Ociez le tout en requoi,
 Et je vous baillera de quoi.
 S'il l'avoit beü et mengie,
 D'une tele poison aigie,
 Li cuers tantost li creveroit.
 Jamais autre jour ne verroit.
 Donnez li la poison à boire.
 Et je destremperai le boivre".
 Dist li peres : „Ça le bailliez".
 Li boivres fut apareilliez.
 Li rois tent au fil sa poison.
 Cil ne set la decevoison,
 Prent le maderin et l'entouche,
 Si porta le boivre à sa bouche.
 Beü l'eüst sans demoree.
 Quant li rois au poing de l'espee.
 Que li damoisiaus avoit çainte,
 Connut son fils. Lors fu atainte
 La traïson et la boisdie
 De cele qui par sa voisdie
 Fist par le pere au fil donner
 Le bevrage à l'empoisonner.
 Li rois saisi le maderin.
 La poison espant et le vin.
 Puis a Son chier fil conjoï,

Besides unfolding the story of Jason and Medea, the *Moralisé* uses this narrative (as others in the collection) as a way to teach Christian morals. The story of Medea is moralized as a way to understand Jesus' sacrifice to the world and uses the themes of medicine and herbs to explore Jesus' salvation.²¹² The author also compares the Golden Fleece with Medea, as something to be attained, relating her with virginity and purity.²¹³ Later treatments of the Jason and Medea tale focus less on Christian moralization tales and more on sympathetic views of a woman betrayed.

Exploring Medea as sorceress, mother and victim in the fourteenth and fifteenth century

Chaucer

Geoffrey Chaucer, in the *Legend of Good Women*, used mainly Guido and Ovid's *Heroides* as his sources, but made some crucial changes. His depiction of Medea is largely of a woman simply wrongfully betrayed by Jason, whom Chaucer is very direct in criticizing: "Thow madest thy recleymyng and thy lures / To ladyes of thy statly aparaunce, / And of thy wordes farced with plesaunce, / And of thy feyned trouthe and thy manere, / With thyn obesaunce and humble cheere, / And with thy contrefeted peyne and wo." (Chaucer, 2008, p. 614, l. 1371 – 1376).²¹⁴ Jason's words are "farced" and his manners "feyned", emphasizing his falsehood and fiction.

The Legend of Good Women is a poem written by Chaucer in the fourteenth century that references virtuous women and their most notorious deeds mostly having to do with love (Cleopatra, Dido, Thisbe) or purity (Lucretia). Hypsipyle and Medea are presented as the betrayed women of the same ungrateful lover. It is interesting that Medea is found in this narrative as a "virtuous woman" since she is known, most famously, for the killing of her children. This detail was crucially omitted by Chaucer, who treated her

Et Medea s'en refoï.

Couverte d'une obscure nue.

Si conques puis ne fu veüe." (Ovide *Moralisé*, 1931, p. 64-65, l. 2075 - 2114)

²¹² 2023, p. 529

²¹³ 2023, p. 528

²¹⁴ "Chaucer's Jason derives much of his character from Ovid's works, likely including the *Ars Amatoria*, whose third book warns women of a list of faithless men, headed by 'fallax Iason': false Jason." (Allen – Gross, Lucy M. *Female Desire in Chaucer's Legend of Good Women and Middle English Romance*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2020, p. 106)

in a much more sympathetic light. He did not, however, omit this detail when mentioning Medea in “The Book of the Duchess” and in the introduction to the “Man of Law’s Tale” in the *Canterbury Tales*. Her violence towards the children was certainly known to Chaucer but its removal from the *Legend* was necessary to allow for discussion of and emphasis on her virtue.²¹⁵ As Katherine Heavey observes (2015, p. 32):

The most famous crime that Chaucer leaves out of the ‘Legend of Medea’ is, of course, her murder of her two children, motivated by Jason’s cruelty and their fatal resemblance to their father. It is true that neither the *Heroides* nor Guido’s *Historia*, both of which Chaucer cites as sources, actually tell the story of the murders. Additionally, in their notes to the poem, A. S. G. Edwards and M. C. E. Shaner attractively suggest that Chaucer’s reference to the ‘Argonautycon’ (line 1457) may betray first-hand knowledge of Valerius Flaccus’ Latin *Argonautica*, which does not portray the murders of the children and presents a Medea whose weakened, romanticised character seems reflected in the ‘Legend of Medea’. Nevertheless, despite his (perhaps deliberate) references to texts that do not present the murders, Chaucer was aware of Medea’s final and most notorious crime, mentioning it in the *Book of the Duchess* and in the ‘Man of Law’s Prologue’ (where it is used, tellingly, as an example of the kind of legendary tale that Chaucer has told before). In eliding the murders here, and in making Medea far less alarming than many of her continental predecessors (most obviously Boccaccio’s Medea), Chaucer also elides the most famous example of her action and agency. Thus Chaucer seems to suggest that a woman’s ‘goodness’ is linked to her passivity and suffering at the hands of men: a suggestion that has proved endlessly troublesome for critics.

In *Legend*, Chaucer addresses Jason as: “Thow sly devourere and confusioun / Of gentil women, tendre creatures” (2008, p. 614, l. 1369-1370) and neglects the vengeful character of Medea on purpose, perceiving and presenting her simply as an innocent victim of Jason’s treason. In Chaucer’s tale, Medea is enamoured with Jason upon his arrival in her father’s court and she asks him to make her his wife. Both lovers firm their contract in a scene where Chaucer describes how Medea teaches Jason how to reach the Golden Fleece:

And hereupon at nyght they mette in-feere,
And doth his oth, and goth with hire to bedde;
And on the morwe upward he hym spedde
For she hath taught hym how he shal nat fayle
The fles to wynne and stynten his batayle;
And saved hym his lyf and his honour;
And gat hym a name ryght as a conquerour,
Ryght thourgh the sleyghte of hire enchauntement
(2008, p. 617, l. 1643 - 1650)

²¹⁵ “By as good ryght as Medea was / That slough hir children for Jasoun” (Chaucer, *Book of the Duchess*. 2008, p. 339, l. 726-727) / “The crueltee of the, queen Medea, / Thy litel children hangynge by the hals, / For thy Jason, that was of love so fals!” (Chaucer, *Man of Law’s Tale*. 2008, p. 88, l. 72 – 74)

It is notable that Medea exhibits agency in her sexual encounter with Jason. He “goth with hire to bedde”: Medea is thus not simply a woman enamoured with a knight, but she is described as the initiator of the contact. However, she is not a siren or simply a seductor. All Medea does stems from her love of Jason, to whom she will, foolishly perhaps, give both her body and knowledge in exchange.

Chaucer’s final lines in this scene (lines 1649-1650) are also a critique of Jason’s prowess as despite being known as a famous warrior, he needs Medea’s assistance to achieve the tasks that were given to him. Chaucer seems to poke fun at the hero as if to say that without Medea, Jason is hopeless. The encounter between the two characters, when Medea teaches Jason her magic, has strong sexual undertones, proving her magic to be an intimate gift. This is again a scene in which the woman teaches the man and not the other way around (as in the *Post-Vulgate* representation of Merlin and the witch Morgan le Fay, for example).²¹⁶ This scene is more thoroughly sexualized in comparison to what other writers mention in their own representations of Medea and Jason’s relationship. Chaucer draws a more explicit description of what her exchange in the bedroom symbolizes. Medea is not only sharing her bed and virginity but her knowledge, her most important asset and what leads inevitably to her downfall.

Chaucer’s differing treatment of Medea may speak to a wider diminishing treatment of witchcraft or associations to paganism in the fourteenth century. Which meant paganism was still being discussed but not as explicitly than before. He gives very little description of her powers and enchantments focusing more on the fact that she gave her knowledge (mostly to win the Golden Fleece) to Jason and was betrayed after he got his prize: “For as a traytour he is from the hire go, / And with hire lafte his yonge children two, / And falsy hath betrayed hire, allas, / As evere in love a chef traytour he was” (2008, p. 617, l. 1656 – 1659).

Christine de Pizan

We find a similar attitude towards Medea in Christine de Pizan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies* in which the author fights against anti-feminists’ ideals and misogynistic characteristics given to women, as expressed in works such as the *Roman de la Rose*.²¹⁷

²¹⁶ “Then Morgan made Merlin’s acquaintance and begged him to teach her what he knew, on her promise that she would do for him whatever he dared ask of her.” (*Lancelot-Grail - The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*. Norris J. Lacy (ed.) v. IV., 1995, p. 200)

²¹⁷ “At the time Christine de Pizan launched her debate, the *Rose* was thus a text of towering importance and Jean de Meun was lionized as a great poet and a model of clerkly brilliance. Christine took issue with

Her portrayal of Medea brings a very sympathetic view of the character and even equates her to another supernatural woman, Circe (who had also been a victim of misogynistic interpretation as a sexualized enchantress).²¹⁸ Christine's text gives more importance to the virtues of these women and argues against antifeminist views. She does not simply omit the killing of the children but gives a different closure to the myth, similar to Guido and Chaucer's ending. By completely changing the end of the original narrative, and claiming Medea would have "destroyed herself" rather than hurt Jason, she creates a more palatable Medea:

Medea, the king's daughter, noting Jason's beauty, royal lineage, and fame, and seeing that he would make a good husband for her and that she could not make better use of her love elsewhere, resolved to protect him from death, for too much pity overwhelmed her at the thought that this knight would have to die in such a way, and so she spoke to him for a long time at leisure. Put briefly, she gave him charms and enchantments, and, in her expertise, she taught him how to win the Golden Fleece on the condition that Jason promise to take her as his wife and no other woman and to show her forever loyal faith and love. However, Jason lied about his promise, for after everything went just as he wanted, he left Medea for another woman. For this reason, Medea, who would rather have destroyed herself than do anything of this kind to him, turned despondent, nor did her heart ever again feel goodness or joy.²¹⁹

(1998, p. 190)

Both portrayals (Christine and Chaucer's) are intended to inspire pity. Chaucer writes how: "This is the mede of lovyng and guerdoun / That Medea received of Jasoun / Ryght for hire trouthe and for hire kyndenesse, / That lovede hym beter than hireself, I gesse, / And lafte hire fader and hire heritage." (Chaucer, 2008, p. 617, l. 1662 – 1666). In *The Book of the City of Ladies* the text mentions her knowledge of sorcery but does not emphasize it:

essentially three interrelated aspects of the work: its verbal obscenity and the indecency of the concluding allegorical description of sexual intercourse; the negative portrayals of women, which tended to treat them as a group and not as individuals, thereby making their 'vices' natural and universal; the work's ambiguity, the absence of a clear authorial voice and intention which would serve as a moral guide to susceptible or ignorant readers." (Hult, David F. *The Roman de la Rose*, Christine de Pizan, and the *querelle des femmes*. In: *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing*. Carolyn Dinshaw; David Wallace (eds). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 186)

²¹⁸ "No matter what century or work Circe appears in, she is associated with our bodily vulnerability and has power over that—a power that is often presented as sexual allure." (Yarnall, Judith. *Transformations of Circe - The History of an Enchantress*.) Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994, p. 2)

²¹⁹ Originally : "La beauté, la naissance royale et la renommée de Jason attirèrent Médée, la fille du roi; il lui semblait que ce serait pour elle un excellent parti et qu'elle ne saurait aimer en plus haut lieu. Aussi résolut-elle de le préserver de la mort, car elle ne pouvait se résoudre à ce qu'un tel guerrier pérît ainsi. Elle lui parla donc longuement et en toute liberté. Bref, elle l'entoura de charmes et de sortilèges, elle qui les connaissait tous, et lui apprit, en échange d'une promesse de mariage, comment conquérir la Toison d'or. Jason jura donc de la prendre pour femme, promettant de ne jamais en prendre aucune autre, et de l'aimer fidèlement toute sa vie. Mais après avoir obtenu d'elle tout ce qu'il voulait, il trahit son serment, car il l'abandonna pour une autre. Médée, qui se serait laissée couper en mille morceaux plutôt que de le tromper ainsi, en fut désespérée, et son cœur ne connut plus jamais le bonheur." (Christine de Pizan, 2000, p. 214)

[...] she knew the powers of every herb and all the potions which could be concocted, and she was ignorant of no art which can be known. With her spells she knew how to make the air become cloudy or dark, how to move winds from the grottoes and caverns of the earth, and how to provoke other storms in the air, as well as how to stop the flow of rivers, concoct poisons, create fire to bum up effortlessly whatever object she chose, and all such similar arts.²²⁰

(1998, p. 69)

Christine's focus has mostly been the courtly love and the betrayal, much like Chaucer, and where magic is concerned, she chooses to focus on Medea's "scientific" mind, presenting her as a learned woman.

Like Chaucer, she also mentions Medea in other works: *The Mutacion de La Fortune (the Book of the Mutability of Fortune)* and *Épître d'Othéa (Othea's Letter to Hector)*, both from the early fifteenth century. The focus remains here on Medea's learning, and some of Christine's narratives, especially in *Mutability*, discuss Medea's violence. However, the author again regards as more important the fact that her actions were being caused by her lovesickness:

[...] for several days Medea was very dejected, went pale and changed color, for the love of Jason. She was so severely afflicted that she never had any respite. She sighed and wept, alarmed by what was happening, because she had never paid attention to love. Now it was necessary for her to love a stranger, in spite of herself!²²¹

(Christine de Pizan, 2017, p. 169).

Christine does not reprimand Medea for her lovesickness or condemn her knowledge. As Ruth Morse (1996, p. 98) states:

Christine constantly associates her with 'science', that theme of her book [...] There is no suggestion of witchcraft, sorcery, or malign intention. Medee has been dedicated to learning, and has disdained marriage, because none of her

²²⁰ Originally: "Elle connaissait les vertus des plantes et tous les sortilèges possibles; elle n'ignorait rien de ce que l'on peut savoir. Elle pouvait par incantations troubler l'air et obscurcir le ciel, faire sortir des profondeurs de la terre le vent des cavernes, soulever la tempête, arrêter le cours des fleuves, confectionner les poisons, faire naître spontanément le feu pour brûler tout ce qu'elle voulait, et bien d'autres prodiges encore." (Christine de Pizan, 2000, p. 98)

²²¹ "Prist congié adont et s'en tourne

En ses chambres, ou moult fu morne

Plusieurs jours, et pallye et tainte,

Pour l'amout Jason, dont atteinte

Est si durement que nulle heure

N'a repos ; si souspire et pleure,

S'esbahist de celle aventure,

Car onques n'ot eu d'amer cure

Or lui couvient un estrangier

Amer, malgré sien! " (Solente, Suzanne (ed.). *Le livre de la mutacion de Fortune par Christine de Pisan*.

New York, Johnson Reprint, 1965, p. 36, l. 14411-14420)

suitors have seemed able to compete with 'science'. But all the learning in the world is no proof against the combined forces of Love and deception. Medee sees Jason and is overcome by love (or by Love) and pity for the young man who faces certain death.

Christine (2017, p. 169) describes Medea's ordeal as something almost spiritual in nature:

Medea looked at Jason attentively. And then Love, who took notice of it, fired a sharp arrow through a look; the arrow lodged in her heart. He severely wounded Medea. The wound, which would cause her great suffering, would not easily be healed! She would even find herself saddened by it! ²²²

(Christine de Pizan, 2017, p. 169)

There is a sense here that Medea has been violated, and her feelings are presented as completely out of her control: "[...] Love gripped her so intensely that, her heart forced, she was obliged to obey him. No reprimand from anybody would matter."²²³ (Christine de Pizan, 2017, p. 169). Again, the emphasis is on the strength (violence, even) of Love's action. This is important for the ending of Medea's tale in *Mutability* which, in true Christine's fashion, is changed (despite this version following the *Moralisé* more closely). By the end of the narrative Medea kills the children in vengeance but also murders Jason and maybe herself, a detail which Christine points out varies depending on the sources:

Medea was so inflamed when she learned of the marriage that, filled with rage, she killed him and two children that she had had with him. No one saved them. Some say that she then killed herself and others say she did not. And thus it ended badly, despite the fleece of fine gold. May whoever wants to see himself in this do so, as this is one time when a doctor treats the illness of another, and then kills himself! ²²⁴

²²² Originally: "Moult ententivement l'esgarde

Et lord Amours, qui s'en prent garde,

Par un regart, qu'au cuet lui serre,

Une poignant fleche desserre ;

Si navre durement Medee.

Ne sera de legier souldee

La playe, qui la grevera !

Dolente encor s'en trouvera !

Mal pour elle l'a accointié ! " ([Solente, p. 35, l. 14379-14387)

²²³ " [...] Amours l'estraint

Si durement qu'a cuer contraint

Couvient qu'elle obeïsse a lui ;

N'y vouldroit chastoy de nullui." (Solente, p. 37, l. 14433 - 14436)

²²⁴ "Dont Medee si s'enflama,

Quant elle sot le mariage,

Que mourir le fist plain de rage

Et deux enfens, qu'ot eus de lui,

Sanz estre rescoux de nullui.

Aucuns dient que qu'après s'occist

Et autres dient que non fist.

Et ainsi fu male la fin,

Gower

Medea's characterization as a mother and most importantly, as an enchantress, was approached differently by John Gower. In the *Confessio Amantis* (Book V), completed in 1390, Medea is described more clearly as a powerful magical woman as we can see in the scenes when she rejuvenates Jason's father. As Gower writes "Sche semeth faie and no womman;" (Gower, 2004, p. 85, l. 4105).

According to the Middle English Dictionary, Gower seems to have used the term "faie" when referring to someone of noble birth or someone who possesses more knowledge than common people.²²⁵ He uses the same word to refer to Jason early in the text.²²⁶ However, when used for women (Gower uses the term to describe a Nymph and Constance)²²⁷ the word seems to allude to a more powerful woman or to one who has more knowledge than a normal human would. Gower's Medea is also shown in a sympathetic light, but a larger focus is given to her knowledge of magic when Medea starts to aid Jason in his tasks to win the Golden Fleece.

Instead of an enchantment to help him with the bull task, in accordance with Gower's main sources of the tale (Benoît's *Roman de Troie* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*), Medea gifts him a magic ring, symbolic of their now consummated relationship, and capable of protecting he who wears it:

Tho tok sche forth a riche tye
 Mad al of gold and of perrie,
 Out of the which sche nam a ring,
 The ston was worth al other thing.
 Sche seide, whil he wolde it were,
 Ther myhte no peril him dere,
 In water mai it noght be dreynt,
 Wher as it comth the fyr is queynt,
 It daunteth ek the cruel beste,
 Ther may no qued that man areste,
 Wher so he be on see or lond,
 Which hath that ring upon his hond [...]

Nononstant la toison d'or fin.

Qui s'i voudra mirer s'i mire

D'autrui maladie garir,

Qui puis fait soy mesmes perir ! " (Solente, p. 48, l. 14774-14786)

²²⁵ *S.v. fay, adj., 1(a)* – See The Middle English Dictionary: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary> Access 30 Sept 2025.

²²⁶ "That Jason was a faie kniht" (Gower, 2004, V, p. 78, l. 3769)

²²⁷ "Of such a nimphe as tho was faie" (p. 51, I, l. 2317) / "How that my wif Constance is faie" (p. 22, II, l. 1019)

The appearance of the ring recalls other medieval narratives of magic, one in particular being the proximity Medea has with the fairy Mélusine (who gifts them to her children). The ring alone is not all that she gifts to Jason in aiding him in his task; she also uses “charme and conjure” to fortify the magic: “And gan out of hire cofre take / Him thoughte an hevenely figure, / Which al be charme and be conjure / Was wrought, and ek it was thurgh write / With names, which he scholde wite, / As sche him tauhte tho to rede;” (Gower, 2004, V, p. 74, l. 3578 – 3583). She gives him an ointment which would ensure “That ther was fyr ne venym non / That scholde fastnen him upon, / Whan that he were enoynt withal.” (p. 75, l. 3597 – 3599); and a magic glue to fight against the bulls: “Sche tok him thanne a maner glu, / The which was of so gret vertu, / That where a man it wolde caste, / It scholde binde anon so faste / That no man mihte it don aweie.” (p. 75, l. 3603 – 3607)

The occurrence again of the word “enchantment” and the fact the author describes an “oignement” that will aid in Jason’s journey likely stems from Guido’s *Historia* which also describes the use of an ointment for the completion of the task. However, in Gower’s text, more focus is given to the occurrence of magic when Medea rejuvenates Jason’s father Aeson: “Jason, which sih his fader old, / Upon Medea made him bold, / Of art magique, which sche couthe, / And preith hire that his fader youthe / Sche wolde make ageinward newe:” (Gower, 2004, p. 82, l. 3946 - 3949).

Gower dedicates more than 200 lines to describe Medea’s magic to rejuvenate Aeson. Her incantation begins with a prayer to Hecate who brings forth the flying chariot and lets Medea gather materials across the land for the ritual. Herbs are mentioned again, as well as water from rivers, foliage from forests, the construction of an altar to Hecate and Juventas as well as sacrificing a black sheep to request aid from Pluto and Proserpina.²²⁸ Her ritual is not all complete before her incantations and charms are given to Aeson: “So that with spellinge of hir charmes / Sche tok Eson in bothe hire armes, / And made him for to slepe faste, / And him upon hire herbes caste.” (Gower, 2004, p. 84, l. 4067 – 4070) but what is interestingly characteristic of Gower’s representation of Medea is her description during the magic ritual where it is specified she turns into a haunting, almost ghost like figure, making animal noises and looking dishevelled to those who see her: “Ther was no beste which goth oute / More wylde than sche semeth ther. /

²²⁸ The description of the entire ritual can be found between the lines 3957 to 4174 of Gower’s text.

Aboute hir schuldres hyng hir her / As thogh sche were oute of hir mynde / And torned in another kynde.” (Gower, 2004, p. 84, l. 4080 – 4084). By referring to her as seemingly turned into “another kynde” Gower suggests Medea’s Otherness. His presentation of her as animal and Other also aligns, as already mentioned, with the Loathly Lady tradition. She makes sounds like a rooster, a lark, a hen etc., again blurring the boundary between human and animal), which prompts Gower to refer to her as fairy or a goddess in the subsequent lines:

Which is noght written in this stede.
 Bot tho sche ran so up and doun,
 Sche made many a wonder soun,
 Somtime lich unto the cock,
 Somtime unto the laverock,
 Somtime kacleth as an hen,
 Somtime spekth as don the men.
 And riht so as hir jargoun strangeth,
 In sondri wise hir forme changeth,
Sche semeth faie and no womman;
 For with the craftes that sche can
Sche was, as who seith, a goddesse;
 And what hir liste, more or lesse,
 Sche dede, in bokes as we finde,
 That passeth over manneskinde.

(Gower, 2004, p. 85, l. 4096 – 4110, *my emphasis*)

The use of the word *faie* can be tied back to the discussion of fairies in Chapter One. However, as discussed by James Wade (2011, p. 4-5) the term fairy was starting to be used interchangeably with words such as *elf* by authors in the fourteenth and fifteenth century but would most likely signify a fantastical creature, coming from an Otherworld that would not be affected by human laws. Medea is human, but her characteristics are supernatural. She stands in a middle ground between the Otherworld (the pantheon of Gods) but with clear human influences. As explained by the Middle English Dictionary the word “faie” refers to someone “Possessed of magical powers or properties; enchanted, enchanting; as noun: a person or place possessing such powers or characteristics.”²²⁹ All characteristics Medea possesses.

Gower does not omit Medea’s killing of her sons and of Creusa (Jason’s new bride) as Chaucer does. He, however, omits the dismemberment of her brother, Absyrtus, and the murder of king Pelias which are described in the *Moralisé*. By ignoring Medea’s other killings, Gower puts more emphasis on the closure of Jason’s line especially in the

²²⁹ S.v. *fay*, *adj.*, *l(a)* - See The Middle English Dictionary. Available at https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED15140/track?counter=1&search_id=4470093 Access 21 Jan. 2026

scene where Medea shows him the dead children: “Tho cam Medea to Jason / With bothe his sones on hire hond, / And seide, ‘O thou of every lond / The moste untrew creature, / Lo, this schal be thi forfeiture.’” (2004, p. 87, l. 4210-4214).

Late fourteenth and early fifteenth century

Guido’s *Historia* was translated into other languages in the fourteenth and fifteenth century with John Lydgate’s version, *The Troy Book*, being one of the most well-known Middle English examples.²³⁰ Lydgate’s version of Medea paints her in a very misogynistic light (details which Lydgate’s narrator attributes to Guido, despite no equivalent judgment appearing in the original source).²³¹ Lydgate was an English monk and writer whose expansion of Guido’s work was made at the request of King Henry V while he was still prince.²³²

Lydgate’s Medea is still very well-versed in science, especially in the seven liberal arts (Grammar, Logic and Rhetoric, Geometry, Arithmetic, Astronomy and Music); according to the author, she knows of “artis called liberal” (1906, p. 59, l. 1608), and she also has knowledge of necromancy which would be characterized by exorcisms and conjuring the dead (“But most sche worouzt by nygromauncye, / With exorzismes and coniuirisons;”) and of the manipulation of natural events (“Sche koude make þe wyndes for to blowe, / To thondre and lizte & to hayle and snowe,”).²³³ Medea is in all sources described in this chapter, seen as an intelligent woman who is capable to help Jason in all his tasks. Lydgate sanitizes the narrative in a much more Christianized version. The author mentions Guido as his source, but a lot is taken from Ovid, whom Lydgate recognizes as a pagan and therefore he dismisses this type of knowledge as incoherent with his faith:

þat any wyzt or lyvyng creature

²³⁰ Lydgate’s version appears in the fifteenth century. See Lydgate, John. *Troy Book*. Henry Bergen (ed). London: Early English Text Society – Began Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Limited, 1906

²³¹ This treatment appears in Lydgate in lines 2082 to 2128. The author states to let Guido be blamed for the idea of women as treacherous and deceiving, but not to blame Lydgate himself: “As Guydo wryt in his original — / Where he mysseyth, late hym bere þe wyte; / For it sit wel, þat þe vengauce byte / On hym þat so þis wommen haþ offendid; / And 3if I myzt it schul[de] ben amendid.” (1906, p. 75, l. 2118-2122). In Guido’s original, no comment on the nature of women is made.

²³² “The *Troy Book* was begun in the late autumn of 1412 and finished in the summer, or early fall, of 1420. It is a very much amplified version in decasyllabic couplets of the prose Latin *Historia Destructionis Troiae* of Guido delle Colonne (about 1287), and was undertaken, the author tells us, at the decide of Prince Henry, afterwards Henry V.” (Bergen, Henry. Introductory Note. In: Lydgate, John. *Troy Book*. London: Early English Text Society – Began Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Limited, 1906, p. ix)

²³³ Lydgate, 1906, p. 60 l. 1623-1624 / l. 1643-1644

Shoulde haue power, I do ȝow pleyn assure,
 So cursed þinges supersticious
 To do or worche, to kynde contrarious.
 For God almyȝti, Iuge of Iuges alle,
 Hath sette a lawe, [þe] whiche may nat falle,
 Amonge planetis perpetually tendure,
 A-forn ordeyned in his eternal cure,
 Þe whiche may nat, as clerkys list termyne,
 Vp-on no syde bowe nor decline [...]

(p. 63, l. 1719-1728)

Despite the Christian gloss given to Medea, the author mentions her magic and describes her as a sorceress: “Al-be sche were a pssyng sorceresse, / And ferpest named of any chanteresse [...]” (1906, p. 65, l. 1797-1798). By using the word “sorceress” and naming her enchantments, the authors could (with the exception of Boccaccio) explicitly reveal her magic without characterizing her work as *maleficium* (harmful magic). The representation of magic would be automatically associated with paganism but not exactly as evil (as the author makes it clear when Medea uses her magic for good and for harming others). Furthermore, according to the Middle English Dictionary, the word “sorceresse” was used by many authors besides Lydgate, including Gower and Chaucer in the narratives already presented here.²³⁴ In the fifteenth century, Thomas Malory was also using the word to refer to women who do enchantment and magic in his work, *Le Morte d’Arthur*. The word is most prominently used in the idea of magic and conjuring, as seen in the examples above, Medea’s magic likely stems from necromancy and charms. The word “sorceresse” has an important meaning in the narratives as it exemplifies the type of magic Medea is capable of doing. Crucially what makes Medea harmful is not so much her practice as the fact that she is a woman.

In Lydgate’s misogynistic account of Medea, the author spends time discussing the general “mutability of women”. The mutability Lydgate presents is related to “þe vnwar change þat is in wommonhed” (p. 67, l. 1843), that is, the “unexpected” or “sudden” change that is womanhood, which opens a discussion on the shame Medea must have felt for bringing disgrace into her house. Lydgate mentions how Guido does not follow Ovid’s account at the end of the narrative since he omits the killing of Jason’s heirs. Lydgate is clear that she has committed infanticide but ends the narrative in a punitive manner towards Jason for having betrayed his wife. The author then says that afterwards there was no more Medea.²³⁵

²³⁴ S.v. *sorceresse*, n., 1(a) - See The Middle English Dictionary: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary> Access 2 Feb. 2026

²³⁵ “By-cause, I trow in myn opinioun,
 þat hir sorwes, ende and euerydel,

Lydgate nevertheless continues on the mutability of women:

To any woman, with-oute experience,
 In whom is nouthr trust ne sikernesse.
 Þei ben so double & ful of brotilnesse,
 Þat it is harde in hem to assure;
 For vn-to hem it longeth of nature,
 From her birth to hauen alliaunce
 With doubilnes and with variaunce.
 Her hertes ben so freel and vnstable,
 Namly in ȝouthe, so mevyng and mutable,
 Þat so as clerkis of hem liste endite
 (Al-be þat chawng and mutabilite
 Appropred ben to femyn[yn]yte-
 Þis is affirmed of hem þat were ful sage.

(p. 67, l. 1848-1861)

The choice of words Lydgate uses for his discussion on women's "doubilnes" relates to how Medea is seen as an Othered Creature not only by being a foreigner and sorceress but also by the fact that she is a woman. The author uses the words "double", "variaunce", "vnstable", and focuses on youth ("ȝouthe") being "so mevyng and mutable". The tale's last sentence, "Þis is affirmed of hem þat were ful sage", describes the ideas of male clerical authorities which were pitted against the alternative, and which rejected the wisdom of women like Medea.

Besides being an uncategorisable figure in these narratives, Medea's monstrosity is akin to Kristeva's notion of the abject since she threatens the natural (and patriarchal) order. Medea's murder of the children is even more repulsive because she goes against all Christian notions of how a mother should be. Her abjection is then made literal in the narrative when she is taken to the heavens in Helios' chariot. Despite medieval authors sympathizing with Medea as a betrayed woman, she is not fully forgiven for committing such an atrocious act.

Rehersed ben ful openly and wel
 Metamorphoseos, & wryte þer ful pleyn:
 Wher as Naso recordeth in certeyn
 Hir deth nat only, nor his heuynes,
 But parcel eke of þe vnkyndenes
 Of þis Iason, and telleth pleynli how
 Medea hir bothe sonys slowe,
 For þei wer like her fader of visage;
 And telleth eke, þat put hir moste in rage,
 How falsely, he, I can hym not excuse,
 Loued another þat called was Ceruse;
 Eke in his pistles, who so taketh hede,
 Hir dedly sorwe he may beholde & rede,
 And how þat sche hir trouþ abouȝt[e] sore,
 Of Medea ȝe gete of me no more
 In al þis boke, nor of hir auenture." (p. 121-122, l. 3698-3715)

However, Medea's abjection does not come only from the murdering of the children (and of her enemies). Medea is already exhibiting threatening behaviours to the natural order when she is shown as a knowledgeable woman with a deep interest in magic, which Jane Bonsall (2025, p. 14) explains: "Narratively, magic permits [...] power authority, knowledge, and abilities beyond the normal for women in medieval literature, not to mention medieval society." Medea is abject because she is foreign, violent, woman and witch.

More Medea narratives

More narratives of Medea continued to be written or translated in the fifteenth century. Examples include William Caxton and his Middle English translation of Raoul Lefèvre's works (*Histoire de Jason* and *Recoeil des histoires de Troyes*), as well as Medea's treatment in the *Scottish Troy Book*, the Scottish version of Guido's *Historia*, where the author is much more favourable to Medea's image than his sources.²³⁶ Not only is Medea's picture painted in a more positive way by medieval authors (Lydgate excluded), but she is more akin to a medieval heroine than to a villainous figure such as the stepmothers in *The Marriage of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and *William of Palerne*.

A running emphasis of earlier sources, especially the *Metamorphoses* and the *Moralisé*, is Medea's ending of dynastic bloodlines. Later writings all seem to gloss over the fact that Medea kills her brother Absyrtus, except for Boccaccio who mentions the deed as a clever idea the princess has for delaying her father during his pursuit of the Argonauts. By killing her brother, her father is left without a male heir, therefore, ending the Colchian royal dynasty. Some versions claim she killed Creusa's father Creon as well, thus ending the House of Corinth. Finally, her wish to murder Theseus also has to do with the birth of her son, Medus, with the king of Athens, Aegeus. Medea becomes the figure of the stepmother, already discussed in the previous chapter, who wants to end one dynastic line so her son can take the place of the king. She, however, does not transform Theseus but tries to poison him through a wine goblet.

²³⁶ "Avoiding the scepticism and anti-feminism of Guido – and later of Lydgate in his *Troy Book* – the Scottish translator paints a largely favourable portrait of this notorious woman that bears comparison with (a literal reading of) her presentation in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and Gower's *Confessio Amantis*." (Wingfield, Emily. *The Trojan Legend in Medieval Scottish Literature*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014, p. 109)

Medea's killing of the children can be interpreted in several ways but attempts to understand its motivation take us inside the mind of a woman who is fighting for her agency in a land far away from her origins and being put to the test by being betrayed and isolated. The proto-witch, as a character type, offers perhaps the best example of female agency in medieval narratives since the enchantress uses her knowledge in order to claim back what is hidden (most likely her authority). Medea's association with magic has more to do with her intelligence and therefore it describes her as an authoritative figure which already puts her as an equal to her male counterpart. This is the difference between the two women betrayed by Jason, Hypsipyle and Medea: both suffer love from the same man but only one is seen claiming back her agency and her authority after being betrayed.

Despite all the different versions of Medea's tale, her magic and knowledge are always made evident which symbolically puts her authority over Jason who is unable to conquer the Golden Fleece without her help. The proto-witch mother does not seem to act on any moralising law or convention given by the medieval society: she will use necromancy if necessary and she will kill if needed. As a supernatural woman, however, the knowledge of enchantments is mostly always seen as a foreigner aspect or pagan and therefore, not a Christian, which renders the sorceress, despite the use of her magic to do good or evil to be seen as harmful. Nevertheless, what is the primary cause for concern for the proto-witch mother is not the use of magic but the fact that she is a woman and she knows magic. If we compare the attitudes of Medea's treatment to sorcerers such as Merlin, we can start to understand the main aspect that represents if magic is good or evil: gender.

Changing attitudes on witchcraft during the Medieval Period

The treatment of Medea's magic shifts throughout the narratives explored in this chapter and this may mirror the emergence and evolution of the discussion surrounding witchcraft. By the fourteenth century, many ideas and threats surrounding witchcraft were already cemented into the public's imagination in both continental Europe and the British Isles. However, the fear of demonic involvement with women came long before, in the writings of authors such as Augustine of Hippo.²³⁷ Overall, magic was a cause for concern

²³⁷ Augustine's scholarship, especially in the *De Civitate Dei* (*The City of God*) has to do with discussion surrounding demonic partners and women's abilities to connect with such beings. See Chapter three: *The Demonic Pregnancy – The incubus in Merlin, Alexander and Sir Gowther* for more information on Thomist philosophy.

since the influence of Christianity on Roman Laws. Harsh punishments for those using magic were described from as early as the fourth and fifth century.²³⁸ As explained by Peter Edwards (2002, p. 178)²³⁹, the fear of magic would encompass that which was considered “irrational and false beliefs”, therefore, all that was not seen as part of the Christian belief was considered magic, which could go to any other religions, for instance Judaism, where we find sources of Christians portraying Jewish people as magicians.²⁴⁰

Texts concerning theology and magic as well as judiciary laws were important in shaping the understanding and development of witchcraft ideas. Augustine was responsible for theories which served as basis for the recognition of demonic interference as explained by his *De Civitate Dei (City of God)* and *De Doctrina Christiana (On Christian Doctrine)* from the fourth and fifth centuries which discussed superstitions and pagan beliefs.

The influence of Augustine’s theories evolved much in the years after and some of its influence can even be seen in other influential texts concerning witchcraft and magic such as the code of law made by the Frankish king Clovis in the sixth century, *The Pactus Legis Salicae (The Agreement of the Salic Law)*. Looking at the treatment of witchcraft given by the Salic Law code, the punishments given to those accused of practising magic was mostly financial as it was not an offense punishable by death (as it becomes some centuries later).²⁴¹

Other writings concerning ideas on superstition were influential in this regard. For instance, in Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies* (seventh century) the author mentions the use of magical arts being instructed by “evil angels”²⁴² and how the knowledge of

²³⁸ “Late Roman law continued to deal harshly with all those accused of magical practices. Even possession of magic books was sufficient to send a high-ranking Roman into exile and entail the loss of his property, while a lower-ranking person convicted of the same offence was to be executed. The emperors of the early fifth century, however, permitted those who owned magic books simply to purge themselves if they converted to Christianity and did not become recidivists [...]” (Peters, 2002, p. 180)

²³⁹ For more information on the evolution of witchcraft theories and law see: Peters, Edward. Part 3: The Medieval Church and State on Superstition, Magic and Witchcraft: From Augustine to the Sixteenth Century In: *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe - The Middle Ages*. Karen Jolly; Catharina Raudvere; Edward Peters. London: The Athlone Press, 2002, p. 173-245

²⁴⁰ “[...] for them [Christians], superstition referred to what they considered to be the irrational and false beliefs — that is, the ‘religions’ — of all others besides Christians and, to a limited extent, Jews, although Christian scripture portrayed some Jews as magicians” (Peters, 2002, p. 178)

²⁴¹ See “Chapter XIX. Concerning Magic Philters or Poisoned Potions” and “Chapter LXIV. Concerning Sorcerers (herburgium)” In: *The Laws of the Salian Franks*. Katherine Fischer Drew (translator). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991

²⁴² “Consequently, this foolery of the magic arts held sway over the entire world for many centuries through the instruction of the evil angels. By a certain knowledge of things to come and of things below, and by invoking them, divinations (*aruspicium*) were invented, and auguries (*auguratio*), and those things that are called oracles (*oraculum*) and necromancy (*necromantium*).” (Isidore of Seville. *The Etymologies*. Stephen A Barney; W.J. Lewis, J. A. Beach; Oliver Berghof (translators). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 181.) Originally: “Itaque haec vanitas magicarum artium ex traditione angelorum malorum in toto

necromancy and above all, *maleficium* is applied for acts such as divination.²⁴³ The emperor of the Carolingian Empire, Charlemagne, was also responsible for the treatment of “pagan” beliefs in the eighth and ninth century with the capitularies *Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum* and later the *Admonitio Generalis* (*General Admonition*), where legislation against superstition and magic was notably articulated.

The development of these ideas would serve as a compass for the treatment of witchcraft both within and outside literary texts. The evolution of the threat surrounding the evil eye, sorcery and heretics became the background for the beginning of witch hunting in the fourteenth and fifteenth century, although fear of superstition is now the only reason why these ideas started to occur.²⁴⁴ Although magic was not always seen as harmful and could be employed especially by the elite as Jan Veenstra (1998, p. 2) comments: “Sophisticated forms of divination, including astrology, the ‘royal science’, were almost exclusively found in the higher echelons of society, practised by clerks and scholars, and patronised by nobility and royalty.” The development of witchcraft theories was mostly developed and modernized after the inclusion of the sabbath and the witches’ flight and most of all, its association with women. Therefore, the evolution of the witch, as a pertinent figure within romance and narrative traditions from the twelfth to the fourteenth century, may relate to the choices present when we analyse the *Medea* tradition. If we go back to the treatment given to her character during antiquity, her magic is not explored as harmful or associated with necromancy, whereas in the medieval period the word “magic” had a heavier weight when used to describe a character, above all, a woman.

terrarum orbe plurimis saeculis valuit. Per quendam scientiam futurorum et infernorum et vocationes eorum inventa sunt aruspicia, augurationes, et ipsa quae dicuntur oracula et necromantia.” (Isidore of Seville / Isidorus Hispalensis. *Etymologiarum sive Originum libri XX*. Lindsay, W. M. (ed). v. 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 323)

²⁴³ “There are magicians who are commonly called ‘evildoers’ (*maleficus*) by the crowd because of the magnitude of their crimes. They agitate the elements, disturb the minds of people, and slay without any drinking of poison, using the violence of spells alone. [...] With their summoning of demons, they dare to flaunt how one may slay his enemies with evil arts. They make use of blood and victims, and often handle the bodies of the dead. [...] Necromancers (*necromantius*) are those by whose incantations the dead, brought back to life, seem to prophesy, and to answer what is asked [...]” (Isidore of Seville, 2006, p. 182); Originally: “Magi sunt, qui vulgo malefici ob facinorum magnitudinem nuncupantur. Hi et elementa concutiunt, turbant mentes hominum, ac sine ullo veneni haustu violentia tantum carminis interimunt [...] Necromantii sunt, quorum praecantationibus videntur resuscitati mortui divinare, et ad interrogata respondere.” (Lindsay, W. M., 1971, p. 324)

²⁴⁴ “At first glance, the fourteenth century seems to offer many explanations for the growth in the conceptualization and prosecution of magic and witchcraft, but the considerable number and varying degrees of scale in these explanations are of different orders of magnitude and cannot be cited simply in a direct causal way to explain the changes in conceptualization and prosecution that took place, after all, in very different regions at different times — and in many regions not at all [...]” (Peters, 2002, p. 224-225)

As already explained, Medea is never referred to by the word “witch” in medieval writings, Boccaccio being the only exception by linking her to the word “*maleficium*” meaning harmful magic (even though she is not seen as a villain by the Italian author). Most sources usually mention her as an “enchantress”²⁴⁵, “sorceress”²⁴⁶ and devotee of Hecate²⁴⁷, definitions that come primarily from her descriptions by Ovid, who wrote during a time where the word “witch” was non-existent. This is why in this chapter I choose to refer to Medea as a “Proto-Witch” instead of “Witch”. The word “wyche” had evolved from the Old English “wicca” meaning a male practitioner of magic or witchcraft, but the word “witch” is a more recent creation appearing only in the sixteenth century, a time in which the reference was already mostly associated with women.²⁴⁸ As Ronald Hutton (2018, p. 104) states:

[...] late Roman Christians who functioned as the mentors and exemplars of churchmen like Aelfric had pulled a significant linguistic trick almost nine centuries before: they had extended the traditional Latin term for harmful magic, *maleficium*, to encompass, and so to smear and demonize, all forms of magic, including those such as healing spells and divination by oracles, which had formerly been generally considered acceptable or indeed admirable.

From as early as 438 A.D., the *Theodosian Code*, a compilation of laws commissioned by Emperor Theodosius II, the association with magic and *maleficium* was already being seen as dangerous and prohibited. This association continues down to the eighteenth century as explained by Edward Peters (2002, p. 181):

It is important to note that the terms *maleficus* and *maleficium*, which conventionally meant ‘criminal’ and ‘criminal act’, and continued to do so in law until much later, appear from this text [*Theodosian Code*] to be now also applied ‘by the common people’ especially to magicians of various kinds. The term *maleficium* designated what we term some kinds of ‘magic’ and all kinds of ‘witchcraft’ down to the end of the eighteenth century [...]

There is a problem in associating Medea so clearly as a witch during the medieval period, despite all indications that she is one.²⁴⁹ In a Christian tradition, her characteristics

²⁴⁵ “[...] hire enchaument.” (Chaucer, 2008, p. 617, l. 1650) / “[...] the enchantress got ready” (*Moralisé*, 2023, p. 531) / “Si s’apresta l’enchanteresse” (*Moralisé*, 1931, p. 36, l. 895)

²⁴⁶ “Al-be sche were a pssyng sorceresse” (1906, p. 65, 1797-1798)

²⁴⁷ “In a great thick forest Medea went to the temple of the goddess Hecate to pray” (*Moralisé*, 2023, p. 525) Originally: “En une grant forest espesse, / Au temple Hecates la deesse / Aloit Medea pour orer.” (De Boer, 1931, p. 26, 483-485)

²⁴⁸ “The word “witchcraft” undoubtedly derives from the Anglo-Saxon *wiccecraft*, just as “witch” derives from the related nouns *wicce*, signifying a female worker of that “craft” (plural *wiccen*) and *wicca*, meaning a male one (plural *wiccan*).” (Hutton, Ronald - The Meaning of the Word Witch, *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, v. 13, n. 1, 2018, p. 103)

²⁴⁹ See Ruth Morse on the problem of whether Medea is or is not a witch: “Two ideas recur: first, in the context of who Medea is arises the problem of whether or not she is a witch. If we believe that this is not a

could not be condensed solely as an expert of magic and much like Merlin, if she is knowledgeable in the supernatural and not an antagonist figure, it is expected that she uses her magic for good. Medieval authors felt uncomfortable with her pagan origins. However, even the evolution of witchcraft theory during the thirteenth and fourteenth century could not get rid of her association with magic. That is because Medea is more than just a witch using magic as a justification for her desires. As I have tried to exemplify in this chapter, her medieval representation is linked to her love of Jason, which authors agree was a folly on her part. Medea is a witch, but she is mostly seen as a tragic heroine.

Medea is briefly mentioned in the *Malleus Maleficarum* when Institoris discusses about women's inferiority to men and their power if affected by rage or jealousy which demonstrates the author's knowledge of Seneca's version of the narrative.²⁵⁰ The conception of women as inferior to men (as previously discussed) is connected to the idea of witchcraft as mostly practiced by women. This is because many medieval authors, despite their fear of necromancy and learned magic, associated witchcraft with the female majority. One of the factors of this connection, as explained by Michael D. Bailey (2002, p. 128), was women's carnal lust and female sexuality:

Witchcraft was not an exclusively female crime, but it certainly represented a more feminized form of demonic magic than did elite, learned necromancy. At the very least, witchcraft could be seen as more suited to women than to men, because the power of witches rested on their submission to the devil and their susceptibility to his seductions.

Medea, explored as this knowledgeable individual, is a complicated character in the narrative as she is both female and learned in the liberal arts. Bailey (2001, p. 964-

question, we need to consider when a witch might not be a witch: when she is already a supernatural figure, or when she is not a woman. I have already referred to the innocence of 'witchcraft' of men such as Odysseus who take advantage of medicinal herbs. That must also be true of Jason, who benefits so dramatically from Medea's knowledge of *pharmakon*. But Jason is a man, a Greek man. Medea is a woman, and not Greek. These issues are intertwined, and not usually argued, but they suggest views about women and foreigners to which poets alluded. Second, in the process of re-telling, they create, emphasize, and multiply examples of a female type, a *topos* which becomes a claim upon the real." (Morse, Ruth, 1996, p. 19)

²⁵⁰ "As for another power of the soul (the will), when she hates someone whom she previously loved, as a result of nature she swells with anger and with her inability to tolerate this, and she is entirely intolerant of this in the same way that the swelling of the sea bubbles and rushes. Various authorities allude to this explanation. [...] Seneca in the eighth tragedy [*Medea* 579–582]: "No terrifying force of flame or of billowing wind or of hurled spear is so great as that with which a wife bereft of nuptial torches blazes and hates." (Mackay, 2009, p. 166); Originally: "Quantum denique ad aliam potentiam anime, scilicet voluntatem, ex natulra, cum odit aliquem quem prius amavit, tunc estuat per iram, et impatientiam et sicut maris estus semper bulit et currit, sic talis est tota impatiens. Alludit huic rationi auctoritas diuersa: Ecclesiastici xxv: "Non est ira super iram mulieris," et Seneca (tragedia viij): "Nulla vis flamme tumidique venti tanta nec teli metuenda torti quanta cum coniunx viduata tedis ardet et odit." (Mackay, 2009, p. 287)

965) discusses how in the thirteenth century, clerical authorities began to take magic (as well as astronomy, alchemy, etc., more seriously and a bigger cause for concern). One of the reasons was also the influence of the texts which, coming from Arab, Jewish and Greek origins, threatened the western church and symbolized demonic interventions.

The Colchian princess ticks all the boxes of a dangerous witch: she is a woman (naturally inferior to men and more susceptible to demonic encounters on account of her sexuality and lust); a foreigner (a threat to Jason's homeland) and finally, she is knowledgeable enough to hold authority over others (a cause for concern since women should not have this type of knowledge lest they use it for evil, which, according to Nider and Institoris and Sprenger is what women usually will use it for). Medea continues being a medieval heroine whose story is mostly focused on her betrayal than her magic. However, the supernatural element in her literary tradition is far greater to be ignored by medieval authors.

Medea is knowledgeable and her tragedy is rooted in what happens when this knowledge is used unscrupulously. By describing her as a powerful sorceress, enchantress (or witch/evildoer), Medea is therefore another category of woman, neither human nor unhuman. She is a woman and a mother, but her actions are more aberrant than anything present in the known world. To quote Morse (1996, p. 28) again: "Medea is one of those dangerous figures between gods and men, whose exact status is unclear."

The Supernatural Mother(s)

Medea is not the only witch mother who appears in medieval narrative traditions. Besides the stepmothers explored in the previous chapter, we can also see representations of the witch mother (now, truly defined by the word "witch") in texts such as *Sir Perceval of Galles*, a fourteenth century Middle English romance. In the narrative, a young man decides to join King Arthur's court and help retrieve a cup stolen by the Red Knight, the same man who killed his father years before.²⁵¹ Upon meeting the knight and fighting with him, Perceval is victorious and steals his armour. Walking through the forest he encounters the Red Knight's mother: "He mett a wyche, as men says" (Braswell, 1995, p. 29, l. 826). She is overjoyed that her son is still alive not knowing that it is Perceval

²⁵¹ "[...] *Sir Perceval of Galles* is the first (and besides Malory, the only) English rendering of the naive and bungling knight made popular in Chrétien de Troyes' twelfth-century *Conte del Graal*." (Braswell, Mary Flowers (ed), *Sir Perceval of Galles and Ywain and Gawain*. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995 p. 3)

who is wearing his armour. She tells him how, even if he had died, she would have been able to bring him back to life: “Mi sone, and thou ware thare slayne / And thyn armes of drawen, / I couthe hele the agayne / Als wele als thou was are.” (1995, p. 30, l. 849-852). Perceval, fearing what magic she might use upon learning about her son’s death, kills the witch before she is capable of harming him:

Than wist Percyvell by thatt,
It servede hym of somwhatt,
The wyde fyre that he gatt
When the knyghte was slayne;
And righte so wolde he, thare
That the olde wiche ware.
Oppon his spere he hir bare
To the fyre agayne;
In ill wrethe and in grete,
He keste the wiche in the hete;
He sayde, “Ly still and swete
Bi thi son, that lyther swayne!”

(l. 853-864)

The details of the witch mother in *Perceval* represent concerns and interests within witchcraft discussions. Perceval fears the unnamed witch, another Arthurian monster to be defeated, and his first impulse is to kill her before she is able to avenge her son’s death. The Red Knight’s mother, like Medea, is an abject figure that needs to be cast out of society as she symbolizes the destabilizing of the order and a threat to the hero’s life. As a figure from the fourteenth century and already in conjunction with the association of women and harmful magic, the Red Knight’s mother is mostly associated with demonic behaviour since she is a woman with this type of power. As Bailey (2001, p. 984) explains on why witchcraft started to be associated with demonic veneration, the Church needed to justify why certain individuals would hold more power than clerical minds. The association of witchcraft with rituals of demonic veneration then opened space to the affiliation of non-learned magic with heresy and crimes such as Satanism, cannibalism and infanticide:

How could clerical minds explain the fact that certain simple people seemed to hold such complete and easy mastery over powerful demons when learned necromancers, and even the church’s own exorcists, had to engage in long and complex rites, and still often failed to compel demons to obey their commands? The answer lay in the notion of a pact between the sorcerer/witch and the demon, an idea that stretched at least as far back as Augustine, but which now attained a new significance. Anytime a demon performed any act for a human, even when no obvious rituals of invocation and worship were present, that was sure evidence that the human had at some previous time offered worship to the demon. Thus sorcerers of all sorts were proven to be heretics. Naturally, then, authorities began to associate long-standing stereotypes about heretical cults,

involving Satanism, infanticide, cannibalism, and sexual orgies, with sorcery and sorcerers.

Narratives from the fourteenth century and beyond were already concerned with the witch figure in a more dangerous way than the treatment given to Medea. We must not lose sight that Medea is not considered an antagonist only because of her characteristics as a tragic heroine. She is loving, sexualized and sadly betrayed because of her passion (traits that the Red Knight's mother does not have).

Given that Medea is carried towards the heavens at the end of most of her narratives, we might further explore Medea's similarities with the fairy Mélusine, another magical mother who aids her husband and is betrayed by him. In Jean d'Arras narrative, Mélusine falls in love with Raymondin and promises to help build his dynasty in Lusignan.²⁵² Very similar to Medea, Mélusine also has powers (and is a knowledgeable woman) and gives rings in protection of her sons and husband: "And now, as a token of our new love, take these interlocking rings set with powerful stones: one grants the beloved bearer safety in battle while he wears it; the other ensures that, if he is in the right, he shall vanquish all foes, whether in ordeals or in combat." (2012, p. 34)²⁵³. She is betrayed and shamed by Raymondin at the end of her story which prompts her to fly away from Lusignan as Medea is also taken "Unto Pallas the court above" (2004, p. 87, l. 4219) being carried by the chariot of her grandfather, the sun-God Helios in the mythology. Returning to Kristeva's theory of abjection, we see here the ambiguity of apotheosis and transgression, which creates a paradox in that they depend on what they try to expel: "Abjection accompanies all religious structurings and reappears, to be worked out in a new guise, at the time of their collapse." (2024, p. 17). In this scene, we also see what Kristeva calls sublimation – the act of trying to describe that which is unexplained, channeling dark and/or repressed desires into art and culture. In this case we have the apotheosis of Medea, which is not simply the abjection of the character but a moment where the author tries to articulate disgust in aesthetic form (sublimation). Kristeva writes (2024, p. 11-12):

If the abject is already a well spring of sign for a non-object, on the edges of primal repression, one can understand its skirting the somatic symptom on the one hand and sublimation on the other. The *symptom*: a language that gives up,

²⁵² I explored Mélusine's narrative in the first chapter *The Monstrous Body: Abject maternity in Mélusine and Richard Coeur de Lion*.

²⁵³ Originally: "Tenez, mon ami, en prélude à notre amour, voici deus anneaux d'or, joint l'un à l'autre. Leurs pierres sont dotées d'un grand pouvoir: la première empêchera celui à qui elle est donnée par amour de mourir par les armes tant qu'il la porte; la seconde lui accordera la victoire contre ses adversaires, si sa cause est bonne, qu'il la défende en plaidoirie ou au combat." (Jean d'Arras, 2003, p. 169)

a structure within the body, a non-assimilable alien, a monster, a tumor, a cancer that the listening devices of the unconscious do not hear, for its strayed subject is huddled outside the paths of desire. Sublimation, on the contrary, is nothing else than the possibility of naming the pre-nominal, the pre-objectal, which are in fact only a trans-nominal, a trans-objectal. In the symptom, the abject permeates me, I become abject. Through sublimation, I keep it under control. The abject is edged with the sublime. It is not the same moment on the journey, but the same subject and speech bring them into being.

Medea does not transcend when she rises to her grandfather chariot, she is abjected because by the killing of the children she ruptures the category of “mother” and is therefore unable to be contained in society. The apotheosis is a sign of sublimation, of an abjection that cannot be contained anymore. The same thing happens to Mélusine, albeit for different reasons.

Both women are also foreigners who marry into a powerful house and begin a dynasty. Mélusine is exoticized, although in a more subtle way than Medea. However both are members of a fantastical family with Medea being part of the Greek pantheon due to her grandfather and the fact that she is Circe’s niece, and Mélusine being the eldest daughter of the fairy Presine. Both women are betrayed by their spouses, and both commit infanticide after their betrayal, with Mélusine’s case justified by the author as follows:

Then, off to one side, she spoke to Raymond and the highest nobles of the land: “My lords, if you wish to maintain your honor and your heritage, see to it that as soon as I have left here our son Horrible, who has three eyes including one in the middle of his forehead, be secretly put to death. Otherwise he would do such damage that the loss of twenty thousand men would be as nothing compared to it, for he would surely destroy everything I have built, and warfare would never cease in the lands of Poitou and Guyenne. Do not fail to see to this, or you will commit the greatest of follies.”²⁵⁴

(2012, p. 193)

Mélusine asks her demonic child to be killed given his violent nature and Medea, as already explained, kills her two children in revenge (or perhaps protection) but with the goal of ending Jason’s dynasty. Mélusine is also the daughter of another supernatural woman, fairy Presine, who is herself a betrayed woman and who despite not committing infanticide, curses her daughter upon learning about the murder of their father.

²⁵⁴ “Puis, prenant à part Reymond et les plus puissants barons du pays, elle leur dit:

— Chers seigneurs, si vous tenez à vos biens et à vos propriétés, prenez soin, immédiatement après mon départ, de faire disparaître discrètement Horrible, celui de nos fils qui a trois yeux, dont l’un en plein milieu du front. Sinon, soyez-en sûrs, les malheurs dont il serait responsable pourraient être si terribles que la mort de vingt mille hommes ne serait pas une aussi grande perte que celle qu’il pourrait provoquer. C’est une certitude, il détruirait tout ce que j’ai construit et la guerre n’aurait de cesse, ni en Poitou ni en Guyenne. Faites bien attention, suivez mes conseils ou vous commettrez la plus grande folie de votre vie!” (Jean d’Arras, 2003, p. 701)

Medea is romanticized by medieval authors becoming more of a victim of betrayal than a murderess despite the treatment given to her magic is seen mostly as aspects of her gender and place of birth. Her similarities with the fairy Mélusine may signify the influence the Colchian princess narrative had on later medieval authors who were not only working in the *roman d'antiquité* but who took inspiration from supernatural Mothers (especially from the classical tradition and the proto-witch) to bring forth aspects of magic and enchantment in medieval monstrous mothers. By looking at the characterization of magical women during the medieval period, we find long historical continuities across necessarily distinct cultural/social contexts, in which, perceptions of the mother's fantastical body coming to the front of the discussion are indicators of the medieval society's expectation of women.

Conclusion

Medea's tale is used by medieval writers to symbolize courtly love using a classical narrative and the betrayal of a loving woman. Her magic is important to the text but her association as a woman, foreigner and mother plays a much important part in her development as a supernatural mother. The Red Knight's mother, in contrast, serves as an antagonistic figure that symbolizes *maleficium* and the threat of heretic behaviour in the Middle Ages.

By comparing Medea's narrative among various medieval writers we can understand more deeply the figure of the sorceress and enchantress (who develops later to the "witch") and by focusing on what each author chose to focus mostly in her story, we can begin to comprehend, how, despite the different treatments, Medea's curse, much like Mélusine's is of being a woman first. Medea's killing of Jason's heirs symbolizes the danger a woman with agency could bring to a dynasty or society, rendering her as abject as I have discussed previously in Kristeva's work. Medea's capability in magic does not cast a shadow on her morality but signifies her abjection since being that knowledgeable as a woman puts to the foreground what was mostly seen as harmful. It was not women's ability to connect with Otherness that made them abject, but that by being Other, the fact that women (and especially mothers) were capable of using magic meant a stronger fear of dynastic end and with that, the end of humanity.

Thesis Conclusion

I have argued in this thesis that in its engagements with monstrous maternity, medieval romance possesses interests in common with medical and theological texts, and in some respects anticipates discussions of witchcraft in treatises from the fifteenth century. The idea of woman as a monstrous being was discussed at length since Aristotle's time and took root in the medieval period in the writings of authors who took inspiration from ancient theologians and philosophers. Women were seen as aberrant creatures whose bodily functions such as menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth inspired complex feelings of abjection on the part of medieval authors, who struggled to classify and determine the boundaries of female bodies.

My thesis has been concerned with perceptions of the female body and women's associations with the supernatural in romance, since is it within the fantastical sphere that authors were free to immerse themselves in all their repressed and imaginary fears and bring to the foreground abject and monstrous elements that would not be possible in non-fantastical worlds. I have used Julia Kristeva's discussion of abjection as a basis for the understanding of the repulsion and fear created by the maternal monster. I have discussed this firstly in relation to Mélusine and Cassiodorien, whose bodily transformations (Mélusine as a serpent woman and later as a dragon, and Cassiodorien as a flying creature) might be situated in relation to wider authorial concerns regarding women's bodies and transformations which stem from abject engagements with bodily processes such as menstruation and childbirth. This, I have suggested, is intensified by the foreignness of these characters, who possess a double alterity, resulting in the shaming and the literal "abjection" – the casting out – of both women.

Returning to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's (1996, p. 20) discussion in "Monster Theory": the monster can explain to us why not only what we fear but *why* we fear. If the monster, as Cohen (p. 20) explains, "stands in the threshold... of becoming", the monstrous mother with her transformative and uncategorizable body, cultural difference and explicit sexuality reveals a fear of mothers as makers of life and bringers of death.

All mothers discussed in this thesis possess a distinct characteristic as Other. This is true for the mothers studied in Chapter Two (Merlin and Sir Gowther's mothers, and Queen Olympias) who, while they do not have supernatural bodies or powers of witchcraft, in their capacity of producing a demonic or marvellous heir speaks to an unavoidable perception of bodily difference or deviation inherent in female bodies and minds. All are examples of "good women", who are either raped or deceived by their

assailants, and they do not have the “problems” seen in the other mothers studied here (that is, we always associate them with the human world), but this does not save them from supernatural threats and the taint of supernaturalism. Merlin’s mother is a virginal Christian woman whose only fault was forgetting to cross herself in the night, and Olympias and Sir Gowther’s mother were both deceived whilst trying to save their marriage. These women did not possess any ties to the supernatural or *maleficium* (harmful magic) prior to their pregnancies but the fact that they are able to be impregnated by demons renders them abject.

The mother plays an important role in romance narratives: the creation of heirs. This does not exempt her from being cast aside when her work is done: the mother continues to be abject and must be “cast away” either physically or spiritually. When the work of producing heirs work is done, the mother disappears: Mélusine and Cassiodorien fly away; Merlin’s mother goes to live in a nunnery; Sir Gowther’s mother is not heard from until the very end of the narrative, and neither is Olympias. The same happens with Dame Ragnelle, discussed in Chapter Three, who, after having her curse lifted, marries Gawain and has a son. She has a fitting end for a romance heroine but dies after five years of giving her husband his most important “asset”: an heir. She leaves Gawain widowed and even though the author mentions how sad and distraught the knight is, he is now free to marry another.

In Chapter Three I discussed the disruptive role played by the stepmother witch in *William of Palerne* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*. Both are narratives where children are cursed by their witch stepmothers to transform into animalistic beings (or plain animals) in order to circumvent existing lines of inheritance, which can then be directed towards the stepmother or her own children. In *William*, the stepmother has her own son, which she expects to inherit the kingdom instead of Alphonse, the king’s first-born, and turns him into a werewolf. Despite already having children, she does not disappear from the text (as the previous mothers) and her ability in magic is what brings the story forward. Alphonse’s quest for revenge will only end when he finds her again. Despite not appearing directly in either *The Wedding* or *The Marriage*, Ragnelle’s stepmother is an inescapable presence, and stands behind the threat posed by Ragnelle’s supernaturally aged body to Gawain’s prospective heirs (or rather their absence) as well as to Ragnelle and Gromer themselves.

Transformation tales, as also seen in the examples of Mélusine and Cassiodorien, continue to exemplify the fear of crossing boundaries of the body, in this case, a fear that makes someone abject (the werewolf, the churl and the postmenopausal woman) and

pushes them to, or beyond, the margins of society. In the case of Alphonse, Ragnelle and Sir Gromer, their transformed identities situate them within, and connect them to, the wilderness. As a space outside the court where the laws of the human world do not apply, the stepmother is then free to bring an end to their bloodline by taking away their humanity. The stepmothers transform Alphonse and Sir Gromer into wild beasts (Gromer is still human but with a giant-like appearance and who abides in the woods) meaning the man will not be able to produce heirs, at least, not human ones. Ragnelle is transformed into a loathly lady, a figure of romance tradition, that symbolizes the postmenopausal woman. As a postmenopausal woman, Ragnelle is similarly incapable of producing heirs, a problem arguably even bigger than her shocking appearance and behaviour at court. Once she is returned to her young and beautiful state this threat remains unrealised, as Ragnelle becomes a mother. Then, like the other mothers of my study, when she is not needed anymore, she dies.

The ending of dynasties by supernatural women finds another example in Medea, the proto-witch, who I discuss in Chapter Four. I refer to her as a “proto-witch” since she is never referred to by medieval authors as “witch” despite having all the recognisable characteristics of one; and have suggested that the distinct development of her tradition in the medieval period depicts changing and historically resituated ideas and representations of witchcraft. As a foreign-born princess well-versed in the supernatural (authors refer to her as “sorceress” or “enchantress”, words that mostly signify her knowledge in the supernatural and the Liberal Arts), Medea is monstrous not only because of her crimes against her children, but because she defies the category of woman within her contexts. She is uncategorisable, which in turn, makes her monstrous. At the end of the narrative her abjection (that is, her casting out from the narrative) is made explicit by removal in the golden chariot of her godfather Helios.

The role of the mother of medieval romance is in some respects relatively constant: she is the progenitor of heirs and the primary educator of the house, and in so being, follows in the Virgin Mary’s footsteps. However, in the monstrous representations with which I have been concerned, she is also exposed as something abject, that needs to be cast away from society – marked by fear of bodily transformations, hybridity, duality and death. In this, she in fact possesses a monstrosity in common with all women, which is in these texts supernaturalised but is not necessarily exceptional. Women are abject and monstrous not because of what they do or are, but because of what they have the capability to do. Childbearing and maternity are not constant aspects in a woman’s life. Even the menstruation period is a cyclical event that happens once a month. Therefore, as Lydgate

puts it in *The Troy Book*: “Þe vnwar change þat is in wommonhed” (1906, p. 67, l. 1843). Women are therefore mutable, changeable. They do not abide by one category and therefore become, according to the Aristotelian position, a defect in nature. No one represents medieval understandings of this gendered mutability better than the monstrous mother of medieval romance. As a non-static figure, a representation of the non-permanent life, she threatens fixed classificatory categories, a threat, I have suggested, to masculine orders of knowledge.

The anxieties resulting from this are demonstrated in my chosen romances in the form of bodies with dual natures, demonic pregnancies, transformative curses, and female knowledge of magic and witchcraft. Rooted in traditions that pre-date the expression of many of these same anxieties in European witch theory, I suggest that the fantastical narratives of medieval romance proved to be fertile ground for the representation of bodily, social and political anxieties, deeply rooted in the medieval cultural imaginary.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Albertus Magnus (attributed). *De secretis mulierum. Item, de virtutibus herbarum, lapidum et animalium*. Amstelodami: Apud Henricum et Theodorum Boom, 1669

Apuleius. *Metamorphoses (The Golden Ass)*, Volume I: Books 1-6. Edited and translated by J. Arthur Hanson. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996

Aristotle. *De generatione animalium*. Hendrik Joan Drossaart Lulofs (ed.) Guillelmi de Moerbeka (translator). Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965

Arrian. *Campaigns of Alexander*. London: Penguin Books, 1958

Aristotle. *Generation of Animals*. Jeffrey Henderson (ed). A. L. Peck (translator). Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 1942

Augustine of Hippo. *City of God*. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957

Benoît de Sainte-Maure. *The Roman de Troie*. Glyn S. Burgess; Douglas Kelly (translators). Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2017

Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Famous Women*. Virginia Brown (translator). Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003

Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Concerning Famous Women*. Guido A. Guarino (translator). New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963

Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Ioannis Boccatii de Certaldo insigne opus de Claris Mulieribus*. Bern: Excudebat Mathias Apiarius, 1539, p. xii.

Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Genealogiae deorum gentilium*. In: *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*. v. 7. Vittorio Zaccaria (ed). 1998

Boccaccio, Giovanni. *De casibus virorum illustrium*. In: *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*. v. 9. Pier Giorgio Ricci; Vittorio Zaccaria (eds). 1983

Boccaccio, Giovanni. *De mulieribus claris*. In: *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*. v. 10. Vittorio Zaccaria (ed). 1967

Braswell, Mary Flowers (ed), *Sir Perceval of Galles and Ywain and Gawain*. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995

Brerenton, Georgine E. *Des Grants Geanz: An Anglo-Norman Poem*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1937

Brunner, Karl. *Der mittelenglische Versroman über Richard Löwenherz: kritische Ausgabe nach allen Handschriften mit Einleitung, Anmerkungen und deutscher Übersetzung*. Wien and Leipzig: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1913

Bunt, G.H.V. *William of Palerne – an alliterative romance*. Groningen: Bouma's Boekhuis, 1985

Caxton, William. *The History of Jason. Translated from the French of Raoul le Fevre*. John Munro (ed). London: Trübner & Co.; Oxford University Press, 1913

Chaucer, Geoffrey. Legend of Good Women In: *Riverside Chaucer*. Larry D. Benson, F. N. Robinson (eds), third edition, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Riverside Chaucer*. Larry D. Benson (ed). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008

Christine de Pizan. *Othea's Letter to Hector*. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski; Earl Jeffrey Richards (translator). Toronto: Iter Press; Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2017

Christine de Pizan. *The Book of the Mutability of Fortune*. Geri. L. Smith (translator). Toronto: Iter Press; Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2017

Christine de Pizan. *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*. Éric Hicks; Thérèse Moreau (eds). Paris: Stock, 2000

Christine de Pizan. *Book of the City of Ladies*. Earl Jeffrey Richards (translator), New York: Persea books, 1998

Christine de Pizan. *Le livre de la mutacion de Fortune par Christine de Pisan*. Suzanne Solente (editor). New York, Johnson Reprint, 1965.

Jean d'Arras. *Melusine; or, the noble history of Lusignan*. Donald Maddox; Sara Sturm-Maddox (translators), Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012

Jean d'Arras. *Mélusine, ou, La Noble histoire de Lusignan : roman du XIVe siècle traduction, présentation et notes par Jean-Jacques Vincensini*. Lettres Gothiques. Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2003

Eumelus. Epic Testimonia and Fragments In: *Greek Epic Fragments: From the Seventh to the Fifth Centuries BC*. Edited and translated by Martin L. West. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003

Gairdner, James. *The Paston Letters. Ad 1422-1509*. London: Chatto & Windus; Exeter: James G. Commin, v. II, 1904.

Geoffrey of Monmouth. *The History of the Kings of Britain. An Edition and Translation of the De gestis Britonum [Historia Regum Britanniae]*. Michael D. Reeve (ed.) Neil Wright (translator). Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007

Gervaise of Tilbury. *Otia Imperialia: Recreation for an Emperor*. S.E. Banks; J. W. Binns (translators). Oxford University Press, 2002

Gower, John. *Confessio Amantis - Book 5*. Russell A. Peck (ed.) Andrew Galloway (translator), Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2005

Guido de Columnis. *Historia Destructionis Troiae*. Nathaniel E. Griffin (ed.). Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1936

Isidore of Seville. *The Etymologies*. Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, Oliver Berghof (eds). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006

Isidore of Seville / Isidorus Hispalensis. *Etymologiarum sive Originum libri XX*. Lindsay, W. M. (ed). v. 2. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971

Lancelot-Grail - The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation. Norris J. Lacy (ed.), New York; London: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1995

Lydgate, John. *Troy Book*. Henry Bergen (ed). London: Early English Text Society – Began Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Limited, 1906

Mackay, Christopher S., (ed. and translator), *Malleus maleficarum*, 2 v. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Map, Walter. *De Nugis Curialium (Courtiers' Trifles)*. Frederick Tupper; Marbudy Bladen Ogle (translators), London: Chatto & Windus, 1924

Micha, Alexandre. *Guillaume de Palerne – Roman du XIII siècle*. Genève: Droz, 1990

Mills, Maldwyn (ed.), *Six Middle English Romances*. Rutland: VT Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1973

Mouskés, Phillipe. *Chronique rimée de Philippe Mouskes publiée par le Baron De Reiffenberg*. Frédéric de Reiffenberg (ed.). Brussels: Imprimeur de La Commission Royale D'Histoire, 1838

On Famous Women: The Middle English Translation of Boccaccio's De Mulieribus Claris Edited from London, British Library, MS Additional 10304. Janet Cowen (ed). Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2015

“Ovide Moralisé”: *Poème du commencement du quatorzième siècle publié d'après tous les manuscrits connus, Livres VII-IX*. C de Boer, Martina G. de Boer, Jeannette Th. M. Van. ‘T Sant (eds.) Amsterdam: Uitgave van de N.V. Noord-Hollandsche Uitgeversmaatschappij, 1931

Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Loeb Classical Library. Frank Justus Miller (translator). London: William Heinemann Ltd; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956

Ovid. *Appendix Ovidiana - Latin Poems Ascribed to Ovid in the Middle Ages*. Ralph Hexter; Laura Pfuntner; Justin Haynes (translators). Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 2020

Prose Merlin. John Conlee (ed). Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998

Richard Coer de Lyon. Peter Larkin (ed). Kalamazoo Medieval Institute Publications, 2015

Robert de Boron. *Merlin and the Grail - Joseph of Arimathea, Merlin, Perceval*. Nigel Bryant (translator). Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001

Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales. Thomas Hahn (ed.) Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995

Sir Perceval of Galles and Ywain and Gawain. Mary Flowers Braswell (ed.), Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995

Skeat, Walter W. (ed.), *The Romans of Partenay, or of Lusignen: Otherwise Known as the Tale of Melusine*. London: Trübner & Co., 1866

The Laws of the Salian Franks. Katherine Fischer Drew (translator). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991

The Medieval French Ovide Moralisé - An English Translation. K. Sarah-Jane Murray; Matthieu Boyd (eds.) Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2023

The Middle English Breton Lays. Anne Laskaya; Eve Salisbury (eds). Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995

The Romance of William of Palerne: (otherwise known as The Romance of "William and the Werwolf") Translated from the French at the Command of Sir Humphrey de Bohun, about A.D. 1350; To which is added a fragment of the Alliterative Romance of Alisaunder: translated from the Latin by the Same author, about A.D. 1340. Walter W. Skeat (ed.) London: Trübner & Co., 1881

The Story of Merlin. Rupert T. Pickens (translator) In: *Lancelot-Grail - The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*. Norris J. Lacy (ed). New York; London: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1993

The Trotula – A Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine. Monica Green (translator), Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2001

The Vulgate Version of The Arthurian Romances Edited from Manuscripts in the British Museum - Lestoire de Merlin. H. Oskar Sommer (ed.) v. 2. New York: AMS Press, 1969

Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae*. The Fathers of the English Dominican Province (translators). Indiana: Christian Classics, 1981.

Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae*. *The Latin Library*, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/aquinas/>. Access 28 Mar. 2026.

Wheatley, Henry Benjamin (ed.). *Merlin: or, the early history of King Arthur: a prose romance*. London: Trübner, & Co., 1899

Women's Secrets - A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus' De Secretis Mulierum with Commentaries. Helen R. Lemay (translator) Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992

Secondary Sources

Abbenes, Jelle. Pausanias in Corinth: Burying Medea's Children. *Mnemosyne*. n. 68. 2015, p. 569-587

Agamben, Giorgio. *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017

Allen-Gross, Lucy M. Marian Maternity and Dysfunctional Pregnancy in the N-Town Nativity and the Digby Mary Magdalene. *Exemplaria*, v. 37, n. 2, 2025

Allen-Gross, Lucy M. *Female Desire in Chaucer's Legend of Good Women and Middle English Romance*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2020

Akbari, Suzanne Conklin. The Hunger for National Identity in Richard Coeur de Lion. In: *Reading Medieval Culture: Essays in Honor of Robert W. Hanning*. Robert M. Stein and Sandra Pierson Prior (eds). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005. p. 198–227

Atkinson, Clarissa. *The Oldest Vocation - Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages*. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1991

Baechle, Sarah; Harris, Carissa M.; Strakhov, Elizaveta (eds.) *Rape Culture and Female Resistance in Late Medieval Literature: With an Edition of Middle English and Middle Scots Pastourelles*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 2022.

Bailey, Michael D. *Battling Demons - Witchcraft, Heresy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003

Bailey, Michael David. From Sorcery to Witchcraft Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages. *Essays in Medieval Studies*, v. 19, 2002, p. 120-134

Bailey, Michael David. The Feminization of Magic and the Emerging Idea of the Female Witch in the Late Middle Ages. *Speculum*, v. 76, n. 4, 2001, p. 960-990

Bain, Frederika, The Tail of Melusine: Hybridity, Mutability, and the Accessible Other. In: *Melusine's Footprint - Tracing the Legacy of a Medieval Myth*. Misty Urban; Deva F. Kemmis; and Melissa Ridley Elmes (eds), Boston: Brill, 2017

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and his world*. Helene Iswolsky (translator). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984

Bardsley, Sandy. *Women's Role in the Middle Ages*. Westport; London: Greenwood Press, 2007

Bernau, Anke. Medieval Antifeminism. In: *The History of British Women's Writing, 700–1500*. McAvoy, L.H.; Watt, D. (eds). London: Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2011

Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 2004

Biebel-Stanley, Elizabeth M. Sovereignty through the Lady: "The Wife of Bath's Tale" and the Queenship of Anne of Bohemia. In: Passmore, Elizabeth S.; Carter, Susan (eds). *The English "Loathly Lady" Tales - Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007

Bildhauer, Bettina. *Medieval Blood (Religion and Culture in the Middle Ages)*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006

Bildhauer, Bettina; Mills, Robert. *The Monstrous Middle Ages*. Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2003

Bildhauer, Bettina. Bloodsuckers: The Construction of Female Sexuality in Medieval Science and Fiction. In: McAvoy, Liz Herbert, Walter, Teresa (eds). *Consuming Narratives Gender and Monstrous Appetite in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002, p. 104-115

Blamires, Alcuin. May in January's Tree: Genealogical Configuration in the Merchant's Tale. *The Chaucer Review*. v. 45, n. 1, 2010, p. 106-117

Blamires, Alcuin. *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended – An Anthology of Medieval Texts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992

Bliss, Jane. *Naming and Namelessness in Medieval Romance*. Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008

Bobel, et al. *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020

Bollard, John K. Sovereignty and the Loathly Lady in English Welsh and Irish. *Leeds Studies in English*, n. 17, 1986, p. 41-59

Bolton, Kirsty. *Motherhood and Its Spaces in Medieval Romance*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2026

Bonsall, Jane. *Women and Magic in Medieval Romance: Genre, Intertextuality and Power*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2026

Boquet, Damien; Nagy, Piroska. *Medieval Sensibilities: A History of Emotions in the Middle Ages*. Robert Shaw (translator). Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018

Bridges, Venetia. 'Trojan Trash? The Seege or Batayle of Troye and the Learning of 'Popular' Romance', In: *Cultural Translations in Medieval Romance*. Victoria Flood; Megan Leitch (eds). Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2022, p. 153-172.

Bridges, Venetia. *Medieval Narratives of Alexander the Great – Transnational Texts of England and France*. Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2018

Broedel, Hans Peter. *The Malleus Maleficarum and the construction of witchcraft - Theology and popular belief*. Manchester University Press, 2005

Brownlee, Kevin. "Melusine's Hybrid Body and the Poetics of Metamorphosis" In: *Melusine of Lusignan: Founding Fiction in Late Medieval France*. Maddox, Donald; Sturm-Maddox, Sara. (eds). The University of Georgia Press, 1996, p. 76 – 99

Burns, E. Jane. "A Snake-Tailed Woman - Hybridity and Dynasty in the Roman de Mélusine". In: *From Beasts to Souls: Gender and Embodiment in Medieval Europe*. Burns, Jane E.; McCracken, Peggy (eds.). University of Notre Dame Press, 2013

Burns, E. Jane. *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993

Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York; London: Routledge, 2004.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York; London: Routledge, 1999

Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Metamorphosis and Identity*. New York: Zone Books, 2001

Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982

Cartlidge, Neil (ed). "Sons of Devils" In: *Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Medieval Romance*. Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012, p. 219-236

Carter, Susan. A Hymenation of Hags; Peck, Russel A. Folklore and Powerful Women in Gower's "Tale of Florent" In: Passmore, Elizabeth S.; Carter, Susan (eds). *The English "Loathly Lady" Tales - Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007

Carver, Robert H. The Medieval Ass: Re-Evaluating the Reception of Apuleius in the High Middle Ages. In: *The Afterlife of Apuleius*. Florence Bistagne, Careole Boidin, Rahaele Mouren (eds.) London: University of London Press, 2011, p. 1-26

Caviness, Madeline H. *Visualizing women in the Middle Ages: sight, spectacle, and scopic economy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001

Cixous, Hélène. The Laugh of Medusa. *Signs*, v. 1, n. 4, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1976, p. 875-893

Clark, Stuart. *Thinking with Demons - The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999

Cohen-Hanegbia, Naama; Erezb, Guy. The womb as a wild mother beast. *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies*, 15, 2024

Cohen, Jeffrey J. *Hybridity, Identity, and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain: On Difficult Middles*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome (ed.) *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000

Cohen, Jeffrey J. *Of Giants - Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999

Cohen, Jeffrey J. (ed.) *Monster Theory – Reading Culture*. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996

Cooper, Helen. “Women and Werewolves: William of Palerne in Three Cultures” In: *Cultural Translations in Medieval Romance*. Victoria Flood; Megan G. Leitch (eds). Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2022

Cooper, Helen. *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004

Creed, Barbara. *The monstrous-feminine film, feminism, psychoanalysis*. Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2007

Dinshaw, Carolyn. *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989

Elliot, Dyan. *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999

Feinstein, Sandy. Longevity and the Loathly Ladies in Three Medieval Romances. *Arthuriana*, v.21, n. 3, 2011

Feimer, Joel N. Medea in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and the Ovide Moralisé: Translation as Transmission. *Florilegium*, v. 8, 1986

Fellows, Jennifer. *Mother in Middle English Romance*. In: *Women and Literature in Britain*. Meale, C. (ed), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996

Firth-Green, Richard. *Elf Queens and Holy Friars - Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016

Flannery, Mary C. *Practising shame - Female honour in later medieval England*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020

Flannery, Mary C. The Concept of Shame in Late-Medieval English Literature. *Literature Compass*, 9/2, 2012

Flint, Valerie Irene Jane. *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991

Flood, Victoria. *Fantastic Histories: Medieval fairy narratives and the limits of wonder*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024

Flood, Victoria. Wonder and Wonder Working in Middle English Romance: The Prose Merlin. In: *Medieval Perceptions of Magic, Science, and the Natural World*. Carolina Escobar-Vargas; Anne Lawrence-Mathers (eds). Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2024, p. 193-206

Flood, Victoria; Leitch, Megan (eds). Introduction: Insular Romance in Translation: New Approaches. In: *Cultural Translations in Medieval Romance*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2022

Florschuetz, Angela. *Marking Maternity in the Middle English Romance - Mothers, Identity, and Contamination*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014

Forste-Grupp, Sheryl L. A Woman Circumvents the Laws of Primogeniture in The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell. *Studies in Philology*, v.99, n. 2, 2002

Freud, Sigmund. *The Revised Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. James Strachey (translator) Mark Solms (editor). v. 1-24, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2024

Friedman, John Block. *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000

Gardenour, Brenda S. *Women's Bodies, Women's Souls Perspectives in the Middle Ages In: Science, Religion and Society - An Encyclopedia of History, Culture, and Controversy*. Arri Eisen; Gary Laderman, (eds) Armonk; London: M. E. Sharpe, 2007

Geary, Patrick J. *Women at the Beginning - Origin Myths from the Amazons to the Virgin Mary*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006

Green, Monica. 'Traittié tout de mençonges': The *Secrés des dames*, 'Trotula,' and Attitudes Towards Women's Medicine in Fourteenth - and Early Fifteenth-Century France. In: *Women's Healthcare in the Medieval West*. Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2000

Griffin, Miranda. *Transforming Tales - Rewriting Metamorphosis in Medieval French Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015

Griffin, Miranda. The Beastly and the Courtly in Medieval Tales of Transformation: Bisclavret, Melion, and Mélusine. In: *The Beautiful and the Monstrous: Essays in French Literature, Thought and Culture*. Amaleena Damlé; Aurélie L'Hostis (eds). Bern: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2010

Hamilton, J. R. *Plutarch, Alexander - A Commentary*. Oxford: Oxford Claredon Press, 1969

Harf-Lancner, Laurence. *Les Fées Au Moyen Âge - Morgane at Mélusine - La naissance des fées*. Paris: Editions Champion, 1984

Heavey, Katherine. *The Early Modern Medea - Medea in English Literature, 1558–1688*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015

Hendricks, Margo. Monstrosity and the Mercurial Female Imagination. In: McAvoy, Liz Herbert, Walter, Teresa (eds). *Consuming Narratives Gender and Monstrous Appetite in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002, p. 95-103

Heng, Geraldine. *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*. Columbia University Press, 2003

Henley, Georgia; Smith, Joshua Byron (eds). *A Companion to Geoffrey of Monmouth*. Boston: Brill, 2020

Herzig, Tamar. The bestselling demonologist Henrich Institoris's *Malleus maleficarum* In: *The Science of Demons - Early Modern Authors Facing Witchcraft and the Devil*. Jan Machielsen (ed). London; New York: Routledge, 2020

Hibbard, Laura. *Medieval Romance in England - A study of the sources and analogues of the non-cyclic metrical romances*. New York: Burt Franklin, 1960

Horney, Karen. The Dread of Women. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*. v. 13. 1932. p. 348-360

Hult, David F. The Roman de la Rose, Christine de Pizan, and the *querelle des femmes*. In: *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing*. Carolyn Dinshaw; David Wallace (eds). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003

Hutton, Ronald. The Meaning of the Word Witch. *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, v. 13, n. 1, 2018

Jacobs, Nicolas. *The Later Versions of 'Sir Degarré: A Study in Textual Degeneration*. Oxford: The Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 1995

Jefferson, Judith A.; Putter, Ad (eds). Introduction: Forms of Transmission of Medieval Romance. In: *The transmission of medieval romance Metres, manuscripts and early prints*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2018

Jolly, Karen; Raudvere, Catharina; Peters, Edward (eds.). *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe - The Middle Ages*. London: The Athlone Press, 2002

Karras, Ruth Mazo. *Sexuality in Medieval Europe - Doing Unto Others*. New York: Routledge, 2005

Kieckhefer, Richard. *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300-1500*. Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 1976

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror - An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024

Kulik, Alexander. How the Devil Got His Hooves and Horns: The Origin of the Motif and the Implied Demonology of 3 Baruch. n. 60. *Numen*, 2013

Lecounteux, Claude. Zur Entstehung der Melusinensage. *Philologie* 98, 1979

Lederer, Wolfgang. *The Fear of Women*. New York: Grune & Stratton, 1968

L'Estrange, Elizabeth. *Holy Motherhood - Gender, Dynasty and Visual Culture in the Later Middle Ages*. Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2008

Leyser, Conrad. From Maternal Kin to Jesus as Mother Royal Genealogy and Marian Devotion in the Ninth-century West In: *Motherhood, Religion, and Society in Medieval Europe, 400-1400*. London: Routledge, 2011

Leyser, Conrad; Smith, Lesley; (eds). *Motherhood, Religion, and Society in Medieval Europe, 400-1400 - Essays Presented to Henrietta Leyser*. London: Routledge, 2011

Lucas, Angela M. *Women in the Middle Ages - Religion, Marriage and Letters*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983

Maddox, Donald; Sara Sturm-Maddox (eds). *The Medieval French Alexander*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2002

Maddox, Donald. Configuring the Epilogue: Ending and the Ends of Fiction in the *Roman de Melusine*. In: *Melusine of Lusignan: Founding Fiction in Late Medieval France*. Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox (eds). Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996, p. 267-287

Herbert McAvoy, Liz. Monstrous Masculinities in Julian of Norwich's A Revelation of Love and The Book of Margery Kempe In: *The Monstrous Middle Ages*. Bettina Bildhauer; Robert Mills (eds). Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2003

Herbert McAvoy, Liz. Walter, Teresa (eds). *Consuming Narratives Gender and Monstrous Appetite in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002

Herbert McAvoy, Liz. 'Ant nes he him seolf reclus i maries wombe?': Julian of Norwich, the Anchorhold, and the Redemption of the Monstrous Female Body. In: McAvoy, Liz Herbert, Walter, Teresa (eds). *Consuming Narratives Gender and Monstrous Appetite in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002, p. 128-143

Herbert McAvoy, Liz. 'The Moders Service' Motherhood as Matrix in Julian of Norwich. *Mystics Quarterly*, 1998

Herbert McAvoy, Liz. Motherhood: The Book of Margery Kempe. *Medieval Feminist Forum*, 1997

McCraken, Peggy. *In the Skin of a Beast - Sovereignty and Animality in Medieval France*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017

McCraken, Peggy. *The curse of Eve, the wound of the hero - Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003

McDonald, Nicola. "Eating People and the Alimentary Logic of Richard Cœur de Lion." In: *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England*. McDonald, Nicola (ed). Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2004, p. 124-150

Mayr- Harting, Henry. Twelfth-century English Mothers In: *Motherhood, Religion, and Society in Medieval Europe, 400-1400*. London: Routledge, 2011

Miller, Sarah Alison. *Medieval Monstrosity and the Female Body*. New York; London: Routledge, 2010

Morse, Ruth. *The Medieval Medea*. Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996

Neumann, Erich. *The Fear of the Feminine: And Other Essays on Feminine Psychology*. Boris Matthews (translator). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994

Niebrzydowski, Sue. *Middle-Aged Women in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011

Niebrzydowski, Sue. Monstrous (M)othering: The Representation of the Sowdanesse in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*. In: McAvoy, Liz Herbert, Walter, Teresa (eds). *Consuming Narratives Gender and Monstrous Appetite in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002, p. 196-207

Noacco, Cristina. *La métamorphose dans la littérature française des XIIe et XIIIe siècles*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008

Oswald, Dana. *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature*. Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010

Park, Katherine. Managing Childbirth and Fertility in Medieval Europe In: *Reproduction - Antiquity to the Present Day*. Hopwood, et al (eds), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018

Parsons, John C. The Pregnant Queen as Counsellor and the Medieval Construction of Motherhood In: *Medieval Mothering*. Parsons, John C; Wheeler, Bonnie (eds.) London: Routledge, 2014

Parsons, John C; Wheeler, Bonnie. Introduction In: *Medieval Mothering*. London: Routledge, 2014

Peck, Russel A. Folklore and Powerful Women in Gower's "Tale of Florent" In: *The English "Loathly Lady" Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*. Elizabeth S. Passmore; Susan Carter (eds). Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007

Penketh, Sandra. Women and Books of Hours. In: *Women and the Book Assessing the Visual Evidence*. Lesley Smith and Jane H. M. Taylor (eds.) Toronto: London University of Toronto Press, 1997

Pérez, Kristina. *The Myth of Morgan la Fey*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014

Peters, Edward. *The Shadow King: Rex Inutilis In Medieval Law and Literature, 751-1327*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970

Peters, Edward. Part 3: The Medieval Church and State on Superstition, Magic and Witchcraft: From Augustine to the Sixteenth Century In: *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe - The Middle Ages*. Karen Jolly; Catharina Raudvere; Edward Peters. London: The Athlone Press, 2002, p. 173-245

Piercy, Hannah. *Resistance to Love in Medieval English Romance - Negotiating Consent, Gender, and Desire*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2023

Power, Daniel. 'The Stripping of a Queen: Eleanor of Aquitaine in Thirteenth Century Norman Tradition', In: *The World of Eleanor of Aquitaine: Literature and Society in*

Southern France between the Eleventh and Thirteenth Centuries. Marcus Bull and Catherine Leglu (eds), Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005, p. 115–135

Provost, Jeanne. Sovereign Meat: Reassembling the Hunter King from Medieval Forest Law to *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*. In: *The politics of ecology. Land, life, and law in medieval Britain*. Randy P. Schiff; Joseph Taylor (eds). Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2016, p. 56-81

Purkiss, Diane. *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*. London: Routledge, 1996

Putter, Ad; Gilbert, Jane. (eds.) *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*. London; New York: Routledge, 2000

Rajabzadeh, Shokoofeh. "The Depoliticized Saracen and Muslim Erasure." *Literature Compass*, vol. 16, no. 9, 2019

Reddy, William M. *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan, 900-1200 CE*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012

Ruddick, Sara. *Maternal Thinking – Towards a Politics of Peace*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1989

Runstedler, Curtis. The Benevolent Medieval Werewolf in William of Palerne. *Gothic Studies*. v. 21, 2019

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979

Salmón, Fernando; Cabré, Monsterrat. Fascinating women the evil eye in medical scholasticism. In: *Medicine from the black death to the French disease*. Roger French, Jon Arrizabalaga, Andrew Cunningham and Luis García-Ballester (eds), Routledge, 2019

Saunders, Corinne. *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*. Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010

Saunders, Corinne. *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001

Schiff, Randy P.; Taylor, Joseph. *The Politics of Ecology - Land, Life, And Law in Medieval Britain*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2016

Smith, Moira. The Flying Phallus and the Laughing Inquisitor Penis Theft in the *Malleus Maleficarum*. *Journal of Folklore Research*, 2002

Stephens, Walter. *Demon lovers - Witchcraft, sex, and the crisis of belief*. University of Chicago Press, 2003

Stephens, Walter. Witches who steal penises Impotence and illusion in *Malleus maleficarum*. *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, n. 28, 1998

Stoneman, Richard. *Legends of Alexander the Great*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2012

Strickland, Debra Higgs. *Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003

Spiegel, Gabrielle M. Maternity and Monstrosity: Reproductive Biology in the *Roman de Mélusine*. In: *Melusine of Lusignan: Founding Fiction in Late Medieval France*. Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox (eds). Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996

Tatlock, John S. P. *The legendary history of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae and its early vernacular versions*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950

Taylor, Jane H. M. Melusine's Progeny: Patterns and Perplexities, In: *Melusine of Lusignan: Founding Fiction in Late Medieval France*. Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox (eds). Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996, p. 165-184

Tomlinson, Maria Kathryn. *From Menstruation to the Menopause - The Female Fertility Cycle in Contemporary Women's Writing in French*. Liverpool University Press, 2021

Trimnell, Karen Hunter. 'And should have been oderwyse understood': The disenchanting of Sir Gromer Somer Joure. *Medium Ævum*, v. 71, n. 2, 2002

Turner, Ralph V. *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Queen of France, Queen of England*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2009

Urban, Misty; Kemmis, Deva F. Elmes, Melissa Ridley (eds.). *Mélusine's Footprint - Tracing the Legacy of a Medieval Myth*. Boston: Brill, 2017

Van der Lugt, Maaïke. The Incubus in Scholastic Debate: Medicine, Theology and Popular Belief. In: *Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages*. Peter Biller and Joseph Ziegler (eds), Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2001, p. 175-200

Van der Lugt, Maaïke. Formed Fetuses and Healthy Children in Scholastic Theology, Medicine and Law In: *Reproduction - Antiquity to the Present Day*. Hopwood, et al (eds), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018

Veenstra, Jan. *Magic and Divination at the Courts of Burgundy and France: Text and Context of Laurens Pignon's Contre les Devineurs (1411)*. Boston: Brill, 1998

Vernant, Jean Pierre. A "Beautiful Death" and the Disfigured Corpse in Homeric Epic In: *Mortals and Immortals - Collected Essays*. Froma I. Zeitlin (ed.). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 50-74

Wade, James. *Fairies in Medieval Romance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011

Warren, Michelle R. Take the World by Prose: Modes of Possession in the *Roman d'Alexandre* In: *The Medieval French Alexander*. Maddox, Donald; Sturm-Maddox, Sara (eds). State University of New York Press, 2002

Warner, Lyndan. Stepfamilies in Early Modern Europe Paths of Historical Inquiry: Stepfamilies in Early Modern Europe. *History Compass*, 14, 2016, p. 480-492

Warner, Marina. *Once Upon a Time – A Short History of Fairy Tale*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014

Whittow, Mark. Motherhood and Power in Early Medieval Europe, West and East - The Strange Case of the Empress Eirene. In: *Motherhood, Religion, and Society in Medieval Europe, 400-1400 - Essays Presented to Henrietta Leyser*. London: Routledge, 2011

Wingfield, Emily. *The Trojan Legend in Medieval Scottish Literature*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014

Wood, Charles. “The Doctor’s Dilemma: Sin Salvation and the Menstrual Cycle”. *Speculum*, v. 56, n. 4, 1981, p. 719

Yarnall, Judith. *Transformations of Circe - The History of an Enchantress*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994

Zeldenrust, Lydia. *The Mélusine Romance in Medieval Europe - Translation, Circulation, and Material Contexts*. Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2020

Zipes, Jack (ed). *The Golden Age of Folk and Fairy Tales – From the Brothers Grimm to Andrew Lang*. Indianapolis ; Cambridge: The Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 2013