THE SERPENT WOMAN AS A GROTESQUE IN FRENCH, ENGLISH, AND GERMAN
MEDIEVAL NARRATIVE

BY

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Abstract:

In contemporary theory and artistic representation, the grotesque is understood as a creative space in which the depiction of a peculiar individual or event assembled in some disproportionate and disparate form turns human society on its head. In a medieval representation the rules are different insofar as that medieval literature is riddled with extraordinary creatures, places, and events. This comparative study investigates the female grotesque within the framework of courtly romance. By establishing a definition of the grotesque that combines contemporary theory with medieval literary concepts, history, and philosophy, a critical reading of four hybrid women, half-human, half-serpent, who have been previously described as monstrous becomes possible. It shows that these serpent women are examples of a female grotesque, a term rarely applied to medieval literature. The characters are true Other in that they are neither human nor beast. I apply the term “grotesque” to four women who challenge their societies’ views on expectations of women and the dynamic between the knights who pursue them. These serpents are grotesque because they are noblewomen with characters, behavior, and status that conform to courtly culture, but appear in ugly and misshapen bodies that reveal at least one audaciously feminine feature desired by medieval knights. Although the women are pivotal for the men’s development, the knights are unexpectedly overwhelmed and mocked. That brings about a double effect that challenges cultural norms on various levels and exposes paradoxes, such as the correlation between appearance and power and generates at least one common women and gender issue in this medieval study and beyond: when the woman loses her human form and becomes ugly, she gains power.
For my parents Karl & Gertrud Woesner
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Is then everything gained by deceiving women well? Who are women? Who are they? Are they serpents, wolves, lions, dragons, monsters, ravishing, devouring beasts and enemies to human nature that it is necessary to make an art of deceiving and capturing them?\(^1\)

The grotesque simultaneously repels and fascinates. Scandalized, even horrified, the observer still cannot look away.\(^2\)

Medieval literature is renowned for its profusion of fairies, dwarfs, giants, and all sorts of outrageous figures. During my developing interest in these beings in medieval romances, I came across one type of woman who especially roused my curiosity. This woman is a peculiar character; she is a noblewoman, half serpent, and half woman, and thus I call her serpent woman. She appears in four medieval tales that were composed between the first half of the thirteenth and the last half of the fifteenth centuries. These four tales are the Old French *Li Biaus Descouneüs*, written by Renaut de Bâgé and composed somewhere between 1191 and 1212-1213;\(^3\) the Middle English *Lybeaus Desconus* most likely composed anonymously between 1346


the Middle French *Melusine* by Jean d’Arras, finished in 1393; and the Early New High German *Melusine* by Thüring von Ringoltingen, written around 1452.

Each story reveals cultural interests by interpreting the particular set of circumstances that created, revealed, and then solved the serpent woman's physical problem. When she appears, she terrifies and repulses, confuses and attracts. The knights, who become involved with her, are ambivalent in their attitude towards her. While they perceive this woman as abhorrent, monstrous, and condemned – even to the extent that some feel they are bound by punishment to her – the knights also feel curious about her and are fascinated by her. Their reactions reveal that chivalric culture only hesitantly embraces the conventions that dictate their relationships with women. Likewise, the portrayal of the serpent women suggests that women, too, are dissatisfied with the limited choices their cultures give them to deal with men and they seek improved communication. In these medieval tales, the serpent women are misunderstood figures, rarely viewed by literary scholars with the complexity they deserve. Seemingly contradictory creatures, the women do not fit into the roles expected from them by the characters of their fictional societies. Whoever meets them is overwhelmed, confused, and terrified by the serpent women’s

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presence, but also feel a sense of admiration for their independence. Their lovers feel shame and rejection at their hands, yet are oddly drawn into their worlds. Their social equals view them as monstrous, and in some of the stories even as creatures with evil intent, despite evidence that these women are noble and benevolent. Due to the physical appearance of the serpent women modern scholars have described them as loathly ladies, monsters, and hybrids in a multitude of variations ranging from human-serpent hybrids, mixed serpent bodies, animal hybrids and other terms for their polycorporeality with the notion of hybrids. These terms do not fit and need to be revised. In his critical study *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, Geoffrey Galt Harpham says that that the grotesque “plays not only with things but also with the act of representation.” Because of its unusual form it invites the audience to search for meaning and – while calling attention to its artistic craft – allows the audience to step outside of learned dogma. The multi-faceted serpent women introduced above are to be understood as such atypical, artistic creations that seek to get attention through their outrageous forms and invite the audience to consider alternative possibilities of how medieval women can be portrayed as participants in courtly relationships and life. To investigate these women as representations of a medieval grotesque is the aim of this dissertation.

The definition of the grotesque used in this study has been refined from current


9 Harpham, 44.
scholarship on the grotesque. However, to summarize this definition in a brief statement is nearly impossible as it defies the purpose of the grotesque’s meaning; it cannot be pinned down to a few sentences without being reduced to complicated abstraction. In attempting such a definition, I describe the grotesque as a condition that is embodied by a qualifier (the serpent woman) and is caused by the joining (not merging), in an unstable and indefinable manner, of fragments of meaning. The composition of these fragments depends on the qualifier’s observer (the characters in the romance) and its surrounding environment (the culture in which the romance is set). It is important to recognize that the grotesque always depends on the framing culture, as otherwise it could not exist and would not be sought after either.

I interpret four serpent women in medieval literature as grotesque. By doing so I expand on the use of the grotesque in literary criticism and in medieval studies. My corpus crosses linguistic, temporal, and cultural boundaries and covers different genres to show that in their grotesque function, these women are neither loathly ladies nor monsters but instead empowered women who challenge a constructed ideal of women's roles in medieval narrative tradition and audiences. My interpretation is daring because I create a new definition for the four serpent women, shattering the idea that they are weak and hideous by identifying them as powerful characters in the narratives and arguing that their peculiar physical conditions give them strength.

Clifford Geertz once explained, “culture is the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action.”\textsuperscript{10} It is important to recognize that the grotesque always depends on a framing culture and on its observer. My model of the grotesque is based on the challenge that this esthetic form poses to the underlying model of the

romances in the cultures in which they are set. While I pull from existing theories of the grotesque, nobody has previously applied the grotesque to the medieval serpent women. By interpreting the four serpent women as grotesque, I expand on the use of this category in medieval literature and literary criticism. Since the meaning of the grotesque is flexible and continues to evolve, wide ranges of interpretive combinations that are simultaneously valid become possible. These can go from humorous to sinister, from familiar to Other, or from courtly to outlandish, and suggest a greater variety in the image of the serpent woman as a cultural portrait of a woman of her time.

The interpretations of the grotesque are framed by an understanding of the societies in which the serpent women reside, both within the stories and their larger medieval cultures. For each story, there are two societies judging and evaluating, condemning and embracing them. There are the worlds constructed by the poets, imaginary societies whose residents judge the serpent women based on the poets’ internal logic. And there are the contemporary worlds of the audiences, who interpret these tales based on their own cultural dynamics, which change and adapt as the narratives are retold in different languages, bringing forth yet other interpretations. My readings of the serpent women take into account these specific and changing environments while also drawing upon similarities among the serpent women, including their lack of conformity to the stereotype of the noble maiden; the descriptive imagery portraying them as ugly and hideous; the seeming conflict between of off-putting appearances and mesmerizing personalities; and the wrongheaded notion that they are loathly creatures rather than noble women. The loathly lady or monster lives on the margins of her society, a medieval noble court. The serpent woman embodies both the ugly looks of a loathly lady and the physical proportions of a monster but lives in the geographic center of her society, the court. Therefore, members of
mainstream society are never really sure what to think of her and are confronted with issues about women they would otherwise not think about. This is the goal of the grotesque: to show that something is amiss in the world in which it occurs. When viewed in this manner, the serpent women interpreted in this dissertation seem not so far detached from a more progressive notion of noble women after all. This upside-down message creates a larger meaning for the serpent woman as she appears in these medieval tales: the stranger her physical appearance, the stranger her interactions with others, the less predictable her nature and the more she begins to embody a more evolved standard of a medieval noblewoman. Ultimately, the term grotesque allows for a richer, more credible view of individual womanhood than the simplified medieval ideal would ever allow in its narrower constructs.

The four texts of my corpus are medieval vernacular romances: there are two romances (Li Biaus Descouneïs and Lybeaus Desconus) and two tales about the origins of a noble family (the French Mélusine ou La Noble Histoire de Lusignan and the German Melusine). All four concern courtly relationships, how they are viewed by those who live in their communities, and how women are treated in the broader cultural sense. When viewed together, the four tales show the evolution of the serpent woman as a character. The stories are produced over roughly two hundred and thirty years – from the oldest in Old French to the newest in Early New High German (i.e., from ca. 1212-1495) – which shows how the motif developed geographically and culturally. While Li Biaus Descouneïs and Lybeaus Desconus are traditionally defined as romances, the Melusine tales are not easily classifiable because they combine fictional, historical, and genealogical elements into the founding story of a noble family in a rural setting,
which shifts in its later version towards the end of the Middle Ages to an urban context. As the stories also spread over a larger geographic region in Western Europe, the women transform from dragon-like figures to creatures in a more urban environment. Comparing the romances from a different narrative tradition will demonstrate how the four stories conform to the standards of their genres and, more importantly for my argument, how they deviate.

While the Melusine stories are not romances in the classical sense but complex texts with genealogical content, Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox “in keeping with the usage of medieval romance” refer to Melusine and its adaptations in other languages as romances despite the complexity of the text (Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox, “Introduction: Melusine at 600,” Melusine of Lusignan: Founding Fiction in Late Medieval France [Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996], 1-11, here 3 and 11, n5). The authors define Melusine as a complex story operating on various levels and constructed by disparate elements, “fiction, history, and genealogy, in its account of the founding of the illustrious dynasty of Lusignan and its innovative appropriation of Crusade narratives; of human and fairy, in the marriage of its two central protagonists; of human and monstrous, in the corporeal metamorphoses of its heroine the grotesque marks borne by her progeny; of folk belief and Christianity; and of romance and epic conventions” (2). Following Maddox and Sturm-Maddox’s example, I am using the term romance for all Melusine narratives I am studying.

See W. P. Ker, Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature (New York: Dover, 1957), here 5. Aside from Ker’s work, there are many studies on the medieval romance genre; some examples are D. H. Green, The Beginnings of Medieval Romance: Fact and Fiction, 1150-1220 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Douglas Kelly, Medieval French Romance (Twayne: New York, 1993); The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance, ed. Roberta Krueger (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Eugène Vinaver, The Rise of Romance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971). More recently, scholars have widely noted that an adequate, all-inclusive definition of the medieval romance is not possible; a lose definition of the romance’s essential and defining features is offered by K. S. Whetter in “Introduction,” Understanding Genre and Medieval Romance (Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), 1-8, here 7, as “the combination and interaction of love and ladies and adventure, culminating in a happy ending.” See also Whetter’s “Redefining Medieval Romance,” Genre and Medieval Romance, 35-98; Barbara Fuchs, Romance (New York: Routledge, 2004), eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), Web, here ‘Introduction’ and ‘Medieval Romance.’
Medieval romance is most closely associated with love relationships, questing, and
chivalry. The stories prioritize achievements of noble status and put to the fore the fulfillment
of love and the marital relationship. Each of the serpent women has learned to adapt, and make
use of her deformed body, thus representing an assertive, strong woman who is in charge of her
situation. In the two Arthurian tales (Li Biaus Descouneüs and Lybeaus Desconus) her existence
mocks the idea of the generally beautiful and submissive medieval maiden. In these tales, the
serpent woman is grotesque because she mirrors the confusion about the chivalric ideal imposed
upon gender roles, which – in a simplified manner – are built on a stylized model that requires
knightly quest to rescue maidens. This knightly quest is meant to achieve status.
However, the knights do not have an easy and linear road to success and often fail along the
way. In the Bel Inconnu material the romances are set up in the Arthurian style, in which the


\[14\] Some famous examples from the Arthurian legends, originally composed in Old French by the 12th-century poet Chrétien de Troyes, are the knight Lancelot, who does not succeed in pleasing the queen, is rejected and punished harshly for his lack of punctuality; Parzival who at first does not understand the gravity of his task, fails to ask the Grail keeper what ails him; and Yvain, who finds himself in the dilemma of having to serve both his wife Laudine and the king. Although all romances, just like the Bel Inconnu stories, end on a positive note, the knights usually do not have straightforward success and must go through a series of complex adventures addressing their individual character weaknesses. For a historical explanation why knightly services and the knights’ willingness to fight declined in 12th-century Western Europe, see, for example, Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann, *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance: The Verse Tradition from Chrétien to Froissart* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 229; the author sees one major reason for this decline in the system’s increasing shift from feudal war services, in which knights were bound to lords who increasingly exploited these knights due to an ever-growing demand of war services, to paid mercenaries who subsequently became an expensive business for the kings and barons. With regard to this historical development expressed in
story is loosely built around King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. The court is challenged by a messenger maiden who seeks help for her distressed lady who lives in a faraway castle and needs to be rescued from a terrible predicament. The happy conclusion is built on the premise that the woman’s rescuer is a most outstanding knight and will consequently be accepted amongst the company of knights back at Arthur’s court. In the Melusine story, the romance motif has been altered from the start. Although Melusine, too, needs help in her dilemma, her story is not designed as a knight’s journey to maturity. Instead, he accidentally commits a crime, and the concealment of this offense leads the lady and knight to meet and to help each other. The assumed expectation for the medieval noblewoman in this fictitious material is to be passive, beautiful, compliant, and obedient according to her traditional role, even if she has been single for a while and has developed self-assuring strength and wisdom during the years on her own.15

Each serpent woman confounds the knights in these stories. Although she is incredibly ugly, the knight finds in her an unconventional, autonomous, sexually outspoken, and at times amusing woman who is additionally distinguished by the fact that she does not intend to harm her lovers. Ultimately, the serpent woman offers the possibility of an improved relationship between a man and a woman because her unique circumstances allow her initial decorum to diminish and force knights and ladies to engage directly with each other. This is the case in Li

medieval romance literature, D. M. Stenton notes that the hesitation to fight reflected in many Arthurian knights, which “is so little in keeping with the stereotype of a romance of chivalry” is probably an “echo of these historical circumstances,” (D. M. Stenton, English Society in the Early Middle Ages: 1066-1307 [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965], 89).

Biaus Descouneüs and Lybeaus Desconus. In the Melusine tales, an oath is indirectly related to her serpent form. The serpent woman demands that her husband never looks at her during her bath time and this promise allows for another form of bonding between the couple that elevates the intimacy represented in the story.

The impact that each of these serpent women has on her knight and the other characters in each story is extraordinary. The individuals in each of these societies are not equipped to deal with this unusual being; this includes the poets, who somehow adapted their source materials in accordance with their own perception of women, and the medieval audiences – potentially expressed in the voices of the people who surround the serpent woman in the romances. Each serpent woman in this study allows us to draw conclusions about her culture; in other words we, as today’s readers, get a glimpse of what moved the people who first read her story a long time ago.

1. Literature Overview

A substantial amount of literature is concerned with the grotesque and also with the interpretation of the four romances under discussion, but no one has brought together the three topics of the medieval romance, the grotesque, and the serpent woman. This absence is due mainly to the fact that the serpent women are usually read as either folkloric with an eye for their mythological origins or as monstrous. Examples for folkloric and monstrous readings are in Boria Sax’s *The Serpent and the Swan: The Animal Bride in Folklore and Literature*. Sax delineates the evolution of the animal bride through the bestial forms in cultures where the story is known. She includes interpretations from Southeastern Europe and Mesopotamia and claims that the snake, when the legends eventually moved north, gradually adapted the characteristics of
a water creature.\textsuperscript{16} Erika E. Hess’s studies hybridity in \textit{Literary Hybrids: Cross-dressing, Shapeshifting, and Indeterminacy in Medieval and Modern French Narrative}.\textsuperscript{17} In ‘Serpent-Women: \textit{Mélusine} and \textit{La Vouivre},’ Hess introduces two powerful images of the serpent-legend by defining Melusine’s origin as a Celtic water fairy in the medieval tale and her connection to the modern image in the 1943 novel, \textit{La Vouivre} by Marcel Aymé.\textsuperscript{18} She associates the serpent woman with the treachery and malevolence that has been assigned to the “dangerous and destructive power of women,”\textsuperscript{19} and provides examples from ancient civilizations, which regarded the female serpent as an image of abundance, fertility, and wisdom.\textsuperscript{20} Hess comes close to my own reading of the serpent woman by concluding that this figure is complex and “worthy of this long, complicated and contradictory heritage.”\textsuperscript{21} Other scholars interpret the serpent woman as a shape-shifter who uncannily confuses men because of her contrasts. In Susan

\begin{flushright}


\textsuperscript{18} Hess, 27.

\textsuperscript{19} Hess, 27.

\textsuperscript{20} Hess, 27.

\textsuperscript{21} Hess, 28.
\end{flushright}
Crane's words, female beauty is “an artificially produced masquerade,” and she suggests that the serpent woman's ability to change from human to hybrid form allows her “to break the bond that ties feminine identity to bodily appearance,” because a woman's beauty is not her own creation but is identified outside of herself and by her culture.

1.1. The development of the grotesque as a literary term

The fundamental problem with the grotesque is that it is a relatively recent concept, which explains why next to nothing has been produced that specifically outlines a theory of the grotesque in the Middle Ages, or even mentions the existence of the grotesque in medieval literature. Most of the scholarship limits its discussion to the monstrous and the ugly; in fact, many scholars do not even make a distinction between the terms grotesque and monstrous and use the term grotesque as an ambiguous synonym for monstrous. Yet, although the term grotesque as a category did not appear in Western European literary studies until the sixteenth century.

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23 Crane, 85.

24 Hess, for example, uses terms such as marvelous, wondrous, grotesque, and monstrous and refers to hybrids in medieval art and literature. She suggests that these terms are not precisely synonymous but can be used interchangeably because of a limited compatibility (these terms as congruent enough to be considered synonymous for Hess) and due to lack of vocabulary in the English language (3-6). Another selection of examples of the mixing of terms can be found in Roy A. Wisbey, “Die Darstellung des Häßlichen im Hoch- und Spätmittelalter,” *Deutsche Literatur des späten Mittelalters*, Hamburger Colloquium 1973, eds. Wolfgang Harms and L. Peter Johnson (Berlin: Schmidt, 1975), 9-34, and Alixe Bovey, *Monsters and Grotesques in Medieval Manuscripts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002). Bovey uses the term grotesque in her title but only devotes half a page to the specific grotesque, while mostly using both terms grotesque and monstrous interchangeably.
In the sixteenth century, the grotesque certainly exists in earlier art and literature, even though there may not have been this term for it. Medieval literature is fond of rhetorical figures, such as allegories, metaphors, and hyperbolic descriptions in embellished, figurative language, stylistic tendencies that suit the grotesque. Medieval manuscripts and documents of all sorts contain an abundance of visual elements, including illuminations, commentaries, and glosses in their margins. The grotesque was used as a fictional element in the romance manuscripts where it occurred in written and illustrated form. The romance genre’s proclivity for figurative images and illuminations, and a poetic climate in which competitive poets enjoyed increasing artistic freedom while composing, adapting, and copying stories, add further to its suitability for the grotesque.

1.2. The grotesque as a critical category for (medieval) women

Putting aside the concepts of the medieval monster and the loathly lady as interpretative models for the serpent woman, I view the serpent woman from the perspective of the grotesque, thereby reading forward in time. I justify this method by defining the individual characteristics that I have observed as a pattern that the four serpent women have in common, within their cultural context of the Middle Ages. Using the grotesque to read the serpent woman reveals significant

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25 The word spread in the sixteenth century from Italy to most of the European countries. In France the word “grotesque” was used as an adjective to describe literature and even people in the early seventeenth century. In the same century this meaning spread to England, and the word began to take on its current meaning, which suggests the monstrous, abnormal, ridiculous, or absurd. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, Web; Harpham, 23, 27.

26 See Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein, 1963 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981). Kayser writes that it is self-evident that the phenomenon of the grotesque is much older than the name assigned to it. He claims that a complete history of the grotesque needed to include “Chinese, Etruscan, Aztec, and Old Germanic art as well as [deal] with Greek … and other literatures (190, n1).
cultural and literary information. She appears, for example, as a playful and carefree character, or as a thoughtful confidante who plans her decisions carefully because she perfectly understands her role at court and can anticipate collective reactions towards her. None of these readings would be possible within the permissible interpretive scope of the medieval monster or the loathly lady; these medieval characters traditionally do not participate in noble society and therefore cannot be understood as true social partners of the nobles who live in the stories. In the four narratives in my corpus, the serpent woman is a fictional character that defines the grotesque by exhibiting a combination of dynamic characteristics, which usually would not come together. Some of these characteristics refer to physical conditions or spatial ideas, such as hybridity, monstrosity, and cavernousness, some to abstract concepts, such as ambiguity, instability, and Otherness, and some to forms of rhetoric and communication, such as hyperbole and secrecy; they will be further outlined below.

1.3. The history of the term grotesque

The term grotesque – *grotto-esque* – in its noun and adjective form is derived from the Italian *la grottesca* or *il grottesco* from *la grotta*, the cave. It originates in ornamental patterns, which ignore verisimilitude and display a new freedom in artistic creativity. The term materialized in the fifteenth century after the discovery of the artist Fabullus’s frescoes in Nero’s Domus Aurea, or Golden Palace, in Rome. Originally it referred more to the setting of underground caves than to the qualities of the designs themselves. Over time the term was applied to describe the patterns. The frescoes feature ornamental images not native to Italy, and include extended details

of flowers and fluted stems with oddly shaped leaves unrolling out of their roots, then topped with figurines without any discernible harmony or rhythm. In Antiquity, these images had provoked stark criticism by Roman theoreticians and architects, such as Vitruvius, who claimed in his treatise *De Architectura* that these kinds of depictions were not appropriate and defied all ideas of how reality should be portrayed.\(^{28}\) He complained that the monstrous forms that decorated the walls were created in a barbarian manner, ignored any static rules, and overturned the natural order. Vitruvius and his contemporaries clung to the tradition that there were correct ways of portraying objects in their full beauty and argued that these grotesque forms did not exist in nature, nor should they ever exist.\(^{29}\) Therefore, the original reception of the grotesque style in Antiquity and beyond coined this particular art form as superfluous and trivial. Despite the fact that for the early art critics the style had no reason to even exist, grotesque art became extremely popular as design in the margins of paintings and frescoes and around all sorts of traditional works of art in the Renaissance.\(^{30}\) Eventually the grotesque became a category in itself, exactly because it exceeded a norm to which it related.\(^{31}\) The grotesque became an artistic expression that ignores aesthetic limits in frivolous, unnatural, and irrational ways depending on the cultural


In the sixteenth century, other European languages, such as French and German, adopted the term using it for paintings, drawings, engravings, and sculptural decorations, and even decorative components on tools and jewelry. Eventually the grotesque was applied to describe an aesthetic category in literature. In France the word was at first *crotesque* by assimilation through the Old French *crote* (Italian *grotta*), but sometimes also spelled *grotesque* by the end of the sixteenth century. The *grottesco* of the Renaissance became a synonym for playful and carefree connotations expressed in the poets’ fantastical creations. This quality of playfulness is an important element in what I identify as the medieval grotesque. The four romances in this study are considered more unconventional than more traditional romances. They play with a broader range of characteristics in their depictions of the serpent women, to the extent that in particular the Old French *Li Biaus Descouneüs* and the Middle English *Lybeaus Desconus* contain several humorous elements.

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1.4. The grotesque according to Harpham

The original *grottesco* was used to describe something threatening and portentous in an unfamiliar world that no longer saw objects and creatures as unified entities, and in which physical laws, previously understood as divinely engineered, gained more scientific explanations. In his critical study *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, Harpham states that studying the subject contains pitfalls because there is not a single constant quality in the study of the grotesque. For Harpham the diffuse attributes and the difficulty of finding fitting terms for the grotesque are already proof that it is a category of importance. He writes that “the grotesque is a concept without form: the word nearly always modifies such indeterminate nouns as *monster, object or thing* [emphasis added by Harpham]. As a noun the grotesque implies that an object either occupies multiple categories or that it falls in between categories; it implies the collision of other nouns, or the impossibility of finding a synonym, nothing more.” This means that the grotesque’s vagueness and its indeterminate


36 Harpham, 3.

37 Harpham, 3.
quality always invite a search for explanation that will never be fully satisfied. However, this 
vagueness is to be seen as a positive aspect because the term grotesque rejects rigidity.\textsuperscript{38}

Harpham analyzes art and literature from the fourteenth century onward by building on 
the known facts about the grotesque since Antiquity. For him the grotesque is always located in 
the monstrous/strange category echoing ancient, mythical worlds in a contemporary context.\textsuperscript{39}
He argues that the grotesque is the art form that embodies the tension between an archaic past 
and a contemporary present, in which the grotesque occurs.\textsuperscript{40} Its form is mostly composed of two 
completely different systems, such as human and animal. Because of the confusion of type, the 
grotesque refuses to be taken as a whole. In an attempt to understand it, its observer has to break 
the grotesque down into familiar fragments, such as categories, objects, body parts, etc. In 
theory, this means that any definition of the grotesque needs to be a unique combination of 
fragments of meaning; it cannot be defined by one concept alone – for example, by a synonym, a 
simple definition, or a symbol. Therefore, the grotesque form is always a hybrid. In order to be 
declared as grotesque, the serpent woman must display characteristics that contradict each other 
so that her configuration can only be understood in fragments of meaning but never as a cohesive 
message.

\textsuperscript{38} Harpham confirms that any of the aspects involving a categorization of the grotesque heavily 
depends on the cultural context; the meaning of the grotesque frequently changes because of its 
strong cultural dependence (xxvi).

\textsuperscript{39} Harpham, xv.

\textsuperscript{40} Harpham, 74.
Harpham also claims that the grotesque assumes a marginal position in relation to the main message of a text, which he calls the "master principle." The grotesque embodies a form of rebellion that creates a dialogue with this master principle. While the master principle lies only at its center, the grotesque seeks, in a dynamic process, to confuse center and margin. It reconciles incompatible elements of the master principle into something new, such as a work of art or a literary character, which instantly appears marginal because it does not correspond to the master principle’s ideal. Center and margin remain at odds with each other in a dynamic form of (mis)understanding, because the observer keeps trying to understand the grotesque and the grotesque keeps trying to confront its observer.

Harpham describes this abstract condition as derived from the literal, once ornamental representation that originally constituted the grotesque. In Antiquity, when the Roman frescoes were first created, the grotesque was literally in the margin, that is, serving to frame or decorate an object within a border consisting of hitherto unknown, bizarre designs. In the study of literature in later centuries, the grotesque became a competing text to the central message and questioned which message was dominant and which one was subordinate. Since then, the concept of the grotesque has evolved into a more dynamic category that moves back and forth

41 Harpham, 6. See also Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), here 41, who argues that no commentary which can be interpreted from the language one is reading would be possible if there were not a dominating idea, that is, a master principle that governs the primary text.

42 Harpham, 6.

43 Harpham, 47.
between center and margin. In this exchange between marginal and central meaning lies the embodiment of the grotesque.\textsuperscript{44} Often a fully developed high or ideal form mixes with an abnormal, unformed, degenerate lower form, which explains the switching between center and margin.\textsuperscript{45} Harpham adds further that the energy between center and margin, which generates the grotesque form, explains why the grotesque ultimately seeks to transform a duality into unity. The struggle for primacy between margin and center is thus also a struggle for new meaning.\textsuperscript{46} Harpham sees also a strong connection between the mythical and the contemporary world both present in the grotesque. While the viewer’s logical mind tries to distinguish what is margin and what is center, the imaginary and creative elements in the grotesque transgress all logical attempts of the mind and create a unity that reminds the viewer of an older and mythical world.\textsuperscript{47} I argue that this process of seeking meaning renders the grotesque particularly appropriate as a critical category for my study. When the serpent women shake up the static structure of a courtly society that is anxiety-ridden by its own standards, when the noble class is xenophobic, they challenge the society to evolve. However, the serpent women also desperately seek to fit in with this society by wanting to leave behind their abnormal physique. Although unity is attempted, as Harpham stresses,\textsuperscript{48} the serpent women do not achieve lasting harmony and unity as long as their

\textsuperscript{44} Harpham, 40.
\textsuperscript{45} Harpham, 31.
\textsuperscript{46} Harpham, 48.
\textsuperscript{47} Harpham, 44, 74.
\textsuperscript{48} Harpham, 44, 74.
grotesque form is present. None of them is integrated as a permanent member into the society. They just disappear.

Harpham’s theory about margin and center is only partially valid for the definition of the grotesque that I have developed. The monstrous condition represents one of eleven shared characteristics that defines the women as grotesque; and this medieval concept of monstrous occurs in the kind of margin to which Harpham refers in his theory. In a medieval context, this imagined margin is removed from noble society, which constitutes the center, and defines a connected, but clearly separated borderland in complete contrast to the noble world. The details of Harpham’s center/margin theory have to be slightly altered to make it useful for my definition of the grotesque. My adaptation makes his model gender specific to suit my purpose. The difference between the serpent woman and Harpham’s model originates in misogyny. While he argues that the grotesque is found in the dynamic between the dominating center’s master principle and an undermining message that comes from the margin to attack the master principle, the serpent woman embodies both, center and margin: the center because she is a ruling noblewoman and expected to conform to the standards of her medieval culture; and the margin because she is not only a serpent but also a woman. While she lives in the cultural center of her society – one could even say that because of her power and her high degree of nobility she is the center – as a female serpent, she is paradoxically a marginalized minority, an Other. In the fictive realities of each story, the serpent women are associated with both a central position because of their noble status and material wealth, and a marginal position because no one expects such a hybrid woman living at the court but deems these kinds of creatures – if they exist at all – to roam in the borderlands, oceans, forests, or the mountains. The people’s natural fear of these seemingly out-of-place creatures shows in their extreme reactions towards the serpent women.
1.5. The grotesque according to Russo

While Harpham’s model of the grotesque is not gender specific unless it is adapted as above, Mary J. Russo considers female gender a key aspect of the grotesque. In her book *The Female Grotesque*, Russo argues that the construction of the female grotesque is a cultural process that went from an archaic model, which showed the woman as an exaggerated form of an earth mother, to an often terrifying and repulsive figuration of bodily metaphors and principles. By comparing the female grotesque with the origin of the term *grotto-esque* she associates the cave image with the female, cavernous body.\(^{49}\) She argues that this archaic design embraced a positive and powerful notion of womanhood, but that over time this image changed into a disturbing, misogynist expression.\(^{50}\)

Russo stresses that the literal reading of the female body as *grotto-esque* is not a strict category; the term grotesque as an aesthetic category is not a natural phenomenon but rather a historical-cultural event.\(^{51}\) She draws a parallel between the historical-cultural reception of the ornamental grotesque and the construction of the feminine, seeing a connection between the originally critical reception of the grotesque and the feminine grotesque. Both are similarly positioned as “superficial and to the margin.”\(^{52}\) The association continues with the cultural obsession with female appearance; it leaves the feminine reduced to mere superficiality. This

\(^{49}\) Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 1.

\(^{50}\) Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 1, 8.

\(^{51}\) Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 3.

\(^{52}\) Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 5.
focus is shallow and marginalizing. Instead of perceiving a woman as a powerful being, as the archaic model of womanhood did, which associated her superiority with a “cavernous anatomical female body,” the appearance-based model assesses a woman’s value by fragmentizing her body to either praise or reject and ridicule its isolated characteristics. Reduced to her appearance alone, the woman is left with nothing to hide and nothing to reveal. For Russo, the female grotesque lies in the absurdity of both models, which she calls the depth-surface model.

The carnivalesque is another important aspect of the grotesque female for Russo. Any type of female body that does not comply with the norm, such as the pregnant, old, or deformed body, makes a spectacle of itself whenever it is in the public sphere. This spectacle equals a complete loss of the woman's boundaries because by revealing a part of her that is usually hidden (physically or metaphysically), she exposes herself to shame and degradation. While this kind of public appearance might have an affirmative effect on societal change because it destabilizes the female beauty ideal, it nonetheless always happens at a cost to the female. In the above situation, the woman experiences and internalizes shame, rejection, and degradation. As I shall argue, this concept of the grotesque is present in the four romances I study. The serpent women are cursed by men and subsequently hide from them and the public eye in order to avoid more transgressions in the form of public ridicule, shame, and even social expulsion for being ugly and

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54 In those ancient times, one could argue, women were still at the center when read through Harpham’s adapted theory.

55 Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 1-3.

56 Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 63.
deformed. In the extreme case of Melusine, the woman’s life is completely destroyed as soon as the public has learned that she changes into a serpent woman on Saturdays.

1.6. The grotesque according to Bakhtin

Mikhail Bakhtin produced the best known contemporary scholarship on the connection between medieval literature and the grotesque. In claiming that the Middle Ages identified the grotesque in the voice of a popular culture, he is one of the pioneers who found value in applying this critical term to works composed before the Renaissance,\(^{57}\) and his argument applies at least partially to various elements in my tales. Bakhtin narrowed his focus to a certain type of humor, specifically in folklore and the literary productions of François Rabelais, in whose writing Bakhtin saw nonconformity to the literary norms and of the European bourgeoisie in the Middle Ages and Renaissance which he described as a market place culture or carnival.\(^{58}\) In his famous study, *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin claims that in the more popular registers of a language the grotesque created an ambiguous effect on the medieval audience, which then projects back into the literature a form of reaction or interpretation, particularly when the literature was read out aloud. He also argued that Rabelais depicts a positive folk spirit, which is mostly expressed in the representation of bodily functions. Bakhtin labeled his discovery also as grotesque.


\(^{58}\) However, Bakhtin has since been criticized for his claim that market culture would create its own genre, as pointed out by Dietz-Rüdiger Moser, “Lachkultur des Mittelalters? Michael Bachtin und die Folgen seiner Theorie,” *Euphorion: Zeitschrift für Literaturgeschichte* 84.1 (1990): 89-111.
realism.\textsuperscript{59}

Bakhtin identifies coinciding positive and negative poles that create ambiguous images. However, instead of associating ambiguity with a sinister future, negativity, fear of death, and demonic forces, as some scholars have done, Bakhtin sees in ambiguity a positive indicator of another order and another form of life.\textsuperscript{60} He claims that the appearance of the grotesque is a chief indicator of change, which is announced by an upside-down world with a carnivalesque spirit.\textsuperscript{61} For Bakhtin, a sense of gloom, supposedly a reflection of the inner world of the post-medieval author and a well-known interpretive model of the grotesque in post-Romantic literature, does not exist in the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{62} Whereas I cannot identify the carnivalesque spirit in any of my romances in the extensive form that Bakhtin suggests, the serpent woman temporarily turns on its head the courtly world in which knight and maiden operate. This inversion adds a humorous element to her stories. She is neither a negative figure nor a representation of hopelessness despite the fact that she evokes fear and a sense of threat. Seeing her impact on the romance as a whole and from a distance, her malleable corporeality embodies change and invites different perspectives on womanhood rather than the portrayal of a doomed existence.

\textsuperscript{59} Bakhtin 2-3, 18-19.

\textsuperscript{60} Bakhtin, 46-48; see also Kayser, \textit{The Grotesque in Art and Literature}, 31-35.

\textsuperscript{61} Bakhtin, 49. He argues that any form of change, even one in the sciences, is preceded by a carnivalesque consciousness.

\textsuperscript{62} Bakhtin, 47.
For Bakhtin the grotesque is also an expression of “abuse, oaths, and curses” and stands parallel to the characteristic of “being cursed,” which I observe in the four serpent women. According to Bakhtin, literary expressions of abuse appear in pre-Renaissance literature in all shapes of “degradation” and “down to earth.” These expressions generate meanings of insult to the body’s lower stratum, the genital area, in order to “send the body into the grave” and to destroy it verbally. Bakhtin says that when abuse takes place, it has a direct impact on the language and its imagery. This imagery manifests itself in the grotesque body.

To sum up this overview, the grotesque is a useful and valuable concept to apply to medieval vernacular narrative because the literature contains an abundance of monstrous beings, outlandish creatures, and supernatural characters of all sorts. Whereas much scholarship has been done on monsters, the scholarship on the grotesque tends to be more concerned with later

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63 Bakhtin, 27.
64 Bakhtin, 28.
65 Bakhtin, 28.
67 Medieval monstrosity has been discussed in the following works: The Monstrous Middle Ages, eds. Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); see in particular “Introduction: Conceptualizing the Monstrous,” 1-27; Jeffrey J. Cohen, Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); John B. Friedman, The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); Erika Hess, Literary Hybrids and “Cross-Dressers, Werewolves, Serpent-Women and Wild Men;” Timothy S. Jones, and David A. Sprunger, Marvels, Monsters, and Miracles: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 2002); Claude Kappler, Monstres, démons, et merveilles à la fin du Moyen Age (Paris: Payot, 1980); Claude Lecouteux, Les monstres dans la pensée médiévale européenne: essai de présentation (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1999); Liz Herbert McAvoy, “Monstrous masculinities in Julian of Norwich’s A revelation of
periods. The reason for this gap is the ubiquitous presence of monsters in medieval literature, which makes it challenging to define the grotesque as a sub-category that is distinguished enough from that of the monstrous with its long tradition. Medieval cultures identified monsters similar to dragons and giants with fixed terms, such as centaur, satyr, and chimera, but they were so static in meaning that none of these can be applied in the interpretation of the four serpent women. As my reading of these four women will reveal, they are special in that they have a shape that would easily fall in the category of the monstrous but they do not occupy the spaces traditionally assigned to the monstrous in medieval romance literature. Instead, these serpent women are of noble birth and inhabit their castles in the lands over which they rule. These women are rare, singular creatures, neither as ubiquitous nor commonplace as the monsters in medieval literature.

2. Putting it all together: grotesque characteristics of the serpent woman

The four serpent women share a number of characteristics that elevate them beyond the monstrous, which is but one of their aspects, and render them as grotesque. They are marked by

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68 The familiar monsters of ancient Greece were named by their culture with fixed terms such as centaur, satyr, and chimera. The latter, for example, came out of Greek mythology and refers to fire-breathing monsters with a lion’s head, a goat’s body and a serpent’s tail. By the fourteenth century the term chimera was used to describe similarly composed hybrid creatures. See Carol Rose, Giants, Monsters, and Dragons: An Encyclopedia of Folklore, Legend, and Myth (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2000), 79-80.
these eleven characteristics: (1) hyperbole, (2) monstrosity, (3) hybridity, (4) ugliness, (5) centrality, (6) ambiguity, (7) secrecy, (8) cavernousness, (9) Otherness, (10) cursedness, and (11) instability. These characteristics shall be further defined and described in this section.

2.1. Hyperbole

Hyperbole is an important rhetorical figure that characterizes the poetics of the grotesque in a romance.\(^6^9\) This technique is important for the description of the grotesque because hyperbolic praise or blame adds to the sensations of horror or magnificence that the grotesque woman produces for the knights who come in contact with her. By the time the stories were composed, the play with measure had seeped into the vernacular, and the romance genre was already looking back at an ample and elaborate literary tradition that made use of the hyperbolic description.

Hyperbole is a form of amplification (\textit{amplificatio} and \textit{superlatio}, and in repetitive form also named \textit{conduplicatio})\(^7^0\) and a particular ornament of style, which in classical and medieval

\(^6^9\) See Patrizia Bettella, \textit{The Ugly Woman: Transgressive Aesthetic Models in Italian Poetry from the Middle Ages to the Baroque} (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2005). Bettella explains that hyperbolic style in medieval romance is applied for descriptive purposes. A derivative from classical rhetoric and epideictic oratory, which strongly influenced medieval poetry, hyperbole is a form of demonstrative rhetoric that organizes descriptions into praise or blame (15-16), and thereby splits a description into polarized opposites, achieved by praise (\textit{laus}) and blame (\textit{vituperatio}). This moral teaching expands to the physical and moral characterization of individuals (\textit{descriptio personarum}) to either praise or insult them (16). These characterizations are written in form of amplification (\textit{amplificatio}), of which one particular ornament of style, the hyperbole (\textit{superlatio}), is a prominent form of exaggeration to either magnify or belittle.

\(^7^0\) Geoffrey de Vinsauf, \textit{Poetria Nova} (Toronto: Pontifical Institute, 1967); see in particular the entries on ‘amplification’ and ‘hyperbole’ (24-40, 52) and the section “Ornaments of Style” (42-
writing represents a prominent form of exaggeration either to magnify or belittle. The four tales enthusiastically apply such strategies of description, which express interest in the unknown, fascinating, threatening, misunderstood, peculiar, or otherwise unsettling narrative elements of the serpent women. The hyperboles used define the serpent women’s characteristics as disproportionate and excessive. Amplification serves as a poetic vehicle for the grotesque quality of the serpent women to manifest themselves as ambivalent figures; their interpretation by their audiences (intra- or extra-diegetic) thus builds on an undecided moral ground, characterized by exaggerated descriptions of positive (virtuous) and negative (sinful) elements of the serpent women’s bodies, behaviors, and actions.

2.2. Monstrosity

Monstrosity is a category that ideologically and visually comes closest to the grotesque and overlaps with it in many instances. To be monstrous is a common denominator of the grotesque, and all studies of the grotesque that I have consulted agree on this fact. Nonetheless, 

87), in particular conduplicatio (58), which is the repetition of words or sentences to support a hyperbolic effect.

71 Geoffrey de Vinsauf says that the author should “give hyperbole rein, but see that its discourse does not run ineptly hither and yon” and that “this mode of expression diminishes or heightens eulogy to a remarkable degree; and exaggeration is a source of pleasure when both ear and good usage commend it” (52-53).


73 Edwards and Graulund, for example, observe that in early texts the grotesque and monstrous always converge (Grotesque, “Monstrous and Grotesque,” 36-50, here 36). See also Thomas Wright, A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art, Illus. F. W. Fairholt
the monstrous and grotesque are distinct because the general consensus is that the monster exists in the margins of medieval society and marks segments of space, i.e., the distinguishing landscape in which demonic creatures reside, as Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Milles describe.\footnote{Bildhauer and Mills 2, 9.} They define the quality of the monstrous in medieval literature as a literary or visual form that serves to distinguish bodies that matter from those that do not.\footnote{Bildhauer and Mills, 2.} Bildhauer and Mills demarcate bodies that matter in the medieval world as “humans, Christians, saints, historical figures, gendered subjects and Christ” and bodies that do not matter, and therefore can be considered monstrous, as “animals, non-Christians, demons, fantastical creatures, and portentous freaks.”\footnote{Bildhauer and Mills, 2.}

In applying their theory, I claim that the serpent woman (a) is not monstrous and (b) has a body that matters because she is gendered. Technically, she occupies a distinctive space, namely the court, and exists therefore at the center of society and not in the typical landscape where monsters live. At her center, the serpent woman creates and sometimes defends the space where she can exist. Her space and the serpent woman herself are both vulnerable.

\footnote{Wright observes that the “monstrous is closely allied to the grotesque” (9) and argues, similarly to Bakhtin, that the grotesque grew out of literature and art in Antiquity and played a great part in medieval “comic art” (vi); see also John, M. Ganim, “Medieval Literature as Monster: The Grotesque Before and After Bakhtin,” \textit{Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Studies} 7.1 (1995): 27-40; and my discussion on Bakhtin and the grotesque in Dwyer, 24-26.}
For Jeffrey J. Cohen the medieval monster is the key site for the expression of the Other and identity issues. He focuses on the formation of identity based on various theories taken from psychoanalysis and postcolonial studies. In the “identity romance,” Cohen sees the young knight’s fight against a monster as a way to understand his sanctioned role in the romance. With each fight the knight gets closer to the final goal: becoming the master of a castle and focusing on the love of one woman in an unambiguous setting. Taming troublemaking bodies, i.e., monsters, establishes order and identity. Cohen also observes the monstrous realm as a gendered place by looking at Grendel’s mother, who is more terrible than her son. Cohen builds upon Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*, in which abjection means the discovery of a space within the self where desire and repulsion coincide in a manner that was already deeply hidden before the encounter with the horrifying object. This buried terror would not have been thought tolerable or even possible before the traumatic encounter. For my study, in particular Cohen’s correlation of abjection with the female monster sheds light on the knight’s confused and shocked response to the serpent woman. When the knight realizes that he has been fascinated by an illusion (which is the beautiful woman he was expecting to find or thought to have married) and instead devoted

77 Cohen, 125.

78 Cohen, 125.

79 Cohen, 27.


81 Cohen, 27.
his time to a creature that is essentially gross or repulsive to him, a clear rupture in his identity-finding process takes place.

Elizabeth A. Hubble argues that in the context of the knightly quest the idea of the monster expands. When confronting a knight, the monster evokes Otherness, which forces the knight to reflect and act, and he becomes aware of his own monster within.\(^82\) The young knight who sets out from Arthur’s court is the representative of the culture’s new generation, whereas Arthur is the representative of the system that needs to evolve. When Hubble’s model is transferred to the serpent woman’s encounter with the knight, the knight is forced into an awareness of his relationship with her, which represents any other relationship he has with a woman; and she reminds us that the culture in which she lives needs to change.

Sarah Alison Miller describes the monster as a culturally gendered narrative.\(^83\) She explains that, based on the interpretation of ancient and medieval philosophical and medical theories, women in the Middle Ages were regarded as monstrous by nature. She refers to the Pseudo-Ovidian poem *De vetula*, in which the virginal body, praised for its stability and health, is read against the old woman’s body, which is disparaged as disgusting and changing.\(^84\) In Miller’s words, the female body was “out of bounds”\(^85\) because of this instability and decay.


\(^83\) Sarah Alison Miller, *Medieval Monstrosity and the Female Body* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

\(^84\) Miller, 2-3.

\(^85\) Miller, 2.
Once the woman’s body had aged, it was considered forever lost and dissolving. Miller puts this philosophical perspective against the medieval medical perception of a woman’s menstruating body, which was the basis for the misogynistic fear that the feminine issue caused disease, deformity, and decay. Miller contends that instability and contamination are the reasons for the monstrous interpretation of the female body.\(^8^6\)

According to Miller, the theory of stable virgin versus changing hag becomes its own monstrous reality. The very boundaries that define the ideology of the maiden’s beautiful body do not sustain the claim when one looks at the fragmented ways in which the maiden is described. Like the hag’s “unbound” body, which disintegrates in front of the poet-narrator’s eyes,\(^8^7\) the image of the perfect maiden, who has the virginal body, can only be taken in as a portion of womanhood. The description of her body occurs in such a fragmented manner – in a series of meticulously described details of her physical beauty – that no animated, organic portrait of a young woman develops.\(^8^8\) Although the description of the *vetula* conveys the

\(^8^6\) Miller, 1-7.

\(^8^7\) The poet-narrator in Miller’s example bewails in the poem this aging body he once loved. In general, the term poet-narrator describes the narrator’s voice in a story, thereby avoiding naively concluding that the narrator’s voice reflects the poet’s personal opinion. I use this term in cases when the narrator’s voice is very close to that of his characters. Since the poet is not a character who interacts with them or inserts himself into his work, as for example in a meta-commentary when he comments on his own process of writing, the term poet-narrator is particularly useful in those situations.

\(^8^8\) Compare also Miller’s discussion of the fragmented female body that ages with Harpham’s discussion of the grotesque that can only manifest as a fragmented condition composed of various elements representing the underlying ideal or culture (see also Dwyer 17-21).
narrator’s disgust in contrast to his long erotic fantasy about the *puella’s* superb physique, the 
*vetula’s* body is nonetheless an image of the most unbelievable transformation of the same 
woman. The two bodies juxtaposed in the poem are indicative of how superficial and momentary 
the physical beauty of the female body really is. The underlying suggestion is always that there is 
a latent monstrosity in the maiden’s body; it shows the anxiety of the male world that this body 
soon will turn into the aging, ugly woman.89

The either static or malleable bodies of women, portrayed as monstrous in the 
misogynistic writings of medieval scientists and writers, can be compared to the four serpent 
women’s bodies. In these bodies, the grotesque manifests as a dynamic rather than static 
condition, and corresponds with Miller’s argument that the old woman’s body disgusts because it 
changes the young woman’s. Furthermore, Miller’s discussion of how medieval culture 
considered female anatomy and the aging female body as monstrous because it perceived them 
as repulsive and abhorrent, supports my observations of the horrible effect the four serpent 
women have on the knights. When these female characters are not in their serpent form, the 
romances describe the women in a similar manner to Miller’s evocation of the virginal, static 
body, the monstrous alternative to the changing body. In a sense the perfect bodies in these 
romances are as grotesque as their serpent form because they are constructed as images of ideal, 
unchanging forms, which can be broken down further into fragments, or characteristics, of so-

89 Miller, 16-17.
called beauty. These perfect bodies represent the model for the stock character of the medieval maiden.\(^{90}\)

The second text discussed by Miller deals with the relationship between monstrosity and secrecy. She analyzes the popular late thirteenth-century book of secrets, *De Secretis Mulierum* ("On the Secrets of Women"), probably composed by one of the students of Albertus Magnus. Since secrecy creates a discourse that cannot be talked about, it produces and reproduces boundaries between those who have knowledge about the secret and those who do not. With regard to the female body, childbirth and other functions belong to an area that medieval authors associate with secrets. When they claim to have knowledge of these secrets and are only understood by their own authoritative system of power, women are not granted permission to know their own bodies, and their relationship towards their own corporeality becomes distorted.\(^{91}\) Miller’s ideas about the connection between secrecy and power bear on the secrets the serpent women have in the romances. These secrets are kept by the women in order to protect themselves and to avoid retaliation against their physical form. The power dynamics Miller describes are reversed in the four romances that I am studying. Unlike in the monstrous figures, in the grotesque women the secrets about their bodies belong to them, and not to the men. In the chapters that follow I shall show how it is indeed the men who are not granted knowledge of the serpent women’s bodies. This inversion is part of the grotesque woman’s act; she likes to turn the world on its head.

\(^{90}\) See also my discussion of Russo’s definition of the female grotesque. She sees the perfect body as the grotesque manifestation of the thousands of years of misogyny during which women have been tyrannized by an unattainable beauty ideal (Dwyer 22-24).

\(^{91}\) Miller, 57.
As outlined above, the four serpent women are more complex than the term “monstrous” allows. These women are grotesque because they are noble and do not live in the demarcated landscape where the medieval monstrous exists. Nonetheless the serpent women exhibit some characteristics that medieval culture perceives as monstrous, such as being a hybrid or a wild, ugly woman.\(^\text{92}\) In a traditional interpretation, the serpent women most closely resemble the wild man and loathly lady, both motifs found in the romance genre. These two character types are best known from the examples of the independent, powerful sorceress Kundrie in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival*, and the figure to which Kundrie has been likened, the Ugly Herdsman in Chretien de Troyes’s *Yvain ou Le Chevalier au lion*.\(^\text{93}\) The boar-like Kundrie is a sorceress and a wise counselor to Parzival. She lives in the wilderness after having been expelled from the court for a former transgression. Except for her clothes and her noble conduct, she has nothing in common with a medieval maiden and operates with ease in the world of men. Chrétien’s character and his later counterpart in Hartman von Aue’s *Iwein* exist in the wilderness and are outsiders.\(^\text{94}\) In *Yvain* one also finds a serpent – *li serpanz* (3361). This serpent lives, as one would expect, in the wilderness. The figure of the Green Knight in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the example that comes closest to the serpent women in the four romances.\(^\text{95}\)

\(^{92}\) See below the detailed discussions on Hybridity, 38-42, and Ugliness, 42-45.


resides in the center of the romance, in his own castle, and is a powerful ruler over his own land. He is a noble figure who challenges Arthur’s court. However, unlike the serpent women who must hide their deformities, the Green Knight is a man and does not have to hide his condition of being green.

2.2.1. The loathly lady versus the grotesque woman

The typical female monster in romance is the loathly lady. Originally found in Celtic legend, the loathly lady motif stems from folklore and mythology. She reveals herself to a true king whose destiny is the throne. Usually, she is an old, ugly hag who sets up a knight so that she can reward or help him in some way, but only on the condition that he choose her despite the fact that she appears repulsive to him. When the knight does choose her, the hag changes into a beautiful maiden and he is rewarded with a beautiful and rich wife. While the serpent woman has considerable resemblance to the loathly lady – the most obvious similarities are her excessive ugliness and hybrid form – she chooses the knight herself and does not leave anything up to his control. She is always the one to take charge. Unlike the loathly lady, who is condemned to live by masculine standards similar to those of criminals or peasants in the forest, the serpent woman might look like a monster that lurks on the margins of society, but she actually lives exclusively in the courtly world.

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96 The English “Loathly Lady” Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs, eds. Elizabeth S. Passmore and Susan Carter (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 2007), here xiv. For a discussion of the wild woman in medieval literature, see Christa Habiger-Tuczay, “Wilde Frau,” in Dämonen, Monster, Fabelwesen, eds. Werner Wunderlich and Ulrich Müller (St. Gallen: UVK-Fachverlag für Wissenschaft und Studium, 1999), 603-615.
The conceptual gap between the loathly lady and the medieval monster provides a niche for the grotesque woman. One finds her between the model of the monster and that of the loathly lady. While the monster, as a hybrid, is clearly non-human, the loathly lady, as an old woman, clearly is. The grotesque woman is both of these identities and, depending on the story, she shows affinities with a non-human, monstrous appearance, in particular in both *Li Biaus Descouneüs* and *Lybeaus Desconus*, or with a more pronounced human appearance comparable to an ugly hag, as in *Melusine*. The space that the grotesque woman occupies covers a vast territory that mixes wildness with courtliness. One might say that the grotesque woman is the monstrous loathly lady who has moved into the castle. This is a unique perspective that blurs the line between wild space and courtly space. While the lifestyle of a courtly maiden creates the frame for the serpent woman’s life, her life is also enhanced by a level of autonomy that is akin to the loathly lady’s wild existence. Neither the loathly nor the courtly lady has access to this strong position.

2.3. Hybridity

The serpent woman is also a hybrid. The hybrid form dominates the physical representation of the medieval monster; it combines two or more animals, an animal and a human, mixtures of both, or even animals, humans, and objects. Although I call these characters as they appear in my corpus serpent woman, none of the romances in my corpus gives them this appellation, but calls them serpents – besides other descriptions, which I discuss in the individual chapters. Examples
in *Li Biaus Descouneüs* are the term *vuivre* (“wiwre” 3128, also “guivre” 3197),
97 “*worme*” (L 2065)98 in *Lybeaus Desconus, serpente* (5vB 134) in Jean’s *Melusine,* 99 and “grosser, langer wūrm,” (a large, long serpent, 11.5), as well as “merféye” (water fairy, 176, 17)100 in Thūring’s *Melusine.* As shown here, the serpent woman has been described as serpent in the original texts, and as a hybrid in scholarly works on medieval monstrosity. Both terms, “serpent” and “hybrid,” are categories found in the theoretical discussions below. The historical sources differentiate between human and animalistic monsters and categorize a gigantic serpent as monstrous and as animal. Claude Lecouteux writes that in the medieval tradition, giants are considered human monsters, but dragons, serpents, including those with human heads, are monstrous animals.101

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Similarly, Kappler, who catalogues monsters as they have been described in Western European texts from Antiquity until the end of the Middle Ages, states that there is a fundamental difference between giants and monstrous serpents. While enormous proportions characterize both forms, Kappler puts giants in the monster category, whereas great serpents (serpents géants) are listed among enormous animals.¹⁰² For the four females of my study this means that while in their serpent bodies and even when viewed as hybrids, they are not considered human. Indeed, becoming human is thematized in the Melusine tales, in which the protagonist wishes to become human through marriage. Kappler generally considers all beings or things hybrid that are constituted by disparate anatomical elements and that rupture normal physical aspects. He does not narrow their occurrences as being bound to any historical period, but stresses the fact that the theme of hybridity and monstrosity are timeless themes crossing all cultures: “Le thème des naissances monstrueuses est de tous les temps et de tous les cultures!”¹⁰³ He goes so far as to determine hybridity not necessarily by biological aspects, as it does not have to be tied to a living organism but can also concern inanimate objects.

Caroline Walker Bynum looks at the increasingly popular depiction of hybridity in the High Middle Ages as a way of thinking about change and identity and suggests that the hybrid is not to be seen as a flawed being, but rather as a place for inquiry where cultural information can

¹⁰² Kappler, Monstres, 130.
¹⁰³ Kappler, Monstres, 147.
be found. From the perspective of the static image, a hybrid is an “inherently visual form.” It is “a way of making two-ness, the simultaneity of two-ness, visible.” The joint anatomy of the hybrid notably does not become a new and complete anatomical unit. Instead, it has clear demarcations between the joint elements and these can be interpreted as pointers to a conflicting situation within the socio-cultural environment of this hybrid. Understood in this manner, the demarcations identify issues not only on the individual level but also on that of a society or even of an entire culture.

Anatomically, the serpent woman is partly human and partly animal. Her body joins in an unfamiliar way parts that are familiar to a medieval reader. She is a hybrid; her parts do not fuse into a new being, for each part remains separately discernible. Thus the hybrid composition can hardly be expressed and understood as a whole unless it is so familiar and occurs so frequently that it already has a fixed term. The interrupted structure of its hybrid form leaves the serpent woman’s body always somehow fragmented, thereby never allowing her to grow into a new phase of being. This particular structure defines her body as a compound, a fact that I try to capture in my use of the term “serpent woman” to describe these female characters. In order to understand and to interpret this form, the hybrid has to be broken down into its fragments. These fragments can be interpreted individually and then read together as a text that informs us about the grotesque being that each woman represents. Her hybrid body either appears in the form of a


105 Bynum, 30.

106 Bynum, 30.

107 Bynum, 30-31.
human upper body that is connected to a serpent’s tail or as an entire serpent with some remarkably female facial traits. The provocative disproportion between human and animal can be so extreme that the grotesque woman seems a beast rather than a human being. The interpretation of each type of disproportion reveals possible patterns that are associated with the perception of the medieval woman.

2.4. Ugliness

Ugliness, and in particular its gendered variation, loathliness, which is exclusively applied to female characters, is another quality that defines the medieval grotesque. Romance literature builds on a very definite aesthetics of beauty, personified in the perfection of the medieval maiden. The poets praise her beauty and are not so much concerned with the woman’s actual features but with a set of attributes. Set in a culture that feeds off the pursuit of such perfection, the serpent woman is ugly because her body lacks all attributes that constitute this medieval ideal of beauty: harmony, proportion, and coherence between the inner and the outer form. Since her grotesque form embodies the opposite, namely disharmony and inconsistency, the serpent woman is ugly by the cultural standards set by each story.

Umberto Eco describes the notion of being ugly as culturally dependent. On the surface, ugliness is understood as the absence of beauty and thus varies depending on what is


thought to constitute beauty. The predominant medieval concepts of beauty and ugliness understand the body as a whole unit composed of the material and the immaterial body.

Accordingly, the truly noble man is inwardly and outwardly beautiful, and therefore an ugly person is considered morally wicked. It is necessary to modify Eco’s conclusions when reading the serpent woman as a grotesque because his strict opposition does not apply to the serpent woman, whose behavior and moral character do not change in the transition from her beautiful body into the serpent body. Despite the fact that the characters involved with her know that she is of noble descent, they are suspicious and wonder about the woman’s morality when they see her in her serpent form. The knights are confused because her ugliness signals to them negativity and moral wickedness but the serpent woman’s actions tell them otherwise. She neither wants to harm them nor act selfishly. To the contrary, she is protective and generous. The confusion that the serpent woman generates in her environment is an additional indicator that ugliness belongs in this catalogue of characteristics that defines my understanding of the grotesque. It suggests that ugliness has a liberating effect on the woman since it affords her more freedom. Whereas medieval beauty is always defined by an ideal standard, there is no ideal form of ugliness that can be required, or quested after, nor can ugliness become desirable. In this sense, the serpent woman’s ugliness is liberating because her lack of beauty, which dictates the woman’s life, liberates an ideological and physical space, beyond the reach of the source of the beauty discourse, the desire to control women.

Ingrid Kasten differentiates among three characteristics that essentially determine female ugliness: (1) similarity to an animal, which Kasten interprets as an image of the fallen, sinful woman whom God punishes by putting her on the same level as an animal; (2) the mother’s “internal wrongness” (Verkehrtheit) or wickedness, which has become outwardly visible in her
children; and (3) black skin, which directly points towards the darkness of hell.\textsuperscript{110} In my corpus, the serpent woman, like an animal, can be read as a misogynistic commentary on her inferiority as a woman. Kasten’s second definition of ugliness as a sign of evil applies to both Melusine tales. Melusine’s sons carry various deformities that are clearly visible and are described as birthmarks (in German Muttermal, which means a mark of the mother), unmistakable emblems of an evil heritage carried into the world of humans. When Melusine bears children, all save one are deformed in bizarre ways apparent to everyone.

The serpent woman’s ugliness challenges romance culture. The knights cannot escape her ugliness, because by the time they realize that the woman is a serpent, she is already too deeply intertwined with their lives and participates in the knights’ social system. The confrontation with ugliness on such a personal level forces the knights to reflect on their identity and function in society, whereas otherwise they would have continued their lives as usual. The encounter affects the knights so intensely that a variety of emotions, such as extreme fear and profound shame, surface. These intense emotions, I argue, when experienced to such a degree that they cause terror, are comparable to a trauma caused by the shattering reversal of an oedipal complex. The individual knight can no longer trust or adore his mother, who hitherto governed his emotional response to women on a deep psychological level. The ugly woman visually suggests to him the real nature of women as conniving and menacing.

2.5. Centrality

There are monstrous beings that always exist outside of the court, and there are monsters that have been excluded from the court and now roam in the wilderness. The grotesque serpent woman, however, is always located at court and conditionally integrated into court society, although she has to hide her physical deformity and lives this in secrecy.

2.6. Secrecy

Secrecy is a strategy of the serpent woman to hide her serpent body. It is a commentary on the experience of being different from the ideally beautiful maiden. The woman conforms to her repression and hides rather than being castigated. Secrecy adds a particularly female aspect to the term grotesque. On the one hand, secrecy hides something that is wrong with the serpent woman and, on the other hand, it works as a protective measure to keep a private space intact and acts like an invisible boundary.

2.7. Cavernousness

Although the serpent woman exists in the ideological center of the romance and is situated at the court, she does not operate in the open. When she is in her serpent form, she resides in a hidden space: a cupboard (Blonde Esmerée), an enclosed space in a wall that can be accessed through a window (the Lady of Synadoun), or a private chamber (both Melusine versions). Ewa Kuryluk points out that all enclosed spaces have a tendency to be seen as female and related to protection
and threat. The cave as a private and feminine space, the armoire, and the locked chamber are places that hide and protect the serpent woman.

2.8. Otherness

Otherness, prevalent in postcolonial theories on identity and the self, certainly applies to the serpent women but it is not exclusive to them. In medieval literature, there are other examples of Otherness, such as giants, cannibals, or Saracens who are present in great numbers. The most obvious identification of the women’s Otherness is that they are not perceived as humans when in their serpent form. Instead, they are identified as fairies or beasts, which are naturally inferior to humans. However, even in their human state the women are inferior to men, an idea that goes back to Eve’s subordination to Adam. The underlying thought, coming out of feminist theory, is that women in general are to be thought of as Other by the misogynist culture of the Middle Ages and later. The serpent woman’s tendency to hide her physical form from her own court’s public eye suggests that she has internalized this belief and acts accordingly. In contrast, a male Other would be found outside of the courtly realm and not directly at court. Identifying an ugly female as Other solidifies male power within noble culture and confirms ideals of female beauty and conformity. Both are necessary for a knight’s own maturation. The depiction of the female Other within her court as an issue of male authority becomes even more apparent when


114 See the above discussion on the Ugly Herdsman motif, 36.
one compares her, as it happens in *Melusine*, to her male descendants. Various bizarre deformations mark Melusine’s sons. While one could argue that some of these men are hybrids, they are never described as Other in the romances. Especially this different treatment of male and female Otherness shows that the female grotesque in the romances is as much ideological as physical.

2.9. Cursedness

The four women have in common that their individual stories entail a curse that initially drives the plot. The curse should be under the umbrella of secrecy because the four serpent women hide this fact with lesser vigor as in the *Bel Inconnu* material or greater as in *Melusine*. The curses are results of each woman’s transgression against a man in some way. The curse motif inserts into the romance a constant reminder that the women have brought their deformity on themselves. The idea that the serpent woman’s punishment is well deserved redirects blame from the perpetrator to her. The concept of the curse is another form of misogyny that is written into the category of the female grotesque. The curses are distinguished, in particular, because in each of the examples another powerful female is responsible for designing and exacting the curse. This fact feeds into female rivalry that disempowers women. However, the curse motif is also peculiarly female because, through their misfortune and disfigurement, the serpent women decide to communicate in different, sometimes nonverbal ways to extend their influence.

2.10. Ambiguity

The romances depict the grotesque serpent woman as a noblewoman whose character, behavior, and status conform to courtly culture despite a body that does not. Therefore, ambiguity aids the grotesque woman’s ability to confuse her audience. She uses this ability strategically as a form of
control. Whoever comes into contact with her is repulsed but also curious as to what type of woman this might be. Her ambiguous effect is heightened because her culture views her as Other. A whole range of positive and negative emotions emerge so that the knights temporarily lose control over their behavior or responsibilities – normally out of the question for a proud knight. This moment of discovery marks a turning point in each of the stories. The knights are forced to deal with their confusion, caused by the fact that fundamental information had been hidden from them until they met the serpent woman.

2.11. Instability

Instability is related to ambiguity. The serpent woman is only temporarily transformed into her hybrid form, which is malleable. Instability covers a wide scope of possibilities in the narratives. The most obvious condition involves changing from a human into a hybrid body. This condition changes again, either only once or frequently. The woman’s serpent form is not always stable either; sometimes her tail is iridescent and shimmering; the knights who come into her presence cannot clearly discern what they see. The serpent woman also needs to adapt. She has to submit to various forms of authority, such as her mother, her suitor, or her husband and his cohort.

Yates describes the encounter with the grotesque as being caught off guard; the encounter includes a range of emotions associated with doubt, horror, and repulsion (“An Introduction to the Grotesque,” 2). It is vital to recognize that the reading of the physical features of the serpent do not deem her a ferocious or virtuous creature; instead the grotesque woman’s aspect is mystifying by way of the “principle of disharmony run wild” (Philip J. Thomson, The Grotesque [London: Methuen Critical Idiom Series, 1972], “The Term and Concept Grotesque: A Historical Summary,” Web). Thomson claims that opposites clash in such a way that they make little sense. He contends that the grotesque is a “fundamentally ambivalent thing, as a violent clash of opposites,” and that the grotesque would often be an “appropriate expression of the problematic nature of existence” (“The Term and Concept Grotesque: A Historical Summary”).
Female malleability disturbs the order in the courtly world because it irritates the characters who want to control her. Because the serpent woman has learned to adapt, she is less vulnerable to an unfavorable suitor and can reside in the small space of autonomy that her ability to adapt grants her. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque body “is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, and builds and creates another body.”

Therefore, the serpent woman’s flexibility suggests an ongoing cultural process in which women and men are challenged to evolve together, lending the courtly quest model a different meaning.

3. Chapter overview and outlook

With instability as the last item included in this catalogue of characteristics that the serpent women share, I will now address their application to each of the romances I have studied. In each chapter I focus on the characteristics that are the most pronounced in each of the figures that I am interpreting. The above catalogue makes an array of discussions possible. It is used like a toolbox in order to make the grotesque visible in each of the serpent women. This approach has not been employed for comparable medieval characters or any other combination of characters in the stories. The discussion in each chapter does not always include all eleven of the aforementioned characteristics, as a rigidly enforced discussion would be contrived. The following interpretations are mostly based on obvious elements but sometimes on subtle nuances of meaning found in individual expressions or words. Although one or another characteristic may be more or less pronounced in the women I am describing, the chapters will show that common traits of the grotesque connect the four serpent women. Imagined in different centuries and

116 Bakhtin, 317.
cultures, these women reflect contemporary notions of love, family, and womanhood.

The discussion opens in Chapter 1 with Blonde Esmerée in Renaut de Bâgé’s *Li Biaus Descouneïs*. She is the earliest instance of the serpent woman in my corpus and at the same time the most draconic and frightening of the four grotesque figures. The narrative structure of *Li Biaus Descouneïs* divides the romance into two equally long parts, each devoted to one of the two most important women in the knight’s life. One part of the romance is devoted to Blonde Esmerée, and the other to La Pucele, the fair maiden whom the knight really desires. While Blonde Esmerée seems antagonistic at first, she is an ally of the knight, whereas La Pucele is an enchantress who conspires to alter the events surrounding him. These two women are each other’s foil and offer us a medieval interpretation of female rivalry, as well as the cultural take on the dichotomy of love relationships and a form of pre-arranged marriages based on ideals, politics, and status.

Chapter 2 is devoted to the Middle English romance, *Lybeaus Desconus*, memorable for its quick moving plot and delightful characters. Its protagonist, the Lady of Synadoun, exhibits an amusing and sexually bold character. What she lacks in sheer hideousness when compared to Blonde Esmerée, the Lady of Synadoun makes up for in her bawdiness. Despite the fact that *Lybeaus Desconus* is also the most humorous of the four romances, it is – as Wolfgang Kayser insists for the grotesque – a form of medieval caricature that “has much in common with the grotesque and may even help to pave the way for it.”\(^{117}\) The poet fleshes out the Lady of Synadoun’s serpent form and behavior more audaciously than the treatments of the figure in the other three tales, and declares both female sexuality and cleverness more assertively.

Nonetheless, the *Lybeaus* poet adheres to traditional maidenly conformity that represents the overall framework for the Lady of Synadoun’s character. He does not seek to produce a caustic commentary on whatever source he adapted but rather portrays the courtly themes through the eyes of a more popular culture that relies less on the courtly character found in his French predecessor’s work.

In Chapter 3, the focus is on Jean d’Arras’s Middle French *Melusine*, the protagonist of which comes from a supernatural place and enters the mortal world through marriage. A lengthy prehistory explains Melusine’s origins and sets the stage for the power she embodies, which is associated with her maternal fairy line. In her grotesqueness lies the contradiction between the medieval maiden, which is her template, and the unruly woman she is. Melusine is portrayed as a curious woman who wants to leave the fairy world with which she is no longer satisfied. She is a character that disturbs a given standard and provokes change, both functions of the grotesque. Her most blatant action is her spectacular departure from Lusignan. By circling the Mervent tower three times before flying off for good she shocks the public, which had previously doubted and loved her simultaneously. By providing the onlookers with an explicit presentation of her Otherness, Melusine leaves them with their narrow-minded misogyny, never to return.

Chapter 4 analyzes the Early New High German *Melusine* by Thüring von Ringoltingen. He pays great attention to the characters’ political endeavors, an approach that reflects the growth of the urban mercantile elite and lower rank nobility in his hometown of Bern. Thüring’s overt avoidance of mythological elements, abundant in Jean’s version, reveals that times have shifted into a more worldly society that is familiar with the classical medieval romance, but no longer indulges in lengthy descriptions of typical courtly topics. In the foreground stands the model description of a noble family that rises to wealth and status by its political ambition and
conquest of European territories, including Cyprus and Armenia (Eurasia). Among this industrious folk, Melusine represents a somewhat misplaced character fluctuating between rational and supernatural capacities. Her grotesqueness effectively displays the incompatibility between her fairy nature and her status as a reasoning human being.

In the chapters that follow, I present as grotesque the four serpent women who appear in medieval literature. My discussion of the grotesque is a contribution to medieval studies and literary theory, and the examples of the grotesque occurring in the Middle Ages contribute to medieval studies in two respects. They show that the grotesque occurred in medieval literature and, that studying examples of it contributes to the study of the grotesque in general. The study of the grotesque also contributes to the study of medieval women by showing that the image of the serpent woman reveals another form of cultural misogyny. The model of the grotesque that I outline is an apt vehicle for studying the medieval portrayals of the serpent woman. My findings narrow the gap between current scholarship on the medieval monster from the perspective of medieval culture and contemporary theory, and the more traditional perspectives on figures like the serpent woman as an ancient motif of storytelling and contemporary feminist theory. In this dissertation, these perspectives combine to form a hybrid text that can be read in various combinations, thereby creating new visions of (serpent) women.

My study not only crosses linguistic, temporal, and cultural boundaries; it expands how the term grotesque has been used in literary criticism and in medieval studies. I demonstrate that in their grotesque form, the serpent women are neither loathly ladies nor monsters but instead empowered and resourceful women who challenge the female ideal constructed in medieval narrative tradition and accepted by the narratives' audiences. My interpretation counters the idea
that serpent women are weak and hideous. By identifying them as powerful characters, I establish that their peculiar physical conditions give them strength.
CHAPTER 2: A HIDEOUS QUEEN IN THE OLD FRENCH LI BIAUS DESCOUNEÜS

1. *Li Biaus Descouneüüs*: a traditional romance in Old French

*Li Biaus Descouneüüs* is the classic romance of my four texts. Typical for the plot in a traditional medieval romance, the story tells a young knight’s maturation journey and centers around his adventures.¹¹⁸ In the story, Blonde Esmerée, lady of the Cité Gaste in Senaudon (Snowdon in Wales) is the sole heir to her father’s estate. After she refuses to marry the sorcerer Mabons he and his brother turn Blonde Esmerée into a large serpent, or *vuivre*. Helie, Blonde Esmerée’s maiden, travels to Arthur’s court for help and recruits the young knight, Li Biaus Descouneüüs (Li Biaus). En route to Wales, the knight has an amorous relationship with the fairy mistress *La Pucele*,¹¹⁹ who wants to detain Li Biaus, but he continues on his mission. When he arrives at Senaudon, Li Biaus kills Blonde Esmerée’s oppressors but then, instead of finding a beautiful young woman, he is greeted by an enormous, red-lipped serpent. This creature frightens the knight. When the serpent moves towards him, bows before him, and then kisses him, Li Biaus is repulsed and in despair. The kiss releases Blonde Esmerée’s curse and, after she proposes to the knight, Li Biaus and Blonde Esmerée get married, but not before Li Biaus returns one more time to his lover, *La Pucele*.

A few facts emerge in the above events. Blonde Esmerée appears midway in the story. She is a hybrid between human and animal with only one exclusively human part, her red-lipped mouth. She looks like a gigantic serpent but has this feminine feature and also behaves with the


¹¹⁹ *La Pucele*, also named Blances Mains, is the female ruler of the Ille d’Or.
courtly restraint expected of the noblewoman she is. In the form of this dreadful animal, she embodies negative and positive aspects, and one cannot label Blonde Esmerée either as serpent or woman. Her combined features do not produce the image of a cohesive, unified being, and she makes an ambiguous impression on the knight. Ambiguity is among the key traits that define the grotesque among the serpent women discussed in this dissertation, and Blonde Esmerée is particularly informed by this quality. She frightens the knight while fascinating him with her fantastical, shimmering coloring.

Blonde Esmerée’s inconsistent form and confusing behavior stand in contrast to the beauty and grace of the courtly maiden. She is the grotesque counterpart of La Pucele and mixes peril with curiosity, fear with sexual innuendo, and wisdom with cunning, provoking a mixture of negative and positive reactions. While La Pucele’s role in the story is that of a clever seductress, Blonde Esmerée functions as a warning against too much beauty and knowledge in women. She constitutes a frightening experience for the knight, who has squandered too much love on one woman and has lost focus on his mission. By being the opposite of La Pucele’s beauty, Blonde Esmerée is a form of Other. Although she is courtly, her serpent form suggests that women are dangerous, demonic beasts in disguise. Yet, Blonde Esmerée has more autonomy in her serpent form than in her female body. In contrast to the courtly maiden or the loathly lady, who patiently wait for the knight to initiate physical contact, she takes the initiative and snatches a kiss from him. She is more self-empowered as a serpent woman than she was in her female form when she was subjected to the magician’s curse as punishment for her rejection of him. During the time she is a serpent, Blonde Esmerée is able to take advantage of her physical situation to achieve her desires, which include marrying an Arthurian knight and securing her assets. Her serpent form allows her to act without being further punished when she approaches
the right suitor. Blonde Esmerée has to be ugly in order to assert herself and succeed in finding her husband.

This compelling tale was presumably composed by Renaut de Bâgé who possibly belonged to the house of Bâgé in the Mâcon region of today’s Central France. Renaut’s work must have appeared sometime between 1191 and 1212 or 1213. Li Biaus Descouneüs likely dates to around the end of the twelfth century. This approximate date can be traced back to Renaut’s own reference to Chrétien de Troyes; additional conjecture ties the date to Guillaume de Dole, which places Li Biaus Descouneüs sometime at the beginning of the thirteenth century. The single manuscript containing the romance is part of the collection of the Duc d’Aumale held at Musée Condé. It is produced on nineteen folios collated in the Chantilly 472 codex, which

120 For further information on the title of the romance, see also Dictionnaire des lettres françaises: Le Moyen Age, ed. Cardinal Georges Grente, rev. by Geneviève Hasenohr and Michel Zink (Paris: La Pochothèque, 1992). The poet identifies himself in his romance as Renals de Biauju (Li Biaus Descouneüs 6249); see also Karen Fresco, “Introduction,” Renaut de Bâgé: Le Bel Inconnu (Li Biaus Descouneüs; The Fair Unkown), ix-xxxii. Fresco explains the name Bâgé was assigned to Renaut after scholars had believed that the forms Biauju and Baujieu belonged to the house of Beaujeu, a clan in the French Mâcon region, when, in fact, it belongs to the house of Bâgé; the name Bâgé is also associated with a blazon the poet describes in Guinglain’s shield (Li Biaus Descouneüs 73-74, 5921-5922) (Fresco ix, n2). For a more thorough discussion on the author’s name, see also Alain Guerréau, “Renaud de Bâgé, Le Bel Inconnu, structure symbolique et signification sociale,” Romania CIII.1 (1982): 28-82.

121 Fresco, “Introduction,” xii. Fresco narrows the window of composition to between 1191, which is the date Chrétien de Troyes is believed to have stopped writing due his patron’s death, and 1212-1213, which dates the reference to Renaut in Guillaume de Dole (xi); see also Walter, Le Bel Inconnu de Renaut de Beaujeu, xi. Walter simply puts the date somewhere to the beginning of the thirteenth century.

in a later inventory bore the number 626. The codex contains altogether eleven texts, most of which are Arthurian romances, but also prose material from Perslevaus and part of the Roman de Renart. The title rubric of Li Biaus Descouneüs might have read “De Guinglan”; however, the upper margin of the folio was cropped. The romance is located at the approximate center of the collection. Blonde Esmerée’s emblematic ambiguity could be connected with the style of Renaut, whose version is known and even criticized for his playful handling of his source material, often adapted from Chrétien.

123 Arlima - Archives de Littérature du Moyen Âge, Web; also Fresco “Introduction,” xxii; Schmolke-Hasselmann, 221.

124 Fresco “Introduction,” xxii. Furthermore, Schmolke-Hasselmann suggests that although there is only one existing manuscript, Li Biaus Descouneüs was notably popular during its time, in particular in Provençal-speaking regions (220, 222). This circulation, however, did not necessarily reach much beyond the fourteenth century.

125 Fresco “Introduction,” xxii-xxiii. The hybridity of Blonde Esmerée’s physical form repeats in Renaut’s poetic style. Renaut’s version is the first full Arthurian Romance after Chrétien with widespread allusions to Chrétien’s romances and Renaut presents an assortment of characters and events prepared in a hybrid literary genre. By disassembling a known story and common motifs, putting them back together in a fresh way, the author seemingly utilizes some of the structural elements of the imaginative grotesque; see also Christine Ferlampin-Acher and Monique Léonard, La fée et la 'guivre': ‘Le Bel Inconnu’ de Renaut de Beaujeu: Approche littéraire et concordancier (vv. 1237-3252), Champion-Varia, 8 (Paris: Champion, 1996). The authors explain that an interplay within the genres creates a “texte en movement” (xvi-xvii) in which topoi and medieval stock characters display an unexpected twist: the ugly seem beautiful; the hideous change into maidens; dwarves, otherwise evil-natured, are noble; and a lady called Rose Espanie is so ugly that she defies her name. These inversions of conventional materials magnified the reaction of the spectators (xvii-xviii). Because of the ambiguous ending in which the poet-lover hints again at a potential renouement of the hero and La Pucele after the marriage between the hero and Blonde Esmerée has taken place, it has been said that the story has an open end, which suggests the unresolved relationships of the main character to both women and the ambivalent relationship between Blonde Esmerée and. In a wider sense, the open end echoes the uncertainty and indefinability that the grotesque in this romance and in general creates.
2. Blonde Esmerée as the grotesque woman

Blonde Esmerée is depicted as an ugly individual, and her story differentiates among various forms of ugliness. She can be defined as a grotesque serpent woman based on the characteristics established in the introduction.\(^{126}\)

2.1. Ugliness: Blonde Esmerée as *vuivre*

Ugliness is one of the core characteristics necessary for the grotesque to exist. Blonde Esmerée’s first physical description is as a *vuivre* (“…/ et une wiwre fors issier” [“…/ and a serpent comes forth” 3128]).\(^{127}\) According to Tobler-Lommatzsch, the *guivre, wiwre*, and *vuivre* from the Latin *vipera*, viper, while not essentially a menacing creature, is not merely a serpent, but has dragon, demonic, and sea monster connotations. The appellation can also apply to someone who is

\(^{126}\) As a reminder, these are the eleven characteristics (1) hyperbole, (2) monstrosity, (3) hybridity, (4) ugliness, (5) centrality, (6) ambiguity, (7) secrecy, (8) cavernousness, (9) Otherness, (10) cursedness, and (11) instability – all of which move Blonde Esmerée into the realm of the grotesque (Dwyer 27-28).

\(^{127}\) Unless noted otherwise, all text quotations and translations are taken from *Renaut de Bâgé: Le Bel Inconnu* (Li Biaus Descouneüs; The Fair Unknown), ed. Karen Fresco, trans. Colleen P. Donagher, music ed. Margaret P. Hasselman, Vol. 77, Series A, Garland Library of Medieval Literature (New York: Garland, 1992). In Fresco’s critical edition the translation line numbers correspond with the original version. If the translation line number is different from the original French line number, the translation also includes a separate reference to the line number. Other editions occasionally consulted for cross-reference and comparison are Renaud de Beaujeu, *Le Bel Inconnu* (Paris: Champion, 2003); also Renaud de Beaujeu, *Le Bel Inconnu: Ou, Giglain, Fils de Messire Gauvain et de la Fée aux Blanches Mains: Messier Poème de la Table Ronde*, ed. C. Hippeau (Paris: A. Aubry, 1860).
deformed or ugly at birth or be used to describe a poisonous, gossipy, cunning person.\textsuperscript{128} In addition to the serpent being a prominently biblical motif in Judeo-Christian tradition, in \textit{Li Biaus Descouneüs} as well as in medieval romance in general, the serpent image can be traced back to folklore and mythology.\textsuperscript{129}

This \textit{vuivre} is incredibly ugly: “Molt par estoit hidosse” (3136). “Hidosse,” according to Tobler-Lommatzsch (under the entry for \textit{hisdor}), describes something so ugly that one is disgusted and horrified (\textit{grauevolle Hässlichkeit}). It leaves a person who comes in contact with the object of disgust in intense shock accompanied by fright and terror. When applied to Blonde Esmerée, and when compared to other words that Renaut uses to describe an ugly person, event, or trait, the term \textit{hidosse} takes on a particular meaning. It describes the ugliness of a monster that is repulsive and horrible, a strange creature that is perplexing during a frightening event. In order to portray a human form of ugliness on the other hand, Renaut applies the term \textit{lais/laiide}, which implies ethical judgment. \textit{Laide} describes moral and physical ugliness that is ominous with an overtone of doom. However, the term \textit{laiide} defines not just the material world but also human morality as in the moral assessment of those who are ugly because they lie to women: “Pecié$s n’est de feme traîr,” / mais laidement svent mentir,” (“It is no sin to betray a woman, / but they are wicked liars,” 1245-1246).


\textsuperscript{129} \textit{Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary}, eds. Jeremy A. Black, Anthony Green, and Tessa Rickards (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 22. The authors also suggest that the snake dragon is generally a magically protective hybrid going back to the Akkadian Period around 2300 B.C. (166).
In taxonomies of medieval monsters, serpents or half-serpents are categorized as animals. Therefore, Renaut’s usage of *laide* versus *hidosse* distinguishes between human beings – or beings he considers human – and animals. Blonde Esmerée, as a serpent woman, is not considered *laide* but *hidosse*. In contrast, the two cannibalistic and lewd giants are described as *lais*: “Au feut avoit dous grans gaians / lais et hisdels et mescreans,” (“By the fire were two huge, ugly giants, / both hideous and evil,” 705-706). Despite the fact that the giants are a threat to the protagonist and the noblewomen, they appear more human than animal, whereas Blonde Esmerée straddles the border between human and animal. These giants live in a cave in the wilderness, threaten to rape, then roast and devour the maiden, Claris. Rendered as social outcasts, they represent some form of Other to the world of the nobles in whose forests they lurk ominously. One could argue that they represent a form of a male grotesque because of their excessive size and strength and their unexpected interest in courtly food etiquette. Curiously, they indulge in fine dining, hoarding all of the region’s provisions including white tablecloths and goblets and “plenty of good wine” (“desos la cave trente pains / et blances napes et hanas, / ... / De bon vin ont trové asés,” 902-903, 906). Yet, the giants live in the open and not in a courtly setting in a castle, one major difference that distinguishes them from the female grotesque.

2.2. Centrality: Blonde Esmerée in the middle

Following Renaut’s opening address, there are two more or less equally long sections: the first is devoted to the hero’s adventures that end with Blonde Esmerée’s liberation (11-3914) and the second describes Li Biaus’s affair with La Pucele (3915-6246). The narrative structure of the 6266 octosyllabic lines of *Li Biaus Descouneïüs* has a striking symmetry that underscores the
architecture of this romance.\textsuperscript{130} Blonde Esmerée’s appearance as the serpent woman is strategically positioned at the midpoint of the romance, splitting the narrative into two parts. Extending over only 70 lines (3127-3197), this short section has a surprising impact on character development and plot motivation. Blonde Esmerée’s transformation determines the plot trajectory from the beginning and is the chief motivator for both parts: Li Biaus sets out on his quest to find Blonde Esmerée, rescues her, then returns to La Pucele, and eventually abandons La Pucele in order to finally marry Blonde Esmerée. The central position of the serpent scene is thus at the heart of the romance. Uitti has drawn attention to the strategic importance of the midpoint in many courtly romances. He points out that romance narratives often take a turn and address matters of identity, such as the name and title of the protagonist.\textsuperscript{131} It is thus significant that the serpent appears in the middle of the tale. In comparison to this Old French romance, the Middle English \textit{Lybeaus Desconus} ends with the Lady of Synadoun’s release from the curse and the couple’s marriage. By omitting the romantic affair with another woman, the \textit{Lybeaus} poet seems to suggest that drawn out love interests are not necessarily important to his English audience.

From a structural perspective, Blonde Esmerée defies the conventional narrative function that a fair maiden in a romance assumes. Typically, a maiden is extraordinarily beautiful and an incentive for the knights to remain on their chivalric path. This path is part of the master principle of a romance plot. In \textit{Li Biaus Descoueneüs} it consists of the knightly quest of a hitherto

\textsuperscript{130} Denis Hüe, "Le Bel Inconnu: Miroirs et Réflexions," Université de Rennes 2, Web.

unknown but promising handsome young knight (Li Biaus), who goes out from Arthur’s court for an adventure in which he will meet a challenge that will determine his destiny and reveal his true identity.\textsuperscript{132} With regard to Harpham’s theory, a grotesque incident challenges the master principle.\textsuperscript{133} Blonde Esmerée as the serpent woman is this challenging factor and beyond that also a commentary on the courtly relationship. The knight’s essential dilemma is whether to choose La Pucele or fulfill his contract with Arthur, the marriage to Blonde Esmerée. Blonde Esmerée’s midpoint appearance embodies this challenge because the knight must make the decision to end the affair with La Pucele. It marks the next stage in the protagonist’s struggle, in which he is pressured to make a decision about La Pucele, eventually marrying the right woman, Blonde Esmerée. The marriage integrates the protagonist into the Arthurian court.

2.3. Cavernousness: a space in the closet

Having finally arrived at his ultimate destination, Li Biaus stands alone in the dark great hall, when all of a sudden Blonde Esmerée emerges from an armoire, which is a strange and unexpected abode for a serpent, but that is also her cavernous space: “Atant vit une aumaire ouvrir / et une wiwre fors issier.” (“Suddenly he saw a cupboard open up / and a serpent come

\textsuperscript{132} In \textit{Li Biaus Descouneüs} the master principle is, for example, illustrated by Bilioblïeris’s companions whom Li Biaus meets early on his quest: “Cil sont molt preu et molt vaillant,” (“All were good and valiant warriors,” 530). This brief description of three knights reveals how, according to the poet, a good knight spends his time: “Le jor vont querrant aventure; / quant doit venir la nuis oscure, / si tornent au Gué Perillous” (“They sought adventure by day, / and in the dark of the night / they returned to the Perilous Ford,” 537-539).

\textsuperscript{133} See Harpham on the connection between a text’s master principle and the grotesque in Dwyer, 19.
forth” 3127-3128). Her form is described as extraordinary: “Hom ne vit onques sa parelle,” (“No one ever saw such a serpent:” 3133). Even if the medieval aumaire could have large dimensions, the presumable disproportion between the cupboard and the serpent’s huge size is another typical and unexpected variable that amplifies Blonde Esmerée’s impact. Indeed, the armoire houses an enormous beast nine yards in length (“Quatre toisses de lonc duroit” 3143), whose middle is wider than a barrel (“par mi le pis plus groisse estoit / que un vaissaus d’un mui
ne soit,” 3137-3138) and whose tail so huge that no one ever saw such before (“c’onques nus hom ne vit grinnor,” 3145).

The armoire is also a place where knowledge is stored. Books and knowledge play a significant role in Li Biaus Descouneüs because it was a book that served to transform Blonde Esmerée into a serpent. In the brief scene in which she explains her circumstances to Li Biaus, she reports that two enchanters cursed her by the touch of a book: “Çaens me vinrent encanter: / quant il m’orent tocie d’un livre, / si fui sanblans a une wivre,” (“Then they entered this very hall and cast a spell on me: / as soon as they had touched me with a book, / I took on the appearance of a serpent,” 3340-3342). This event informs our understanding of Blonde Esmerée’s fate in several ways. The book is a powerful tool; it transmits the curse to Blonde Esmerée but its secret information is inaccessible to her. After becoming a serpent, she spends her time hiding in the armoire that is located in the great hall, which is the social center of medieval court life. The medieval armoire (aumaire) was not a cupboard or closet for miscellaneous items of day-to-day

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life as it is understood today, but a piece of furniture to store precious items, such as books or a relic.  

The image of an armoire that contains not books but a magic serpent, charmed by a book, is thought provoking. It combines several aspects of Li Biaus Descouneüs without providing detailed information about the meaning of the setting. The armoire can be considered a forerunner to a Wunderkammer, a cabinet of curiosities that became popular in the Renaissance around the time the grotesque received more attention. With the growing interest in foreign cultures and items brought from overseas, such cabinets became holding places for anything exotic. Here, items could be kept safely and one could marvel at these objects. Moreover, Jean Dufournet suggests that the association between armoire and grammar, “armoire” and “grimoire,” was frequent in medieval texts because both were compared to places where one could find something, though nothing specific. Dufournet’s observation suggests that books had diffuse meaning and were comparable to a holding place for something unknown that eventually could become useful or understood. Thus the book that was used to curse Blonde Esmerée recalls the bewilderment it creates for her and others involved. The sorcerers did not approve of the maiden’s unwilling, obstinate behavior, so they used a book to change the


136 The Wunderkammer or Early Modern wonder cabinets were used to collect and explore unusual things and often resembled medieval cabinets holding relics (Bynum, 64). This type of cabinet can be compared to Blonde Esmerée’s armoire.

disobedient Blonde Esmerée. Her transformation is a punishment, and the idea underlying this extreme measure devised by a book is also the fear of female knowledge. Books contain wisdom and truth (e.g., The Bible), and the serpent woman contains wisdom and truth about herself. The connection between these two ideas lies in the knowledge that can be found in books. Once Blonde Esmerée is let out of the closet, others can learn her secret. The book has authority and should be only accessed by men, i.e., the sorcerers, but the serpent woman is her own authority in that she has knowledge of her own situation. Besides the magicians, Blonde Esmerée is the only witness to everything related to her curse. Moreover, Blonde Esmerée’s knowledge of her rejection of the sorcerer’s proposal, as well as her clever strategies and the timing of applying these when the knight appears, are exclusively in her control and no one else’s. Her intuitive knowledge stands against the sorcerers’ knowledge of their book, whose touch transformed her. Whereas books represent learned knowledge, the serpent’s knowledge is more intuitive and feared by men. They do not have access to exclusively female, non-literary knowledge. Ultimately, no matter how much book knowledge the men acquire, the serpent woman has the advantage of keeping secret her own knowledge. The disobedient female and the book are also tied together by the punishment that Blonde Esmerée is not able to speak. She is a voiceless woman. In the twelfth century, unless given the opportunity to be sent to a convent or educated at home by a religious teacher,138 women were still barred from formal education and study of

138 Marie de France, for example, appears to have been educated in a convent, according to Keith Busby (“Introduction,” Marie de France, The Lais of Marie de France, trans. Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby [London: Penguin, 1999], 7-36, here 19). More recent scholarship stresses that we have no knowledge about Marie de France’s identity or life. Her education is deduced from her literary allusions (see, for example, Logan E. Whalen, “Introduction,” A Companion to Marie de France, ed. Logan E. Whalen [Leiden, Nethrlands: Brills, 2011], vii-xiv, here vii-viii). Other
Scripture. Although women, as patronesses, obviously had access to many books at their courts, most of them were not formally educated and were illiterate. They likely had the material read to them.

Conversely, the relationship between the book and the woman is positive because it brings about the curse, which becomes necessary for Li Biaus to succeed in his adventure and to mature. The key to making the right decision lies in his acceptance of Blonde Esmerée’s appearance because the kiss he receives and his reaction to it reveals to the knight what has been hitherto unknown to him – his name. Moreover, the serpent woman lives in a cabinet for books, the armoire. The magician’s book is not kept in this armoire but rather the being it created. The armoire as a place for something precious applies here. It also contains a queen in disguise who wants to help a knight.

Joan Ferrante, who comments on La Pucelle’s knowledge, which is extensive and much greater than that of any of the characters in the romance, states that it would be easy to interpret examples of educated medieval women are Hildegard von Bingen, whose famous prose work Scivias (composed around 1141-1151) represents only one of many works of her poetic oeuvre (Christopher Headington, History of Western Music [New York: Schirmer, 1976], 65); also Christine de Pizan, who was educated in Italian and French and whose literary career did not emerge until widowhood. By 1405 Christine wrote for the most esteemed royal society in France (The Selected Writings of Christine de Pizan: New Translations: Criticism, eds. and trans. Kevin Brownlee and Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski [New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997], 99). Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughters, Marie de Champagne and Alis de Blois shared their ambition and love for the literary arts and promoted the poet culture throughout Northern and Southern France in the twelfth century (Chrétien de Troyes: Arthurian Romances, eds. and trans. William W. Kibler and Carleton W. Carroll [London: Penguin Classics, 1991], 13).

139 D. H. Green, Women Readers in the Middle Ages (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 85.
the book used to curse Blonde Esmerée as an admonishment against the educated woman. La Pucele is the most educated woman in the tale. She stands out by the education and knowledge she learned from her father. The details of her education are clearly spelled out, and, as the poet will reveal towards the end of the romance, linked to Blonde Esmerée’s enchanters. Ferrante suggests that Blonde Esmerée’s enchantment through the touch of a book is a warning against refusing the poet, who is the “literary lover, since poets are magicians.” I suggest that La Pucele and Blonde Esmerée’s roles become entwined, because Blonde Esmerée’s body is a direct result of the knowledge found in the “poet magician’s” book. The two women are related more deeply than is readily apparent because La Pucele’s knowledge is acquired through book learning. Both women are connected to the concepts of knowledge, sorcery, and danger. The image of the serpent woman issuing forth from the armoire invites multiple interpretations. It brings up for debate whether the vuivre’s armoire holds something curiously odd, precious, even ominous; whether the armoire’s meaning is linked to Blonde Esmerée’s wisdom and intelligence; or whether it is another form of misogynist commentary on woman's disobedience.

140 Joan Ferrante, To the Glory of Her Sex: Women's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997). Ferrante states that the enchantment through the touch of a book reveals anxiety against educated women as in “hit them with books and they turn into dragons” (127).

141 La Pucele was trained in the seven liberal arts and also in sorcery, which, according to Ferrante, replaces music (127): “que les set [ars] me fist apre[ndre] / tant que totes les soc entendre. / Arismetiche, dyomotrie, / ingremance et astrenomie / et des austres asés apris,” (4937-4941) (“I learned a great deal about arithmetic and geometry, / necromancy and astronomy, / and all the other arts as well,” 4939-4941).

142 Ferrante, 127.
2.4. Secrecy as a strategy

Secrecy plays a great role in the definition of the grotesque in *Li Biaus Descouneüs*. Blonde Esmerée’s condition is kept a secret from Li Biaus and the audience until the knight arrives in the great hall. The lady’s secret ensures that the knight would not delay his mission or even remain with La Pucele because of the unattractive reward he would have seen in rescuing an ugly serpent. Blonde Esmerée’s secret is also particularly associated with the female grotesque because of her own fears of being seen in public. Her strategy is also a result of her nobility because she resides at the center of her society and cannot afford to lose her reputation as a beautiful woman.

2.5. Ambiguity: the brilliant serpent woman

Despite Blonde Esmerée’s frightening form, she radiates a marvelous brilliance:

[…] elle jetoit une tel clarté

[con] un cierge bien enbrasé.

Tot le palais enluminoit,

une si grant clarté jetoit. (3129-3132)

[…] she gave out] as much light

as a brightly lit candle.

It filled the hall

with the great light it gave off.
The Old French meaning of the word *clarté* is distinctly positive and can be associated with divine light and the Holy Spirit. Its meaning suggests intellectual clarity. This magnificent image quickly reverses, however, only a few lines later when the *vuivre* spits fire: “par mi jetoit le feu ardant,” (“spewed forth flames,” 3135). Fire breathing underpins Blonde Esmerée’s description as a “si fait dyable” (“diabolical creature” 3152), evoking hell. Blonde Esmerée intensifies this image because of the two extreme forms of light that her body produces at the same time, brilliant luminosity and its opposite, diabolical fire. These opposite qualities evoke the theory of Bakhtin, for whom one way to define the grotesque as an aesthetic category is an image that contains “both the positive and the negative poles.” This statement strengthens the category of ambiguity well.

In an ambiguous scene that joins different images of light and darkness, the *vuivre* crawls out of an armoire into a completely dark hall, where the walls are shaking, and which is filled with an uncomfortable noise. Then she illuminates the hall with awe-inspiring light while blowing up a hellish firestorm at the same time. The impact of Blonde Esmerée’s unexpected entrance brimming with light is ambiguous, because she really seems to fill the great hall with

143 According to Tobler-Lommatzsch’s entry on *clarté*, other terms that could fit Blonde Esmerée’s description are also “enlightenment,” “new understanding,” “transparency,” “beauty,” and various forms of clarity (466, 739-741).

144 Margaret Miles, “Carnal Abominations: The Female Body and the Grotesque,” *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, eds. James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 83-112. Miles explains that the female grotesque in Western Christian figurations is principally a negative expression; the preferred depiction were images of body parts of lustful women tortured for their wantonness by reptiles and repulsive serpents (85-86).

light, which does not evoke an image of a single candle, but rather that of a flaming torch.\textsuperscript{146} Blonde Esmerée’s ability to produce such a strong light by being compared to a candle, “[con] un cierge bien enbrasé,” (“with a well-lit candle,” 3130) amplifies her power, emphasized by the image of the jongleurs only a few lines above. They needed candles to light up the hall but took them all away leaving the hall in total darkness:

\begin{quote}
Li cierge furent enporté
si i faisoit grant oscurté
que on n’i pooit rie[n] veoir
tant i faisoit oscur et noir. (3081-3084)
\end{quote}

The jongleurs had taken all the candles with them
so that it had become very dark,
and one could see nothing
in the blackness.

Renaut’s lyrical play on light creates a visual narrative.\textsuperscript{147} While the earlier darkness echoes the enchanters’ sinister intentions towards Blonde Esmerée, the light that she disperses is stronger than the darkness in which they wrapped her. The fact that the serpent can produce her own light once she leaves her armoire expresses her ability to overcome the enchanters’ control and her


wish to help the knight, who can now see again. Her self-illuminating quality embodies intelligence, which enables her to relieve both the knight and herself from suffering.

So far, no characteristic that defines Blonde Esmerée’s serpent body seems to be clearly interpretable; instead, each characteristic shows variations or contrasting aspects. This ambiguity is represented in the structure of her skin; it is multi-faceted with a golden underbelly and a tail shimmering in all imaginable colors: “Ains Dius ne fist cele color / qu’en li ne soit entremellee; / desous sanbloit estre doree,” (‘All the colors God created / were in this serpent’s tail; / its underbelly seemed to be golden,” 3146-3148). With each of her serpentine slithers, Blonde Esmerée seems to change color. When Blonde Esmerée’s iridescent, huge body, further reflecting her underbelly’s golden brilliance and huge glistening eyes, moves towards Li Biaus, it is difficult for the knight to discern what he is seeing. Fascinating and frightening, Blonde Esmerée’s unpredictable, ever-changing, and patterned body perfectly expresses the grotesque.

The scene is random and playful, and it has been suggested that Renaut has no need yet to identify the serpent Blonde Esmerée with the Lady Blonde Esmerée for the audience or the knight. The capriciousness that characterizes Blonde Esmerée’s grotesqueness is a quality

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148 Francis Dubost, Francis Gingras, and Nathalie Fortin, Merveilleux et fantastique au Moyen Age (Montpellier: Montpellier III-Université Paul-Valéry, 1996), 49. The authors refer to another ambiguous creature of Arthurian romance, the Bête Glatissante in Perlesvaus and suggest that the iridescence is a rather random choice because the beast does not need to provide any hint of what it will eventually become. For Kappler, the multi-coloration in monsters is generally part of a beauty discourse on the Other. It describes skin color of those humans portrayed as monstrous inhabitants of foreign worlds, such as seen in Marco Polo’s travels. Kappler describes the curiosity about gigantic, multi-colored serpents from distant lands found in earlier writings that seem to have trickled down in the medieval lore on beasts (168-169); see also Marco Polo, The Travels of Marco Polo, trans. Ronald Latham (London: Penguin, 1958).
traditionally associated with women. At first, her obstinate behavior towards her (evil) suitors caused her punishment; now, her radiant, multi-colored, and iridescent body offers a wondrous sight but it also spits fire. At this point, it is unclear whether the serpent is supposed to be frightening or appealing, or both. Nonetheless, Dubost proposes that Blonde Esmerée’s *bouce vermelle* and golden underbelly are indicators of gender, a prefiguration of the *blonde* Esmerée and a “golden connection” to La Pucele of the Ille d’Or.\(^{149}\) Gold is an emblem of Blonde Esmerée’s noble birth and character.

Blonde Esmerée’s gold tones are signs of nobility, character, and knowledge. According to ancient beliefs a serpent or dragon is wise and preserves cultural knowledge.\(^{150}\) Blonde Esmerée’s wisdom is evident in her decision to reject Mabons’s advances, which would have relieved her from the curse.\(^{151}\) Instead, Blonde Esmerée chooses to remain enchanted, a decision that is an indicator of her sovereignty and attachment to her realm, as she, restored to her human form, reveals when she describes her powerful position to Li Biaus:

\begin{quote}
C’est de mon roiaume li ciés.

Trois roi tienent de moi lor fiés;

molt par est cil roiaumes grans

molt est rices, molt est vaillans. (3391-3394)
\end{quote}

\(^{149}\) Dubost et. al., 51.


\(^{151}\) “Cil me veoit molt souvent dire / que jo a mari le presisse / et que s’amie devenisse / et que de cuer amaisse lui,” (“Again and again he pressed me / to take him as my husband / and to become his lady / and to love him with all my heart,” 3348-3351).
This is the seat of my realm.

Three kings hold their fiefs from me;

the realm is indeed a large one

a very powerful and wealthy land.

Within the same context, Blonde Esmerée also explains to the knight that she, well knowing that only a good knight could have saved her land, had refused to marry Mabons although he had offered to free her from her torture.  

Since Blonde Esmerée refused his request for marriage each time he offered to lift the curse if she would take him as her husband, and her refusal eventually led to Mabons and Evrains li fiers’s destruction, her decision to remain enchanted can be understood as a sacrifice for her land.

Brightness and multi-coloration are signs of disorder in the serpent woman’s appearance. Christine Ferlampin-Acher suggests that due to the growing poetic creativity in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, fictional creatures were increasingly portrayed as glaring, bedazzling and luminous, shimmering in all colors of the earth. When authors began exploring ways to expand the literary material handed down to them, they disengaged from the strict idea that monstrous portrayal needed to be a tight mimetic representation. Ferlampin-Acher points out that this literary development was related to the growing technical interest in optics and the diffraction of light.  

The design of Blonde Esmerée’s shining body, and the poet’s play with

152 “si m’osteroit de cest anui,” (“saying that he would then free me from this torture,” 3352).

light and color might well reflect such an interest in optics. His serpent woman creates ever-changing patterns suggestive of the culture’s increased awareness of these elements.

Usually, beautiful eyes contribute to the ideal beauty, and Blonde Esmerée’s eyes are an essential physical feature that twists the notion of this ideal. Her big red eyes are comparable to carbuncles: “Les iols avoit gros et luissans / come deus esclarbocles grans,” (“It had big shining eyes / like two great carbuncles,” (3139-3140).154 Although the carbuncles confer a noble quality to the serpent woman,155 at first sight, the description of Blonde Esmerée’s eyes generates a

154 According to Williams, the analysis of horrible, monstrous eyes is suggestive of more than “mere strangeness” (149). For example, the location of Blonde Esmerée’s eyes may have to do with older historical sources that shaped medieval lore, such as the Liber Monstrorum, a late seventh-or early eighth-century Anglo-Latin index about marvelous creatures. One passage reads that “there is a certain island in the oriental parts of the globe, on which men are born reasonable in stature, except that their eyes shine like lanterns” (149). Moreover and arising from Judeo-Christian imagery, glowing eyes suggest a tie to angels. In the legend, the progeny of the union between angels and the daughters of Cain had shining eyes. Williams also refers to Grendel, who is depicted as a descendent of Cain with a monstrous shining light in his eyes. He concludes that those monsters sharing a similar trait are, in some general form, associated with fallen angels (150). Other references, which seem variations of such an angelic eye turned into a form of “evil eye” describe, for example, the basilisk that kills by glancing at its victim; there are also peculiar races, as Mandeville reports, that have gem stones propped into their eye sockets which they use to kill (151); see also Andy Orchard, Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), in particular the Liber Monstrorum, Book III.2 on serpents in the Assyrian deserts with eyes shining “like lanterns” (307).

155 According to the Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore, and Symbols, the carbuncle is a gemstone associated with qualities such as constancy, energy, self-confidence, strength, blood and the Christian symbol of martyrdom. The carbuncle was perceived as a wondrous gemstone that illuminates all day and night. Whoever would wear it would receive great honor and grace by all who come in contact with the wearer (Gertrude Jobes, Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols, [New York: Scarecrow Press, 1961], 290); see also Martha H. Shackford, Legends and Satires from Medieval Literature (Boston: Ginn, 1913), who explains that in the medieval lapidary De Gemmis produced in the twelfth century by Marbodus, Bishop of Rennes, the red carbuncle stone is said to surpass “the wonders of all other stones” (115) and has the virtues of
different image than Renaut’s portrait of a regular beautiful maiden’s eyes, as for example in the lady Margerie in the Giflet adventure. Her eyes are bright in the conventional sense, “Le[s] iols ot vairs …,” (“She had bright eyes …,” 1549). Renaut’s praise of this maiden’s eyes emphasizes how unique and powerful the serpent woman’s eyes really are. Blonde Esmerée’s eyes truly glow, and despite her serpent body she is so special that her eyes illuminate the hall.156

While her eyes only allude to the features of a courtly maiden, her mouth and lip color are undoubtedly reminders of beautiful maidenly lips. Like her glowing eyes, her lips are red: “que la bouce ot tote vermelle, / par mi jetoit le feut ardant,” (“its mouth was red, / and spewed forth flames,” 3134-3136).157 Such a bouce vermelle represents a true human feature of a medieval beauty. Alice M. Colby-Hall discusses the color of Blonde Esmerée’s lips as an unmistakable indicator of courtly beauty, whereas Renaut “has given us a portrait of an ideally ugly serpent whose only human characteristics are those associated with such ugliness in both men and beasts.”158 Indeed, when Blonde Esmerée looks at the knight with big, shiny red eyes, all stones combined. Moreover, the carbuncle is considered to have comforting qualities, to both heart and body (115).

156 Colby-Hall suggests that the big bright eyes of the serpent would be appropriate for a fair youth or maid, where they compare to stars, candles, or ordinary gems rather than to two large carbuncles, red, glowing, and, according to the popular medieval conception capable of lighting up a room (“The Lips” 113).

157 See André G. Ott, Etude sur les couleurs en vieux français, 1899 (Genève: Slatkine, 1977). Ott describes the color “vermelle,” from the Latin “vermiculus,” in Old French as a red “rouge écarlate” (scarlet red) or “rouge vif” (bright, vivid red) (123).

158 Colby-Hall distinguishes plain rouge from “vermeil,” traditionally applied to “attractive mouth of both men and women” and indicates that both expressions “bouce” and “vermelle” “could easily have been lifted without change from a standard portrayal of ideal beauty” (“The Lips” 113). With the “bouce vermelle” the salient color goes even beyond an attribute of mere
welcoming him with a bright red mouth, the sexual innuendo is striking. Her bizarre looks are emphasized by the contrast between her womanly lips and the rest of her body, which is hideous and huge with a waist bigger than a barrel: “Molt par estoit hidosse et grant; / par mi le pis plus grosse estoit / que un vaissaus d’un mui ne soit,” (“It was huge and hideous / wider across the middle / than a wine-cask,” 3136-3138). Blondine Esmerée reveals beauty and ugliness as coexisting aspects; by measuring the rest of her body against the red mouth, the grotesque comes to the surface.

Her red mouth mesmerizes Li Biaus. For a moment he forgets his fear because looking at Blonde Esmerée’s female lips reminds him of La Pucele. Just a few lines earlier (3115-3116), fearful and alone in the dark great hall, he had comforted himself by remembering that “Entemes cil qui a amor / ne doit avoir nule paor,” (“And besides, he who has love / should never be afraid,” 3115-3116). To Li Biaus, the lips are an icon of love, but the sexual overtones physical beauty but exhibits a shade used by medieval contemporaries to describe costly silk and wool garments, “shields, armor, and banners,” which, in Li Biaus Descouneüs, makes it an overt reference to Blonde Esmerée’s social status (114).

159 See also Raphaela Averkorn, “Les Nobles, sont-ils toujours beaux? Quelques remarques sur les descriptions de personages dans les chroniques médiévales de la Péninsule Ibérique,” Le beau et le laid au Moyen Âge, CUERMA (Aix-en-Provence, France: Centre universitaire d'études et de recherches médiévales d'Aix, 2000), 27-44. Averkorn writes that in the medieval Christian world a woman’s ideal body shape would include a small waist (taille mince, 29). Blonde Esmerée’s waist size, however, does not conform to the medieval body standards, a fact also commented upon by Alice M. Colby-Hall, The Portrait in Twelfth-Century French Literature: An Example of the Stylistic Originality of Chrétien De Troyes (Genève, CH: Librarie Droz, 1965), 69.

160 This reading of the grotesque can be “defined only in relation to an ideal, standard, or normative form” (Miles, 89); see also Harpham, who contends that the co-presence of the norm, “fully formed ‘high’ or ‘ideal,’ and the abnormal, unformed, degenerate, ‘low’ or material” marks most grotesque forms; my reading of both the high form of Blonde Esmerée’s rosy lips and her otherwise abnormal body as vuivre is supported by Harpham’s argument (9).
of the serpent woman’s lips also fascinate him:

\[
\text{Il l’esgarde, pas ne s’oublie}
\]

\[
\text{ne de rie[n] nule ne fercele,}
\]

\[
\text{et si a molt grant [se] mervele}
\]

\[
de la bouce qu’a si vermelle. (3179-3182)
\]

He looked at it, his attention fixed

without moving,

and he marveled greatly

at the mouth so red.

Nonetheless, Blonde Esmerée overall repulses the knight. Beyond the sexual attraction to a woman’s red lips lies another problem with a woman’s mouth: it speaks. Jane Burns claims that the mouth is a body part that poses the problem of a woman’s speech in the antifeminist discourse of the French Middle Ages.\(^{161}\) Discussing a variety of Old French texts including romance and fabliau, Burns argues that the sexualized representation of the female mouth as a body part that confuses men comes out of the same misogynist tradition.\(^ {162}\) We see this in the poet’s mockery of Blonde Esmerée’s female mouth that he attaches to a huge serpent’s body.


\(^{162}\) Burns suggests that when analyzing “a dirty story,” such as the fourteenth-century fabliau “Farce moralisée à quatre personneiges” (written roughly three hundred years after \textit{Li Biaus Descouneis}), the female mouth and “ass” are “equivalent and interchangeable body parts” against which the husband finds himself in “a relentless struggle against two complementary sets of female lips” (31).
The enchanters make sure that Blonde Esmerée’s mouth is beautiful but not used for speaking, which presents a problem similar to the one that Burns addresses in her study of the fabliau. The control over Blonde Esmerée’s speech as punishment for having talked back to a male (she had refused to accept Mabon’s proposal) demonstrates this male anxiety: “Quant voloient a moi parler, / andoi me venoient devant, / s’ostoient lor encantemant,” (“Whenever they wished to speak with me / they came before me / and removed the enchantment,” 3344-3346). The enchanters are entirely in command of her voice.

2.6. Blonde Esmerée as Other: the knight in crisis

Li Biaus’s maturation and his identity depend on the serpent woman. Her body and demeanor are centrally important in this identity forming process, and we can finally understand why her appearance is necessary for the emotional transformation of the protagonist. Therefore, the Fier Baissier episode, which will determine the knight’s identity and make him fit for being included at the Round Table, lies at the heart of the romance. Li Biaus must learn acceptance through the shocking encounter with Blonde Esmerée and face the challenge to make the right choice that serves the greater good of his court. Blonde Esmerée teaches him this lesson by kissing him at a vital moment that completely takes the knight by surprise and shames him so deeply that he at first believes he has been forsaken by God (3209). However, Li Biaus’s despondency subsides because it very soon becomes clear that the lady’s alarming conduct and her disturbing form have a positive meaning for his growth and the outcome of the tale. This paradox adds to my interpretation of Blonde Esmerée as a grotesque woman.

When Li Biaus arrives at Blonde Esmerée’s castle, he is tired and unsure of himself after having just slain the two magicians and left behind La Pucele so unworthily (“… come vilains,” 3120). He finds himself in the midst of a dark and quaking great hall when he suddenly sees a
cupboard open and a serpent crawl out of it: “Contreval l’aumaire descent / et vint par mi le pavement,” (“It slithered down the cupboard / until it reached the ground,” 3141-3142). Renaut sets up the scene in a slow-moving description of Blonde Esmerée emerging from the cabinet. As soon as the strange serpent has progressed far enough to reach the knight, she rises and assumes a more human posture, and surprisingly bows submissively before him: “et la grans vivre li encline / del cief dusqu’a la poitrine: / sanblant d’umelité li fait” (“the huge serpent bowed to him / from its head down to its middle: / it made a gesture of respect to him,” 3157-3159). It is disarming to see a huge beast behave with grace rather than ravenously lunge towards its enemy to devour him. According to Gertrude Jobes, the bow is a gesture of humility, obeisance, submission, and yielding. Blonde Esmerée performs such a humble act, directly and strongly confirming her subordinate disposition towards Li Biaus, who otherwise would be subordinate to Blonde Esmerée if she were not transformed.

The scene is evocative of a similar episode in Chrétien’s tale in _Le Chevalier au Lion_. Yvain, an ambitious young knight at Arthur’s court, has behaved selfishly on various occasions, and filled with shame he vanishes into the wilderness. When he saves the life of a lion that is battling with a serpent, the lion bows before him in gratitude. The lion’s gesture denotes

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163 Jobes, 238.

164 Chrétien de Troyes, _Le Chevalier au Lion, ou, le Roman d’Yvain_, ed. David S. Hult.

165 The lion ‘stood up, his paws joined, then went down to the ground and came up on his two hind paws: “Et ses piés joins li estendoit, / Puis se va vers tere fichier / Si s’estut seur .ii. ses pies derrier / …/ Set que li leons l’en merchie / Et que devant lui s’umilie / Pour le serpent qu’il avoit mort / Et lui delivré de la mort” (Chrétien de Troyes, _Le Chevalier au Lion, ou, le Roman d’Yvain_, 3396-3398; 3403-3406). This is a central moment for the romance’s main theme of a knight needing to mature and to serve selflessly. It occurs at the midpoint, which resides at the
courtesy and nobility. When comparing Chrétien’s scene to Blonde Esmerée and Li Biaus in the great hall, Yvain’s experience seems to be the model for Li Biaus’s. Like Yvain, Li Biaus had been negligent of his duties because of his amorous pastime with La Pucele, whom he leaves only after being reproached by Helie for his disregard of Blonde Esmerée’s plight. His situation echoes Yvain’s admonishment by his wife’s lady-in-waiting for being disloyal to Laudine, his wife.

Li Biaus recognizes a human aspect in Blonde Esmerée but is unsure what to do. The encounter rouses in him a deep-seated anxiety. Esmerée’s red mouth, her shimmering body, and her barely perceptible human sexuality allude to temptation that both attracts and repels. The images that Blonde Esmerée conveys reveal a “modicum of truth”\(^\text{166}\) about Li Biaus’s life. They counsel the knight to honor his duties and not pursue La Pucele. Wilson Yates describes an encounter with the grotesque as one being caught off guard,\(^\text{167}\) and it is Blonde Esmerée’s function to startle the knight into rethinking his chief purpose. Obviously, when Li Biaus stands in the great hall across from her, he is seized with fear of the big serpent he sees: “Vers le

\[\text{heart of a romance. (See Uitti on the meaning of a romance’s midpoint [this chapter, 61]). The lion, which enters Yvain’s service in gratitude, from then on becomes his loyal companion. It has a great impact on Yvain’s emotional growth as he learns about bravery, loyalty, and humility through the beast’s companionship.}\]

\(^{166}\) Kayser, \textit{The Grotesque in Art and Literature}, 31.

chevalier s’en venoit; / cil se saine quant il le voit,” (“It advanced toward the knight, / who crossed himself when he saw it,” 3149–3150).

Li Biaus has to surrender his personal motives and embrace his service to Arthur. However, after the Fier Baissier adventure has been completed, the knight is vain and grieves over the fact that his life will be ruined because he was tricked by a serpent whose kiss he compares to the devil’s work.168 After his lament the knight hears an encouraging voice from above, which, he will learn much later, belongs to La Pucele who plotted the entire set of events, including Blonde Esmerée’s transformation. This voice asks Li Biaus to overcome his doubt and flatters the knight that he has accomplished his greatest adventure by accepting Blonde Esmerée’s despicable kiss:

Tres bien le savoie de voir
que chevalier n’aroit pooir,
nus ne peüst pas delivrer,
nus ne peüst tant endur[er]
ze le baisier ne l’aventure
qui tant est perilleuse et dure. (3217-3222)

I knew quite well
that no other knight would have such strength,

168 “‘Dius, Sire,’ fait [il], ‘que ferai / del Fier Baissier que fait i ai? / Molt dolerous baisier ait fait! / Or sui je traïs entresait. / Li diables m’a encanté / que j’ai baissié otre mon gré. / Or pris je molt petit ma vie,’” (“‘Lord God,’ he said, ‘what shall happen to me / because of the Fearsome Kiss which I have undergone? / That kiss was indeed a terrible thing! / Surely I have been betrayed. / The devil has caught me in a spell, / for I have kissed against my will. / I now set my life at a small price,’” 3205-3211).
that no other could accomplish this rescue,
that no other could endure
either the kiss or any adventure
so dangerous and harsh as this one.

The praise reveals to Li Biaus that he is the one designated for this kiss. He learns that he has done something for the Arthurian community that no one else could have accomplished. His achievement resonates with the master principle of the romance. The completion of the challenge results in Li Biaus being endowed with his true name, Guinglan, and also determines his further destiny as Blonde Esmerée’s husband. Her ugliness is used to test the knight’s loyalty and engender modesty. Had Li Biaus rested on the laurels of his past victories, he would not have acquired the humility necessary to be fully recognized by the other knights at the Round Table. While being counted among these men is one of the highest individual rewards for the romance knight, the designation requires a selfless dedication to the group. Blonde Esmerée’s awful appearance works in two ways in favor of the romance culture and serves to define the knight and the group’s identity. It seeks to destroy Li Biaus’s will and also to demoralize him so that he will not pursue the relationship with the woman he desires, La Pucele.

The *Fier Baissier* ends Blonde Esmerée’s existence as a serpent because the kiss lifts her curse. She needs this situation to secure her own destiny and reveal her true identity as much as Li Biaus needs the kiss to complete his adventure. Therefore, Blonde Esmerée tries a bold move; she throws herself towards the knight, and immediately recedes: “La guivre vers lui se lança / et en la bouce le baissa. / Quant l’ot baissié, si se retorne,” (“Then the serpent darted toward him / and kissed him on the mouth. / And when it had kissed him, it drew back,” 3185-3187). She then acts quickly – se lança, se retorne, or earlier reacts “eneslespas” (“at once” 3172) – in
movements that imply rapid and necessary action to overpower the knight. She does not lean towards him as she did when she bowed to him (“encline” 3157), although also the leaning and bowing took Li Biaus by surprise so that he did not draw his sword (“Ançois qu’il l’eüst fors jetee, / et la grans wivre li encline” (“Before he could draw it, / the huge serpent bowed to him” 3156-3157). Blonde Esmerée knows that Li Biaus will not kill her because she trusts that her submissive conduct will remind him of knightly ethics: “De molt grant francisse li vient / que il ferir ne le vult mie / por ce que vers lui s’umilie,” (“It had come to him with such a nobility of manner / that he did not wish to strike it, / for it had bowed to him,” 3194-3196).169 The vuivre’s quick movements, once she has advanced close enough to the knight, emphasize her urgency because she knows that Li Biaus would most likely refuse to kiss her. Once again Blonde Esmerée applies her intelligence to help herself. Knowing that the knight would draw his sword if she merely advanced towards him, instead she first bows, which causes Li Biaus to hesitate long enough that Blonde Esmerée can quickly snatch her kiss.

169 The scene is reminiscent of Marie de France’s Bisclavret, composed around 1170. In this scene, the king calls off the hunt of Bisclavret, when the beast behaves as would a human being (see Marie de France, Lais de Marie France, ed. Karl Warnke, trans. Laurence Harf-Lancner, Lettres gothiques [Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1990], 116-133). In Li Biaus Descouneis, Li Biaus realizes that the serpent woman behaves in courtly fashion. Blonde Esmerée greets him with a bow, and he decides to keep his sword sheathed. This decision emphasizes the knightly honor not to dispatch an opponent showing surrender.
Blonde Esmerée’s kiss turns the serpent woman’s behavior into an image of the grotesque. Although her kiss is political, a seal that enables the marriage between Li Biaus and Blonde Esmerée, it is also an ironical echo of Li Biaus kissing La Pucele, whom Li Biaus liked to kiss. The *Fier Baissier* mocks an erotic form of kissing and has a disenchainting function that forever eradicates any possibility that Li Biaus could marry La Pucele. Li Biaus’s excitement about the young lovers’ kissing is spoiled and leads to his personal disappointment that kissing La Pucele was part of a set up. As the sorceress, La Pucele successfully had controlled all events from the beginning except for the one moment when Li Biaus chose to listen to Helie and leave the Ille d’Or and La Pucele behind in order to pursue his rescue of Blonde Esmerée. Accomplishing the *Fier Baissier* fulfills Li Biaus’s intended destiny: to be fit for the Round Table and ensure that Arthur’s kingdom will continue. This outcome corresponds to the romance’s master principle, namely that the knight matures by overcoming his own struggle.

Li Biaus is tested in the *Fier Baissier* adventure, which when analyzed more closely, reveals issues with the society’s rigid beauty ideal. It ridicules a man who is involved with an undesirable woman but also exposes problems with the culture’s limited choices in making marital decisions. In the romance, true forms of personal bonding between a man and a woman, for example, between Li Biaus and La Pucele, are portrayed as ephemeral. Instead the romance reveals how emotionally indifferent the knight really has to be towards his object of rescue. The romance plot shuns the desire for a beautiful woman and punishes a smart and powerful woman by putting her in a serpent’s body. Female physical appearance, ugly or beautiful, is used only superficially as a function for sexual satisfaction and status.

At the same time, the *Fier Baissier* adventure ridicules the knight. The poet uses the serpent woman to introduce passivity in the knight, a quality that the Middle English *Lybeaus*
Desconus will exploit further. Just as the serpent woman is an inversion of the courtly maiden in Li Biaus Descouneüs, this afflicted creature also inverts the typical figure of the Arthurian knight in his most essential qualities: prowess and authority. Li Biaus does not have to do anything to win the Fier Baissier adventure; in fact, he has to do the opposite of what a knight usually does. He has to remain passive, which serves to introduce humility to him.²⁷⁰ His beliefs about love, revealed in his self-soothing talk when standing in the dark great hall just before Blonde Esmerée comes out of her armoire, turn out to be false. His love for La Pucele did not save him from the humiliating Fier Baissier. Li Biaus learns that love does not save a knight but bedazzles him.

With regard to the grotesque, this sobering revelation also suggests that beneath the surface of a seemingly humorous and odd event, such as kissing a huge serpent, lies a graver truth. The complexity of the situation shows the conflicted relationship among the women with whom Li Biaus is involved. It also shows the conflict between the knights and their objects of desire in general. This conflict is embodied in the confusing message of danger and desire that Blonde Esmerée’s grotesque body sends out. Her appearance has, however, a positive influence on Li Biaus. Gérard Chandès suggests that the loathly woman is the only woman who enables a knight to move forward, whereas the other models he encounters, such as the vamp or his mother, have a desire to retain the hero close to their person and thus alienate him by forcing him

²⁷⁰ Renaut possibly draws a parallel to Le Chevalier de la Charrette and makes a humorous comparison between Li Biaus and Lancelot, who, in the Tournament of Noauz does his worst in order to please Guinevere, and willingly follows her orders (lines 5369-6056). See Chrétien de Troyes, Le Chévalier de la Charrette, ed. Catherine Croizy-Naquet (Paris: Champion, 2006).
to remain in the territory from which they reign.\textsuperscript{171} Chandès’s argument can be applied to my reading of 	extit{Li Biaus Descouneüs}. At the source of Li Biaus’s quest lies a force that configures diverse images of women as sorceress (La Pucele), loathly woman (Blonde Esmerée)\textsuperscript{172}, vamp (La Pucele), and mother figure that do not want to let him go. Blonde Esmerée is the only one who enables him to move forward in his life. While the mother kept Li Biaus “unknown” to the world and hidden at their remote home in a forest, La Pucele wants to keep him hidden in her island castle. The goal of both women is to control the love he has for them, because unless they can control Li Biaus physically and emotionally, they can never be sure that he will stay. The adult women, like the mother and La Pucele, are emotionally dependent on the young knight, who is, unlike the other knights in their culture available to them, still malleable and treats women more gently than the weathered knights hardened by their social interaction with women. This tenderness of a young man might be the only opportunity for noblewomen to receive genuine affection from the opposite gender. Their manipulation for love is but a symptom of a cultural malaise that grows from dissatisfaction with oppressive cultural standards. From the medieval male point of view, this dynamic caused by a profound yearning is the reason why love would harm a knight’s ability to function properly. Deep inside, the knights are aware that they need affection, too, and that their own rules prevent finding it. The men freeze any emotional

\textsuperscript{171}See Gérard Chandès, 	extit{Le serpent, la femme et l'épée: Recherches sur l'imagination symbolique d'un romancier médiéval: Chrétien de Troyes} (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1986). In “La Demoiselle Hideuse,” Chandès refers to Perceval’s encounter with the loathly lady (147). Before this encounter Perceval’s mother kept her son away from society and thereby raised a young man with a troubled psychology caused by stunted emotional development into adolescence.

\textsuperscript{172} While I do not consider Blonde Esmerée’s appearance as an example of the loathly lady motif, I parallel her here to Chandès who claims that the ugly woman helps the knight to move forward in his journey. See also Dwyer, 37-38.
dependence on a woman as soon as it becomes apparent, especially when recognized in their new crop of knights whom they collectively train to the customs of the Round Table. The anxiety about female sexual power is engrained even in the representation of their familial ties. The serpent woman is a literary image created to prevent knights from losing all that they can hold on to. She makes us aware that the serpent curse is a grotesque form of abuse of a young, bereaved woman and an adolescent knight who has fallen in love for the first time in his life. Blonde Esmerée yanks the still innocent and naïve Li Biaus away from being too soft by traumatizing him with her appearance and by kissing him so grotesquely.

The women surrounding Li Biaus are related to each other, and their dangerous ideas culminate in terrifying creatures such as the *vuivre* or frightful nightmares, which the hero experiences during his second visit to La Pucele (4511-4579). These images of horror reveal another underlying misogynistic core belief that women operate in a treacherous web of deception and that their unity is ultimately based on trickery and dishonesty. It is a grotesque element in this romance that in the end it is the horrible *vuivre* that enables the knight to find his identity, and it is the beautiful La Pucele who announces to him the meaning of the *vuivre’s* kiss by revealing his name, Guinglain. However, these outcomes are well intentioned despite the deception used to arrive at them. These women are nurturing. They selflessly create situations that will ensure the knight’s maturation in a safe though challenging environment, thereby accepting to the loss of this man. Not surprisingly, La Pucele had close contact with Li Biaus’s mother: “Ciés vostre mere molt sovent / aloie je por vos veîr,” (“I often went to the house / of your mother to see you,” 4970-4971). Here at last it becomes clear that the women have been neither weak nor passive at all, but are in fact in control of Li Biaus’s life.
2.7. Blonde Esmerée and La Pucele: mirroring maidens

La Pucele is closely associated with the serpent woman Blonde Esmerée, suggesting an ideological link between both characters. Both women are rivals who compete for the protagonist. La Pucele’s wish to keep Li Biaus at Ille d’Or is an impediment to the knight. It explains why some earlier critics have found fault with the romance for placing so much emphasis on the love between Li Biaus and the fairy mistress in contrast to other *Fair Unknown* versions, in which she is no more than a temporary diversion from his real task. Compared to La Pucele, Blonde Esmerée has secondary meaning for the knight’s emotional life. These opinions, however, fail to take into account the psychological interest in the workings of the relationship that is generated by the extended role of La Pucele as a foil to Blonde Esmerée. Fresco remarks that the portraits of La Pucele and Blonde Esmerée, as a female, not a serpent, are stereotypical and interchangeable for female characters.¹⁷³ The double structure that describes the hero’s involvement with these women keeps the reader in the dark as to which of them will be more important.¹⁷⁴ While most of the scholarship focuses on the fairy mistress as the hero’s true love and a force undermining Arthur’s endeavors, Blonde Esmerée has not received much attention. Her appearances in the story are few, which explains why she can easily be overlooked as a character worth studying.

¹⁷³ Fresco, “Introduction,” xiii.

¹⁷⁴ Fresco, “Introduction,” xiii.
Denis Hüb argues that La Pucelle and Blonde Esmerée are more closely related than originally thought. He describes the relationship between La Pucelle and Blonde Esmerée (in her human form and not as *vuivre*) as innovative play with mirroring characters, for example, the poet’s literary attention to the description of their eyes, lips, and face in which he incorporates images of both moon and sun.¹⁷⁵ Both women have sexual contact with Li Biaus, if only – as in the case of Blonde Esmerée – in the form of one kiss. Both women’s abilities to choose a potential husband are controlled by powerful men, and both are liberated from these controlling men by the help of the young knight, Li Biaus.¹⁷⁶

Hüb’s thesis may be extended to the parallels between La Pucelle and Blonde Esmerée in her serpent form, which he does not address. La Pucelle’s encounter with Li Biaus is positioned between his departure from the court and his arrival in the Cité Gaste, thus making sure that the knight is already familiar with elements that he later witnesses in the serpent woman’s body. These features, echoed in Blonde Esmerée’s body, form a semiotic system that unveils elements of La Pucelle, and vice versa, from equally different contexts. La Pucelle, who lives on the Ille d’Or, the Golden Island, carries in her location’s name the color “gold,” the color of the serpent Blonde Esmerée’s underbelly. Gold as an indicator of a place where knowledge is hoarded¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ Hüb writes: “Les deux héroïnes sont présentées par Renaut de Beaujeu en des termes bien voisins, qui, s’ils reprennent la tradition médiévale du portrait (on décrit bouche, yeux, visage, front ...) jouent de plus sur des parallélismes sensibles” (“Le Bel Inconnu: Miroirs et Réflexions,” Web).

¹⁷⁶ Hüb; Fresco also refers to Renaut’s method of doubling the female characters and their situations and even supplying two endings (“Introduction,” xiv).

¹⁷⁷ Williams writes that the dragon in the Germanic tradition is conceived as “bearing an ancient curse” and the image that it hoards gold stands for “an image of wisdom” (206).
appears in the place name where La Pucele, a wise and educated female, reigns. Similarly, gold is descriptive of Blonde Esmerée, whose hair is blond. A carbuncle, shining brighter than the sun, tops La Pucele’s palace that is made out of clear crystal and set in the most magnificent of locations.\(^\text{178}\) In contrast to the *esclarboucles* of the *vuivre*’s eyes, La Pucele’s carbuncle illuminates a much bigger space, not merely a hall, which is the only place where Blonde Esmerée can fully shine. La Pucele’s gemstone lights up the entire land. Naturally, as if guided by this bright light, the knight finds his way to the Ille d’Or. However, La Pucele is not really a figure of daylight but rather meets with Li Biaus in the evenings or at night, which explains why Philippe Walter describes La Pucele as “Reine de la Nuit” (130).\(^\text{179}\) One could say that the queen of the Ille d’Or leads the knight, deceived by the bright light, into the potential darkness, a metaphor for her extraordinary but dangerous beauty.

Paradoxically, true “clarity” and “brightness” lie in the serpent woman Blonde Esmerée, who disgusts any man who looks at her. She, too, lives in darkness, namely in the armoire in the dim great hall. Regardless of her repulsive effect and the darkness surrounding her, *clarté* describes Blonde Esmerée’s body, which “filled the hall” like “a bright lit candle” (“Tot le palais enluminoit, / une si grant clarté jetoit,” 3131-3132). Renaut deliberately applies the image of *clarté* to create a sense of uncertainty as to whether the serpent’s light is perceived as positive or negative. As we see, some merits describing La Pucele’s beauty and her location are reused in

\(^{178}\) “Une esclarboucle sus luissoit; / plus que solaus resplendissoit / et par nuit rent si grant claret / con se ce fust en tans d’esté,” (“At the very top was a carbuncle / that shone brighter than the sun / and gave out such great light at night / that it seemed to be summertime,” 1913-1916).

\(^{179}\) Walter, 130.
Blonde Esmerée’s description. These qualities transcend the two figures, creating ambiguity as to how to interpret both women’s intentions towards Li Biaus. The ambiguous image suggests that a woman has two sides, one ugly and the other beautiful, or in a greater religious sense a good and an evil side, comparable to Mary and Eve.

3. Conclusion: Blonde Esmerée glittering and ghastly

In this romance, the noble female is more self-empowered in her serpent form than in her human form. This condition suggests that through the transformation into a nonconformist, unattractive serpent woman, Blonde Esmerée gains a small space of autonomy that is untouched because it is inaccessible, misinterpreted, overlooked, or even purposefully created for her. Glittering and ghastly, shining and terrible, the cursed serpent queen asserts her sovereignty by pushing beyond the constrictions of her enchantment. Blonde Esmerée’s grotesqueness is seen foremost in the ambiguity of her huge, multicolored, fantastic body, which she exhibits and which takes over the great hall. Her physical presence contrasts with her courtly bowing and bold kissing. During her punishment as a serpent woman, Blonde Esmerée accelerates the knight’s mission to her advantage. While under enchantment, she is able to extend the limits of her quiet power as a noble maiden to protect her assets and secure the estate that she inherited from her father. Blonde Esmerée’s courtship maneuvering as a grotesque element emphasizes the difficulties that all medieval women faced in safeguarding their interests within the boundaries of the courtly relationship. This was a system that idolized the woman as a prize or artifact to glorify the male-centric interests of adventuring knights.

Blonde Esmerée is a valuable model for a noble female protagonist in a classical romance. Her serpent form and its function challenge concepts of ideal beauty, as seen in the physical attributes of her romantic rival, La Pucele. Her grotesqueness functions as a warning to
the knight and plays with ambiguous imagery of light and darkness to describe her serpent body. She succeeds in leading the young knight away from La Pucele, who has distracted him too long. Blonde Esmerée’s strategy to snatch the *Fier Baisser* from the young knight eventually fulfills the knight’s mission, and Li Biaus completes the adventure that ends Blonde Esmerée’s enchantment. By being an ugly foil to the beautiful La Pucele, Blonde Esmerée teaches the knight a lesson in not getting distracted by beauty and exterior values, and to be more vigilant in fulfilling his obligations to Arthur. In the next chapter, the protagonist’s serpent form assumes a stronger sexual meaning as the Lady of Synadoun asserts her desire in the Middle English *Lybeaus Desconus*. Although her physical form is less ghastly than that of Blonde Esmerée, her conduct is remarkably forward and considerably less courtly.
CHAPTER 3: A SERPENT WOMAN IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH LYBEAUS DESCONUS

1. Lybeaus Desconus: a romance in Middle English

In the previous chapter, I have described the grotesque woman in the Old French Li Biaus Descouneüs, which was written over a century before its Middle English cognate, Lybeaus Desconus, appeared around 1350. Covering roughly one third of Li Biaus Descouneüs’s length, Lybeaus Desconus is the shortest of the four tales included in this study. The romance survives in six manuscripts; this analysis is limited to three. Lybeaus Desconus distinguishes itself from the Old French poem by its swift plot development and formulaic style. Lybeaus Desconus remains improperly understood and little studied.¹⁸⁰ Just like the Old French cognate, the English romance also offers a treatment of the ideology around courtship and marriage. Lybeaus Desconus represents a condensed version of the Bel Inconnu material that, according to Shuffelton, stands out through its “abridgment, simplification of ‘courtly’ Eros, and a more insistent emphasis on action.”¹⁸¹ Although Thomas Chestre is often considered the author of Sir Launfal, Lybeaus Desconus, and Octovian, the recent editors of Lybeaus Desconus, Eve Salisbury and James Weldon, argue that there is not enough conclusive and convincing evidence

¹⁸⁰ Eve Salisbury and James Weldon, “Lybeaus Desconus: Introduction,” (University of Rochester, TEAMS Middle English Text Series, Robbins Digital Library Projects, 2013), Web. Although the exact source for Lybeaus Desconus is not known despite of various analogues in other languages that closely relate to the poet’s version, i.e., the Middle High German Wigalois by Wirnt von Grafenberg and its own close analogue, the anonymous Wigamur, as well as the Italian Carduino, Salisbury and Weldon consider Renaut de Bâgé’s Li Biaus Descouneüs the closest analogue to Lybeaus Desconus.

available that would justify this claim; instead, they refer to the poem’s author as the Lybeaus poet.\(^{182}\) In this dissertation, I follow their example.

In *Lybeaus Desconus*, the relationship conflict is embodied by the young knight Lybeaus,\(^{183}\) who goes out to rescue the Lady of Synadoun after her maid Elene and the dwarf guide Theodoelyn have requested help from King Arthur and his knights. After an initial squabble between the king, his knights, Elene, and Lybeaus, Arthur agrees to send the inexperienced Lybeaus with the messengers. Once equipped with the appropriate armor and a horse, Lybeaus sets off for Synadoun. During his journey, he masters the same adventures as his Old French counterpart, Li Biaus, however in slightly different order.\(^{184}\) For example, the sorceress, La Dame Amoure, a figure comparable to La Pucele in the Old French, seduces Lybeaus. Lybeaus cannot resist her, interrupting his travels for over twelve months.\(^{185}\) Only after Elene vehemently reminds Lybeaus to get back on his way to rescue the Lady of Synadoun, does

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\(^{182}\) Salisbury and Weldon, “*Lybeaus Desconus*: Introduction,” ‘Authorship,’ and n31, Web. Salisbury and Weldon argue that the wrongfully assumed fact Thomas Chestre has been associated with *Lybeaus Desconus* is based on a reference that the poet refers to at the end of *Sir Launfal*, as well as arguments made by early editors. They similarly criticize Mills, who also makes the assumption that Chestre is the author, (Maldwyn Mills, “The Composition and Style of the 'Southern' ‘Octavian, Sir Launfal’ and *Libeaus Desconus*,” *Medium Aevum* 31 (1962): 88-109); to follow the ongoing search in verification of Chestre’s authorship, see also James Weldon, “‘Naked as she was bore’: Naked Disenchantment in *Lybeaus Desconus*,” *Parergon* 24.1 (2007): 67-99, here 67, n1. In his earlier essay, Weldon still supports the claim that *Lybeaus Desconus* has been widely associated with Thomas Chestre despite other scholarly debates that argued against Chestre as the author of *Lybeaus Desconus* (which by 2013 have been reclaimed as correct, as Salisbury and Weldon argue, and Weldon rectifies his earlier claim).

\(^{183}\) Because of the variant names in the primary sources I have consulted, all proper names used in my chapter correspond with Mills’s list of “Names and Places” (*Lybeaus Desconus*, 270-271).


\(^{185}\) In L and C, over three weeks in A.
the knight depart from the sorceress’s castle. Lybeaus finally arrives at his destination and fights off the magicians, Maboun and Yrayn, who had earlier changed the Lady of Synadoun into a serpent with a female face and imprisoned her. Lybeaus is exhausted and confused, wondering what to do next, when the serpent woman emerges from a wall. She moves toward Lybeaus, grabs him and kisses him vigorously, then is transformed before the startled knight’s eyes into a beautiful and naked woman. Having been rescued, the Lady of Synadoun proposes marriage to Lybeaus, who becomes the future sovereign of Synadoun.

Compared to the Middle English romance, the Old French *Li Biaus Descouneiüs* uses twice as much space to describe the young knight’s journey, and, unlike in *Lybeaus Desconus*, the serpent woman plays a secondary role because she is less developed than La Pucele. Moreover, the Old French romance draws on rudimentary elements of the medieval supernatural world in which Blonde Esmerée reminds the reader of a legendary beast of mythical origin mixed with a few human features. Although her enchantment and her suffering are mentioned, they are not emphasized and serve only to drive the knight forward. Conversely, the Middle English tale advertises Lady of Synadoun’s serpent form and her plight, which the characters explicitly discuss. They communicate to each other all they know about the lady, even if only in small portions to understand what happened to this woman, whom none of them has ever seen until Lybeaus appears in the great hall of her castle. Presumably the Lady of Synadoun’s steward, Lambard, has seen her; however, it is not known whether he has seen her in her transformed state. Another major difference between the Middle English and the Old French presentations of the female protagonist is that the Lady of Synadoun is a more humanized and sexualized character than Blonde Esmerée. One could assume that this difference would enhance the Lady of Synadoun’s womanly value for the knight because she might appear more human to
him, but this is not the case. Moreover, unlike Blonde Esmerée, the Lady of Synadoun does not function as a foil to another woman.

Blonde Esmerée functions as the bait in the romance quest in which the knight enters a challenge that involves a single heiress in order to mature, gain valor, and achieve a knightly identity. This model governs *Lybeaus Desconus* as well. It requires that a hitherto insignificant but unabashed knight sets out from King Arthur’s court in order to help a lady in distress and prove himself in battle. Although the young knight knows virtually nothing about the woman on whose behalf he sets out on his quest, he assumes that this unknown woman is beautiful, which is untrue. In the Old French, Blonde Esmerée overcomes the handicap of her curse by acting in a courtly manner, although she initially looks more bestial, and by securing a marriage to the knight. In *Lybeaus Desconus*, the Lady of Synadoun is also a serpent woman and achieves the same result by exceeding courtly behavior with extreme forwardness. However, she has a more human presence and even speaks; she is a rare female character who is shocking, amusing, and sexually bold, but still appears in a romance and not – as one might expect – in a fabliau or other satirical genre. Moreover, the Lady of Synadoun’s audacious demeanor places her as the female counterpart to Lybeaus, who is impulsive and proactive during his quest until he encounters this woman. Lybeaus, a representative of Arthur’s knights, does little to question himself or his ideals until then. His flaws go unrecognized and unaddressed until he encounters the Lady of Synadoun, who upsets all his expectations. At this moment of self-doubt, the courtly quest, which governs the knight’s existence and identity, seems to play a joke on him; the pillars of the chivalric world seem to crumble. The Lady of Synadoun’s hideous appearance represents this disintegration, showing her serpent body to be a grotesque that reveals the men’s angst over female sexuality and, more generally, over unruly, disorderly women. This Middle English
romance is a perfect platform to introduce the grotesque as a manifestation of a topsy-turvy Arthuriana. It allows audacious and unexpected activity by all characters. While the genre favors courtly themes, it broadens the depiction of human life in society by simultaneously questioning late medieval cultural standards, which are still promoted in the narrative’s underpinnings.

There are important aspects unique to *Lybeaus Desconus* that distinguish this romance from the Old French version, making it incorrect to describe the Middle English version as a translation of the Old French romance, as Cory James Rushton suggests. For example, when seen through the serpent woman, the weathered Arthurian knights are mocked more openly than in the Old French tale. The English knights do not perform in their function as lovers and do not realize at all what women desire. They have weakened to the extent that a dwarf becomes a suitable alternative as a lover. The Lady of Synadoun exhibits in abundance all that is unknown about women to the knights and boldly expresses her sexuality both verbally and physically. Another unique element is the house of stone that the magicians built inside the castle of Synadoun and which they label a prison. Here, they keep the Lady of Synadoun locked away.

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187 Nicola McDonald points out that Middle English romances treat subjects of love and relationships in a more provocative manner. This is one of the reasons why these romances are consistently measured against the French and wrongly denigrated (Nicola McDonald, “A Polemical Introduction,” *Pulp Fictions of medieval England: Essays in popular romance* [Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2004], 1-21, here 8-9). Thomas Hahn adds that the Middle English, Arthurian protagonists establish themselves as battle proven, chivalric heroes who are less conflicted by their heterosexual adventures than their Old French counterparts (“Gawain and popular chivalric romance in Britain,” *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2000], 218-234, here 221); see also Schmolke-Hasselmann, 290-294, and Dwyer, 8, n14.
The walled-in space replaces Blonde Esmerée’s earlier armoire, which seems random and harmless in comparison. The Middle English captors use a more potent image than that of an armoire because they obviously feel a stronger need for control than Blonde Esmerée’s captors. As the tale tells us, this may be because the Lady of Synadoun had been exposed to a more intense pursuit, and her suitors had become more aggressive and greater in number than in the Old French romance.

The Middle English romance has recently been reassessed and revalued for its fiction-making capacity. The stories are laden with cultural values that promulgate ideologies, making it difficult to escape their didactic charge. The more one attempts to escape the real world, the more these narratives increase the understanding of it. Nicola McDonald writes that the romance is a genre of fiction that has no problem “reproducing the easy certainties of sexist, racist and other bigoted ideologies.” At the same time the romance uses its fictional space to transgress cultural boundaries and portray a variety of life situations with unabashed vigor. Its accessible structure and easy-to-follow subject matter invites the reader to imagine the baser elements of humanity – outrageous, shallow, obscene, immoral, violent thoughts that are contained within the reader but seldom expressed openly. Similarly, the grotesque is an artistic expression for transgressing cultural restraints and experimenting with new visual or literary forms.

Therefore, I argue that the grotesque is a perfect vehicle to embody many of the ideas that the romances bring up for debate. The grotesque feeds itself by the understanding of its readers who, in a Foucauldian sense, cannot escape their episteme, in other words, their own culture. In the context of this study, Lybeaus Desconus’s audience recognizes all of the story’s elements,

188 McDonald, 1.
including the serpent woman; however, her extreme behavior challenges their previous understanding of a courtly romance’s bounds. Readers interpret a grotesque by means of the certainties of the ideological extremes discussed, filtering them through an internalized imaginary world. The appearance of a grotesque within the structure of a romance conjures whatever self-censorship exists within a person.

*Lybeaus Desconus* has the happiest ending of all the romances I am studying, and this is accomplished by the Lady of Synadoun’s forward and emboldened character. She also distinguishes herself from all other serpent women by her ability to speak. Her brief speech is proof that she is aware of her situation and the misrepresentation of her form to the human world; moreover, she is conscious of the cultural standards required of her as a courtly maiden, including youthfulness before changing into an older, undesirable woman. The stark contrast that the lady hereby offers in comparison to the other three serpent women, and any other female portrayed in monstrous or loathly form, makes the reading of *Lybeaus Desconus*’s Lady of Synadoun as a grotesque unique.

Shuffelton writes that many Middle English verse romances, such as *Lybeaus Desconus*, were written in an easy-to-read tail-rhyme, a fact that spurred criticism of *Lybeaus Desconus* for its form and style. For example, it has been suggested that the *Lybeaus* poet rarely goes beyond the common formulas of applying tail-rhyme, which he presumably chose for its excitement and efficiency.\(^{189}\) The textual dialogue and inner conflict are minimized and action is emphasized.

\(^{189}\) Shuffelton, “Item 20, *Lybeaus Desconus*: Introduction,” see also Shuffelton, n4, Web and Salisbury and Weldon, “*Lybeaus Desconus*: Introduction,” Web; see ‘Genre, Style, and Form,’ for explorations of the Middle English literary works that are labeled as tail-rhyme romances.
Generally, the Middle English romance is said to be cruder and has often been lambasted as such in comparison to its French relatives. It has been criticized for a lack of adherence to traditional form and subject matter because its stories are action-based and minimize internal conflict.\textsuperscript{190} The brevity of the tales is conducive to bold and impulsive characters. Scenes and adventures rhythmically move from one event to the next, building up into the adventure that the male hero chases. Since this type of criticism was long accepted and contributed to the lack of appreciation for \textit{Lybeaus Desconus}, it is not surprising that the tale mostly has been overlooked and that little has been written about it.\textsuperscript{191} Consequently, the Lady of Synadoun has been overlooked, as well. The \textit{Lybeaus} poet claims that the French tale was the source for his work ("Thus telleth the Frengishe tale," [L 245] and C "So seyð þe Frenȝsch tale," [221]).\textsuperscript{192} Assuming he was quite

\textsuperscript{190} Mills, "Introduction," 60.


\textsuperscript{192} All text quotations in MSS. L and C are taken from Thomas Chestre, \textit{Lybeaus Desconus}, ed. Maldwyn Mills, EETS 261 (London: Oxford University Press, 1969); all quotations in MS. A are taken from \textit{Lybeaus Desconus}, ed. George Shuffelton, Codex Ashmole 61: A compilation of Popular Middle English Verse (University of Rochester, TEAMS Middle English Text Series, Robbins Digital Library Projects, 2008), Web. Unless otherwise indicated all translations are my own. See Mills’s detailed discussion of the six MSS., in Maldwyn Mills, "Introduction," \textit{Lybeaus Desconus}, EETS 261 (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 1-70. In particular Mills’s genealogical diagram in “II. Textual History and Affiliation of the Manuscripts” shows that the Cotton Caligula MS. and the Lambeth Palace MS. are the earliest, and how the MSS. relate to each other (here 1-28). According to Mills, MS. Lambeth Palace 306 (L) is the best of the six surviving version. In what follows, I concur, using L as the main source for all of my citations. I find Mills’s suggestion to be the most useful for all of my citations, and I use L as the main source for these. The Mills edition publishes MS. L along with MS. Cotton Caligula (C), which I quote secondarily. My third source is Oxford, Bodleian library MS. Codex Ashmole 61 (A) in \textit{Lybeaus Desconus}, Shuffelton edition. I use MSS. A and C to further illuminate MS. L.
familiar with the French material, and courtly romance subject matters in general allows us to hypothesize that the English romance functions as a form of meta-narrative or second-degree romance that becomes an indispensable cultural and literary resource. The Middle English verse romances, and the Lybeaus romance in particular, provide information about the English audience’s interest in literary topics and the courtly reading culture at the time, and if we understand the material in its adaptation in the way other scholars have done (see below), we can assume that the differences and similarities, the concentrations and alterations found in the courtly subjects and styles of *Lybeaus Desconus* compared to its Old French precursor offer numerous insights.

There are various opinions on the audiences of the lesser-studied romances in Middle English literature. One of the two main opinions is that the romances were written for the entertainment of the new and growing literary classes of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, such as the gentry and the growing urban mercantile elite.\(^\text{193}\) A less pervasive view is that they

\(^{193}\) See Dieter Mehl, “Introduction: The Middle English Romances,” *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1968), 1-19, here 2-3. Mehl explains the style differences in French and English romances through a historical context. The Old French Arthurian romances reflect the preoccupations of the highly sophisticated courts of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This is in contrast to the Middle English romances, which were mostly written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and reflect a feudal society of smaller, often less affluent aristocratic households where knights fulfilled administrative tasks rather than engaging in tournaments or other activities associated with a chivalric lifestyle. Thus, the English romances focus less on courtly etiquette than on socio-economic realities, and the courtly world increasingly gains a fairy-tale-like appeal (2-3). Barron argues that comparisons between the unassuming English manuscript compilations and the richly decorated French manuscripts are evidence of their authors’ and audiences’ aristocratic social status and economic situations in both languages (“Readers and listeners, minstrels and poets,” 54). Cohen writes that *Lybeaus Desconus*, for example, can be found in collections with treatises on the body, “explications of humoral theory” and “medical prescriptions” (91). Cooper suggests that the English romances “tend, in fact, to show many of the qualities often described
were promulgated by minstrels during feasts and festivals and meant for ordinary people, i.e., everybody.194 Shuffelton suggests that Codex Ashmole 61, which contains a great variety of the genre as a whole, includes stories that are characterized by “a homely style and unpretentious vigor,” and that this style made these romances particularly popular “for a very wide range of English audiences.”195 By no means, however, could this or similar claims be understood in today’s sense that the romances were catering to a broad, universal audience.

Ideas about the audiences of Middle English romances, whether they were familiar with the courtly topics developed on the Continent, and about how the reception of the Middle English texts were disseminated have been widely discussed. For example, Rosalind Field emphasizes that various English audiences precisely understood the courtly subject matter because the Middle English authors exploited these traditional qualities in the romances they

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produced.¹⁹⁶ W. R. J. Barron argues that the Middle English romances did not simply try to copy or imitate their Old French models but were motivated to “express their own conception of the mode.”¹⁹⁷ Donald B. Sands notes that while the subjects of the verse romances were aristocratic, the audience could very well include “coopers, brewers, tavern keepers” and not lords, franklins, or knights.¹⁹⁸ Andrew Taylor, who discusses the production and dissemination of devotional material in late medieval England, writes that while devotional books depended on the private circulation amongst patrons, friends, and family, educational texts and romances were actually widely disseminated by strangers on marketplaces.¹⁹⁹ *Lybeaus Desconus*’s audience was largely familiar with romance subject matter specific to this text, and with the genre more generally. It can also be understood to have a set of expectations about how the courtly genre works. Thus, the *Lybeaus* poet most likely considered the anticipation of courtly elements among his readers and listeners, and creatively designed the Lady of Synadoun and her peculiarities with an ironic twist, changing, reducing, or exaggerating courtly acts and adapting the physical attributes of the French original, Blonde Esmerée, to the more boldly sexual presence of the Lady of Synadoun.


Her peculiarities viewed in the context of the Middle English audience, and in comparison to her Old French model, sustain my reading of her as a medieval grotesque.

As aforementioned, there are several elements that have been altered in the Middle English poem but only those relevant to the grotesque shall be mentioned here.\(^{200}\) One of the most obvious differences from the Old French is that *Lybeaus Desconus* severely trims the love affair with La Dame Amoure, enchantress of the Yle de Ore. The entire second part of the tale in *Li Biaus Descouneüs*, which is dedicated to the protagonist’s relationship with La Pucele, La Dame Amoure’s counterpart, is omitted in the Middle English version. Although La Dame Amoure has a similar function to distract the hero from his original mission and put him into a moral dilemma, her role is not developed at length.\(^{201}\) As Mills puts it “the brusque account of the affair with the Dame d’Amore [sic] offers nothing to correspond with the mental gymnastics of Renaut’s hero at the same point in *Li Biaus Descouneüs*.\(^{202}\) Mills refers to few lines (1411-1434 in C, 1473-1496 in L), in which the knight decides to stay with the lady before he is reprimanded by Elene to leave. Moreover, La Dame Amoure’s beauty is described with meager praise (I counted only three lines) compared to *Li Biaus Descouneüs*’s lengthy descriptions of La Pucele’s beauty, which is typical for the high medieval classical romance and sets the stage for the courtliness of romance. What *Lybeaus Desconus* lacks in poetic elaboration of the courtly

\(^{200}\) A detailed overview of the differences in narrative structure and plot can be found in Salisbury and Weldon, “*Lybeaus Desconus*: Introduction,” Web.

\(^{201}\) La Dame Amoure, too, keeps the hero captured in her castle after enchanting him with “suche melodye” (“such song” L 1488).

love affair, it makes up for in the depiction of the Lady of Synadoun’s sexuality. It displays bolder and more daring behavior than Blonde Esmerée’s. The Lybeaus poet’s depiction of a sexually forward female is an example of the Middle English genre’s tendency to be more daring. The narrative picks up the subject of courtship to gratify its audience’s desire and is more provocative than its Old French predecessor.203

Another difference in portrayal of the grotesque is found in the shift from the Old French armoire to a walled-in space inside the castle, comparable perhaps to a room where an anchoress would reside. No longer an armoire as in the French tale, the serpent woman’s space is now a real residence, which the Lybeaus poet defines as a prison. She seems to be guarded under lock and key by captors who protect the lady also as an economic asset to ensure that the wrong suitor will not appropriate her land. We cannot know why the poet chose this walled-in room over the armoire, but the dwelling and the prison analogy are more realistic and logical locations for a (serpent-)woman’s hideaway than is an armoire. The shift in imagery shows the people’s changing cultural taste in romance topics and is an example of how the romance functions as a meta-narrative of the Old French romance. The Middle English story paints for its audience a less fantastical or fabricated image (a huge serpent in a cupboard) and instead utilizes their day-to-day reality (people generally inhabit rooms not cupboards) as the platform for fiction-making. By supplying an image of a woman kept alive in a castle dungeon this scene also offers a dramatic moment for the audience.

The book analogy, which the Old French Li Biaus Descouveüs utilizes, does not appear in Lybeaus Desconus. One could imagine that the omission stems from the Lybeaus poet’s

203 See McDonald, who argues that the Middle English romances treat subjects like courtship, marriage, and other “fantasies and anxieties of that time in extremis” (15).
decision to write for an audience who did not have manuscripts or early imprints at home, much less interest in collecting them. The poet imagined his audience interested in a more rigorously punishing device than a non-threatening book about controlling women. Moreover, romance topics were cultivated in portrayals of courtly life with instructional, didactic, and entertaining value for the gentry, the primary audience for romances like *Lybeaus Desconus*. If we believe that the Middle English romance was more convincing and instructional than the Old French model, then the women’s enchantment should be portrayed differently and with more raw intention than by an esoteric touch of a book.

There are several details in *Lybeaus Desconus* that refer to speaking and its aural delivery. *Lybeaus Desconus* is also considerably shorter, which makes sense if this romance is meant to be read aloud. Joyce Coleman finds fault with the strict distinction between literacy, orality, and aurality, made up by scholars of medieval romance, and suggests that these forms co-existed. One can assume that *Lybeaus Desconus*’s audience was literate but enjoyed the tale aurally. In *Lybeaus Desconus*, examples of aural delivery are found in many references to speaking, such as the sorcerers’ preference for speaking and their skillfulness with words (“With maystres of her mouthe,” [“By mastery of their words,” L 2101]), or Theodoleyn’s skillfulness in

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204 Shuffelton, “Introduction,” *Lybeaus Desconus*, Codex Ashmole 61, Web. Shuffelton explains that, for example, the collection of Ashmole 61 contains a variety of tail-rhyme romances with various subject matters and themes that represent a good range of romances written in this form in Middle English literature.

speaking (L 148-150). There are plenty of instances of formulaic repetitions and references to an oral culture in the romance.

While little has been published on *Lybeaus Desconus*, even fewer studies address the Lady of Synadoun’s serpent form. Weldon explains the two major concerns in the central scene (i.e., when the Lady of Synadoun is transformed back into her female form) as the “nature of women and marital consent.” Some of Weldon’s thoughts on the protagonist’s disenchantment shaped my own focus on the event. He suggests that the serpent woman (Weldon uses the same term I do) did not derive from an “accidental phrase hastily put together by a hack writer,” one of the derogatory monikers used by disapproving scholars to disqualify the *Lybeaus* poet as a serious composer. It is rather the poet’s deliberate choice to describe a woman and an heiress: the heiress of Eve’s original sin in the biblical sense. Thus, the Lady of Synadoun inherits roles as both woman and seductress. The woman as a daughter and heiress of Eve has a powerful resonance and is embodied in the character of the Lady of Synadoun while in serpent form, which Weldon considers the seductive sinner’s role. The disenchantment scene, according to

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206 See also my discussion of Theodoleyn in Dwyer, 119.

207 See also formulaic repetitions, this chapter, n232. Other examples that show the focus on speaking are: “than saide …” (“then said …,” L 55 and C 40); “Sayde Gyngelayn …,” (“Guinglain said …,” L 61); “Than sayde Arthur the kyng,” (“Then King Arthur said,” L 67 and C 55); “The dwerf saide …,” (“The dwarf said …,” L 1032); “Qu[o]d Sir Otys de Lyle,” (“Sir Otis de Lyle said,” L 1089); and “Lybeous, with-out fable, / seyd …],” (“Lybeaus said, without lying [Lybeaus asks the constable to tell the truth],” L 1744-1745).


209 Weldon, “Naked,” 74.
Weldon, is the moment in which the misogynist symbolism is dismissed, and the Lady of Synadoun’s marital proposal legitimizes her relationship to Lybeaus. Weldon’s interpretation complements that of Janice A. Radway, who writes that a romance usually establishes a permanent love relationship such as marriage in order to diminish the anxiety about a sexually bold woman, who is culturally positioned as an essential threat to men and society as a whole. Radway draws on Dorothy Dinnerstein’s critical study about male fear of female sexuality in The Mermaid and the Minotaur. Dinnerstein describes how female sexuality is systematically suppressed for the most practical reason of “one-sided male possessiveness.” A woman who is sexually confident can no longer be an exclusive possession of the man. Moreover, fear is stirred on a deeper level through “fantasy-ridden resentment” an irrational jealousy of the woman's impulsiveness in fulfilling her own sexual desires. Dinnerstein's explanation of this threatening factor is helpful in understanding Lybeaus’s strong reaction when he encounters the lady who spontaneously takes her fate in her own hands by kissing him abruptly and with

210 Weldon, “Naked,” 74-75.

211 Janice A. Radway, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), here 169 and “The Failed Romance: Too Close to the Problems of Patriarchy,” 157-185. While Radway writes about modern romance, her observations can be transferred to the more progressive plot of Lybeaus Desconus. Just like the modern romance’s desirable, daring woman, the Lady of Synadoun’s sexual audaciousness challenges the Middle English narrative but is structurally end-oriented. The audience can rely on the fact that the sexual threat, which the Lady of Synadoun imposes on its cultural conventions, will be resolved by the couple’s marriage.


213 Dinnerstein, 59.

214 Dinnerstein, 59.
passion. Similarly, one can interpret the fact that the magicians Maboun and Yrayn keep the lady locked away as a sign of their fear that she might escape and engage with another suitor. In particular, the killing of other suitors before Lybeaus’s arrival reveals the enchanters’ covetousness. The Lady of Synadoun’s words to Lybeaus after her curse has been lifted, “Many man con they shende. / Thorowe ther chauntement” (“Many men could they destroy / through their sorcery” L 2102-2103), show how her dismal circumstances added to the anxiety that she could have been lost for good to another suitor. Since Maboun and Yrayn are described as clerks, and not knights, they know that the lady, as a single wealthy heiress, will soon be in the arms of a noble knight. In the culture of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the magicians/clerks would never be able to have a sexual, or indeed, any other relationship with her.

Cooper makes an argument for the wooing woman’s strong presence in the Middle English romances, explaining that we are simply not accustomed to thinking of the medieval maiden as a passionate woman who “focuses all her newly awakened sexual desire on the man she chooses to be her husband.” It is wrong to approach the subjects of female desire and explore their subjectivity through the French and Latin stereotypes of woman, which “prioritize different models: the more courtly, and the overtly misogynist.” She argues like Coleman that genre boundaries cannot be drawn clearly and that the strict distinction always leads to a false interpretation due to scholarly opinions, such as the claim that the sexually active, desiring, and passionate woman would be absent in Middle English romances.

215 Cooper, 218.

216 Cooper, 220.
Focusing on the role of the woman as a sexual being in romance literature, Judith Weiss describes how the wooing woman disappears in the French romance due to a lack of sympathy and admiration for her, but then reappears in Anglo-Norman romance literature as both an “attractive and formidable” figure in the later thirteenth century. Although Weiss studies Anglo-Norman and not Middle English romance, some of her observations are paralleled in *Lybeaus Desconus*, in which the Lady of Synadoun’s behavior is a form of wooing. First, Weiss argues that the overt sexual boldness of a Saracen maiden is a male fantasy of a wooing woman who is available and beautiful. Since this woman is not a Christian, she is an Other (my reading of Weiss’s example) and therefore comparable to the Lady of Synadoun, who is – in the simplest of interpretations – an Other because of her obviously odd, perhaps foreign, appearance. Secondly, the same Saracen maiden in Weiss’s example is also portrayed as amusing in her courtship, in which the “tone of wooing is not sensual but humorous.” Weiss argues that the humorous effect is used to enhance the hero because he “is the desired, not the desiring,” which grants him “always a situation of superiority.” Furthermore, Weiss says, the hero cannot take up any offer from another woman before he has completed his task to establish


218 Weiss, 151.

219 Weiss, 153.

220 Weiss, 153.

221 Weiss, 154.
himself as a worthy fighter because his identity in a romance must be defined by prowess alone. In drawing a parallel to Lybeaus Desconus, I note that a similar motif is developed when the protagonist is wooed twice – by La Dame Amoure and the Lady of Synadoun. La Dame Amoure, the first wooer, has no chance of keeping Lybeaus for herself because he must continue to seek the Lady of Synadoun. Once he has reached his destination and has defeated the magicians, his battles have proven him a worthy enough warrior that the wooing of the lady, albeit in her serpent form, happens at the right moment.

The aforementioned scholars support my reading of the role of the woman in Lybeaus Desconus, but some scholarship particularly shapes my interpretation of the protagonist as a grotesque within the genre of the romance. My reading focuses on those features that some scholars have criticized as too simplistic and crude, such as how the Lady of Synadoun appears first in an absurd serpent form and then naked. Apart from the romance’s conflicted reception, which ironically represents one of the parallels to the grotesque, McDonald describes the Middle English romance as a genre that always benefits from its well-known structure. The narrative can transgress its own limits because of the assurance that from the outset the romance will conclude satisfactorily. Likewise, McDonald’s view of the romance’s potential to present the medieval otherworld as fiction and its general proclivity to create meaning “out of the clash between the marvelous and the mundane” are all supportive of my reading of the Lady of Synadoun as a grotesque. The above indicators show the romance’s suitability as a fascinating form for the

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222 Weiss, 155.

223 McDonald, 14-15.

224 McDonald, 15.
medieval grotesque. Moreover, desire turned into bolder sexuality as the basic thrust of the romance is also a communicator of the grotesque because this change alters the social expectations of the female protagonist.

Raluca L. Radulescu argues that the attractive sides of the Middle English romance are the “shocking twists and turns” that the narratives take and thereby unsettle the chivalric adventure’s order. The romances particularly focus on family issues, and within that group they use female agency to achieve goals. Radulescu's argument also supports my reading of Lybeaus Desconus as a romance notable for its depiction of the realities, consequences, and gains of chivalric failure or success. Her discussion of social topics, such as the discussion of chivalric values, the focus on material advantages and the importance of money are particularly useful.

Radulescu claims that the Middle English romances increasingly displayed an economic awareness of how one could climb the social ladder.

Myra Stokes describes a similar development by comparing how the Old French Lanval and the Middle English Sir Launfal treat the hero’s poverty and concludes that in describing her hero’s monetary problems and alienation from court, the comparison reveals that Marie de France has fewer problems than the Lybeaus poet. Whereas the Old French Lanval deals with


226 For these discussions see Radulescu, “Genre and Classification,” A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance, eds. Raluca L. Radulescu and Cory James, here “Self-conscious narrative in the popular romance,” 47-48.

227 Stokes, 56-77.
his circumstances with less worry, his Middle English counterpart, Sir Launfal, recognizes his poverty as problematic and experiences it more publicly, and therefore as more humiliating. This problem renders the Middle English hero as a “squeaky-clean but victimized hero” whose poverty is justifiable. Both Radulescu and Stokes support my attention to the economic interests and personal concerns, which the Middle English *Lybeaus Desconus* exhibits more abundantly than the Old French *Li Biaus Descouneüs*.

2. The Lady of Synadoun as a grotesque woman

The following section analyzes *Lybeaus Desconus* in relation to some of the characteristics laid out in the introduction and will demonstrate how the Lady of Synadoun in her serpent form is an example of the medieval grotesque.

2.1. Centrality: struggle for power

In the French and English romances, the enchanted serpent women are noble figures who live in their castles whereas the monstrous woman or the loathly lady wanders in the wilderness. Centrality characterizes the serpent woman’s space: she does not operate outside of, or peripherally to, the romance, but is directly in its center of power and culture, the court. Her

228 Stokes, 57.

229 The Lady of Synadoun’s castle is a substantial construction: “With castelles high and wide, / And palysed proude in pryde,” (“With high and wide towers / And enclosed with palisade,” L 1527-1529); it exhibits the protagonist’s economic status. She later offers this castle, which has “Castellys fyfty and fyve” (“Fifty-five towers” L 2110), to Lybeaus as her dowry.
central role defines the serpent woman as different from the monstrous woman or the loathly lady.\textsuperscript{230}

In \textit{Lybeaus Desconus}, the Arthurian court sets the standard for everything and is the center to which all characters, locations, and decisions are wholly limited. \textit{Lybeaus Desconus}’s protagonist, when challenged to rescue the Lady of Synadoun to gain access to the society of the Round Table, leaves Arthur’s court for Synadoun, which is far away in Wales. While Synadoun is a central place with all the trappings of a court rather than an extra-courtly place – for example, the wild place where the giants live – the point of the story is to bring the Lady of Synadoun back to the real center at Arthur’s court and only after the king has agreed to marry her. In this sense, the serpent woman in the Arthurian romance is central to the noble society because she is noble by nature, thus giving centrality an ideological dimension. The young knight who sets out from Arthur’s court is the representative of the culture’s new generation, whereas Arthur is the representative of the entire system that needs to evolve.

I have explained earlier that in the theory of the grotesque there exists an affiliation between a center and a margin, and that the grotesque questions a central idea thereby destabilizing a master principle.\textsuperscript{231} \textit{Lybeaus Desconus} disrupts the idea of what is center and what is margin. The court of Synadoun is at once a cultural center and a mirror of the distant

\textsuperscript{230} In particular in the Middle English corpus of medieval romances, the distinction between the loathly lady and the serpent woman expands the research scope on the medieval grotesque. In the loathly lady motif, the knight is normally given clear instructions before embarking on his travel toward the maiden with full knowledge of the difficult choice he has to make. However, in the model of the serpent woman, the young Lybeaus is ignorant and naively enters the situation, in which he is taken by surprise in his most shocking and difficult encounter with a woman.

\textsuperscript{231} See my discussion of Harpham and his explorations of the relationship between center and margin in Dwyer, 19.
Arthurian court. Although Synadoun, as Lybeaus’s destination, is a marginal space when seen from the perspective of Glastonbury, it is also a central space where the Lady of Synadoun resides. From the perspective of the Arthurian court, all other court systems are marginal, and this includes the court of Synadoun. Although it is smaller than Glastonbury and peripheral to it, Synadoun is the absolute center of *Lybeaus Desconus* and its plot, and is the center where the Lady of Synadoun exists in all her forms. Lybeaus embarks from the “center of the world,” the court of Arthur, believing he knows everything. After engaging in marginal places (i.e., where monsters, foes, and mostly inferior knights live), he enters Synadoun, which he believes is a form of center because it is a noble court and home of a respectable and wealthy duchess. However, Lybeaus soon finds himself in an encounter that boldly eradicates any expectations he might have had before meeting this lady. It is only in this upside-down world that Lybeaus can meet the serpent woman.

Rescuing presumably helpless maidens, a task that requires overcoming a multitude of adversities and foes, is usually the knight’s central purpose. At Synadoun, however, Lybeaus does not find a helpless lady, but rather a serpent woman who knows how to solve her own

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232 The tale poetically spins each of his illustrious adventures together by beginning and ending the sentences with reminders of the traveler’s original purpose, which is to get to Synadoun in order to rescue the lady in distress. Phrases such as “They redyn on her jornaye / Taward Synadon,” (“They were on their journey / Toward Synadoun,” L 466-477), or “They reden even weste / Jn-to the wilde forest / Taward Synadoun;” (“They rode straight west / Into the wild forest / Toward Synadoun;” L 574-576), also “Tokyn her right waye / Tawarde Synadowne,” (“Took their right way / Toward Synadoun,” L 1027-1028), emphasize the journey motif. The plot structure also creates anticipation and tension of what will be found at the journey’s end.

problem once the knight arrives. In the ten prior adventures, Lybeaus proved himself to be a proud and fierce attacker, making him a worthy knight. Ironically at Synadoun, in the great hall, he must remain passive in order to fulfill his destiny. The reverse of Lybeaus’s usual reaction to adversity exemplifies how the master principle of the courtly quest is also inverted. His meeting the Lady of Synadoun and her ensuing actions are entirely beyond the knight’s control. Lybeaus, a representative of courtly culture, arrives at the castle with the intention of helping someone and becoming a true knight, but he must instead endure a horrible serpent woman’s kiss. This meeting represents the absurdity of what has driven him all along: participating in a social contest to achieve the courtly ideal of love and status.

The dialogue between the marginal idea and the master principle extends to economic interests. For example, the castle of Synadoun represents power, which the sorcerers covet. Their plan to appropriate this power represents social one-upmanship, which was becoming an economic reality in fourteenth-century England. Whereas before it was not a matter of ambition to gain power because status had been closely bound to nobility, one could now gain status among the rising class of the mercantile elite. When Lybeaus inquires about the sorcerers’ names, he assumes them to be other knights: “Whate is the knyghtis name / That holdeth in prisoun / That lady of Synadoun,” (“What is the knight’s name / That holds in prison / That lady of Synadoun,” L 1745-1747), to which Lambart replies: “‘…Be Seint John! / Knyght, sir, is ther none / That durste hir away lede: / Twoo clerkys ben hir foes,’” (“‘By Saint John! / there is no knight, Sir, / That dared to take her away: / Two clerks are her foes,’” L 1749-1752). This brief conversation between the two shows how important it is to identify status. Another example is when Elene, who has been described throughout as peerlessly beautiful,

Gentyll, bryght and shene:
A lovely messengere.

Ther nas countes nor quene
So semely on to sene
That myght be hir pere. (L 116-121)

Well-proportioned [Mills],

fair, and beautiful:
A lovely messenger
No country has ever seen
Such a stately queen
That might be her equal.

is jeered at by the crowd as the mere subject she is when she appears side-by-side with Lybeaus as his lady to participate in the falcon tournament: “‘Ellyne the messangere / Ne were but a lawnder: / Off hir no loose make J!’” (“‘Elene the messenger / Is nothing but a washerwoman: / Of her I will gain no fame!’” L 930-932).234 This scene exemplifies how much sway status has over the society. It suggests that when a crowd of spectators can distinguish queen-like beauty from genuine nobility, nobility is never attainable by personal attributes alone.

Conversely, no matter how the Lady of Synadoun looks, she is still a duchess and maintains her power, which is very attractive. There were prior suitors who journeyed to Synadoun to liberate the duchess under the pretense of courting her, even though these suitors

234 A reads “Elyn the messynger / Were worthy to be a lawnder / Of hyr noryssery,” (“‘Elene the messenger / Would be worthy to be a washerwoman / By her upbringing,’” A 957-959).
knew very little of this lady. They might also have sought power, but all had perished as the
Lady of Synadoun explains to Lybeaus after her disenchantment: “Two clerkys kowthe, / … /
Many man con they shende / Thorowe ther chaunteament;” (“Two notorious clerks / … /
Destroyed many men / Through their enchantment” L 2098, 2102-2103). These passages show
how people’s lives are tied to the idea of nobility. In a way, the vanquished suitors are also
involved in the woman’s grotesque condition because, no matter the price, they were driven to
gain access to her center where nobility exists and a supposedly beautiful young woman reigns
without a husband. The knights were attracted to the power promised by her situation, even
without the assumption of knowing the Lady of Synadoun’s appearance or what her exact
problem is. Herein lies the absurdity, that the suitors accept this challenge without any
foreknowledge about her. In Lybeaus Desconus, the suitors were questing after something that
killed them; even if they had been victorious although the Lady of Synadoun would not have
satisfied their preconceptions of, and desire for, a beautiful maiden, it would have been a
successful mission from an economic perspective. Although their object of desire would have
been a woman in serpent form, the suitors would have succeeded in gaining access to a cultural
center. The fantasy of acquiring power by marrying a prosperous noblewoman stirs a destructive
frenzy among the knights.

The grotesque appears episodically throughout the romance. It introduces odd, colorful
courtiers, whose appearance, actions, and behaviors are conspicuously described at court
festivities and events. These elements take the reader by surprise; their qualities amuse, inverting
assumptions about courtly appropriateness and foreshadowing the Lady of Synadoun as the
grotesque woman. For example, the first time the lady is introduced, her maiden Elene and
Theodoleyn, Elene’s chivalrous, well-dressed companion dwarf, arrive at Arthur’s court covered
in sweat: “The[r] con a mayde in ryde, / And a dwerffe by hir syde, / All be-swett for hete,” (“A maiden rode in / A dwarf by her side / All sweaty from the heat,” L 115-118). This depiction of lowly body functions adds an odd detail that stands in stark contrast to the pair’s origin and to the surrounding nobles who are witnessing their entrance. Besides being sweaty, Theodoleyn, a dwarf, is also a lady’s man and an entertainer: “He was a gentill boourdour / Amonge ladyes in boure: / A mery man of mouthe,” (“He was a noble jester / In the ladies’ chambers / A merry man of his mouth [of poetry],” L 148-150). The sexual innuendo suggests that the women prefer a dwarf for private companionship, raising the possibility of Theodoleyn being a competitor for the Arthurian knights – an absurd notion in itself. His presence insinuates that Arthur and his men are blind to their own loss of virility. This implication is additionally highlighted by the fact that Arthur’s weathered, skilled, and renowned retainers are hesitant when Elene requests help for her lady.

2.2. Cavernousness: weeping behind the wall

Yrayn and Maboun, whose curse transformed the Lady of Synadoun, keep her hostage in a stonewalled chamber. The mysterious stone dwelling is simultaneously a palace: “Jran and that Mabon / Haue made in this towne / A paleys queynte of gynne:” (“Yrayn and this Maboun / Have constructed in this town / A curiously contrived palace:” L 1761-1763) and a prison, “Therin lyeth in presowne / My lady of Synadon, / That is of knyghtis kynne,” (“[Within the wall] lies in prison / My lady of Synadoun, / Who is a noble,” L 1770-1773); A even calls it a place of torture, “‘Therin is a prisone, / And the lady of Synadowne / Ther within is dyght,’” (“‘Within is a prison / And the lady of Synadoun / Is condemned to it,” A 1776-1778). The “paleys queynte of gynne” seems a dreadful place that, at once palace and prison, is the Lady of Synadoun’s living space. She is kept in a stone walled chamber adjacent to the hall, which might
only be accessed through a window rather than the more typical door. The romance describes how the Lady of Synadoun crawls through a window in the wall as soon as Lybeaus sat down in the great hall to take a break:

As he [Lybeaus] sat thus in halle,
Oute at a stone walle
A wyndowe fayre vnfelde;

........................................

A worme ther gonne oute-pas. (L 2061-2063, 2067)

When he sat in the great hall
Out of a stone wall
A window unfolded;
A serpent went out of there.

The setting suggests violence, emphasizing the magicians’ cruel nature and engendering sympathy for the female who is forced to spend her time in a place not adequate for a noblewoman.

The comparison to a prison also suggests that the lady is locked in as she probably could not come out by herself except when Lybeaus appears in the great hall. In contrast, the Old French romance does not place the serpent woman in a structure built by the magicians but in an armoire not associated with anything punitive. The Middle English romance goes a step further and depicts the serpent woman in a fortified space that is controlled by her abusers. The language the Lybeaus poet applies in his description evokes a grotesque image and is a sharp critique of the desired life of a courtly maiden. Her “hous of ston” (A 1771) is the courtly palace as
ideological prison, where women have little autonomy to choose their lovers or decide over their lives in general. Moreover, although villains constructed this confined space, in their minds it is the woman’s fault that she needs to be locked in because of her incontrollable nature. The Lady of Synadoun, in her role as a woman and function as a noble heiress, supplied the template for the prison, in which she dwells.

The Lady of Synadoun’s house of stone resembles the dwelling space of a walled-in maiden or medieval anchoress. An anchoress lived a secluded, contemplative life in a walled-in space adjacent to a church or convent, spending her time in prayer, with writing and in religious meditation. We can find examples of anchoresses in romance literature. The Middle High German character Sigune in Wolfram’s *Parzival* withdraws from her secular life after her husband Schionatulander has died. While he was still alive, Sigune had rejected another man’s love as an illustration of her love and loyalty, and as a widow she chooses an ascetic life that continues her understanding of honor and pure love. Although Sigune was punished harshly, she stands for triuwe, the Middle High German term for loyalty and sincere commitment, and one of the important values in feudal society the hero needs to learn on his journey. The parallels between the Lady of Synadoun’s house of stone and the life of an anchoress suggests two

\[\text{\begin{footnotesize}\begin{itemize}
\item Information on an anchoress’s lifestyle can be found in the thirteenth-century English Ancrene Wisse, a monastic rulebook. Most anchoresses were not entirely secluded and had access to the outside world through a window, where parishioners could seek her council and through which she received her meals. A famous anchoress in English history is Julian of Norwich (ca. 1342-1416) who is considered a Christian mystic (Elisabeth M. Dutton, Julian of Norwich: The Influence of Late-medieval Devotional Compilations [Cambridge, UK: Brewer, 2008], here 2, 11); see also Kevin Magil, “The anchoress and her community,” Julian of Norwich: Mystic or Visionary? (New York: Routledge, 2006). 36-54.
\item See also Alexandra Sterling-Hellenbrand, Topographies of Gender in Middle High German Arthurian Romance (New York: Routledge, 2001), 106-108.
\end{itemize}\end{footnotesize}\]
perspectives of the same thing. The Lady of Synadoun resides in the walled-in prison because she has chosen chastity over marrying someone she does not like or because she needed to be punished for her disobedience to male authority. While the romance’s whole point is to free her and while Lybeaus’s efforts suggest the lady was treated unfairly, her stone-walled imprisonment also suggests that disobedient women deserve to be chastised. This ambiguous message invites a debate among the audience to decide whether they find her treatment fair or justifiable. The lady’s weeping behind the stone walls works as one of the narrative devices to generate empathy and propels the decision-making process forward.

From the perspective of the female cavernous body as a place of female sexuality and power (i.e., hollow, deep, cave-like, protective), the prison image suggests that men are so afraid of the Lady of Synadoun that they keep her locked up. Otherwise, they might get lost and be held captive by the powers of her body, as happens to Li Biaus marooned in La Pucele’s arms in the Old French romance, and Lybeaus in the Middle English romance, enchanted by the beguiling La Dame Amoure. She keeps the young man hostage, causing him harm because their affair prevents Lybeaus from continuing his quest: “She dyde hym traye and tene. / For xij monthes and more / As Lybeous dwelled thore” (“She caused him affliction and harm, / For twelve months and more / While Lybeaus dwelled there” L 1478-1480). By making the connection between the magicians’ prison made out of stone for the serpent woman and La Dame Amoure’s prison made out of love, Lybeaus’s desire for and repulsion from the Lady of Synadoun are simultaneously presented in the grotesque message that the palace/prison hybrid described above sends out. The Lady of Synadoun’s space is dangerous, even to the bravest of all men: “Ther nys erle nor baroun / That bereth hert as a lyon, / That durst come ther-in,” (“There is no earl or baron / Who bears heart like a lion’s / That dares to go in there”; L 1764-1766).
From a feminist point of view, the Lady of Synadoun’s confinement is the ultimate in misogyny. One is not surprised to hear the lady weeping in her chamber: “Oftyn we hire hir crye: / To sene hir withe none eye, / Ther-to haue we no myght,” (“We hear her cry often: / To see her with our [own] eyes, / We have no power,” L 1773-1775). No one knows what the Lady of Synadoun looks like – however, she weeps. Her crying, recurring in several scenes, portrays the Middle English serpent woman more sympathetically than her Old French counterpart because the expression of her emotions, such as weeping and lamenting, humanizes her character. These emotions add complexity and depth, thereby allowing readers to identify with the character and suffer with her.\textsuperscript{237} The details presented in repetitive form are an astute fictional device that draws readers toward the cursed Lady of Synadoun’s humanity. In turn, these events and the sympathy generated for the protagonist increase the audience’s curiosity about her.

2.3. Secrecy: an unknown beauty and a clumsy knight

Secrecy is a consistent characteristic that defines the serpent woman as a grotesque. In Lybeaus Desconus it adds additional meaning to the cave image as a place where men get so befuddled that they lose control over their ability to think rationally. On the surface, secrecy means that the Lady of Synadoun keeps her disfigurement hidden from the rescuers and other suitors who are interested in her (in Li Biaus Descouneüs and Lybeaus Desconus) or are married to her (in both Melusine versions). Secrecy also means that the serpent woman must suffer her plight alone. These positions are contradictory. On the one hand, secrecy protects the Lady of Synadoun from public condemnation (as happens to Melusine before her secret has been exposed), and Elene can

\textsuperscript{237} For McDonald, one of the reasons for the popularity of the Middle English romances of this type is their propensity for generating textual pleasure (“A Polemical Introduction,” 2).
only guarantee that a knight will set out to free her by deliberately withholding information. On the other hand, secrecy also enforces the tragedy of the lady’s curse and continues an eternal, female dilemma: no knight would even consider pursuing the Lady of Synadoun if her ugliness were not a complete secret.

Karma Lochrie argues that “secrecy is not so much a matter of secrets as it is a matter of rhetoric, and its power lies rather in what is kept hidden than in the dynamic between the ‘knows’ and the ‘know-nots.’” This dynamic can be observed in *Lybeaus Desconus*. By guarding her lady’s secret, her maiden strategizes to get from the knights what she needs. When Elene appears in front of Arthur, her speech is quite powerful, but deliberately obscure:

Mi lady of Synadowne

Js brought in stronge prison,

That was of grete valure,

And pray you sond hir a knyght

That is of wer wyse and wight,

To wynne hir with honoure.’ (L 160-165)

My Lady of Synadoun

Was put into a strong prison

Of great might,

I beseech you to send her a knight

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That is experienced in war and strong.
To rescue and win her honorably.

Elene’s claim that her lady is in a prison leaves much guesswork for the surrounding knights. She alone controls what will be disclosed to them. Lybeaus, portrayed as light-hearted (“With her[t] mery and light,” [“With a merry and light heart,” L 167]) – a synonym for young and possibly, foolish – immediately volunteers. In C and A, Lybeaus believes the lady he is about to rescue will be bright and fair, “And wynne þat lady bryȝht,” (“And win that cheerful lady,” C 161; A 173). Although Elene only has a small window of opportunity to exercise influence at Arthur’s court, her manipulation of the young knight sets his quest in motion. This event is followed by a number of political and economic consequences for both Lybeaus and the Lady of Synadoun, and eventually for Arthur himself. Since the Lybeaus poet never clarifies whether Elene, Theodoleyn, and Lambard, Synadoun’s steward, even know about her serpent form, the truth about this problem remains secret to the audience as well until the moment the Lady of Synadoun has been released (a fact that confirms Lochrie’s theory that a secret awards power to the one who keeps it). Elene uses her sparse information cleverly, and the effect that her discretion has in setting off a string of events is grounded in secretive rhetoric rather than secretive facts.

Upon their arrival at Sir Otis’s castle, Theodoleyn tells Lybeaus for the first time that there is something odd about the lady, but the young knight is too far into his quest to turn back and would not cancel the operation for fear of destroying his opportunity for fame or of blemishing Arthur’s reputation. Lybeaus learns that the proud knight Sir Otis once served the Lady of Synadoun, but ran away in panic after he realized she was enchanted. Lambard reports about Sir Otis,
That servid some-tyme my lady
Stately in hir sale.
When sche was takyn with gile,
He ffled for grete perile. (L 1036-40)

Who served my lady for some time
So capably in her great hall.
Once she was enchanted
He fled for fear of danger.

As mentioned above, we do not know if Elene and her dwarf are familiar with the Lady of Synadoun’s serpent body, nor do we know what Sir Otis knew about her appearance. Like Arthur’s retainers who hesitated when Elene asked for help, Sir Otis appears weak and cowardly, though he is not part of Arthur’s court. The interesting point here is that a weathered knight dreads an enchanted lady. It adds a layer of humor when a knight flees after learning about a woman’s Otherness.

Shame and secrecy are connected. The romance repeatedly creates a discourse on these two aspects. For example, the knights make fools of themselves when their skills with horse and armor are not flawless, as in the case of Lambard, who is ashamed when he falls backwards from his horse: “Syr Lamberd was ashamed sore; / Qu[o]d Sir Lybeous, ‘Wilt thou more?’ / And he answerd, ‘Naye!’” (“Sir Lambard was very ashamed; / Sir Lybeaus said, ‘Would you like more?’ / And he answered, ‘Ney!’” L 1700-1703). The knight Lambard’s openly expressed embarrassment at his minor faux pas informs us about the Lybeaus poet’s observations of people’s concerns in his own culture. He describes what the characters do when they make a
mistake or realize that who or what they are does not correspond with a cultural ideal imposed on them. They avoid getting embarrassed any further or being hurt more. Unlike the Lady of Synadoun, the men in *Lybeaus Desconus* express shame and despair from superficial values lacking emotional purpose. Lybeaus seems to lack emotional involvement and specific interest besides compliance with the courtly system that repays him with honor and status. Shortly after Lambard’s shameful riding incident, Lybeaus suddenly admits to Lambard that he does not know for what or why he really fights:

Lybeous sayd, 'Sekerlye,

Fyght Y shall for thy ladye,

By heste of Kynge Arthure;

But Y ne wote wherfor ne whye,

Ne who dothe hyr that tormentrye,

To brynge hir in dolour. (L 1713-1718)

Lybeaus said, “Sure,

I shall fight for the lady,

On command by King Arthur:

But I do not know what for or why,

Nor who torments her in that manner

To cause her pain.

Lybeaus is mired in ignorance; however, he begins to question his own situation, which makes him appear jaded, but his own expectations give him no choice. He can only press further
because in his mission he, too, carries a heavy burden. If he were to quit, he would diminish
Arthur’s reputation:

For-lorne is thy pryde
And thi lose shentt
When thou wilt send a childe
That is witles and wylde. (L 182-186).

Your pride is foregone
And your reputation put to shame
If you want to send a child
That is foolish and wild.

If Lybeaus continued but failed, he would forfeit his opportunity for knighthood, perpetually
endure social scorn and possibly even end as a poor, unemployable knight wandering around in
the Welsh highlands. Luckily things work out, and in the end everyone is happy that Lybeaus’s
honor has been restored: “They thanked God with al his myghtis, / Arthur and all his knyghtis, /
That he hade no shame,” (“They thanked God with all his power, / Arthur and all his knights /
That he was not disgraced/humiliated,” L 2175-2177). We must ask ourselves whose “shame”
the Lybeaus poet really means: Lybeaus’s or Arthur’s?

The Lybeaus poet is interested in portraying the day-to-day fears of the characters whom
he describes. He easily arranges such anecdotes as Lambard’s embarrassment side by side with
accounts of happenings at Arthur’s court, a combination that expresses his irony and humor in
the knights’ explorations, one would think. The discussion in this section has shown in detail
how the poet interprets the worries of a (noble) culture. Some characteristics of the Middle
English romance become apparent. Unlike the classical French romance, the Middle English romance does not focus on idealizing and often tedious lengthy passages meant to flatter high-class nobility; instead it lets us glimpse their private lives. The romance becomes a “medieval reality show” by exposing the nobility’s secrets and shame, and the grotesque woman is its host.

2.4. Hybridity: a female serpent

The Lady of Synadoun has a monstrous body covered in golden color similar to that of Blonde Esmerée, and her serpent form is unmistakably grotesque since a woman’s face and a serpent’s torso are obviously a joining of unrelated species. Although her appearance in this form is brief, it unites the physical and behavioral aspects of the grotesque woman. The key scene occurs when Lybeaus, quite desperate and “… of blysse all bare,” (…”without any joy,” L 2060), sits in the great hall at Synadoun, wondering what he should do next. He suddenly sees a serpent with a female face, shining like gold: “A worme ther ganne oute-pas / With a womanes face:” (“A serpent came out of it / With a woman’s face:” L 2067-2068) and “Hir body and hir wyngis / Shone in all [þ]ynchis / As amell gaye and gilte,” (“Her body and her wings / Glimmered everywhere (in all things) / Like enamel bright and golden,” L 2070-2072). She crawls out of the window in the stone wall, and in C even more quickly: “A warm com out

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239 See my discussion of Blonde Esmerée’s golden colorings in Dwyer, 71-72.

240 Interestingly, in C Lybeaus prays, “On kne hym sette þat gentyll knyȝt / And prayde to Marie bryȝt / Keuere hym of hys care,” (“The noble knight kneeled down / And prayed to fair Mary / To take care of him,” C 1981-1983). This is similar to the Old French, in which the hero prays to God. The passage in L, in which Lybeaus feels alone and joyless but does not pray, further suggests that the hero is disillusioned without seeing hope for himself.
pace” (“A serpent quickly came out” C 1990). The description of a snake emerging from a
window is suggestive of the earliest depictions of the grotesque forms produced in ancient Italy.
One example reads: “little stems…support half-figures crowned by human or animal heads.” The
image casts the Lady of Synadoun not as a decorative item but as someone in action. The poet’s
imagination and his intention to surprise and confuse his protagonist Lybeaus – and the audience
– seem to be similar to what the ancient artists had in mind when they created the daringly
innovative frescoes that are now known as the early forms of grotesque imagery. 241

The Lady of Synadoun’s face is attached to a tail of unseen dimension and quality: (“Hir
tayle was mekyll vnette, / Hir peynis gryme and grete.”) (“Her tail was mighty underneath, /
which suggests that the serpent had terribly big paws. Monsters and odd beasts of all sorts are
familiar to a medieval audience. Although the serpent woman is not the most fabulous of beastly
forms, this creature is outrageous and effective because of her unadorned simplicity. Weldon
corroborates that the serpent woman’s form and enchantment are part of the Lybeaus poet’s
original contributions to the source material, and have been undeservedly overlooked. 242

The Lady of Synadoun’s physical form is clearly gendered whereas Blonde Esmerée’s is
not. Unlike Blonde Esmerée, who appears foremost as a giant serpent, the Lady of Synadoun
might be perceived as a human in a serpent form, a serpent with a human face, or simply as a
female serpent. The Lybeaus poet emphasizes the fact that it is indeed a woman who is forced to

241 Kayser describes how contemporaries of Augustus condemned the new style, which they
perceived as barbarian. The cave paintings were not discovered until the sixteenth century (The
Grotesque in Art and Literature, 20); see also Dwyer, 12-13.

242 Weldon, 69.
live in a serpent’s body. Lybeaus perceives her as a dragon when he later describes her as a “…lady bright / To a dragon was y-dight,” (“…a cheerful lady / turned into a dragon,” L 2130-2131). The Lady of Synadoun’s form is also ambiguous, as a female head at the end of serpent body collapses human and animal in such a manner one cannot easily decide whether it is a serpent in a woman or a woman in a serpent.

2.5. Ambiguity and instability: shedding her skin

In the previous section I have shown how the Lady of Synadoun’s hybrid body functions as a grotesque from a primarily physical aspect. However, her bold sexual conduct, followed by her physical transformation, supports the notion of instability, another qualifier of the grotesque. Her behavior is the opposite of what is expected from a courtly maiden. After emerging from the wall, she moves toward the knight and confidently kisses him:

As she neyhid hym nere.

And ere that Lybeous wiste,

The worme with mouth him kyste

And clypped aboute the swyre. (L 2081-2084)

As she approached him.

And before Lybeaus knew it,

The serpent kissed him with her mouth

And coiled around his neck.

C provides a variation of the kiss that is even more daring than that described in MSS. L and A. In C, the lady does not embrace the knight’s neck, but boldly kisses him: “And er Lybeaus hyt wyste, / þe warm wyth mouþ hym kyste / All aboute hys swyre,” (“And before Lybeaus knew it,
The serpent kissed him with her mouth / All over his neck,” C 2005-2007). The unexpected, sudden kiss can only occur in her serpent form. It happens precisely before the Lady of Synadoun’s return to her maidenly form. The bold act of kissing would be forward behavior for any courtly maiden, but becomes permissible during the chaos of the Lady of Synadoun’s hybrid state. She confuses the knight profoundly and catches him off guard after he has sat down to rest, not knowing what to do. Additionally, her gesture of clasping Lybeaus’s neck “with great paws” (“… pawes grimly grete,” [“… terribly big paws,” C 1997]) or the coil of her serpentine body is an even more sexually daring act of urgency, guaranteeing he would remain long enough to see her curse lift.

In contrast to the Old French, the serpent woman in Lybeaus Desconus does not bow before the knight, nor does the knight prepare to draw his sword, making ready to strike. Both gestures in the Old French version are indicative of the pair’s status and their courtly upbringing. Bowing and preparing for battle are fundamental and essential signifiers that place both figures firmly within the etiquette of their cultural realm. Both knight and serpent woman follow tradition. Blonde Esmerée is still aware of her status and proper decorum, whether she is in serpent form or not. In the Middle English scene, however, courtly etiquette is absent, and for a brief moment both participants act beyond their normative customs. In this instant, the world is truly upside-down. The serpent woman throws herself around the neck of her rescuer who, tired and bewildered, has been sitting in a chair during the most significant of all his adventures. Their behavior is opposite to expectation: it reveals the courtly maiden’s private fantasy and the chivalric knight’s innermost discontent. After the kiss, the Lady of Synadoun’s tail and wings (above also referred to as paws) fall away from her body and she changes before Lybeaus into a beautiful, but naked woman:
And aftyr this kyssynge
Off the worme tayle and wynge
Swyftly fell hir froo:
So fayre, of all thinke,
Woman, with-out lesynge,
Sawe he neuer ere thoo;
But she was moder naked,
As God hir maked:
The[r]for was Lybeous woo. (L 2085-2093)

And after this kissing
The serpent’s tail and wings
Swiftly fell from her:
So fair, of all things,
[A] woman, without a lie,²⁴³
He had never seen before;
But she was stark naked,
As God had made her:
And for this Lybeaus felt sorry.

In A, the Lady of Synadoun’s nakedness is contrived by the clerics, who by extension perform
the work of God: “Bot sche was all nakyd / As the clerkys hyr makyd;” (“But she was

²⁴³ Meaning that the poet-narrator does not tell a lie.
completely naked / As the clerics made her;” A 2078-2079). C does not mention any originator of the Lady of Synadoun’s nakedness; she simply stands before the knight naked and trembling: “But sche stod be-fore hym naked / And all her body quaked.” (“But she stood before him naked / And her entire body trembled:” C 2014-2015). In a biblical sense, the trembling could be understood as a sign of shame of her naked body, evoking the Genesis story of Adam and Eve, who remedied their shame by sewing together fig leaves. The Lady of Synadoun, likewise, loses the skins of her serpent aspect. This allusion would have been well known to a medieval audience and supports my earlier reflections that the poet noticeably works with the knowledge of an informed audience.

In contrast to the Old French version, in which Blonde Esmerée disappears and on the next day comes back in her human form, the Middle English lady does not disappear, but performs a wondrous spectacle suggesting both innocence and desire. Weldon suggests that the kissing and shedding scene is an image of a return to innocence. Although his suggestion that a medieval audience would immediately read the Lady of Synadoun’s nakedness as a return to innocence, it is just as easy to think that the people would have perceived the sexual connotations in this scene, even if they intuitively understood the larger set of symbols. In a popular sense, the image of a beautiful naked young woman standing in front of a young knight is undoubtedly suggestive; it responds to the lower stratum of the body (in Bakhtin’s language). This process is set deeply within an individual’s unconscious mind, provoking a constant internal battle between the simultaneous impulse and repression of desire. This process also recalls the tension between center and margin, which I have argued is a core indicator for the presence of a grotesque image.

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244 Weldon, 80-81, here n40.
Weldon’s use of a biblical interpretation to read the Lady of Synadoun’s wondrous retransformation shows how the Lybeaus poet creatively adapted another romance element. His exegesis shifts away from the older Old French romance, which portrays Blonde Esmerée as a representative of the Holy Spirit working its divine wisdom through her brilliant body to save the confused knight from getting lost any further. Reading the Lady of Synadoun’s naked body as a form of purification, as Weldon suggests, would have been reassuring for the Middle English audience. The storyline is altered. While in the biblical tale, the innocent couple becomes ashamed after the serpent has unmasked them as sinners, here innocent returns after the Lady of Synadoun has experienced shame. The biblical motifs are displayed in contradictory images of the serpent woman’s sexuality and innocence.

Witnessing the Lady of Synadoun become transformed from the physically active, ugly and kissing body into the perfect but morally confined trembling body is also an example of a process Bakhtin describes as a development in European art from Antiquity to Modernity. He writes that the depiction of a sexually active, desiring, and ugly body is an image of the grotesque and can mostly be found in the ancient bodily canon, which has existed in European art since Antiquity. Whereas the older canon is a vast arena for the popular, the newer, modern bodily canon can be found in all its “historic variations and different genres [and] presents an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something

245 See a discussion of Blonde Esmerée’s brilliance in connection with the Holy Spirit in Dwyer, 69.

246 Bakhtin, 320-321.
individual.” One can see how this development happens in miniature form in *Lybeaus Desconus*, particularly in the Lady of Synadoun’s physical representation, but also in the hero. Lybeaus develops from a young, headstrong, and nameless knight (i.e., not individual in Bakhtin’s sense), who is “full savage” and “completely wild” (L 19), into a knight with status and identity (i.e., an individual). Arthur rewards “Lybeous that lady to wife, / That was so gentil a dame,” (“Lybeaus that lady as a wife / Who was such a noble dame,” L 2179-2180).

McDonald suggests that there is always a desire present that sets off the romance and it will always be satisfied; the romance comes to life by a result-oriented plot through its most essential strategy, the Aventure. In *Lybeaus Desconus*, the hero’s desire fuels this quest. In the process of Lybeaus’s journey, he exhibits his drive to fulfill his desires, for example, by volunteering with alacrity at Arthur’s court and by defeating his fiercest opponents, pressing forward to rescue the lady. The closer he is to his destination, the more his desires are satisfied (including his sexual curiosity about La Dame Amoure), which are ultimately completely fulfilled by his encounter with the Lady of Synadoun. Therefore, the romance can reach its “happy ending” after the Lady of Synadoun has been freed from enchantment and restored to her beautiful, but sexually harmless, maidenhood. Nonetheless, she has managed to satisfy one of her desires – to kiss and embrace the knight, but this bold and sexually awakened (serpent) woman would not be able to proceed without annihilating the basic plot structure.

Part of the ideals of medieval beauty and her key to status as a woman is her clothing. In the three versions of this story, the Lady of Synadoun is found without clothing. When her

247 Bakhtin, 320.

248 McDonald, 13.
serpent form (tail, wings, and/or paws) fall away, it is as if a very unflattering and ugly piece of clothing were stripped from her body. The serpent form then functions as if it were a disguise or a costume under which a woman can assume more sexual audacity, making up for the lack of sovereignty that the loathly lady seeks.249

The knight receives his fame and status, and the Lady of Synadoun receives the restoration of her former body, her beauty, and her role as a duchess. But while Lybeaus makes progress in his personal development and matures by his own input and ambition, the Lady of Synadoun gains really nothing that she achieves by means of her own intelligence and effort other than freeing herself from the fetters of the magicians and obtaining a kiss. Of course, she gains a spouse, but so does Lybeaus, and he also gains the benefits of becoming a wealthy and privileged lord. The Lady of Synadoun takes advantage of the instability of her cursed form only to remain a noblewoman within her courtly center. Her confident overtures toward Lybeaus, while grotesque, brought a knight of notable instability toward the center of her realm, and despite the instability of the events surrounding the kiss, it was not enough to shake the lady from the stability of her station.

2.6. Ugliness: yonge I am and nothing olde

Three forms of unpleasant physicality or ugliness can be described in Lybeaus Desconus. The most basic form of ugliness occurs when the Lybeaus poet applies the term “loathly” to describe a scene or a creature. In Lybeaus’s third adventure he encounters two ugly giants: “Two gyauntes

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249 See also my discussion on the idea that ugliness can be liberating (Dwyer 43).
he saw there. / That one was rede and lothelych, / The oþer blacke es eny pyche:” (“Two giants he saw there. / The one was red and loathly, / The other black as pitch:” L 603-605). In hues of red and black and with a gruesome presence, these giants are ugly, but there is essentially nothing ambiguous, hybrid, or unstable about them. In *Lybeaus Desconus*, the red and black giants are examples of absolute ugliness that is ugliness without counterpart. This means that the Middle English giants are ugly by the nature of their being, not because they are ugly representations of another regular or ideal giant.

The second and third forms of ugliness in *Lybeaus Desconus* are less powerful in their meaning and circumscribe a dissatisfying quality of a woman’s appearance. The first example in this group describes a sense of the serpent woman’s aging. Although the Lady of Synadoun lacks anatomical features that would render her an old hag, the poet seems aware of her potential as a

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250 Although the giants are not grotesque, another giant might be; the quality of the grotesque depends on context and interpretation and the response of others.

251 The most basic term to describe ugliness was (and still is) disharmony. In the Middle Ages, the idea was that inner and outer body are congruent, i.e., a person who was ugly on the outside would have been regarded as ugly on the inside, thus as wicked. According to Augustine, there is no ugliness in nature, by which he concluded that all creatures are beautiful in God’s eyes. In Plato’s sense, ugliness is the absence of perfection and can therefore only exist in the physical universe. For a more in-depth study on the subject, see also Eco’s *History of Ugliness*.

252 On the other hand, the giants in the context of their cannibalism could be an example of grotesque, depending on how the term “giant” would be further posited in this romance, and within the medieval realm of monsters with its own culture and set of ideals – but this would be another topic. Naturally, the loathly lady is an example of *lothelych*. She is also part of the wilderness and exists in the imaginary borderland between courtly monarchy and wild places. Her strong ties to the noble culture are part of the loathliness that defines her. This also means that the loathly lady as such is not a grotesque, although she has been easily misunderstood as one and described as such; for a discussion of the grotesque woman as a form of a loathly lady who has moved into the castle, see Dwyer, 38.
loathly lady. In A she is described as “Yong and nothing olde,” (“Young and not old at all,” A 2056). The theme of youth can be found in other romances, such as in “The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle.” Here, Dame Ragnelle reminds Gawain that women like to be flattered as young: “To be holden not old, but freshe and yong.” Although written approximately one hundred years after Lybeaus Desconus, this theme of youth stands out as a quality that is important to women. The youthful analogy connects both texts, offering consistency in the motif of the loathly lady. In L, the statement relating to youthfulness goes further by presenting this line in the first person. Here, the Lady of Synadoun, as “A worme …/
With a womanes face:” (“Serpent …/ With a woman’s face:” L 2067-2068), proclaims: “‘Yonge Y am and nothing olde,’” (“‘I am young and not old at all,’” L 2069). Since these are the only words that the Lady of Synadoun utters while in her serpent body, the story emphasizes how important youth is for a woman, even a woman in serpent form. By affirming that she would be beautiful despite her outward appearance, the lady speaks from the vantage of a woman, not a serpent. Her comment takes the audience aback, as it must have Lybeaus. The Lady of Synadoun is certainly aware of the cultural value of youth, which, even for an ugly serpent, materializes in the Middle English tale. Compared to the Old French scene, where nothing like it occurs and the serpent woman is located in the mythical body of an ageless dragon, the Middle English romance surprises and poses the question: Who is speaking, a woman or a serpent? Her hybrid form is then an additional prison whence the woman can speak, as she had also wept from her stone wall prison.

253 Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales, ed. Thomas Hahn (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 1995), 415.
There is an immediate humorous element present. The serpent woman’s entrance into the castle’s great hall is, in a theatrical sense, comparable to the stage entrance of a costumed actress stealing the show with one great line. This sort of staging sets the scene for the grotesque: the serpent is oddly juxtaposed to a female head and claims to possess youth, an asset in the realm of mortal women and not serpents. These poetic lines themselves acquire a hybridity the moment the Lady of Synadoun advertises her age.

The third occurrence of ugliness occurs in the Gyffroun adventure, which Maldwyn Mills calls “the prize of beauty.” Elene is publically mocked as a washerwoman. Naïve and good-natured, Lybeaus learns a lesson. Being without a lady he chooses a woman of lower status. Elene, who is up to now considered truly beautiful, (“‘Here cometh a lady gaye: / Js semely vn-to see!’” [“‘Here comes a bright lady / So fair to look at!’” L 877-878]), makes haste for the tournament and gets dressed:

The mayde Ellyne, also tiȝth,
In a robe of sa[m]yte,
Gaylie ganne hir atyre
To do Lybeous prophite. (L 861-864)

At once Maid Elene,
Sprightly put on a silk robe,
interwoven with gold threads


In the name of Lybeaus’s honor.

Despite Elene’s individual beauty and her precious clothing, she seems a rag in the presence of the noble lady who is in the company of the knight Gyffroun Le Flowdous. While Gyffroun’s lady’s beauty is so perfect that it requires twenty-three lines of hyperbolic description (L 897-920), Elene becomes ugly only because of her lack of status. This scene exemplifies the material value of beauty in this culture. By comparison, in Lybeaus’s encounter with La Dame Amoure, she receives a mere three lines specifically regarding her beauty. Here, the Middle English style treats scenes of courtly romance minimally, while in cases of social events, beauty is put on display because of its economic potential (L 1461-1462, 1485). In this context, the term prophite is worth another look. It is glossed by Mills as “to do honor,” but has an additional meaning, simply profit.

2.7. Otherness: the Lady of Synadoun

The Lady of Synadoun is a grotesque because her Otherness – primarily as a woman and secondarily as an heiress of a powerful dukedom – combines in her serpent form. The lady must contend with various male representatives of the courtly world, some with more, and some with less status. Material concerns become prime in her interactions with these men, and these dynamics between knights, the Lady of Synadoun, the other courtly characters, and the two magicians are layered from this perspective. At first glance, the knights are good and the magicians are bad, and the Lady of Synadoun is a victim. This situation creates the most basic idea of the courtly quest. The material gain of having control over the woman becomes seemingly a competition between opposing forces, knights and magicians. For instance, in

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256 Mills, Lybeaus Desconus, 261.
Lambard’s speech to Lybeaus after his arrival at Synadoun, Lambard reveals his concern that the cursed and imprisoned lady may even be suffering physical abuse. At the same time, he suggests that the magicians seek control over her property.

Of alle þys dukdom feyr
þat ylke lady ys eyr
And come of knȳtes kenne.
Sche ys meke and boneyre,
þer-fore we beþ in despeyre
þat sche be dȳt to synne! (C 1723-1728)

Of all this beautiful dukedom
Is my lady the heiress,
She is noble.
She is submissive and compliant
Therefore we have been in despair
That she is brought into sin!

In his speech, Lambard points out the three identifiers of what drives all involved. First is the dukedom, which stands for land ownership; second is the potential for a male to gain access to this land through marrying the right woman; and third is the Lady of Synadoun’s noble status, which is at the top of society. There is hope to acquire all these rewards because the Lady of Synadoun (standing in for all noble maidens) is “submissive and compliant.” However, now the magicians threaten to appropriate not only her property but also her virginity. Lambard points out the fear of losing the entire heredity of the house of Synadoun. As the Lady of Synadoun’s
speech below shows, this dukedom was luckily rescued by Gawain’s kin. After being freed from her enchantment she reports to Lybeaus:

To a worme they had me went,
Jn wo to leven and lende,
Tyll [J] had kyssed Gaweyne,
That is doughti knight, certayne,
Or some of his kynde. (L 2104-2108)

They had me turned into a serpent,
To live and remain in woe,
Until [I] had kissed Gawain
Who is for sure a valiant knight
Or some of his kin.

It is remarkable that the lady was aware of her condition and that the kiss was finagled so that only Gawain or one of his sons could release her. While she was the magician’s victim, she was also able to protect her assets and buy enough time for the best knight to come along. Does this mean that she was in league with the magicians to ensure that she would have her own choice of a future husband? If so, then Lambard’s characterization of the lady as submissive and compliant would be a misconception because she is rather aggressive, taking charge when Lybeaus finally arrives and finding her own solution to release her curse in the nick of time, i.e., the opportunity to kiss him. It is during this moment that the Lady of Synadoun uses the resource of her own female sexuality to break her curse. I have argued that the Lady of Synadoun possesses sexuality when she instigates the kiss while a serpent and also afterward as a trembling
naked woman. Ultimately then, the grotesque image is a layer of modesty, similar to a layer of clothing, that allows the Lady of Synadoun to have the courage to initiate a romantic encounter with Lybeaus, which will continue after the curse is lifted. When the curse lifts, she remains a sexual being even in her naked and trembling form, and the grotesque emerges because in her society she should rather be modest and not use her sexuality as a tool to get power. The Lady of Synadoun’s bold behavior turns the world on its head.

Ultimately, however, all men are in control of the lady and her estate. They control her from both her opponents’ and her suitors’ side. The Lady of Synadoun's Otherness depends on this functionalization of the woman, which is dictated by men in terms of how a woman should behave and look like. The magicians use the curse to lure Lybeaus so that he will take charge of what they have been controlling. From this viewpoint, a transfer of power is accomplished through the curse, in which the Lady of Synadoun is the bait. Although the magicians are not directly conspiring with the knight, the masculine culture advantages men. The entire operation aids Lybeaus in accomplishing his goal. When Lybeaus sets off from Glastonbury for Synadoun, he knows that he travels empty-handed, possessing only his horse and armor. When he returns, he has gained fame, prowess, a wife, a dukedom, and the elevation of his status. This means that he has been identified as an insider within the most powerful circle. Lybeaus has found his seat at the Round Table.

3. Conclusion: the Lady of Synadoun's wondrous retransformation

The account of the Lady of Synadoun’s life could be summed up in the turn of phrase, “What’s a girl got to do for a kiss?” There is obviously a gap between the Lady of Synadoun’s expected and assumed feminine submissiveness and her actual character. Compared to her counterpart, Blonde Esmerée, the Lady of Synadoun has no female rival and is less refined in her courtly etiquette.
Moreover, it is unique to *Lybeaus Desconus* that a courtly lady appears naked (even when she has just been released from a spell). Her wondrous return from serpent to maiden is tied to the erotic event of nakedness, modesty, and the knight’s bewildered reaction to it, since he also recognizes the powerful and reassuring biblical message communicated by the image of a serpent retransforming into a maiden. None of these images are present in the traditional courtly romance as seen in the Old French canon. The Lady of Synadoun’s grotesque qualities, in her cursed body and situation, eventually make one consider the more unusual elements of courtly society, such as the single-minded romantic interest of a knight’s quest and the seemingly static nature of a noble woman. As the grotesque slithers through the romance plot, it embodies the ordinary courtly protocol reflected against an increasingly self-aware society at large. Thus, her grotesque meaning derives from a dramatic combination of a courtly lady and a young woman. The courtly romance is diminished in its Middle English adaptation, a development typical of the Middle English genre, and the story emphasizes that the courtly love model has become too ascetic for the relationships between the Knights of the Round Table and the ladies whom they pursue. This shift is a jab at the old courtly model; the knights lay down their swords.

The poet creates a humorous figure of a serpent with a woman’s face that shows the cultural matters that move an audience in fourteenth-century England. A word about poets. While in *Li Biaus Descouneüs* knowledge is controlled by the sorcerers’ books, in *Lybeaus Desconus* the sorcerers exert control with their speech, “With maystres of her mouthe,” (“By mastery of their words,” L 2101), and resemble the courtly dwarf and jester Theodoleyn, who enchants the ladies with his words, “A mery man of mouthe,” (“A merry man of his mouth [of

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Perhaps the poet of *Lybeaus Desconus* is the master of his words as well. He enchants and entertains the people.

The Old French and the Middle English romances are both titled after their protagonist, Lybeaus, a knight who comes to maturation by his willing submission to an afflicted noblewoman. For the Lady of Synadoun and her counterpart, Blonde Esmerée, the affliction of the grotesque female was a temporary condition over which they both triumphed through their overtures toward an innocent Arthurian knight. Both romances end expectedly well for both ladies. The protagonist of the next two romances to be discussed is not a knight, but another grotesque female called Melusine. In both the French and German versions of *Melusine*, her affliction as a serpent woman is a permanent, inescapable state of suffering. Here, the grotesque goes beyond the physical and temporary and achieves immortality in spiritual realms that reach into eternity.
CHAPTER 4: A GROTESQUE FAIRY IN JEAN D’ARRAS’S MELUSINE

1. Mélusine ou La Noble Histoire de Lusignan: genealogical fiction in Middle French

Jean d’Arras’s character Melusine enjoys much greater fame than her counterparts Blonde Esmerée and the Lady of Synadoun. Melusine’s legendary story tells of the marriage between a human and a supernatural being. Like Blonde Esmerée and the Lady of Synadoun, she appears as a serpent woman, but her story fleshes out her hybrid form more extensively than the Old French and Middle English Arthurian romances. Melusine’s serpent body is more than a singular problem that needs to be solved by relieving her curse. Instead, her physical condition defines her existence and is an expression of her complex fairy heritage and dissatisfaction with this supernatural origin. The text is considered a hybrid genre that blends history with fiction and upholds claims to the founding of the House of Lusignan, a royal house in Western France in the former province of Poitou. The work is a narrative that is best summarized by Donald Maddox as “an amalgam of disparate elements.” Jean composed this prose narrative in 1392 at the court of Jean, duc de Berry, who governed the castle of Lusignan in Poitou. The romance tells the legendary history of his Poitevin dynasty and begins with the story of the family’s supernatural origins in the fairy world, continues with Melusine’s story, then follows the lives of her sons Geoffrey, Guion, and Urien.

258 Maddox and Sturm-Maddox list these disparate elements as “fiction, history, and genealogy, in its account of the founding of the illustrious dynasty of Lusignan and its innovative appropriation of Crusade narratives; of human and fairy, in the marriage of its two central protagonists; of human and monstrous, in the corporeal metamorphoses of its heroine the grotesque marks borne by her progeny; of folk belief and Christianity; and of romance and epic conventions” (2); see also Dwyer, 6-7 and 7, n11.
Melusine’s story has been widely studied. Her legendary origin can be traced back to folklore of mixed Celtic and Roman mythology written as early as the twelfth century. However, while the tale has been examined with a focus on its genealogic content, historical events, and the theme of destiny, interest in Melusine’s character is still neglected and often reduced to an examination of her mythical and maternal functions or her marvelous character. For example, Maddox and Sturm-Maddox write that *Melusine*, an amalgam of disparate elements, has not received enough scholarly attention and criticize, amongst others, that there is still no thorough study of Melusine as an expression of an Other. Melusine’s serpent-form affliction and the circumstances surrounding its punitive curse necessitate her marriage to a mortal, Remondin, taking her from the fairy world to the land of nobles. Here, she succeeds in hiding her form for a long time but she is expelled from society as soon as her physical abnormality is revealed. Her biography reflects the pathology of the grotesque woman, informing it with an array of possible readings. Melusine is portrayed as a conflicted woman who is full of opposites. These seeming contradictions are not limited to visual appearances but extend to detailed descriptions of behavioral aspects, human emotions, and relationships in all their intricacy.

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Dictionnaire des lettres françaises, 744.

260 Maddox and Sturm-Maddox, 3; see also Claude Lecouteux, *Witches, Werewolves, and Fairies: Shapeshifters and Astral Doublers in the Middle Ages* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2003), 64.
Melusine is a supernatural immortal with a human father and a fairy mother. The eldest of three daughters, she is born to King Elinas and Presine on the isle of Avalon. When she convinces her sisters to avenge the father’s abusive treatment of their mother, the three sisters, at Melusine’s suggestion, decide to incarcerate him inside Mount Brumelion. Erroneously thinking that Presine would welcome her daughters’ intervention, the mother is instead infuriated and punishes each daughter with a curse. Melusine is condemned to be a serpent from the navel down every Saturday for eternity until a man loves and marries her, thus removing immortality and enabling her to die a mortal’s death. Such a union, however, will not relieve her of the curse's weekly transformations. Nonetheless, Melusine seeks an end to the burden of immortality and meets Remondin, son of the house of Poitou, who has accidentally killed his uncle, the count of Forez, during a hunt in the forest of Colombiers. Obviously less gifted and confident than his future wife, Remondin is shocked by his misdeed and submits to everything that the clever fairy suggests. He agrees to marry Melusine and promises to obey her demand never to look at her on Saturdays. In return, Melusine vows to make Remondin the most successful and richest lord of Poitou. After their wedding, Melusine immediately builds the fortress of Lusignan, the couple’s home. She and Remondin have ten sons, nine of them born with bizarre disfigurements. For a long time Melusine and Remondin live a successful life together and gain political and economic fame. As promised, Remondin never attempts to look at his wife on Saturdays, until his brother, the new count of Forez, tricks him one day into spying on Melusine when she is locked in her private chamber behind a thick door. Remondin observes his wife bathing and sees that she has a female upper body and her lower body is a serpent’s tail. Surprisingly, after discovering his wife’s secret condition, Remondin does not leave her. At first the couple continues as before despite the fact that he has broken their agreement. Soon, however, consumed by anger, jealousy,
and guilt, Remondin accuses his wife publicly: she is a horrible serpent, whose evil nature he considers to be the cause of his sons’ violent problems. In particular, Remondin is furious about the death of his son Fromont, whom Geoffrey, his older brother, burnt to death. Remondin’s public renunciation of his wife destroys the couple’s relationship. Although she forgives her husband’s breach of trust in a dramatic scene, Melusine turns into a giant serpent before everyone’s eyes and leaves Lusignan.

The romance presents the co-existence and interrelation of the human and the supernatural world. On the surface, it seems that men cause problems for Melusine and her female relatives. From the male perspective, Melusine’s extravagant, powerful personality is seen as Other. She embodies a different, exotic type of woman who evokes in the men curiosity and desire as well as fear and a sense of weakness. Even though the men worry that they could lose their authority, for Melusine it is only possible to be successful in the mortal world because of her serpent form; and the men let her have her success – from which they benefit – until Melusine’s secret will be publicly known. For Melusine, the collective opportunism, which both her maternal family and her husband’s family exhibit, is partly beneficial. While her shape seems negative at first because it is the consequence of a punishment, it is actually what enables her to enter the world of mortals, in which she can temporarily live as long as her physical condition is kept a secret.

It is not far-fetched to see Melusine’s curse as an advantage that allows her to participate in this world dominated by men if one looks at it more closely. The curse is based on a paradox: without the transgression of her father, Elinas, against Melusine’s mother, Presine, Melusine would not enter the human world, and Elinas’s human and Presine’s fairy lineage would not continue. The curse is the necessary stressor that brings about the remarkable circumstances that
continue their family. It also forces Melusine to find a mortal husband in Remondin, who marries and sires ten children with her. Had Melusine not been cursed by her mother, she might have remained in the fairy world, lacking the necessary impetus to address her dissatisfaction. In addition, her story never mentions the existence of possible suitors from the fairy world; we do not know if fairies are only female or if they must always find a husband outside of their realm. This suggests also that the fairy needs to undergo a crisis in order to collide with the human world. Thus it is not the tale’s objective to resolve Melusine’s curse as an obstacle that can be vanquished through the testing of a knight as in the plot of both Li Biaus Descouneüs and Lybeaus Desconus.

Melusine experiences the signifying traits of the grotesque not only physically but also emotionally in her relationship with her human family. The prehistory of her familial situation is the cause of Melusine's grotesque form during her temporary existence as a mortal being on the human stage. Likewise, her serpent form is the cause of most of the conflicts that arise in the romance. The details of her enigmatic history contribute to Lusignan's establishment, the House of Lusignan being one of the great noble families in the area where Melusine settles. Lusignan’s subsequent survival is intertwined with the curse and always leads back to it. The curse was brought upon Melusine for her strong-minded decision to punish her father. It then dominates nearly all the decisions that she makes during her life. Hence, the serpent woman’s physical appearance is neither entirely positive nor negative but rather an expression of her heritage.

Melusine's punitive enchantment is part of a family system of violence, violations, and transgressions. The curse produced tremendous suffering for the entire family into a third generation of Melusine and Remondin’s children. This is also the case for curses cast on Melusine’s two sisters – Melior, the middle daughter and Palestine, the youngest – and on
Presine, when a curse forced her out of Albanie after her husband broke his oath and accidentally looked at his wife while she was taking a bath with her three daughters. The pain connects the women to each other. Their serpent forms can be understood as a type of language spoken only by women. This language is expressed in the characteristics that the cursed female develops as a woman and the actions that she takes during her life. One example of this female language is shown in Melusine’s exchange with her younger sisters, whom she asks to avenge their mother’s pain by punishing the disrespectful father. The younger sisters are eager to follow Melusine’s lead and thereby demonstrate the female bond among the three of them: “Et les autres deux lui répondirent: ‘Vous estes nostre ainsnee, nous vous suivrons et avouerons ce que vous en vouldréz faire,’” (5va 132)262 (“And the two others replied: ‘You are our eldest sister. We’ll follow your lead, accepting all that you wish to do,’” Morris 69). Their immediate agreement shows their unwavering loyalty to the family, as they unquestioningly trust the older Melusine.

As if they were responding to an order, the sisters do not even ponder whether the father’s punishment is warranted.

Language is not only a system of words, signs or symbols used for communication but can also be a system of sounds, gestures, actions and appearances that are understood by a group of people as their form of communication. The few females who appear in the romance understand and guard each other’s actions and secrets. The communication between the female family members in *Melusine* derives from their curses. Therefore Melusine’s grotesque body is actually a survival mechanism and an instrument of power. This power is often expressed as control over communication, which is in *Melusine* a female strategy, similar to a “female language.” It is evident in behavioral patterns and decision-making processes and in the reactions the women employ to achieve their goals despite the presence of men who do not support their wives, daughters, and female neighbors. For a minority group such as the women in *Melusine*, communication goes beyond the verbal and can be found in nonverbal communication, such as silently agreeing, writing or nodding. The women share similar experiences, but cannot openly speak about the circumstances because they are oppressed. Moreover, it seems that the women can neither rationally describe what they have in common nor realize they are communicating in alternative ways outside the controlling boundaries of their authorities. For example, in *Melusine*, Presine adopts a strategy to accomplish at least part of her ultimate life goal to become a mortal by cursing her daughter Melusine. The mother can live out her wish vicariously through her daughter by a choice that banishes Melusine to the mortal world, establishing a human lineage through her. The women seem to understand the higher purpose behind their actions and

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reactions; it connects them with each other. This indirect, ambiguous, and burdensome way to reach a goal can be deemed a grotesque strategy. It deploys a paradox to attain an outcome that would be otherwise impossible.

Maddox and Sturm-Maddox’s reading that Melusine would be composed of a hodgepodge of elements corroborates one of the grotesque’s most salient qualities. Their statement builds on that scholarship of Sylvia Huot, who claims that Melusine’s danger lies in the fact that the shocking encounter with her husband, who realizes that he has a deformed wife, leads to the knight’s problematization of selfhood, which threatens to destroy him as a human being. Huot addresses psychological aspects of madness but also intimacy between the couple, and she delineates their relationship from the perspective of the encounter with the serpent. Additionally, Kevin Brownlee argues that not only is Melusine a hybrid, but the entire romance becomes a place of hybridity composed of countless cultural traditions and elements. By including communication in her hybrid makeup, I extend Brownlee’s research and view Melusine’s body as a place and source of communication and language. Where he sees external modes contributing, I additionally see varied modes of communication.

Gabrielle M. Spiegel, surprised by the obvious lack of response in current scholarship to the violent patricide and the number of confounded expectations that Melusine contains,

264 Maddox and Sturm-Maddox, 2-3; see also Dwyer, 6-7, and 7, n11.


describes duplication and doubling effects as the major characteristics of the narrative. She explains Melusine’s monstrosity by the fact that she is a twin, since twinship in the Middle Ages was conceptualized as a form of monstrosity. Spiegel’s observations of Melusine as a hybrid of female and male qualities, which expose androgynous social behaviors and functions, influences some of my own analysis of Melusine’s rather masculine forcefulness that I see as an aspect of her grotesqueness.

Françoise Clier-Colombani looks at the relationship between Melusine’s extraordinary beauty and the absurd description of her children as if they were also absolutely beautiful and without any defect. My reading of Melusine as a grotesque woman builds on the above scholarship by describing her as grotesque figure. The following analysis will show that Melusine’s grotesqueness is expressed in many aspects of her life, well beyond the bounds of her body.

267 Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “Maternity and Monstrosity: Reproductive Biology in the Roman de Melusine,” Melusine of Lusignan: Founding Fiction, eds. Maddox and Sturm-Maddox, 100-124. Spiegel questions Melusine’s dubious family dynamics: “But the fact that this socially prestigious origin is mediated by a mother who was the instigator of a venegful plot against this very same ancestor [Elinas] goes unremarked [and is] part of a larger pattern in which no one seems to register what they read or are told” (102-103). The family’s lack of understanding of their violent dynamics represents a “failure of insight that significantly marks the narrative as a tale of illusion and duplicity” (103); see also Claudia Steinkämper, Melusine – vom Schlangenweib zur ‘Beauté mit dem Fischschwanz’: Geschichte einer literarischen Aneignung (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).

2. Melusine as a grotesque woman

The same catalogue of traits that defines Blonde Esmerée and the Lady of Synadoun as grotesque women also pertains to Melusine. Her grotesqueness is more suitably understood when interpreted with all of the traits in mind. The earlier grotesque women exhibit these with less complexity, whereas Melusine possesses all of these qualities with much greater nuance.

2.1. Melusine's curse as a maternal gift

In the fairy world, Melusine tries to help her mother Presine, who has been mistreated by her husband and who ordains that Melusine be a serpent from the navel down on Saturdays. Although to humankind Presine’s curse seems to doom her daughter, from a fairy perspective, it is an inheritance that gives Melusine access to the world of mortals. From this angle, the mother does Melusine a favor and attempts to remedy her own disappointment at having lost the opportunity to die a mortal death. The curse is the mother’s second chance, vicariously experienced through her daughter, with the hope that she would achieve what was impossible for the mother herself.

Accordingly, rather than flatly identifying Melusine’s punishment as a curse, her mother actually describes her own action towards her daughter as a gift: “Mais, desormais, je te donne le don que tu seras tous les samedis serpente du nombril en aval” (5vb 134) ("But I give you the gift that from now on, every Saturday, you will be a serpent from the navel down” my translation). The mother’s wording is striking. In the reading of Melusine as a grotesque woman, her mother’s gift, bizarre and unusual, reflects one of the grotesque’s impacts, which is to
bewilder. Readers are forced to reevaluate the parameters of a gift. Jean includes the prehistory of Melusine’s ancestors and the details about her and her sisters’ enchantment. This information already produces an image of Melusine before her story begins. It opens the door to various aspects of the female grotesque. Kayser explains that the grotesque contains sinister, fated elements, and therefore frightens and unsettles the reader.\footnote{270} Likewise, Melusine’s curse (and the other curses that dominate the Middle French \textit{Melusine}) is widely recognized as the expression of a destiny that the protagonist cannot escape, which links the curse to the doomed destiny theme described by Kayser.

In \textit{Melusine}, the prehistory that leads to Presine’s curse of her daughter describes this said curse as caused by a series of transgressions. Melusine is punished for avenging Presine, who lost her husband, King Elinas, because of his transgressions against her. Melusine imprisons her father inside a mountain, leaving him to die, an act amounting to patricide.\footnote{271} All this violence among family members flows from the fact that Melusine’s lineage has fairy origins and is governed by “des meurs nimphes et faées,” (5vb 134) (“supernatural law – that of nymphs

\footnote{270} Kayser describes the grotesque as an expression of estrangement from the world; the reader or viewer of the grotesque is frightened because the familiar world “ceases to be reliable” (185) and he or she feels unable to continue living in this changed world. The foreboding stems from the fear of life rather than of death, because the grotesque disorients and alienates. The world is perceived as absurd (\textit{The Grotesque in Art and Literature}, 184-185).

or fairies,” Morris 71). The fairy women of Avalon, however, desiring to escape this condition, need a Christian man who will love them, for union with a mortal male offers the possibility of becoming mortal. Thus, the opening of the romance presents the fairy realm and broken promises between King Elinas and Presine that end in curses. The fate that these transgressions involve is portrayed as ambiguous, fatal, and wicked rather than supportive and positive.

The violent curse of her daughters is an outpouring of the mother’s harsh despondency over remaining in the fairy realm; she has lost her chance to become a mortal, a “femme naturelle” (5vb 136) (“mortal woman” Morris 71). Presine blames her daughter, Melusine, the most: “C’estoit ce ou je prenoye toute la plaisance que j’avoie en ce monde mortel et vous la m’avez tollue,” (5vb 134) (“Twas from him that I took all pleasure in the world of mortals, and now you’ve deprived me of even that!” Morris 71). The prehistory explains why Presine’s punishing of Melusine and her sisters would be a revenge for her daughters’ deed against her husband. However, Presine’s justification – losing the chance to enjoy a mortal man – does not entirely make sense. After all, originally it was Elinas who had broken the promise never to look at Presine, and with this breach of trust he forfeited his wife’s hope for a mortal life, as she points out: “Faulx roys! Tu m’as failli de couvenant, dont il te mesavenra! Et m’as perdue a tous jours mais!” (4vb 130) (“Scoundrel! You have broken your word! And you’ll reap misfortune for it. You have lost me forever!” Morris 65). Since the curse cannot bring Elinas back nor reestablish Presine’s chances to become human, the curse seems futile. Presine, having had a

272 Already the poet-narrator explains in the prologue that there are marvelous things on earth and in the universe that derive from so-called fairies, “les choses dictes faees” (1va 112), that it would be better not to meddle with.
much desired taste of the human world at Elinas's side, cannot go back to the fairy world and be satisfied. Instead she feels alienated and doomed in either of these two worlds. Moreover, she realizes that her chance to become human is irrevocably lost. This loss is the failure of Presine’s entire life. Here, the sense of loss can be compared to Kayser’s explanation of the grotesque as an image of “failure to orient ourselves in the physical universe.”\textsuperscript{273} Presine’s curse provokes her sensation of estrangement and her fear of moving on. It does not repair anything for her, but rather alienates her even further because the three daughters would be Presine’s only company in Avalon. Presine’s decision and her disorientation without Elinas corroborate Spiegel’s description of the meaning of patricide in a family; it is a taboo that violates any moral code in such a manner that the family’s source of organization is erased.\textsuperscript{274} The action against Elinas dissolves the family’s identity.

However, Presine’s curse might also recover some of the loss that she perceives. She hands over to Melusine her forfeited chance to become a human. Presine is enraged at both Elinas and her daughters. It appears, though, that she does not suffer as much from having lost her husband as from the consequences of having lost control over him and her daughters. Presine’s intention becomes clearer when, after having cast her spells, she encourages her eldest daughter by telling her that “et non contretant de toy ystra noble lignie moult grant et qui feront de grans et haultes prouesces,” (5vb 136) (“but however it might turn out, from you will be born a noble and powerful lineage who will accomplish great feats,” Morris 71). The statement implies that Presine recognizes another opportunity to regain control over her lost chance

\textsuperscript{273} Kayser, \textit{The Grotesque in Art and Literature}, 185.

\textsuperscript{274} Spiegel, 106.
through her daughter, who will be able to sustain the great line from which both women descend. Melusine will guarantee their survival, regardless of the outcome of her curse, that is, whether or not a man keeps his promise to her. Melusine suffers the affliction of her curse only on Saturdays. This idiosyncrasy allows her enough flexibility to make it nearly manageable for herself.

The episode of her curse portrays Melusine as an inquisitive and willful figure, both qualities that point toward a type of female protagonist rare in medieval literature. For example, Melusine recognizes the miserable conditions and the sad destiny that a life in Avalon’s fairy world would entail: “la grant griefté et misere” (5rb 132) (“the great pain and misery” Morris 69). She is curious about the conditions in the world of mortals in Albanie: “Et celle Melusigne remist sa mere en autres paroles en demandant les estres et les noms des villes et des chasteaulx du païs d’Albanie,” (5rb 132) (“And Melusine asked her mother other questions about those living in Scotland and about the names of cities and castles there,” Morris 69). Presine ascribes to Melusine an “orguilleux couraige” (5va 134) (“overconfidence” [my translation]).275 The description has the negative connotation of overestimating one's ability or authority. This character trait is what caused the young woman to act so violently against her father. According to Tobler-Lommatzsch, “orgoillos” may mean “haughty” or “prideful” (“hochmütig, stolz”); it may also mean “wild” (“ungestüm”), “aggressive,” “hasty,” or “forceful.”276 It also evokes the

275 The Dictionnaire du Moyen Français (1330-1500) interprets the term couraige as “ensemble des sentiments, des pensées, des dispositions, des intentions,” (“nexus of feelings, thoughts, dispositions, and intentions,” my translation) entry A3, Web; Morris translates “orguilleux couraige” as “audacity” (71).

276 Tobler-Lommatzsch, 1262-1264.
lively activity commonly associated with disobedient children or rebellious teenagers. Thus, Presine’s reaction to her daughter has a natural, maternal cast if seen separately from the mythology or folklore usually associated with these figures. She speaks to a young woman whom the romance describes as dissatisfied, curious, determined, arrogant, disobedient, and wild. All these words portray the personality of a character that at once disturbs a given standard and provokes change, both mannerisms inherent in the grotesque.

2.2. Powerful secrets

At the beginning of Melusine’s own story, she meets her future husband, Remondin, at the Fountaine de Soif in the Forest of Colombiers, a borderland between the fairy realm and the human world. Remondin has accidently killed his uncle, and lost in his thoughts, lets his horse carry him aimlessly through the woods. This scene indicates a liminal moment of crossing over into the otherworld (see 10va 160). Here, Remondin encounters Melusine for the first time and is astonished that she knows everything about him. Taking Remondin by surprise, she proposes to help him conceal the count’s death and make him the most powerful and richest man of his lineage if he agrees to wed her. Her sole condition is that he never look at her, nor ever inquire about her whereabouts on Saturdays. This pact establishes the tabou mélusinien, the major force that drives the plot. After they have been married, Melusine insists that Remondin renew his oath, an act that amplifies the importance of their secret. However, Remondin’s double transgression, when he peeks at his wife through the hole in the door and denounces her as a horrible serpent before everyone, breaks this oath. The fact that these transgressions destroy the

\[\text{Subheading used in Jean d’Arras, Mélusine, Vincensini edition, 135.}\]
relationship between Remondin and Melusine validates the importance that the secret has for their union. Whereas the intact secret is the source of Melusine’s exuberant power in the mortal world, the broken secret will deprive her of all power.

The secrecy associated with the serpent woman is a theme already encountered in *Li Biaus Descouneüs* and *Lybeaus Desconus*. In *Melusine*, this theme gains greater importance. While in the *Bel Inconnu* material, the secret is limited to the concealment of Blonde Esmerée and the Lady of Synadoun’s temporary physical conditions until the knight arrives at their castle, in *Melusine* both male and female are connected through mutual secrets. Both characters hide an unspeakable truth that is the ground upon which their union becomes possible.278 As Lochrie claims, “secrecy is not so much a matter of secrets as it is a manner of rhetoric, and its power lies less in what is kept hidden than in the dynamic between the ‘knows’ and the ‘know-nots.”279 In Melusine and Remondin’s case, Melusine is the “know” and her husband is indeed the “know-not.” Her existence in the mortal world depends on this condition and, as long as she is in charge of what is known only to her, her destiny as a fairy among mortals is secure.

Curses are exclusively women’s business. Presine’s curse is at the beginning of the romance and carries over to Melusine; she also punishes her other two daughters Melior and

278 For further discussion on Melusine’s secret, see also Laurence Harf-Lancner, *Les Fées au Moyen Âge: Morgane et Mélusine; la naissance des fées* (Paris: Champion, 1984), 161-170; the author describes the secret pact between Melusine and Remondin based on the so-called Mélusinien theme that entails that a fairy marry a young knight to gain access to the mortal world; see also Pierre Martin-Civat, *Le très simple secret de Mélusine, mythique aïeule des Lusignan: un arbre sacré, une divinité sylvestre, une fée des bois, une maison féodale, une légende* (Poitiers. France: Oudin, 1969).

279 Lochrie, 93.
Palestine with heavy burdens.\textsuperscript{280} It has been argued that medieval secrecy is mainly a male concern because usually men are in charge of knowledge.\textsuperscript{281} In Melusine’s case, however, secrecy becomes a female issue because the fairy women are in charge of secrets. Their power of knowledge not only consists of the taboo which founded the union between Melusine and Remondin, but also manifests itself in the various ways in which women keep knowledge concealed, and thus collaborate outside of male control.

This female collaboration becomes apparent to us when Melusine, after she has left Lusignan, regularly returns at night to suckle her two mortal sons, Thierry and Remond. Her former maids, who witness Melusine’s nightly appearances, keep this knowledge from Remondin: “Et sachiez que Melusine 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,” (141rb 708) (“You may rest assured that Melusine went to see her children every evening. She held them near the fire and did all she could to comfort and nurture them. The nurses saw her clearly but dared not say a word,” Morris 613). The grotesque image of a serpent that comes at night to nurse her children corroborates the idea that secrecy is a female “language” expressed in silence or in the gentle speech associated with a well-mannered maiden. Although Melusine's nursemaids are silent out of fear rather than by willing agreement, Melusine relies on their

\textsuperscript{280} Melior, Melusine’s next oldest sister, is banished to Armenia to watch over a sparrow hawk until Judgment Day. Although once a year suitors may relieve her of this duty, Melior can never get married to any of them. The youngest sister, Palestine, is imprisoned inside of a mountain guarding her father’s treasure and must remain there until a knight uses the treasure to finance a crusade to the Holy Land (see 6rb 138).

\textsuperscript{281} For example, see a discussion of how men used medical knowledge in order to exercise control over women and female perception of their own bodies in Sarah Alison Miller’s “Gynecological Secrets: Blood, Seed, and Monstrous Births in \textit{De Secretis Mulierum},” \textit{Medieval Monstrosity}, 55-90.
cooperation for her activities to remain undisclosed. She counts on Remondin's ignorance to uphold her strategy to remain hidden as well. Melusine and Remondin have a silent language about his own secret – killing his uncle, a secret both Remondin and his wife know and determine to keep. As long as he is a silent participant in this agreement, there will be no problems in the marriage.

Though the concept that secrecy expressed in silence can be a language may seem paradoxical, it is a valid one. Silence is a strategy and can be considered a language of the grotesque, which works through paradoxes. There are several incidents in *Melusine* in which remaining silent is indeed a powerful activity. Women do not speak in order to avoid the consequences that they anticipate they will endure if they do speak out loud. As in the scene in the nursing chamber, they communicate silently. In another example, Presine decides to establish a monument for her husband on Mount Brumelion. After her daughters had left the fairy world, she establishes “la figure d’un chevalier grant a merveilles, ... et a ses piéz avoir en estant une royne d’albastre, ... et tenoit unetable qui disoit: ‘Cy gist mon mary, le noble roy Elinas d’Albanie,’” (143a 718) ([a] surprisingly large sculpture of a knight…At his feet, there stood the image of a queen in alabaster, ... and in her hands she held a tablet which said: ‘Here lies my husband, the noble King Elinas of Scotland,’” Morris 621). Although Presine does not speak with her voice, she communicates non-verbally, in writing, through an epitaph on a monument for what she has lost: the marriage, which would have enabled her to become a human being. Eventually, this information is communicated to Geoffrey Great Tooth (‘“Gieoffey au Grant Dent” [41va 294]), Melusine's sixth son, who accidentally comes to Mount Brumelion while pursuing a giant that his grandmother Presine had placed as a guard at the tomb. Here, the woman’s nonverbal language exercises great maternal authority because, in communicating
through the monument, Presine sends a message to her family members and thus exerts some influence over the world of humans, whom she could not control while she was among them. Presine’s respect for humans, however, is also ambiguous. The giant threatens the surrounding villages, and by placing him to guard the dead while also devastating the living, Presine reveals her aloof, violent tendency, which she passed on to her daughter, Melusine. In this context, Huot points out that while Presine is the ancestor at the root of Lusignan, she is outside the human world; not only Elinas but also the entire population has to suffer from her legacy.\footnote{282 Sylvia Huot, “Others and Alterity,” \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Medieval French Literature}, eds. Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 238-250, here 243.}

In contrast, after Melusine’s promise has been broken and the secret about her serpent body is made public, she appears, in full embodiment, as a giant serpent in the sky above Poitou, making a great din (“en manent tel tempeste” (140vb 706) (“causing such a stormy fracas” Morris 610-611). This loud and forceful appearance suggests that, for Melusine, the secret language of her pact with Remondin has become meaningless. In this tempestuous public display, she breaks her silence to the entire Poitevin population with a reckless impulsiveness that trumps the selfish tantrums of her mother.

2.3. Central Positioning at Lusignan

We find in this romance, too, the centrality of the grotesque serpent woman. Centrality characterizes the courtly space that comprises the world of the nobles. The serpent woman does not operate outside of this world and peripheral to a romance, but is directly at its center of
power and culture, the court. This basic aspect defines the serpent woman as different from the monstrous woman or the loathly lady. Apart from this broad interpretation, I have concluded in Chapters 2 and 3 that centrality must be narrowed and perceived on multiple planes. In both romances, the Old French *Li Biaus Descouneüs* and the Middle English *Lybeaus Desconus*, Arthur’s court represents the starting point and is the ultimate center and ideological core upon which the knights and ladies are largely modeled. In both tales, the serpent women’s courts, Blonde Esmerée’s court at the Cité Gaste in Senaudon, and the Lady of Synadoun’s court at Synadoun, are political and cultural 'sub-centers' distant from Arthur’s and subordinated to the king’s reign. Whereas in *Li Biaus Descouneüs* I extend centrality beyond the above meaning to a structural context, namely that Blonde Esmerée appears in the strategic midpoint of the tale, in *Lybeaus Desconus* I focus on the disruptive and tongue-in-cheek effect that the Lady of Synadoun has on the ideals of its cultural centers, i.e., the noble courts.

Centrality in *Melusine* takes on yet another meaning. It encompasses the world of humans, which is the only possible location where Melusine’s curse can manifest itself. Only in the human world does Melusine appear as a serpent woman. As a location, centrality includes the area of Poitou, and most of all the fortress of Lusignan, which the protagonist builds in the form of a magnificent castle as soon as she is married. At Lusignan, Melusine lives a life of great luxury and political power. It is here that she raises each of her sons and that her family prospers, becoming one of the most successful and influential noble dynasties in the area. Melusine is the

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283 See Dwyer, 37-38.

284 See my discussion on the Arthurian romance and its center, Dwyer, 113-115.
progenitor, the kernel from which Lusignan grows, which indicates that she is central in a
genealogical sense, too.

Although Poitou and Lusignan do not remain a permanent home for Melusine, she
succeeds in establishing a permanent location for her progeny, who will eventually understand
their connection with their maternal fairy ancestors. This permanence for later generations
reveals itself to Melusine’s son Geoffrey with his discovery. Wandering away from Poitou
toward a marginal area located in its mountainous borderland, Geoffrey finds his ancestral tomb
at Mount Brumelion. The mountain contains a passageway showing a bright light in the distance,
an image of clarity, because Geoffrey will learn about his ancestry and thus link his birthplace of
Lusignan to the otherworld: “s’en va parmy un estroit sentier et voit au long grant claret.” (143va
716) (“[he] began negotiating his way through a narrow passageway; in the distance he could see
a bright light,” Morris 621). Geoffrey wanders away from his parent’s court and only here, in a
place where court and wilderness blur, do things become clearer for him. The Forest of
Colombiers, where his parents first met, is another of Poitou’s frontiers. Here, both Melusine and
Remondin appeared differently to each other, a condition that emphasizes that there is meaning
to be discovered when each family member traverses the home’s borderland. In the fairy world
of Avalon before the curse, Melusine has the body of a princess. Although for her Avalon is the
courtly world, from the Poitevins’ perspective the fairy world is a distant, mysterious land where
the inhabitants differ from human beings.

Melusine and Remondin are both out of place in the forest. The two begin their
relationship at first sight on this frontier between their worlds. For Remondin, the woods become

285 See my discussion of Geoffrey’s discovery of his grandparents’ tomb in this chapter, 164-165.
a functionless, empty place after he detaches himself from the hunting party, suffering guilt over his uncle’s death. For Melusine, being in the wrong place is a condition that follows her wherever she goes. Two desperate beings leave the place from which they became alienated – both violated the rules of their places and transgressed boundaries that were set by their communities – find each other in a marginal place, and are sheltered by their marriage. Their union gives them, for a while, an important status in their society, in which they – as the rulers of Lusignan – occupy a central place. The problem is, however, that Melusine’s grotesque form, marked by unresolved contradictions, becomes visible in the human world.

Because of her fairy nature, Melusine challenges the Poitevins’ own humanity. From the moment she arrives, the local nobility envies her extraordinary qualities. Their nagging suspicion and surprise seem reasonable in a human context because they see a rival in this strange but intriguing woman who immediately outdoes everyone in looks and talent of hitherto unheard dimensions. This surprise climaxes when Melusine shows herself in full serpent form to everyone in Poitou. However, this utter amazement when encountering the Other goes both ways. Earlier in the tale, when Melusine had just crossed the threshold into the human world and met Remondin in Colombiers at the Fountaine de Soif, the young knight – lost in thought and not paying any attention to the beautiful ladies frolicking at the well – appears to her different from what she expects to encounter in a mortal knight. Melusine thinks he is more like a country bumpkin than a refined lord and calls him “sire musars,” (10vb 162) (“stupid youth,” Morris 93).

2.4. Hyperbole: Melusine extraordinaire

Hyperbolic description in *Melusine* emphasizes the protagonist’s extreme and contradictory qualities. These traits distinguish a grotesque female. Everything about Melusine seems extraordinary. Although the exuberant praise of a maiden is nothing unusual in medieval
romance, in Melusine’s case, her qualities surpass description as if she were too marvelous for words. In her female form, Melusine is wondrously beautiful. She is also an extravagant personality capable of retaining her composure despite enduring fratricide, patricide, violence, and betrayal. Her emotions run the gamut in a very short time although they never disable her. For example, when Melusine has just experienced public defamation by her husband, she exhibits the entire emotional spectrum. She quickly moves through anger and despair, and then expresses forgiveness in a tender voice. She ends by calmly instructing her husband as to what to do with their children after her departure. Melusine does not forget her maternal and political obligations even in the face of her greatest calamity. Eventually, she jumps upon the windowsill and flies out the window, changing into a huge serpent before everyone’s eyes. This departure is a spectacular event in a carnivalesque sense: the woman changes into a serpent before the flabbergasted assembled community.

Melusine is extraordinary also in her social life. Her generosity matches her excessive wealth; her luxurious wedding party is the biggest ever seen: “mais il n’y ot cellui qui fort ne pensast aux merveilles et richesses que ilz avoient vues aux nopces” (22ra 210) (“There were none of them who did not think about the wonders and riches they had seen at the wedding,” Morris 41), and her subsequent settling down is similarly remarkable. Once married, she promptly builds the enormous fortress of Lusignan in a short period of time: “Et sachiéz que le conte de Poictiers et tuit ly noble et les menuz peuples du paîs furent tous esbahiz comment si grant ouvraige pouoit estre ens si pou de temps faiz ne achevéz,” (23ra 214) (“You may rest assured that the count of Poitiers, the nobles of the country, and the commoners were all astonished to see how little time it had taken to complete such a construction,” Morris 143)
These accomplishments are just as exceptional as Melusine’s savvy efficiency and her political aptitude in acquiring land, here evident as she advises Remondin to assert his right to inherit his father’s property:

‘Amis,’ dist Melusigne, ‘or vous ay je devisié comment vostre pere party de son [25rb] païs et laissa les heri-taiges, qui doivent estre vostres, vacquans, lesquelx je ne loue pas que vous les laissiéz perdre.’ (25ra - 25rb 226)

‘Friends,’ Melusine said, ‘I have just told you how your father left his country and left vacant the heritage which must come to you. I advise you not to let it be lost.’

(Morris 151).

In her charity, Melusine surpasses normal human abilities, as well. She is exceptionally good natured and loved by everyone even after her serpent form has been recognized by the Poitevins. In her plight, Melusine’s ability to forgive is also astonishing, and her powerful determination to accept her destiny without a fight is dramatic: “et ainsi la me fauldra porter et souffrir jusques au jour du Jugement (138va) et par ta faulseté. Je pry a Dieu qu’il le te veuille pardonner,” (138rb-138va 696) (“Now, because of thy betrayal, I shall have to endure that penance in suffering until Judgment Day. I pray to God that He might forgive thee for it,” Morris 601). Melusine’s accusatory tone towards her husband switches to forgiveness only a few lines down: “car, quant a moy, je le vous pardonne de bon cuer,” (138vb 696) (“I, myself, do forgive thee with all my heart!” Morris 601). The surrounding group of nobles and retainers add to this dramatic scene, for they cry out in one voice:

… Nous
perdons aujourd’uy la plus vaillant dame qui oncques
gouvernast terre et la plus saige, la plus humble, la plus
charitable, la mieulx amee et la plus privee a la necces-
sité de ses gens, qui oncques feust veue. (138vb 696, 698)

We are losing today the most worthy lady who ever ruled a country. She is the
wisest, most respectful, most charitable, most beloved, and most sensitive lady –
ever responsive to her people’s needs – that the world has ever seen. (Morris 603)

2.5. Melusine as Other

Melusine’s Otherness further defines her as a grotesque woman.²⁸⁶ Portrayed as a mysterious,
enigmatic and complex figure, she clearly challenges the Poitevin lords’ idea of a woman.
Suspicious and alarmed, they begin questioning Remondin as soon as Melusine has been
introduced into their circle:

Lors dist ly contes: ‘Au moins, beau sire, nous
dictes qui elle est ne de quelle lignie.’ ‘Par ma foy,
dist Remondin tout en riant, vous me demandéz ce dont

²⁸⁶ Melusine as Other is explored more extensively in its German adaptation (Dwyer 186-229, in
particular 223-227), where the basic parameters are the same as in the Middle French version.
However, her discovery is drawn out. The German version is the youngest of all four and links
the grotesque to concepts of identity, foreignness, and the Other. The discovery of Melusine’s
true nature justifies the term frömd (strange, foreign) that the people of Lusignan use as an
identifier. While in the other tales the characters’ reactions to the hybrid figure are confusion and
incomprehension, the German Melusine is clearly resented as an outsider. The characters that
inhabit Thüring’s Lusignan are not so much baffled by Melusine’s appearance as willing to have
their prejudices satisfied in a self-righteous way similar to postcolonial racial bias. See also
Maddox and Sturm-Maddox, 3, and Hess, 27-28 for their discussions of Melusine as Other.
The count asked then: ‘Tell us at least, fine sir, who this woman is and what her lineage is.’ ‘To be sure,’ said Raymondin, laughing, ‘You ask me questions that I cannot answer, for I have never asked as much myself.’ (Morris 121)

The uncertainty about Melusine’s lineage is deepened by the suspicion about her geographical origin, marking her as a stranger who comes from an unknown place: “‘Sire chevaliers, dist ly contes, il me plaist bien, mais sachiez que je ne cuidoie pas trouver, logiee si prez de moy, damoiselle de si hault affaire ne qui eust tant de si nobles gens avec lui,’” (18vb 196) (“I never expected to find, living so near to me, a maiden of such high rank and accompanied by so many people of noble condition,” Morris 127). It is nearly unthinkable that the Count of Poitou does not know Melusine. The fact that she has been introduced just a few lines earlier as coming from Scotland highlights the notion that the cultural Other in Melusine is not so much associated with hailing from a near or far location, but simply with “knowing or not knowing,” which is a quality defined earlier by Lochrie regarding female secrecy and which I use to define the grotesque female. The unknown origin of this woman causes confusion in the noblemen and women; Melusine’s beauty and riches placate them, but at the same time the nobles are intimidated. Melusine’s strangeness, expressed in her foreign, bizarre status, allows her to exercise control because it is up to her how much or how little she reveals about her origin.

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287 Lochrie, 98.

288 See Dwyer, 45.
When the men continue to inquire about Melusine’s family line even after the couple are married, confusion and irritation – typical reactions to the grotesque – are eventually also expressed by Remondin, who had, up to this point, repressed such thoughts: “L’ystoire nous dist que Remondin fu moult courrouciéz en cuer quant il ouy la requeste que ly conte de Poictiers, ses sires, et le conte de Forests, ses freres, lui fesoient,” (208, 21va) (“The chronicle states that Raymondin – deep down inside – was very irritated when he heard this request from the count of Poitiers, his liege lord, and from the count of Forez, his brother,” Morris 137). The mystery surrounding Melusine’s inexplicable Otherness – which cannot be made plain to the lords because she remains anonymous as a supernatural being – lays the groundwork for the eventual dissolution of her union with Remondin, a fact which the poet-narrator foreshadows shortly afterwards. Any explanation of Melusine’s origin is doomed from the outset because of the secret to which the couple agreed. Albrecht Classen characterizes Remondin’s interest in the Other as an innovative form of relationship. He explains that the story, which comes out of the long literary tradition of courtly literature, mixes romance tropes with new social and cultural aspects, such as marrying below one’s rank, for example a fairy.289 The serpent woman is able to challenge conventions. By inserting a spectacular Other into the romance, Jean describes Remondin’s curiosity about a glamorous woman and her enticing proposal. The erotic attraction and repulsion of Melusine solicits the ambiguous reaction of the Poitevin lords, who seem partly envious, partly annoyed because their opinions are ignored. They experience this as a challenge to their control.

Furthermore, the sense of foreboding that Melusine causes in the people whom she encounters must be understood as a warning. A grotesque image points towards a condition or a problem that should be recognized. Melusine’s mythological nature seems never to be entirely hidden or entirely present, thus producing a fractured picture of her. On a deeper level, through the encounter with Otherness, Remondin is confronted with his own shortcomings, such as his weakness, immaturity, guilt, and regret. The grotesque woman brings to the surface the knight’s innermost fears about the self.290

2.6. Cavernousness: Melusine in the marble basin

In Jean’s romance, the room in which Melusine takes her weekly bath represents the motif of the cavernous secret space. Here, she changes into a serpent from the navel down. Melusine’s seclusion is secured with “un fort huis de fer, moult espéz,” (130ra 658) (“a heavy iron door, very thick,” Morris 565). Remondin pierces the door with his sword after heeding his brother's charges that Melusine either engages in supernatural activities or worse, fornication, on Saturdays (see 129vb). Considered Remondin’s first transgression against his wife, the scene evokes a peepshow in which a forbidden, and often sexual act can be observed in secret.291 The opening through which Remondin spies on his wife functions as a peephole through which Remondin sees a truth about his own life.

Melusine’s intimate space is inherently feminine. In the safety and security of a private bath, a woman can care for herself without fear or shame. The room protects her modesty and


291 This is a phallic scene, a sword that penetrates a door, and has caused interest for its strong sexual meaning. See, for example, Brownlee, “Mélusine’s Hybrid Body,” 21.
shields her vulnerability. The bathing of the serpent woman, which the Poitevin society would misunderstand and condemn, can take place here. Melusine’s hiding place has a function similar to that of Blonde Esmerée’s aumaire. Solid borders, which shelter the woman from the public eye and leave her the choice as to when to reveal her secret and herself, limit both spaces. However, in this romance, Remondin violates this space. The Poitevin tower where Melusine, in the form of a serpent, hides before she disappears from Lusignan repeats this image of a safe place for a woman misunderstood in public. Darkness is associated with a cavernous space and plays a role in Melusine’s life on several occasions after her departure from Lusignan. She appears at night to feed her babies and also at night to the future lord of Lusignan, Cesuelle, who perceives Melusine as an apparition on two occasions in his bedroom.

During the bathing episode, Melusine knows that her husband has looked at her through the hole in the door although Remondin is unaware that she does. When the couple meets in their bedroom shortly after the event, Melusine remains silent and does not address the subject: “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,” (131rb 664, 666,) (“Now, when Raymond heard her thus speak, saying nothing of his misdeed, he thought she knew nothing of it. But he was quite wrong, for she knew everything,” Morris 571). By remaining silent, Melusine chooses to keep her knowledge to herself and to guarantee her safety in the human world for a little longer.

2.7. Hybridity and ugliness: a serpent from the navel down.

Remondin’s discovery finally reveals Melusine’s hybrid body to the reader as well. Although we have long been informed about this condition, we have never actually witnessed Melusine as a serpent woman. Together with Remondin, we learn about her:

Et voit Melusigne en la cuve, quit estoit jusques au nombril en
There he saw Melusine in the basin. Down to her navel, she had the form of a woman, gracefully combing her hair. But from the navel down, her body had the form of a serpent’s tail. As big around as a barrel for storing herring it was, and tremendously long. She lashed the water so forcefully with the tail that it made it splash all the way up to the vaulted ceiling of the chamber. (Morris 567)

Melusine’s hybrid body reveals extremes: her upper body is that of a woman engaging in the feminine act of combing her hair, but her lower body is huge and moves around with force as if taking joy in making a spectacle of itself. The text produces an image of exuberant movement. Like Blonde Esmerée’s serpent body, Melusine’s is wide as a barrel, providing an image of her repulsive figure. To compare the most beautiful Melusine with a fish barrel seems amusing to today’s readership and a reminder of the measurements of Blonde Esmerée’s serpent body.292

The comparison to a barrel is, however, mostly a generic spatial idea, and Jean uses it to illustrate Melusine’s dimensions to his audience. This analogy is an example of his application of

292 See the description of Blonde Esmerée’s physical measurement described as barrel sized in Dwyer, 63.
humor in a scene that is disturbing to Remondin. While the reader is clear that Remondin’s peeping through the hole will have grave consequences for the couple, the comparison of Melusine’s tail to a barrel of herring also diminishes the scene’s seriousness. Although any reader may be amused at Melusine's joyous splashing and even voyeuristically enjoy imagining the womanly upper half, this reception must have always been utterly different from Remondin’s emotions, when he, completely surprised, takes in the reality that his wife was indeed half serpent, half woman.

Interestingly, Melusine’s transformation is completed when she changes into full serpent form as she departs from Mervent after her husband has insulted her in public by revealing her secret to everyone, breaking the bond of the silent agreement to keep their secrets for good:

“Hee, tresfaulse serpente” (137vb) (“Oh, false serpent” my translation). Describing his wife in such ugly terms leads to Melusine’s departure. Even then, however, once hybrid and now fully transformed into an animal, her being remains ambiguous for the onlookers in the romance and for the reader. As Melusine circles Lusignan three times, she looks like a serpent but cries out with a woman’s voice: “Et tant ala qu’elle vint a Lusegnen et l’avironna trois tours, et crioit moult piteusement, et se lamentoit de voix femmenine,” (140vb 704) (“She flew on all the way to Lusignan. Thrice she circled the town, emitting heart-rending cries in a woman’s voice,” Morris 609). This powerful image shows what the people, foremost Remondin, see and hear. Maddox describes the gradual shift from beautiful woman to half serpent to a complete serpent as a figure of the tale’s discursive hybridity. He sees in the unstable contrast between fairy and
monstrous, courtly-erotic and maternal, and political-functional as well as Christian, a plurality of cultural elements that are represented in Jean’s work.\textsuperscript{293}

In my view, however, the image conveys a strong expression of Melusine’s perception of herself as a beast on the outside and a suffering woman on the inside. Misogyny, as I have explained in the introduction, reduces the woman of the civilized world to a beautiful surface model without emotional or intellectual depth.\textsuperscript{294} The grotesque female is perceived as ugly and repulsive. Melusine’s external serpent form, crying out in female lamentation, suggests a woman’s deep sorrow at having to leave the world of mortals, to which she has wanted to belong. However, Melusine’s spectacle overshadows her true message. With her extraordinary departure she makes an awkward and certainly not feminine statement that will be remembered. The actions detract from Melusine’s attempt to communicate the conditions she perceives about herself. Thus, as Russo states, no matter what a woman does – being silently beautiful or outrageously loud and true to herself – she will always pay the price.\textsuperscript{295}

2.8. Ambiguity: Melusine’s haughty disposition

Ambiguity also defines Melusine as a grotesque. It refers foremost to the perception the serpent woman has about herself and to the confusing and changing ways in which others perceive and judge her. As described in the prehistory in Avalon, Presine’s ambiguous behavior towards Elinas as well as towards her daughters, who punished him, offers no conclusive image of the


\textsuperscript{294} See discussion on the feminine grotesque and Russo’s depth-surface model in Dwyer, 22-24.

\textsuperscript{295} Russo, \textit{The Female Grotesque}, 63.
outcome she wishes to achieve with her rage against both parts of her family. Presine scolds her husband for watching her give birth to their daughters, and simultaneously she condemns these daughters for having avenged the transgressions by their father. Shortly after Presine has cursed the young women, she points out that the curses will help them find marriage to a mortal man.

Melusine seems to interpret Presine’s reference to the “hault juge qui punira les maulx et essaucera les biens!” (5rb 132) “Great Arbiter [who] comes to punish the wicked and reward the good!” Morris 69) as permission to punish the father for mistreating her mother. According to her mother, Melusine has an “orguilleux couraige” (5va 134) (“overconfidence” [my translation]) and is presumptuous. Additionally, Jean deliberately chose to portray him as ignorant for two more reasons: to represent him as naïve and flattered by the beautiful woman’s attention or as terrified by his own deed of killing his uncle and now hoping that the lady at the fountain would help him to cover up this catastrophic event. Ignorant, naïve, or traumatized, Remondin is open to anything that Melusine suggests.

The ambiguous tendencies that overshadow the interaction between Remondin and Melusine continue throughout the romance. For example, despite the fact that the broken oath was supposed to be the end of their relationship, Remondin at first appears neither extremely angry nor shocked at his wife’s serpent form. Instead, he is more concerned that he has broken his promise, and this frightens him. It is not clear whether he is disturbed because he may lose her or because his killing of his uncle may be disclosed in the course of their separation. Remondin’s ambiguous behavior is surprising; it suggests that he might not be too concerned

296 See also this chapter, 160-161 and 160, n275.

297 See also Miller’s discussion of the medieval idea of human in Dwyer, 32-35.
that his wife is different. He openly declares this to his lords. He does not care whether Melusine is of a noble lineage or not, another surprising admission. Eventually Remondin cannot withstand the public pressure; he discloses Melusine’s secret to everyone. His ambiguous behavior towards Melusine may express a reaction to the stringent social expectations imposed on a knight.

The ambiguous reaction provoked by the grotesque woman is, however, most extreme in Melusine’s description as a “fantosme” (137vb 692) (“evil spirit” Morris 593; a phantom, illusion, or ghost according to Tobler-Lommatzsch 1628). With this identification Melusine becomes a negative figure, and she has always feared this reaction toward her. Already in the beginning during the Fontaine de Soif episode, Melusine emphasized that she was not an illusion when her incredible beauty seemed too marvelous to Remondin. Remondin remains ambiguous. After his outburst at Mervent, he immediately regrets calling Melusine an evil creature and apparently dissolves in shame and sorrow. Here, Melusine falls in a swoon and only after a while regains her senses but soon leaves for good in serpent form. Ambiguity is a constant condition that surrounds Melusine. As soon as the audience or Remondin (and other characters in the romance) seem to have formed an opinion, it is overturned by an opposite event or behavior. Ambiguity is an essential quality of the serpent woman’s language that cannot be fully deciphered. The message lies in the gap between the extreme opposite interpretations that her images provoke.

2.9. Instability: Melusine as a woman of opposites

Whoever encounters the grotesque Melusine will be confused. She is a woman of opposites that define her as much on the inside as on the outside. Melusine of Lusignan is both powerful and vulnerable. She is a fair and protective mother and yet orders her son, Horrible, to be killed.
Although she is a fairy who makes use of her supernatural powers, her wish is to become a mortal and give up these abilities. Melusine is a practical woman, a caring mother, and a devoted wife. She is beautiful yet ugly. She is both funny and serious. She exudes goodness and generosity but also indulges in violence, hatred, and revenge. She suffers and punishes. Melusine makes her own choices yet is a creature of destiny unable to escape her dire fate. She lives in the light at Lusignan (whose name is associated with Latin lux) yet operates in the darkness. She sallies forth to build cities and cultivate entire regions but retreats to hide as well. She is a Christian woman and a pagan fairy. Melusine is at once human and non-human.

The opposites of the grotesque woman generate two challenging observations that go hand in hand with gender theory as discussed in the introduction.\textsuperscript{298} Is Melusine’s grotesqueness unusual if she is viewed outside of her mythological context or is Melusine an alternative to the stereotypical medieval maiden, who appears flat and rather static and often appears as a secondary character, not necessarily as the protagonist in medieval tales, but who is nonetheless

\textsuperscript{298} See a discussion of Russo’s depth-surface model of the cavernous feminine (depth) that contests the socio-historical feminine (surface) in Dwyer, 22-24. Russo’s model portrays the woman as a contradiction per se, not only because of the incompatible images that the woman embodies, but also because she would never be able to fulfill the paradoxical requirements of both models combined. Therefore, the woman perceives any of her conditions as wrong and tries to overcome the parts of herself that do not conform to the given norm, which is dominated by the surface model. For Miles, the female grotesque evolved when theological scholarship merged with medieval popular culture and developed into a discourse that is at once fascinated with and horrified by female genitals (99). Miles observes that three characteristics dominate the grotesque representations: caricature, inversion, and hybridization (91), which are all present in Melusine’s portrayal. In particular Miles’s theory supports the notion that Melusine has been viewed as a phallic mother, who not only refers to her serpent shape but also to her masculine efficacy and authority; see also Spiegel, 107; and Wolfgang Beutin, \textit{Sexualität und Obszöniät: Eine literaturpsychologische Studie über epische Dichtungen des Mittelalters und der Renaissance} (Würzburg, Germany: Königshausen & Neumann, 1990), 288.
the beautiful prototype that Miller described earlier? As Harpham has pointed out, the grotesque is an ever-becoming being or situation, in short an on-going cultural change, and the grotesque Melusine is an emblem of this change.

3. Conclusion: Melusine’s grotesque struggle

Melusine’s goal is to establish her life in the mortal world to overcome her mother’s curse, which was Presine’s paradoxical attempt to heal the family’s past, and to die a human death. Melusine is a more enduring instance of the grotesque woman than the previous two examples, Blonde Esmerée and the Lady of Synadoun, because her serpent form is recurring and irreversible and remains a permanent affliction. Jean’s protagonist is beautiful and most refined, yet malevolent, and unforgiving, but from the standpoint of a woman’s day-to-day life, Melusine’s actions can be even humorous and are reminders of her fairy culture. However, because of her ambiguities, Melusine’s fairy heritage remains questionable throughout the romance. The grotesque in Melusine can also be found in the female characters’ use of non-verbal language, which originally helps the protagonist gather the strength to fulfill her mission in the world, but disappears when the oath is broken. Dependence on an oath is ever present in Melusine. While her life at Remondin’s side is stable for many years, in the end, Melusine is crushed as her life shatters. Her belief that she will transform into a normal woman ("femme naturelle," 5va 136) is nothing but an illusion because the human world, too, is flawed.

Thus for Melusine, her human family turns out to be just as destructive as those in her fairy life. The curse is the impetus for the grotesque emerging in the tale. It adds a level of

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299 See Miller for the discussion of the superb physique of the young maiden, the puella, and how her body serves as the standard model for Western literature from Antiquity onward (32-35).
secrecy to the romance and reveals how women strategize around men who do not treat them well. The women deceive these men, and use them – as the men use the women – to become mortals. Melusine uses deceit and secrecy to work to her advantage. Her approach turns out to be problematic because by definition a secret can be broken, and its duration depends on the trust of the people who share knowledge of it. Remondin accepts his betrothal to Melusine, agreeing to the condition that he must keep her secret. For Remondin, the promise is opportunistic and ends with him breaking it. However, at the end of their relationship he admits he knew about Melusine’s serpent form and anger overcomes him; he admonishes her and their sons as hopelessly rotten, wicked creatures except for Fromont, who had burned to death earlier, a fact that Remondin finds unfair and inconceivable since Fromont had just taken holy orders. Remondin calls down God’s wrath on Melusine’s dubious Christian nature; he knows about her serpent form and believes that it weakens her morally. His reaction is understandable, but it shows he is blind to his betrayal of Melusine, who admonishes him for his treachery. His irrational, abusive behavior and his inability to adapt to the situation is his reaction to the grotesque. Remondin cannot change in the face of adversity, something his wife has shown to be necessary for their survival and prosperity ever since he had met her at the fountain.

The ambiguity and irrationality in Melusine’s story is complex and a consequence of the curse that prompted her Saturday bath ritual. Jean never explains the reason for this stringent measure and also omits details about why she was so intent on hiding her serpent form from her husband and the community. While Melusine lives her serpent life in secrecy, she has to make compromises as a woman and a fairy. In contrast, her sons who are deformed do not have to bother hiding their true form one bit. Their grotesque features are qualifying markers, as Jean uses their oddities to distinguish them from one another in his descriptions of their worldly
explorations. *Melusine* is misogynistic through and through because the women are punished harshly while the men get away with everything. They delay decisions, kill their kin, abuse or betray their wives, lie to their families and communities, and are ugly but do not suffer any significant material or physical consequences.

As a grotesque character, Melusine is physically and psychologically unstable and vacillates between love and retaliation, which is understandable to some extent given her biography and the permanent threat of doom and nothingness that torments her. The premonition seen in the original patricide, which was an eye-for-an-eye act of violence revenging her mother’s sorrow, is a cardinal sin by any religious measure. But even when her serpent form forces her to leave Lusignan, she neither repents for the crime against her father nor exposes her husband’s transgression against his uncle, but protects Raymondin further, as if sacrificing herself for him. She even goes as far as ordering Horrible’s murder because she foresees the threat he poses to Lusignan. From that perspective, Melusine’s contradictory behavior is an ominous blend of Christian selflessness, irrational defeat, and inhuman, fairy heartlessness.

The fact that this Middle French tale claims to be the founding history of the illustrious house of Lusignan, and that it establishes Melusine as its famous relation to the ancient past of the fairy world, calls for more explanation.\(^{300}\) On the surface, Melusine seems misappropriated; she disappears from the novel entirely but is made immortal in the patron’s chronicle. Melusine is either an Other, whom the founders of Lusignan admire for their own elevation of status, or the patron wants to redeem her damaged reputation and reestablish her superiority, which is

\(^{300}\) For more information on the relationship between the serpent woman Melusine and Lusignan, see E. Jane Burns, “A Snake Tailed-Woman: Hybridity and Dynasty in the *Roman de Mélusine*,” *From Beasts to Souls: Gender and Embodiment in Medieval Europe*, eds. E. Jane Burns and Peggy McCracken (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 185-220.
severely compromised by her biography. In both cases, the message is not clear and leaves the reader puzzled, adding to her ambiguous portrait and rendering her a grotesque woman.

Melusine’s sad story shows how a deformed, nonconforming woman struggles alone while men do not. She leaves the fairy world and gets more than she has bargained for when she seeks to enter the human world. She ultimately receives all of the harsh treatment that the men of this cruel world measure out to their mortal women. The total sum of Melusine’s youthful action against her father, and Presine’s curse with all its ramifications, first brings Melusine love and luxury and then great misery. Her grotesqueness is emblematic of the displacement of women in general. In the fairy world, she has outgrown the old model of the grotesque earth mother, yet in the human world she does not fit in either. The theme of female Otherness is taken up in the German Melusine. In the next tale that I will discuss, her displacement has become more concrete because Melusine is perceived as a stranger whose fairy nature is further suppressed in the romance. The development from the Middle French version of Melusine to the Early New High German version points towards a shift in the characteristics that define the German protagonist as a grotesque Other.
CHAPTER 5: FREMD OR GESPENST – THÜRING VON RINGOLTINGEN’S MELUSINE

1. Melusine: an Early New High German prose novel

Jean d’Arras’s Middle French Melusine is the oldest known complete version of the Melusine story. In this chapter, I analyze the only available German version, the Early New High German Melusine by Thüring von Ringoltingen. The poet, a native of Bern, belonged to a wealthy mercantile family whose ancestors were peasants from the surrounding mountains. He finished his Melusine in 1446. This version is also the youngest of the four romances that I am analyzing. Thüring’s Melusine is not adapted from Jean’s version, but from Coudrette’s Le Roman de Mélusine ou Histoire de Lusignan par Coudrette, which the poet finished around 1400 (shortly after Jean’s romance appeared in 1396). Instead of comparing the German version to its Middle French source, I use the two oldest known versions in the target languages, the versions that are the most meaningful for my analysis of the grotesque woman. For example, Coudrette and Thüring omit the story of Melusine’s maternal ancestry, which is indispensable for my interpretation of the grotesque woman in the Middle French tale and also for the grotesque

301 For further definition of the term and the linguistic period of Early New High German see particularly section 6.1.1., in R. E. Keller, The German Language (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1978).


303 In cases when Thüring’s work is a close translation of Coudrette’s and the juxtaposition of both versions seems necessary, I will provide quotes from Coudrette’s Melusine.
woman in medieval literature as a whole. My choice of Jean’s version in the previous chapter and Thüring’s adaptation of the Coudrette version in this chapter is influenced by their completeness and superior readability. In my interpretation, I treat Thüring’s Melusine as a text that stands on its own as a complete and independent work of literature. Thüring speaks of his work as a history, höxторé (11, 18), and a scholarly debate has been devoted to Melusine and its homogeneity of genre. As Walter Benjamin taught us, even the most literal translation from one language to another would render an entirely new version. Thüring’s descriptions of


305 As the following scholars point out, the German Melusine is not a classical romance. However, for reasons of practicality, and in the same tradition of Maddox and Sturm-Maddox as laid out in the Introduction, I am applying the term romance in my discussion of Thüring’s Melusine; see also Dwyer, 6-7 and 7, n11. For an overview of German scholarship that addresses Melusine and the problem of its classification as a mixture of genres combining chronicle, epic, and classical romance see, for example, Jan-Dirk Müller, Volksbuch/ Prosaroman im 15. / 16. Jahrhundert - Perspektiven der Forschung. Sonderheft des Internationalen Archivs für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur. Forschungsreferate. IASL: Tübingen 1985. 1-128., here 65-69; Joachim Knape, Historie im Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit. Begriffs- und gattungsgeschichtliche Untersuchung im interdisziplinären Kontext (Baden-Baden, Germany: Von Koerner, 1984); Claudia Steinkämper, “Thüring von Ringoltingen: Melusine (1456),” Melusine - vom Schlangenweib, here 81-86.

306 Walter Benjamin, “The Task of a Translator,” Illuminations (Glasgow: Fontana/ Collins, 1977). Benjamin argues that while the languages of an original text and its translation maybe kin to each other, both versions will never be alike: “If the kinship of languages manifests itself in translations, this is not accomplished through a vague likeness between adaptation and original.
Melusine are culturally charged and must be interpreted as individual, unique literary representations.

Melusine’s German portrait allows the reader to draw conclusions about how she was perceived by the characters in the story and by the poet-narrator. In the prologue, Thüring names the patrons who commissioned his work and defines himself as the translator – in the form of the first person pronoun “ich” (“I”) and not by his name:

… die aber ich zů eren vnd zů dienste des Edlen wolgeboren herren Marggrauen Rudolffs von hochberg /

herren zů Roetteln vnd zů Susenburg meines genaedigen her-ren zů teütscher zungen gemacht vnd translatiert hab nach meinem besten vermügen. (11, 19-23)

… which however, I have translated in honor and service of the noble lord Margrave Rudolf von Hochberg for my gracious lords of Rötteln and of Susenburg, into the German language to the best of my knowledge.

In the epilogue he claims that, despite his great familiarity with classical romances, he never read anything as adventurous and strange as Melusine’s story; because such a wonderful story

It stands to reason that kinship does not necessarily involve likeness” (73-74). My analysis of the Early New High German Melusine is therefore a valid and justified interpretation, even if Thüring’s words are adapted or translated from Coudrette’s original. See also Schneider, “Einführung,” 33-34, who provides a general overview on the comparison of both texts. Schneider explains Thüring’s own words, in which the poet claims to have closely followed and translated the source material (“substanz der materyen” Melusine 36).
remained unknown in Germany, Thüring believed its translation was his worthy goal (see 128.33-29.1). Despite the poet’s fondness for romances, *Melusine* is the only known existing work by him.307 In comparison to Jean’s Middle French version, the German tale distinguishes itself in three major aspects: (1) Melusine’s genealogy is withheld until later in the tale; 308 (2) the story uses a more modern, much expanded, and flexible vocabulary to describe Melusine; and (3), the language used by the people of Lusignan is a colloquial language that much resembles gossip. In a larger sense, the story often reads like townspeople gossiping.

The characteristics that formed the main points of my interpretation of the German Melusine as a grotesque woman, however, are peculiar to the German text and the poet’s style in describing the protagonist and her life. For example, Coudrette does not mention Melusine by name until line seventy, where he introduces her as the fairy who built the castle of Lusignan (“Le chasteau fut fait d’une fee,” 70), whereas Thüring introduces her in the beginning. Compared to the three grotesque women described so far, the character of Melusine in the German version does not appear gradually. Already in the first six lines the narrator proclaims that she is a noblewoman and a serpent: “DAs [sic] abenteürlich bůch beweÿset vns von einer frawen genandt Melusina / die do ein merfaÿm vnd darzů ein geborne künigin / vnd auß dem berg Awalon kommen ist” (“This adventure book teaches [us]309 about a woman called


308 As aforementioned, Thüring follows Coudrette’s narrative structure whereas Jean’s account of Melusine includes a long section about her mother’s prehistory and Melusine’s life in the fairy world, which Melusine finds boring. Jean adds various descriptions of her difficulties and mentions that Melusine’s greatest wish would be to leave the fairies in order to experience living among mortals.

309 Müller glosses the term beweÿset as unterrichtet (*Melusine* 11, n1).
Melusine, who was a water fairy and a queen by birth and had come from Mount Avalon (Thüring 1, 1-3). Thüring immediately establishes Melusine as the reference point for the upcoming story but her own family history is not told until much later. With the unexpected opening, Melusine is portrayed as an ambiguous woman from the start. Her character remains one-dimensional in the earlier part of the tale, and assumes a supporting role for the local events and the accounts of her sons’ global explorations. While her sons are busy conquering Europe, Melusine builds up the House of Lusignan and brings it to great success. Nonetheless, her husband’s family keeps wondering about her origin and does not trust her. Melusine seems also more humanized: her form as a woman with a tail needs constant explanation to those who do not know her prehistory, which provides additional commentary for the readers, who know about her shape. Family and community members in the story do not know about her secret, but the reader is privy to it and has an omniscient point of view. Coudrette also provides an overview for his audience – for example, by foreshadowing events and introducing Melusine as a fairy in his prologue – but refers to her more formally and without the additional qualifiers that Thüring uses.

Melusine’s story links the grotesque to theories of identity and the Other, and I consider Melusine to be a grotesque woman because she is an Other. While she shares many of the characteristics found in the other serpent women studied in the previous three chapters, in none of the earlier tales is the serpent woman perceived so strongly as a stranger as in Thüring’s Melusine. The public and private reactions to her indicate a shift in the society that explains differences in appearance and behavior increasingly with social, ethnic, and geographical origins and less with supernatural reasons. The people of Lusignan are aware that Melusine comes from “elsewhere” but they are not sure whether she is a friend or (supernatural) foe. In this context, two words repeatedly occur: fremd and gespenst. In fact, the poet applies the term fremd twenty-
six times, and its orthographic variant, *froemd*, twice. *Fremd* can mean unusual, strange, wondrous, outrageous, and also foreign, as from a foreign country or from an unfamiliar place.\(^{310}\) However, *fremd* can also mean abandoned, turned away, opposite, rough, and hostile.\(^{311}\) In *Melusine*, then, *fremd* refers to a strange person, such as in the protagonist’s character; to a strange or odd feature; and in the context of a different origin, to a foreign land or custom.\(^{312}\) The other term, *gespenst*, occurs twenty-three times, mostly to refer to *Melusine*. The adjective *gespenst* may mean “seductive” and “magical,” and as a noun “seductive being,” “seduction,” and “temptation.”\(^{313}\) When used as a negative modifier, *gespenst* is understood as an illusion, a

\(^{310}\) Christa Baufeld, *Kleines frühneuhochdeutsches Wörterbuch: Lexik aus Dichtung und Fachliteratur des Frühneuhochdeutschen* (Tübingen, Germany: Niemeyer, 1996). Baufeld lists *fremd* as “vrem(e)de, vrömde” and translates the term as “ungewöhnlich, seltsam, wunderbar,” as “befremdlich, unerhört” and “aus-, fremdländisch” (96).

\(^{311}\) Alfred Götze, *Frühneuhochdeutsches Glossar* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1956). Götze writes “frembd” [sic] and translates the word as “sonderbar; abgekehrt; entgegengesetzt” and “spröde, ablehnend” (90).

\(^{312}\) See for example in *Melusine*: “fremde hÿstoryén funden in franczosischer sprach vnd waelscher zungen” (“foreign histories found in French language and Romanic language” 11, 18-19); “Das beweÿset sich gar eýgenlich an diser fremden figur” (“this shows itself truly in this unfamiliar character” 12, 17-18); “ob sÿ dye hochzeit ettwas fremd duncket” (“although they found this wedding somehow strange” 38, 22-23); “Vnd fremder wunderlicher vnd wilder sỳnnen” (“and with a strangely wondrous and wild disposition” 50, 4-5). The poet refers to Geoffrey, *Melusine’s* son: “das man gar verr vnd weit in fremden landen preiß lob” (“who is praised in foreign lands near and far” 91, 15); “der im von fremden landen potschafft pracht” (“who brought to him a message from a foreign land” 105, 22-23).

\(^{313}\) Baufeld lists under *gespenst* the variants *gespönst* or *gespunst* and translates it as “Gespenst, Fabelwesen, Nixe, teuflische Lockung, Teufelstrug, Unheimlichkeit, etw. Unheimliches, Grauen, Blendwerk, Verlockung, Täuschung,” “ghost, mythical creature, mermaid, fiend, weirdness, something uncanny, horror, illusion, deception” (109). Lexer translates *gespenst* as “verführerisch, zauberisch,” and as a noun he lists “verführerisches wesen, verführung verlockung [sic]” (66).
deception, or false being. It can also be interpreted as a supernatural being or one from the fairy world. Altogether one cannot neglect the negative association of the term gespenst. In contrast, Jean’s Melusine has only two separate occurrences of similar terms: faee, fairy, and fantosme, ghost or illusion. Jean applies the cognate fantosme only twice, and the word fremd does not have an equivalent. Coudrette uses both terms that Jean applies to describe Melusine as well, and refers to her and her maternal family’s fairy nature in multiple places but uses the equivalent of ghost only once. Interestingly, Thüring interprets Coudrette’s choice of the term fairy, applied in the sense of enchantment, or related to fairies and the supernatural world, as ghostly and strange. Whereas Coudrette writes, “Cilz mons ou Grimaut s’est boutez / Est trestout plain de fairie,” (“this mountain to which Grimaut escaped / is completely enchanted,” 4768-4769), Thüring’s passage reads “in dem perge do ist gar vil gespenstes vnd fremder selczamer dinge,” (“In the mountain there are many ghostly and strange and odd things,” 135, 13-14). Thüring’s use of gespenst including his choice to associate Melusine with an uncanny,

314 Götze defines gespenst as “Blendwerk, Verlockung; Schwindel, (unwahres) Wesen” (105).

315 See, for example, Jan-Dirk Müller, Melusine, 140n4.

316 “Je croy que ce n’est que fantosme,” (“I believe it is only an illusion,” 3810). Here, Raymond refers to the scene in which he looked through a hole and saw his wife taking a bath; now he talks to himself to understand what he just saw. Like Jean, Coudrette uses the term serpent for Melusine, for example in 3816, 3879, and 4208.

317 Another example by Coudrette reads “Un don lui donnay a sa vie / De par l’ordre de faerie : / Tant que le siècle dureroit, / Le samedi serpent seroit” (“I gave her a gift for her life / that she, through enchantment, / would become forever / a serpent on Saturdays,” 5001-5002), and Thüring translated the passage to “das sóel seýn vnd werden alle samstag von dem nabel hin vnder ein schlang oder wurm” (“that she should become and be all Saturdays a serpent or a worm from the navel down” 139, 26-27).
odd, and deceptive figure is thus his thoughtful and intentional interpretation. This example shows how the difference between the original and its translation significantly influences the meaning of the German Melusine as a grotesque woman.

While in the Middle French version, the terms used for Melusine, which justify an interpretation of her as Other, was not a prominent issue among the people who came in contact with her, the German version pays attention to how this woman is defined. The poet plays with the definition of Melusine as either a ghostlike character or a cultural Other. Melusine reflects this trend because the romance mixes historical facts with fictional accounts. Thüring (like Coudrette) assumes that the character Melusine actually existed. By associating his original materials with the noble house of Lusignan, Thüring follows a model that describes how a noble family acquires its wealth and gains political power. The presumably factual content of Melusine and the suppression of the protagonist’s mythical background further generate my interpretation of Melusine as grotesque with a focus on the characteristic of Other. Since the story was written at a time when an increasing number of explorers were discovering new worlds, the German Melusine can be viewed as a stranger from a different culture who does not really belong. She turns out to be Other in the early postcolonial sense and serves the society’s identity formation, because their Self is defined by what they perceive as different, the Other. Melusine is ambiguous, a hybrid of a regional foreigner and a stranger with a mythological


319 Classen, *The German Volksbuch*, 144.
origin. Thus Melusine’s Otherness is detached from her mythological background, which did not need much explanation, as Jean and Coudrette reveal in their applications of the terms *fee* and *fairie* for Melusine and her world of origin. Instead, the German poet, as his frequent application of the terms *gespenst* and *fremd* show, doubts Melusine’s fit as a fully acceptable member of the community from the start.

The shift in terminology and translations from the Middle French versions of *Melusine* to the Early New High German romance shows also that Thüring’s portrayal of the serpent woman is more rationalized and might explain why he assumes a more critical position from the beginning. The lack of explicit details about Melusine’s fairy nature that would portray her as deeply rooted in the culture with which a medieval audience would identify, indicates that by the time Thüring composed his *Melusine*, it had become less fashionable to tell stories from the perspective of a glorious mythological past. Instead, the focus shifted to the more popular outlook toward an enlightened future. In *Melusine*, the omission of the protagonist’s mythical past is a choice the poet makes, thereby moving away from a mystifying representation of the figure’s ancestral origin and replacing it with a narrower definition of the woman Melusine. In defining her as a fairy a few lines into the tale, there is nothing mystical about her to be discovered and no guesswork is necessary; the story tells the readers how to perceive the character by labeling her. As Müller describes, the evolution from the poetic exploration of Melusine’s fairy nature, which is more organic in representing her origin as equally valid, to deliberately “otherizing” this figure within a few lines of the tale’s beginning, can be read as a rationalizing process and be interpreted as the genre’s evolution.\footnote{Jan-Dirk Müller, “Rationalisierung und Mythisierung in Erzähltexten der Frühen Neuzeit,” *Wolfram-Studien* 20 (2008): 435-456.} I note this regardless of the
fact that the poet’s ignorance might have been merely due to inaccessibility to Melusine’s family story because he had only Coudrette’s version with which to work.

Without Melusine’s prehistory, both Coudrette and Thüring’s versions suppress Melusine’s supernatural origin and the circumstances that lead to her transformation. However, Coudrette treats the description of his protagonist with greater subtlety and does not apply appellations such as fremd and gespenst as frequently as Thüring does. Thüring’s approach, on the other hand, underscores Melusine’s Otherness, as the aforementioned shift in language seems to explain. Such heightened interest in portraying her as a stranger may be attributed to an established literary and cultural development, a German imprint previously referred to as Volksbuch (the English chapbook). In the history of German literature, Thüring’s Melusine belongs to a group of prose texts that appeared at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Early Modern era between the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries and that comprise this type of imprint called Volksbuch. This category consists mostly of New High German adaptations of Middle High German texts that came out of the medieval romance tradition and deal with courtly topics. Despite its name “book for the people” the Volksbuch is not to be understood as a book written for the general public. Although a broader audience had access to reading material by the time Thüring composed Melusine, the name Volksbuch is actually an early nineteenth-century term created by Görres, who published in 1807 a collection of stories in Die teutschen Volksbücher. ³²¹ Scholars at the time described stories that sought to recover a

historical sense of national identity as part of German Romanticism. The Volksbuch comprises a combination of imprints, reception, and production.\textsuperscript{322} The imprints were never clearly defined as a genre and included legends and stories that mostly could be traced back to the Middle Ages. The Volksbuch also comprised documents of all sorts, such as calendars, medical essays, and plant books. Today, these early imprints (Frühdrucke) have been renamed as the Prosaroman, a term that describes the prose novel that grew out of the medieval verse romances and flourished in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{323}

In previous scholarship, Melusine has been read through the lens of the Volksbuch/prose novel category that rationalizes and demystifies topics and figures of the high and late medieval era. Jan-Dirk Müller discusses the Volksbuch from the perspective of its claim to be historical, i.e., a historie.\textsuperscript{324} Müller looks at medieval curiosity, which seeks to understand the concept of wonders. Curiosita was a problematic concept because it was considered heretical thinking; wonders were exclusively God’s matter. The Volksbuch shows a growing interest in explaining

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Drittenbass, André Schnyder, and Alexander Schwarz (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 11-40; see also Reinhard Hahn, “Erlauben die Rahmentexte der Prosaromane Schlüsse auf deren Publikum?” Eulenspiegel trifft Melusine, 41-66.
\end{flushleft}


\textsuperscript{323} Jan-Dirk Müller, “Melusine Stellenkommentar,” 989-991.

otherwise wondrous events as experience; therefore it portrays plot elements as historical. The medieval discussion of wonder gradually shifted and fused the idea of the divine miracle with the documentation of the wonders of the world, the *mirabilis mundi* that became popular through the growing number of medieval travel accounts and comparable texts.\(^{325}\)

In *Melusine*, the serpent woman is mentioned in the context of *wunder*, which describes the people’s marveling at Melusine, but also the uncertainty expressed about her: “sÿ hat von gottes wunder ein andere gar fremde vnd selczame außzeýchnung gehebt,” (“through God’s wondrous doing she had a different, really strange, and unusual characteristic,” 12, 4-6). Melusine’s serpent form is associated with this type of late medieval, Early Modern understanding of wonders. She is perceived as wondrously inexplicable, but also as wondrously *fremd* and *selczame* “peculiar/ odd/ curious,” a type of wonder that is marveled at as Other.

The inquiry into how the *Prosaroman* attempts to rationalize mythical events plays a role in my assessment of Melusine as a grotesque woman. The discussion of medieval alterity or Otherness still seems to be underexplored in the scholarship about this German literary figure. It is non-existent concerning Otherness as an aspect of the grotesque. Müller explains why and how elements of her mythical life have been altered and/or minimized.\(^{326}\) Also Mara R. Wade and Glenn Ehrstine’s study of Melusine’s Otherness, discussed from postcolonial and orientalist perspectives and interpreting the protagonist as a multifaceted expression of geographic,


\(^{326}\) Jan-Dirk Müller, “Rationalisierung,” 435-456.
political, as well as religious estrangement, has been helpful. Few attempts have been made to read Melusine as a discussion of Self and Other. Classen, for example, argues that the marriage between Melusine and Reymond eventually breaks apart because the husband, at one point enticed by Melusine’s exotic Otherness, cannot accept her in the long term due to his own intellectual and emotional shortcomings.

Otherness also defines Melusine’s role as a woman. Coming from the fairy world, she does not have much time to adjust to Poitiers, and she must take matters into her own hands from the start. Once Melusine has met Reymond, she immediately takes over planning their relationship, and soon she is in charge of the couple’s wedding preparations. Later, during the couple’s marital years, Melusine is a busy mother and woman contributing in extraordinary measure to Poitiers’s economic and political growth. Despite her superiority and great strength, she shows respect toward her husband, and the couple has many peaceful years together. In this context, Claudia Steinkämper argues that Thüring understands gender roles as a composite of (1) the courtly maiden and the chivalric knight as portrayed in his source material and other romance literature known to him; (2) the German topos of the Martenehe (marriage between a human being and supernatural being); (3) the contemporary Bernese feudal class’s understanding of gender roles; and finally (4) other, urban examples of marriage witnessed on a day-to-day


While the Martenehe is a model in which the woman dominates the husband, Reymond and Melusine’s relationship is temporarily mended because the husband regains control in their marriage. In the marriage, he can demand obedience and subordination from his wife.

Steinkämper does not go beyond the Martenehe as a literary motif; Otherness does not represent any significant problem in her interpretation.

Ana Mülherr argues that Melusine’s violence and her dishonest tendencies (such as demanding that Reymond betray his relatives for her advantage) should not be overlooked, in particular in the context of the political explorations of the House of Lusignan that are also based on fierce endeavors. Mülherr sees one reason for this negative energy in the fact that Melusine’s origin is never resolved, an element that works against the family. She argues that Melusine’s renunciation as a poese slange (“wicked snake”) is a typical example of how evil works in the lineage’s constellation and continues to destroy the family. Mülherr’s argument has contributed to my reading of the protagonist as taking on the appearance of an evil force when Melusine becomes a welcome scapegoat for others who justify the political explorations and unjust treatments of others.

While most interpretations consider Melusine a mythical figure, Ulrike Junk is one of the


few scholars who describe Melusine from a feminist perspective.\textsuperscript{331} Junk’s reading of Melusine leans more towards viewing how literature in general portrays a normal woman. She argues that the woman is typically reduced to the physical and is therefore sexualized, as seen in the taboo that is broken through a voyeuristic transgression by a male. She argues further that the story demonizes Melusine while humanizing the demon. This happens because male failure, that is, Reymond’s dishonesty and also his weakness, is projected onto Melusine’s female lust.

Hildegard Elisabeth Keller focuses on subjects like identity and the female body versus a female voice.\textsuperscript{332} She describes Melusine’s hybrid body as a functionalized element; it is a metaphor for the family’s vertical genealogy, which is supernatural and partly human. Keller, like myself, sees a relationship between the woman and the cave. She understands the cave as an indicator for Melusine’s and Presine’s minimized subjectivity. It literally buried Melusine’s history but is a place where Presine gets to have a subjective, but dead, voice.

In previous scholarship, the character of Thüring’s Melusine was interpreted as if she were an incomplete version of the French portrayal. It is surprising that the focus on Melusine as Other is not explored more widely despite the fact that so much scholarship on her genealogy and the roles of her family has been published. The scholarly preoccupation with her fairy pedigree narrows the depth of Melusine. Seeing her as merely a fairy erases her fundamental


value as a human and as a woman. I propose that Thüring and his audience view Melusine from a rationalizing perspective that some of the modern scholarship has avoided. Melusine can be allowed to claim responsibility for her own human life, and not as a reflection of a courtly or fairy past. Perhaps we can look at Melusine as a stranger about whom we would like to know more. It has been useful in reading Melusine to imagine her through the skeptical and judgmental eyes of Thüring’s fictional residents of Lusignan. The genre’s emphasis on a changing culture should be considered because the geographical world was expanding, a fact that also forced people to expand culturally and ethnically.

The view of Melusine as the grotesque woman should take into consideration the issue of alterity. She is grotesque because she is a fremde (stranger) and a gespenst (ghost), both of which terms define her Otherness in Early New High German as alterity. No other account of the four serpent women relies on such strong identifier labels as does the German version. Moreover, many German scholars who read Melusine’s mythical origin as the foundation for her story seem to pay less attention to the fact that her physical form can be interpreted as a gendered representation of a rule breaker who defies the male-dominated culture of which she is a part.

While my own reading of Melusine as a grotesque woman acknowledges her mythical origin as part of the foundation for her Otherness, I also expand this reading to interpret her physical form as an expression of Otherness that incorporates feminist and postcolonial points of view. In the latter approach, Melusine is perceived as coming from a place that is outside of the geographical limits of Lusignan, however, not from the marginal landscape where monsters, savages and wild men live, but a noble place that is – despite its familiar parameters – also a place of a different
culture. Its figure, familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, is envied and feared as a reflection of the people’s own fallible humanity. Thus, my reading of Melusine combines the viewpoints on mythical, familial, gendered, and genre-related meaning in the versions in my corpus, and provides insight into how a poet who flourished in a fifteenth-century German-speaking urban culture represents a provocative noblewoman from elsewhere.

2. Melusine as grotesque woman

As in the Middle French version of Melusine, Thüring’s Melusine is a grotesque version of a medieval noblewoman. In comparison with the Middle French narrative and with reference to the characteristics of the grotesque delineated earlier, I will discuss Melusine’s grotesqueness as a shift from the French Melusine.

2.1. Central positioning: Melusine in focus

In announcing in the very first lines Melusine’s status as a queen and her physique as a water fairy, the poet presents his protagonist not only as a noble but also as a foreign creature whose appearance is out of the ordinary:

Das abenteührlich bůch beweŷset vns von einer frawen ge
nandt Melusina / die do ein merfaŷm vnd darzů ein geborne
künigin / vnd auß dem berg Awalon kommen ist / der selb
berg leýt in franckreych. Vnd ward disse Merfaŷm alle sam-

333 See also Habiger-Tuczay’s discussion of the concept of the medieval wild woman, here 607-610, and Dwyer on the loathly lady motif, 37-38.

334 See the catalogue of shared characteristics of the grotesque, Dwyer, 27-28.
stag von dem nabel hin vnder ein grosser langer würm /
dann sÿ ein halbe gespenste was. (11, 1-6)

This adventure tells of a woman called Melusine who was a water fairy (woman of the sea, mermaid) and a born queen and who came from Mount Avalon, the very same mountain is in France. And when this water fairy turned into a large, long serpent (dragon) from the navel down every Saturday, then she became half an illusion (deception, ghost).

Thüring continues with a brief mention of Melusine’s political successes and her establishment of a great line of kings, dukes, and other rulers, whose families have survived up to his day. However, despite the fact that the poet-narrator mentions Melusine’s nobility and lists some of her successes, the introduction swiftly discloses that she does not belong to the place where the story, which is about to be told, takes place. By quickly focusing on Melusine, the description diminishes the importance of her origin and transforms her into a contributing member of the community of Lusignan. To a certain degree the matter-of-fact opening suggests normality, implying that Melusine seems to lead – at least on the surface – a regular mortal life. Compared to examples of how other noble (and human) characters are introduced into the tale, Melusine’s initial depiction is uncommon for a queen’s introduction. For example, only a few lines down we learn of the “groß natürlic meyst Aristotiles” (“the great Philosopher Aristotle” 11, 13), and find that the work was commissioned by his “Edlen wolgeboren herren Margrauen Rudolffs von Hochberg,” (“noble and highly born lord Margrave Rudolf von Hochberg,” 11, 19-20). The narrator also introduces Lord Emmerich of Poitiers as “Edler graffe” (“noble lord,” 14, 3). This list could be continued.
Melusine’s image is one of contrast from the start; she combines aspects of a *merfaým* and *grosser langer würm* with those of a *geberne künigin*. This contradictory identification might have been surprising to an audience, but it is the first impression they get of Melusine and will remember these three facts about her for the rest of the story. Melusine’s disparate characteristics, suggesting a species put on display, are typical for her portrayal throughout this romance. Since her prehistory is erased, she stands alone, is robbed of her identity, and seems undefined the entire time. In Jean’s version, Melusine’s early history contains the story of her mother Presine and of her mortal father Elinas; it details the description of the curse, which explains the serpent body. The ancestral tale is Melusine’s familial identity and grounds her firmly in the fairy world. In Jean’s version, Melusine does not come to the reader out of nowhere as she does in the German account (despite Thüring’s reference to Mount Avalon), but from a place that acknowledges her legitimate home. The initial events are crucial for her character development, but in Thüring’s shortened version Melusine seems to have turned into a historical figure. The poet exercises full control of her situation. With strong intentionality on his part, he sets her up as the Other who instantly provokes curiosity. Right away, the poet-narrator exposes the most guarded secret of Melusine’s life, namely her serpent form. This condition identifies Melusine, and to make matters complete, the narrative also ends with a reminder of her serpent body. The epilogue frames the historical account of the noble family with another reminder of Melusine’s peculiar condition:

… Melusinam
die merfeýe jn der forme als sÿ dann alle samstag was naemlich
von dem nabel hinauff ein menschlich vnd hübsch weŷblichs
bilde / vnd von dem nabel hinab ein grosser langer wurm
Hie nýmpt dises bůch ein ende / das got vns allen seinen heyligen segen sende. (176, 16-21)

[Of] Melusine the water fairy, who appeared in this form each Saturday from the navel up a human being and a pretty woman, and from the navel downwards a large, long serpent. Here ends this book, God may bless us all.

This passages restates that Melusine’s life had not much significance beyond her body: it is the story of a woman who is both “pretty” and “monstrous.”

2.2. Cavernousness: in ein vinster loch

While Melusine’s son Geffroy is hunting for the giant that guards his grandparents’ tomb and has become a threat to the surrounding communities, the knight accidentally stumbles upon a cave. Here, he finds his ancestral grave and learns about his grandfather Helmas’s death and about Presine and her daughters. Although the cave does not appear until Melusine’s part of the story is over, the cave is strongly connected to her history. The cave brings the grotesque back to its origins, and also brings Melusine back to her own origin. For the grotesque as a literary motif, the cave is a reminder of the original term *grotto-esque*, which referred to a new type of artistic representation that consisted of elements put together in a playful, obscure, inconclusive, and provocative manner. The same aura surrounds Melusine and her own familial history whenever it is addressed in the tale.

The cave is open to many interpretations. Besides darkness and obscurity it houses historic information that needs to be excavated, such as Melusine’s history. Instead of placing the 

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335 See also my discussion of the origins of the grotesque as an esthetic motif in Dwyer, 14-16.
information on a mountain, as Jean does, Thüring buries it in the ground. The image of the tomb conveys Melusine’s supernatural origin as a matter of the past, as having been laid to rest awaiting resurrection. Moreover, a cave is also an image of roughness and of an uncultivated lifestyle – for example, savages and wild men live in caves but certainly not noble people.

The cave is also described as an obscure place: “In dem perge do ist gar vil gespenstes vnd fremder selczamer dinge” (“In the mountain there are many ghostly and strange and odd things” 135, 13-14). This description combines three aspects of Otherness: the ghostly, the strange, and the odd. In addition, here readers get a glimpse of Melusine’s supernatural origin. The cave is also a “vinster loch,” (“dark hole,” 134, 5), into which Geoffrey jumps after the giant has disappeared into it. In the introduction to this study, the dark hole was described as a typical image of how feminists understand the female grotesque. It is a nurturing, maternal place and conversely evokes male anxiety about being swallowed up by the woman’s power and her control. The cave communicates that a woman is dangerous for a man. Strange things happen here, and Geffroy is engaged in a dangerous pursuit, but must pass through the cave in order to find his enemy and also genealogical answers.

2.3. Melusine’s curse: family history carved into stone

Without the prehistory the reader is kept in the dark for a long time about the details of the serpent woman’s life before she came to Lusignan. It is not until about two-thirds into the romance that Melusine’s curse is revealed when Geffroy reads about it in the cave. As in Jean’s Melusine, the family history is carved into a stone tablet that is held by Presine, who appears as a

336 See Russo’s discussion of the female grotesque in reference to the cavernous (here vinster loch) in Dwyer, 22-24.
statue at the feet of King Helma’s grave. Whereas in Jean’s *Melusine* this tablet provides additional information about Melusine’s family, whose history has already been introduced, Presine’s tablet and the epitaph found by Geffroy contain the entire familial account including the mother’s mistreatment, her departure to Avalon, the father’s abandonment and Presine’s subsequent curse of her three daughters (138-139). Thus the curse is not revealed until Melusine has left Lusignan. To talk about it in retrospect, however, makes the curse seem as though it is in the past, something that no longer poses a threat to Lusignan – just as Melusine no longer poses a threat. Keller compares this retroactive clarification to a feminine “dea ex machina”\(^{337}\) and compares the tablet to a *verlebendigt scheinendem “Todesdenkmal”* (“a death monument that appears to have come to life again”).\(^{338}\) Just as Melusine is compared to a *gespenst*, this pertinent information about her also seems to be a *gespenst* or “ghost.” Despite the fact that the excavated information could clarify much about the origins of Melusine’s physical condition, the facts neither have great impact nor do they seem very useful because her days at Lusignan are in the past.

Until this point, Thüring’s version has not offered any information as to why Melusine would turn into a serpent woman on Saturdays. Instead, she has been portrayed as a problematic figure seemingly with no family, and therefore no identity-forming history other than a recent, brief one that she has developed in Lusignan. Thüring’s audience has no opportunity to appreciate Melusine’s courage in resisting a system in which women can be violated with impunity. Readers of Jean’s *Melusine*, however, realize that the young woman’s affliction as a

\(^{337}\) Hildegard Elisabeth Keller, 206.

\(^{338}\) Hildegard Elisabeth Keller, 206.
serpent is a consequence of her disobedience as a daughter. In Thüring’s version, the readers are not able to form an idea about Melusine’s protectiveness of her mother, nor do they see Melusine in the familiar setting among her sisters and mother. In Jean’s account, these details are powerful; they contribute to perceiving Melusine as a determined and strong-willed character before she even enters the scene for the first time at the Fountain de Soif. In Thüring’s Melusine these facts have become historical data that is communicated through a dead person via a third medium; and all of this is embedded in the story of a battle against a giant. The poet devotes about ninety lines to the entire history of Melusine’s parents and the three daughters. We learn this in real time as Geffroy reads all this on the tablet. By providing such shortened and concealed information, the serpent woman’s biography is clearly subordinated to her functioning role in the world of mortals, as a builder of cities and mother to a great lineage. In contrast, Reymond’s biography, which details how the knight is burdened by the killing of his uncle in the hunting accident, covers five chapters before his first meeting with Melusine at the fountain. This imbalance of prehistories before the couple’s path together begins repeats the biased attitude towards Melusine’s supernatural origin, which further manifests in her Otherness.

The reason for this need to control Melusine’s story might be found in the powerful relationship between the mother and her daughters. Presine’s curse, written on the tablet, reads:

“Nun hab ich meinen toechtern geben dreỳ goЪ / Nemlicli Melusina der iüngsten die gar weiβ vnd wolkoennendewas. das sý soel seỳn vnd werden alle samstag von dem nabel hin vnder ein schlang oder wûrm.” (“Now I have given three gifts to my daughters, Melusina, the youngest, who was very wise, and understanding she should be, and shall become every Saturday, a serpent or a dragon from the navel down,” 139, 24-27). The power of the curse is inaccessible to men. While it looks like a punishment on the surface, Presine calls it a gift or a talent that provides her
daughter Melusine with a form of power. Additionally, her serpent shape represents the archetypical female temptation that leads to a man’s unavoidable demise. He is sexually attracted to her and does not recognize the danger of his loss of judgment. In the story, Reymond’s denial and bliss prove this. When his uncle questions him about his beautiful bride, he states that he simply does not care where Melusine came from or what her family’s background is:

… Reůmund sprach Herr in der warheit sŷ ist also
wolgestalt vnd mit preys mit schone und loeblichen sitten
gezieret als ob sŷ eines kûnigs tochter waer / vnd ein schoener
weŷb ward kaum yé gesehen Jch hab auch nit gefraget ob sŷ
keines herczogen oder Marggraffen tochter seŷ Vnd sŷ ist
gancz nach meinem geuallen / vnd ich will sŷ auch haben. (36, 3-8)

Reymond said, Lord in truth she is so comely and precious and blessed with lovely and commendable manners / as if she were the daughter of a king / and a more beautiful woman has never been seen. I thus did not ask her if she was the daughter of a duke or a margrave. And she is exactly what I like / and therefore I want her.

Reymond’s longwinded response to his uncle does not provide the slightest clue about Melusine’s origin. In view of Eco’s discussion of the medieval concept of beauty that views the body as a whole unit composed of the material and the immaterial body, Reymond’s vague infatuation with her does not convince his relatives because of his claim that his new bride would
be beautiful inside and out. In these kind of contradictions lies the paradox of the grotesque that the serpent woman embodies. Her physical form brings together ugliness and beauty in a way that confuses her observer; he is repulsed and afraid but also strangely attracted at the same time. Even if Presine’s gob were not read as a gift, but understood more basically as a condition that the mother puts upon her daughter, the mother’s words are still positive and not condemning. They continue with Presine describing Melusine as wise, understanding and skilled (wolkoennende). As I have argued already in the previous chapter, in Jean’s Melusine the curse is a powerful maternal strategy to participate in the human world. In the Melusine stories it is a female form of communication that is hard for men to comprehend. In addition, while ultimately the poet’s authoritative voice is the absolute form of control, it seems that female power slips through by taking on the form of the grotesque and this, at least temporarily, gives the woman a dominant role.

2.4. Secrecy as a strategy

Going back to the chronological order of Thüring’s prose novel, the fact that the curse is not added until later makes it comparable to a secret about Melusine that suggests her mystery and exoticism. Wherever she appears, she evokes wonder and repulsion in the poet-narrator’s account. In the Arthurian romances, information about the protagonist’s serpent form is withheld until later to protect her and to assure that the knight would not refuse to travel to her rescue. In Thüring’s Melusine it is the reverse; protection is not the issue. To the contrary, Melusine is rendered more vulnerable as a female figure. While her serpent form is exposed in the very beginning, the reason for it remains unknown until she has left Lusignan. At no time during

\[^{339}\text{See Eco’s discussion of beauty and ugliness in Dwyer, 42-43.}\]
Melusine's active participation in the narrative could the reader develop any compassion or understanding for her character without becoming familiar with the story beforehand. If not, she must be perceived as a noble, and also very odd stranger whose fate does not seem to matter much.

The delayed disclosure of the curse reflects the poet’s goal to portray Melusine as the only matriarch. Her own family’s history becomes a genealogy that can be read in reference to her husband and her sons.\textsuperscript{340} And even though Melusine might be perceived as the absolute matriarch of her lineage, without any information about her heritage and her supernatural origin, her description as \textit{fremd} and \textit{gespenst} in context with her serpent body represents Melusine as the permanent outsider. If we read her as a grotesque woman, the secrecy about her origin is a strategy. It ostracizes Melusine because the secrecy controls the audience’s ability to understand her physical shape and her actions. The reader cannot form any idea about the serpent woman’s motivation and decisions, which in turn increases the impression of her character that from the start appears ambiguous.

2.5. Melusine as hybrid: subtle and not-so-subtle gossip

Just as the labels \textit{fremd} and \textit{gespenst} are recurring themes in Thüring’s version of \textit{Melusine}, his protagonist’s physical hybridity is mentioned in three scenes: (1) when the curse is spoken, (2) during the first transgression, and (3) during the second transgression including her departure. In the remaining scenes Melusine only appears as a full serpent. Thüring uses a variety of expressions to describe her hybridity. More focused on her physical form than Jean, he creates an

\textsuperscript{340} Hildegard Elisabeth Keller, 204.
abnormal image of Melusine. Thüring describes her as “ein merfaým” (“a water fairy” 11, 2) and “ein grosser langer wûrm” (“a large long serpent” 11, 5); a “halber mensch vnd ein halber wûrm,” (“half a human being and half a serpent,” 113, 7-8); as “vnder der guertel widerumb ein veintlicher vngeheûrer langer wûrm” (“below the waist a hostile, horrible and long serpent” 123, 6-7); and as a “von dem nabel hinauff ein menschlich vnd hübsch weîblîchs bilde / vnd von dem nabel hin ab ein grosser langer wurm” (“from the navel up a human being and a pretty female and from the navel downwards a large, long serpent” 176, 18-19). As these few examples show – and the list could be continued – the attributes of her physical description range from marvelous and harmless (great, wondrous, pretty) to dreadful and harmful (hostile, horrible, unreal).

However, this catalog of modifiers is not exhausted by direct descriptions; they also occur in more subtle ways, as seen for example in the description of Melusine as having an “andere gar fremde vnd selczame außzeîchnung” (“a different, really strange and unusual characteristic” 12, 5-6).

The subtle or not-so-subtle accounts of Melusine’s serpent form are interesting in the context of the suspended disclosure of her biography. While the German romance omits any opportunity for the audience to interpret a scene individually and therefore develop empathy for the serpent woman’s body and her Otherness, no opportunity is missed to mention Melusine’s physical deformity. Excessive descriptions of her hybrid, abnormal physique enhance her image as a potentially dangerous Other. When Reymond sees his wife through the hole in the door, her two most distinctly features are shown:

… sỳ was von dem nabel auff auß dermassen vnd vnaußsprechlich ein schoen weîplîch pilde von leỳb vnd von angesicht vnseglichen schoen / Aber von dem nabel hinab do
was sy ein grosser langer veÿntlicher vnd vngeheŵrer wur-
mes schwancz von ploer lasur mit weisser silberin varbe. vnd
darunter silberin troepfflin gesprenget vnnder eŷnander. als
dann ein schlang gemeingklich gestalt ist. (97, 16-22)

She was from the navel up such an inexpressibly beautiful woman and her body
and her face were unbelievably beautiful. But from the navel down she was a long
and hostile and monstrous serpent (dragon) tail that was glazed in blue with a
white, silver color. And underneath silver dots were sprinkled all over. Just as a
serpent usually looks.341

By simultaneously portraying the woman as a threatening monster and a most beautiful being,
Thüring combines disparate images of incredible beauty and hostility and terror. The poet
suggests how close deception and beauty are. First, he provides a portrait of Melusine’s upper
body as incredibly beautiful, but then he continues describing her as extremely dangerous by
showing her lower body, suggesting that the truth of her beauty – or any woman’s beauty – lies

341 Coudrette imagines his protagonist differently. He praises Melusine’s beauty rather than
elaborating on her serpent tail. He neither applies terms like “hostile,” nor does he reinforce any
comparison to a serpent at the end of the passage. He only mentions the condition once:
“Jusqu’au nombril la voit si blanche / Comme la nege sur la branche, / Le corps bien fait, fricque
et joly, / Le visage fres et poli; / Et a proprement parler d’elle, / Oncques ne fut point de plus
belle. / Maiz queue ot dessoubz de serpent, / Grande et orrible vrayement: / D’argent et d’asur fut
burlee,” (“Up to the navel she looked as white / as the snow on a branch, / the body well formed,
fresh and beautiful, / the face fresh and bright; / and to speak of her properly, / there was never
one portrayed more beautifully. / But she had a serpent’s tail underneath, / large and truly
horrible / it was striped in silver and blue,” 3067-3076). In contrast, Thüring’s focus on the
serpent’s menace is consistent with other negative nuances he attributes to his protagonist.
dangerously underneath. A man cannot easily discover this “danger” unless he finds a way to examine the woman secretly from a distant spot, as if through a looking glass. The impact of this image on the reader is as stunning as it is on Reymond. While the reader already knows about Melusine's serpent body, Thüring’s vivid description takes any preconceived notion to a level where beauty, deceit, and danger create the realization of how wrong and naïve Reymond must have been to marry her without knowing his wife’s whereabouts. In this moment, the audience either will sympathize with Reymond or pity him; both notions are underpinned by the poet’s suggestion that the woman is a hostile and monstrous creature. Reymond’s previous doubts about his wife’s honesty, which his family members suggested earlier, materialize in the grotesque image that combines beauty with horror.

Unique to Thüring’s Melusine is the great length of her tail, which brilliantly shimmers in blue and silvery white and is sprinkled with silver spots. This allusion to water relates to her first appearance at the *turst brunn* (22.5), the Fountain de Soif, and in the bath. Thüring calls her a water fairy on several occasions. The water fairy lingers around a fountain and has been long related to ancient Celtic and Greek motifs. She has been interpreted as the “voracious, man-eating, female sea monster” whose “symbolism is strongly sexual.” Whereas in Jean’s *Melusine* the serpent woman/water fairy is portrayed as a playful, self-indulgent character that splashes around in her bath as her husband observes her through the fissure in the door, Thüring’s image of the water fairy is a static and one-dimensional appraisal attached to an ecstatic evaluation of the rest of her. Melusine’s sexuality does not come alive in the scene he

342 Williams, 183.
created, and the allusion to her origin as a fairy is objectified through a historical, more stationary image.

Finally, when Melusine leaves Lusignan, her hybrid form becomes permanent. In Thüiring’s version, Melusine flies away as half human/half serpent and does not change into a fully formed serpent but only below her waist: “vnd was züstund eines augenplickes vnder der guertel widerumb ein veintlicher vngeheërzer langer wûrm worden” (“and within a moment [she] changed again from below her waist into hostile, dreadful, and long serpent” 123, 6-7). In Jean’s version of Melusine, on the other hand, the character changes into a full serpent after she has jumped out of the window and lifted her body up into the sky. In the few times when she reappears to Lusignan, she is also described as a full serpent. Although she cries out with a woman’s voice, the French Melusine physically has been fully transformed and is from then on an animal, which indicates an end of her participation in the mortal world, still echoed in her human wailing. This closure is valid for both the character herself and the people of Lusignan, Poitiers, and her family members. Although one does not learn where she continues to live, she seems to have found another mode of active existence. This is not the case in Thüring’s Melusine. The poet-narrator tells us early on, when he talks about Melusine that she permanently is supernatural: “die ein merfeýin gewesen vnd noch ist” (“[who] has been, and still is, a water fairy” 12, 2-3). According to Thüring’s interpretation, Melusine’s life situation is permanently unresolved, thus leaving the impression that she is a gespenst, a ghost that lingers forever.

Hybridity is a key quality of the grotesque and shows a character that is composed of contradictory elements – not only in the physical sense, but also in the figurative sense. Melusine combines impressions of beauty, wisdom, and skillfulness with monstrosity, hostility, elusiveness, and dishonesty all at once. For a feminist reading this is not surprising because a
combination of these qualities is always found in the subtext of the perception of the female Other. In *Melusine*, this imaginary subtext is further manifested, in particular in the form of her menacing lower torso, which embodies the mysteries of childbirth and the danger of female genitalia.

2.6. Hyperbole: an expensive wedding

Melusine’s Otherness is underlined by her hyperbolic portrayal. Excessive praise describes Melusine as extraordinary but also isolates her within the community. Her astonishing aspects reflect that she is not human and establish boundaries between Melusine and the people of Poitiers. For example, Melusine’s wedding guests have an ambivalent reaction towards the wedding and their reaction shows how marvelous and unusual she appears to them:

Das ist ein unsaegliche schoene hochzeit

der geleichen wir alle nie gesehen noch vernomen haben

Vnd was auch nit ein wunder ob sÿ dise hochzeit ettwas fremd duncket

wann an soelichen enden als kostlich hochzeýt vngewonlich seind zû haben.

(38, 20-24)

That is an indescribably beautiful wedding.

We have never seen nor heard of a similar one

and it is not surprising that this wedding seems a bit strange,

because in our area, such an expensive wedding seems very unusual.

For the guests, this type of wedding is a culturally new experience and seems foreign to them.

The event exceeds everyone’s expectations, challenging the people’s thinking and provoking
their envy. The wedding guests are ambivalent: they admire Melusine, yet they become aware of their economic limitations and backwardness.

The hyperbolic depiction of Melusine’s beauty creates another contrast: “Vnd also was nun Melusina auß der massen schoen / vnd geleichet sich baß einem schoenen engel denn einem toettlichen menschen” (“And Melusine was also so extraordinarily beautiful that she rather resembled a beautiful angel than a mortal human being” 38, 8-10). The expression “auß der massen” is a good example how the grotesque manifests in Melusine’s appearance and other characteristics of her life. It means “beyond common measure,” in other words, disproportionate. In this instance, the description is two-fold. Melusine’s beauty is comparable to that of an angel. On the other hand, it also emphasizes how incomparable she is to a mortal. Meant as a praise of her extraordinary beauty, the description defines Melusine as an Other on her own wedding day.

Shortly after the wedding, Melusine begins building the castle of Lusignan. With its immeasurable dimensions, the building magnifies the picture of Otherness, which the wedding earlier generated:

… Da nun dise fremd vnd
abenteürlich hochzeüit ein ende nam / aller erst da hüb sich
wunder vnd abenteüwer als ir hoeren werdent / vnd ward ein
soeliches gebawe angefangen des geleichen vor vnd hernach
nie mer gesehen / gehoert noch vernomen ist worden. (44, 15-19)

When this strange and adventurous wedding was coming to an end, right away another wondrous adventure began that you will hear about: then began the
construction of a building, which never was seen before or ever again or heard or reported.

Melusine’s construction of Lusignan constitutes a benefit to the community, but its dimensions and design are presented as excessive.

2.7. Ambiguity: continuous suspicion

So far in Melusine’s portrayal the poet describes her character in ambiguous, uncertain ways. Sometimes this is subtle, but many times ambivalence concerning the serpent woman is very explicit. It is expressed in Thüring’s *Melusine* more often and more overtly than in any other descriptions of the grotesque woman in this study. The foremost reaction that reflects the ambiguity of Melusine is doubt about her. For example, when Reymond sees Melusine for the first time, he does not know whether she is real or not. He is so confused that he even thinks he might be dead: “Da Reýmond die schon junckfraw ersach erschrack er / vnd west nit ob er lebendig oder tod was / oder ob das ein gespenst oder fraw waer,” (“when Reymond saw the beautiful maiden, he was startled and he did not know if he was dead or alive or whether she was a ghost or a woman,” 22-23, 16–18). The knight reacts to an unexpected beauty encountered in the middle of the woods while he is in great distress about having killed his uncle. The wording implies that Reymond finds Melusine beautiful but dangerous, and his reaction reveals that she appears so unusual to him that he seems to lose his senses over this encounter. The text continues to associate supernatural, evil forces with Melusine’s serpent form when the poet-narrator tells us that

… sÿ nit nach ganczer

menschlicher nature in weýb gewesen ist / sunder sÿ hat von
gottes wunder ein andere gar fremde vnd selczame auß-
she was not a woman, according to the entirety of human nature / but had through God’s wondrous doing a different, really strange, and unusual characteristic, and [asks] how it was possible that her transformation was almost like one of God’s great wonders or [whether it was] an illusion.

This passage exposes the insecurity about Melusine. It is uncertain whether Melusine’s transformation stems from her unnatural origin or is a miracle. Müller claims that for the interpretation of Melusine the demonic connotation of the term gespenst moves into the background but this seems repeated by the above and the following description:343

… Do nun Reýmond hort das sŷ
von gott redte da gewan er besundern trost zů ir / vnd gedacht in seinem herczen Nun mag ich ettwas trostes haben
das die junckfraw kein gespenste noch keins vngelaubens /
sunder von Christenlichem blůt kommen vnd nicht vngelau-big seŷ. (24, 13-18)

When Reymond heard that she spoke of God, he found a certain hope in her, and he thought in his heart, Now I may believe that this maiden is not an evil spirit nor pagan, but comes from a Christian family and is not a heathen.

343 Jan-Dirk Müller, Melusine, 11, n6.
Reymond’s thoughts show again that the word gespenst is associated with malicious, diabolic energy. Reymond can only find hope and trust in Melusine because of her Christian background, which also shows in the fact that he develops enough confidence in her to receive her help and protection. Christa Baufeld glosses trost as Trost, Zuversicht, Hoffnung, Zusage von Hilfe und Schutz, i.e., consolation, confidence, hope, or promise of help and protection. The simultaneous mention of both good and evil forces intensifies Melusine’s ambiguous portrayal, associating her with the devil and with God at the same time. Despite the fact that she speaks about Christian piety and that Reymond trusts her, the sense of doubt persists.

Unsurprisingly, the Poitevins’ reaction to the serpent woman is ambivalent throughout. Although the people appreciate and recognize Melusine’s extraordinary qualities and contributions to the community, they express their doubt in her. The count of Poitiers, representing authority, claims that he finds disturbing the situation at the fountain and the manner in which Reymond’s land is surveyed by means of a leather strap: “Der Graff sprach / diß ist ein froemde sach / es mag wol ein gespenst sein” (“The count said: This is a strange matter; it might be a spook” 33, 3–4). He further admonishes his nephew to do nothing wrong: “Wer oder von wannen ist die frawe die du da nimest Acht das du nit mißfares (./.) von welcher gegnet oder was geschlaechtes” (“[With regard to] who or from where this woman is whom you will marry, be careful to make no mistake (./.) [in terms of] from which region or what lineage she is” 35, 21, 23). Whereas this type of probing occurs also in Jean’s Melusine, here the uncle’s admonishment expresses stronger suspicion.

344 Baufeld, 57.
For Mühlerr the skepticism about Melusine is justified. She interprets Melusine’s request that Reymond keep the accidental murder of his uncle a secret as a callous act of dishonesty that foreshadows the final destruction of the couple’s bond. Mühlerr also finds a great flaw in Melusine’s request that Reymond should ask Bertram for a piece of land that is to be measured by the length of a cord made out of stag skin. According to Mühlerr, the request is ignoble because Bertram is the murdered count’s son. Mühlerr’s reading supports the idea that Melusine’s Otherness is expressed by her lack of the honor code that is usually associated with medieval and Early Modern nobility. Melusine’s influence contaminates the young knight's value system and brings destructive energy into all their family relations. Ambiguity can be perceived not only in the descriptions and the people’s verbal reactions but also in Melusine’s character, as Mühlerr suggests. Shifting between conspiracy and violence, reason and Christ-like goodness, the portrayal of this woman suggests horror, dread, and destructiveness, but also charity, forgiveness, and sympathy.

2.8. Ugliness: a greüsênlich Melusine

Ugliness as a characteristic of the grotesque woman is found in the modifier greüsênliche (“dreadful” 98, 4), which the poet uses to describe Melusine after she has been discovered by her husband:

Reymund do der dise greüsênliche vnd freme geschoeff an

345 Mühlerr, 331-332.

346 Mühlerr, 332.

347 Götzle defines greuslich and its variants as “fürchterlich” in the sense of appalling, dreadful, frightening, and horrible (111).
seinem gemahel gesahe / do wardt er gar ser bekümeth.
von allem seinem gemuet betruebet vnd erschrack ser von diser
gesicht. vnd stünd also von vorcht inn grossen sorgen das im
der schweiß von not außgieng. (98, 4-8)

When Reymond saw this dreadful and foreign form of his wife, he was very upset and sad. And he was startled by this image and he felt so much dread and worry that he was sweating with fear. Reymond responds strongly to Melusine’s physical appearance. He perceives her serpent body as horrible and separate from her person, an seinem gemahel (“in/on his wife”) – possibly hoping that what he saw is not true. Müller glosses the expression geschoeff as “Beschaffenheit, Gestalt” (“nature, appearance”). The husband does not seem to see both entities, wife and serpent shape, as one unified being, but perceives them as separate entities, in which the serpent shape configures an Otherness that he cannot grasp. Since he is saddened, angry, and confused, Reymond later decides that he should investigate what this spooky appearance really meant: “Es ist ganz ein gespenst vmb diß weib (./) das mag ich wol pruefen. wann sÿ sich in dem pad erzeigete also ein halber mensch vnd ein halber wûrm. Das doch ein grewsenlich angesicht was” (“there is something very peculiar about this woman. I can attest to this because she appeared in the bath as half a human being and half a serpent. That was a horrible sight” 113, 7-9). The decision to verify whether he saw an illusion or not also explains the initial reaction that he thinks that Melusine and the being he sees are not really one and the same.

348 Jan-Dirk Müller, Melusine, 98, n4.
2.9. Melusine as Other

As aforementioned, the all-encompassing attribute that constitutes Melusine as a grotesque is Otherness. There are various levels of Otherness in Thüring’s protagonist: a gendered Otherness, a private and public form of Otherness, and finally a monstrous Otherness that parallels Melusine’s form to other monsters this tale. As a gendered Other, it is not surprising that Melusine is a huge provocation for the men of Poitiers. She is talented, intelligent, courageous, and rich, therefore takes on a dominating, masculine role that is matched only by her son Geoffrey. Her husband is weaker than she; he does not even notice that his wife is not what he thought she was whereas the community has been suspicious from the beginning. Conversely, Melusine’s extraordinary beauty and her nurturing quality draw men to her. This is a potent combination and has been seen in all the grotesque women whom I have discussed. It is a form of gendered alterity that goes beyond the mere dichotomy between man and woman.

Within Melusine’s personality are elements that are masculine and dominant, feminine and attractive, and dangerously mysterious.⁴⁴⁹ Thüring’s original representation of his protagonist, which he changed from the descriptions that Coudrette applies, divides the world into fremd and not-fremd. Melusine appears exotic to the people of Lusignan. Her Otherness evokes an atmosphere of far-off lands, curiosity, and wonder. Men are attracted to Melusine. They may have never seen an ethnically or culturally different woman like her before, or if they have, she might represent a woman about whom they can fantasize because of their attraction to

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⁴⁴⁹ See also Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* (New York: Routledge, 2005). Karras argues that medieval gender roles were perceived as binary, i.e., active or passive, which implied that an actively sexual woman transgressed her gender boundaries and acted like a man (27).
the Other. Reymond’s uncritical acceptance of Melusine reveals her sexual magnetism. With respect to identity, the term fremd takes on a similar meaning of Otherness. Melusine is extremely capable but from a different region and therefore unknown and completely foreign. Bynum suggests that fascination with the Other evolved because of the economic, agricultural, and urban growth during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Social and familial structures were shifting so that people became increasingly interested in changing their roles in society—especially when they were privileged. Accordingly, Melusine’s superior skills are welcome, yet profoundly dissimilar to those of other figures in the story, which puts her in a weak position. As soon as conflict arises, she stands alone against the entire community. While Melusine promises change and status, her propensity to overpower and deceive the ordinary nobles of Lusignan results in her demise and Reymond exposes her secret. It is not surprising that Reymond cannot take the public pressure after he has watched his wife bathing; had he kept quiet instead of rebuking Melusine, he would have run the risk of being associated with an outsider and being excommunicated. The medieval concepts of public and private, however, have to be understood differently from contemporary meanings. Something private was not seen or talked about in the open. This concept explains why the couple’s marriage functions for a long time, and even persists for a little while after Reymond has discovered Melusine’s secret. The situation shifts to a public arena, i.e., it is acknowledged, seen, and spoken about in the open, when Reymond calls his wife a serpent in front of the entire court at Vouent.

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350 Bynum, 26-27.

In the end, the dichotomy between Melusine’s portrayal as a familiar and beloved community member and wife versus an unfamiliar and disparaged Other manifests in her transformation into the half-serpent in front of everyone’s eyes. Besides these obvious readings of Melusine as the grotesque Other, a multitude of subtle reactions by others throughout the text reveal that Melusine and her lifestyle are often perceived as strange, elusive, or even monstrous. For example, the guests find Melusine’s wedding party overly ostentatious, and cannot believe what they see: “oefen bachen / kuchel (riechen) vnd koech vnd volckes on zal vil Sÿ gedachten alle / dises mag ein gespenste sein” (“stoves were baking / kitchens smelled good and there were many cooks and people; they all thought / this might be an illusion” 31, 27-29). The Poitevins look on with suspicion when they first see the preparation for the festivity. Because these measures were without precedence, they did not have the ability to take this event as a wondrous experience, but considered it as uncanny.

How profound the public suspicion of Melusine’s Otherness really is shows when the Count of the Forest (“graf vom vorst” 96, 6) reports to his brother Reymond what people are saying about his wife: “Ettliche sprechen es seÿ ein gespenst vnd ein vngeheŵr wesen vmb sÿ. Diß sag ich eüch als meinem lieben průder” (“many say that there is something unreal and monstrous about her. I am telling you this, dear brother” 96, 21-23). It is unusual for the Poitevins to call Melusine a vngeheŵr wesen (monstrous being) in the presence of her husband since these accusations describe Melusine as a physically monstrous creature and not as a wife. In fact the vngeheŵr, which can be read as monstrous, fiend-like and ogre-like, represents the postcolonial notion of the monstrous Other and is used in reference to Melusine multiple
times. Otherwise, the poet uses the same term *vngeheŵr* for the giant who guards Helmas and Presine’s cave (“dem grossen greûßenlichen vnd vngeheŵren risen [“the huge, frightening and monstrous giant” 144, 14-15]). The same adjective is used to explain the sea monster that swallowed the knight from England who was pursuing Melusine’s sister Palatina while she was guarding her father’s treasure on Mount Arragon (“Das der ritter von Engellant mit den tieren vnd wuermen gefochten hett vnd zû leczt von dem grossen vngeheŵren merwunder verdorben vnd verschlÿcket were. als ir vormals wol behoert habt,” [“That the knight from England had fought with beasts and dragons and was finally killed and swallowed by the great sea monster. As you have heard before,” 170, 16-19]).

Although Melusine is the center of the noble culture of Lusignan, the poet describes her in terms similar to the commonplace monsters that represent a fatal threat to the people. Thus, when the text compares her to the types of ubiquitous monsters with culturally fixed terms, Melusine is grotesque because she is the female Other. The crossover between the ideology behind the meaning of monstrous and the brother’s description of her – representing the public’s voice – support this claim. Normally, the people perceive beings as monstrous when they live in a distinct area, where they believe demonic creatures to be (like the sea monster or the mountain giant). While Melusine appears in her serpent form, she does not live in a geographically remote or marginal region, and while she is in her homeland, we never see her in serpent form because in the fairy world she is not portrayed as an Other. Nonetheless, Melusine is the Other in

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352 The other examples are: “Aber von dem nabel hinab do was sy ein grosser langer veûntlicher vnd vngeheŵrer wurmes” (“But from the navel down she was a long and hostile and monstrous serpent [dragon] tail” 97, 19-20) and “vnd was zûstund eines augenplickes vnder der guertel widerumb ein veûntlicher vngeheŵrer langer würm worden” (“and in a moment she changed again from below the navel into a hostile and dreadful long serpent” 123, 5-7).
Lusignan, and this is known even to her. Therefore, she creates a safe space for herself where she has her weekly bath ritual. This space turns out to be vulnerable and only works for Melusine until her secret is discovered.

The matter is even more complex because despite the general sense of suspicion against her, everyone (except for her husband’s brother) seems to love Melusine. Consequently, the people are torn between accepting a stranger among them and letting her go. Melusine’s only choice is to leave Lusignan for good, and her ultimate permanent change into a serpent is a final provocation of the society’s fear of a stranger. She must take on the role of the *poese slange*, “wicked serpent” and “poese schlang vnd scheinlicher wůrm” (“wicked serpent and shameful worm” 114, 16-17) because Reymond, his family, and the communities of Lusignan and Poitiers (or Bern) can only define themselves by their ultimate recognition of her as Other. By driving out of town someone who they believe is a stranger who does not belong, the people reconfirm who they are.

Melusine’s final transformation and subsequent departure do not seem too difficult for her and she does not try to resist her fate. Interpreted from a feminist perspective, her Otherness in being a woman has already been internalized by her long before. Therefore, the additional accusation by Reymond when he finds out that his son Freymund was burnt to death by his other son, Geoffrey, adds to Melusine’s negative self-perception. She makes the decision to leave despite there being no real necessity for her departure, because, to her credit, her husband and her entourage deeply regret everything. Her final destiny will not be known other than that she remains in her serpent form as the poet-narrator had already proclaimed in the beginning.

3. Conclusion: Melusine demystified

To sum up, Melusine’s grotesqueness is based on the conflicting qualities described and the
contradictory narrative strategies applied that rationalize her mythical nature. The German Melusine embodies the dichotomy between nobility and Otherness as no other serpent woman does. While she is mostly considered and treated as a human being, she is often feared as a monster, yet also admired as a noble figure. Thüring’s work seeks to minimize the mythical and marvelous events he found in his sources. Melusine is deconstructed and her mythological origin reorganized; her portrait seems altogether more human, that is, individualized as a person, than her counterpart in the Middle French version. This humanization, however, does not comply with Melusine’s physical form at all. Her attempt to assimilate human behavior and actions often seems strange and contradictory. Even Thüring struggles in defining his protagonist as a human figure and avoids references to her supernatural origin and biography. While the one part of her life that caused her hybrid form is neglected, the condition is labeled and the poet applies these labels often in reference to Melusine. The descriptions change swiftly from one term to another and fluctuate between positive and negative signifiers, such as wondrous (wunderlich) and strange (fremd), which both signify something hitherto unknown, illusive or ghostlike (gespenst), and even plainly horrible (greüsenlich). Any of these terms serves as a vehicle for conflicting ideas and adds to the ambiguous assembly of the grotesque woman.

Various points come together. The audience of the poet’s town of Bern probably identified with the story of Melusine of Lusignan for its courtliness and the family’s political successes because the nobility aspired to these goals for themselves. From that perspective, Melusine is welcome and identified with contemporary noblewomen. However, her physical form is the unattractive problem that can neither be explained nor denied. Therefore, Melusine also represents the anxieties concerning the growing interaction with people from foreign places and different cultural backgrounds. Despite her great wisdom and political and familial
accomplishments, the characters are infused with the poet’s skepticism, which reminds them of Melusine’s foreignness, including herself. She cannot permanently fulfill her role as a wife, mother, and ruler of Lusignan because her mysterious background wins over her desire to become a mortal. Compared with her Middle French counterpart, who never had to leave behind her fairy nature entirely, the German Melusine is an outsider the entire time. She is also feared because she is considered deceptive, a rather sinister combination. Despite the successful path that Melusine and her family take for a while, she turns out to be an image of the grotesque that was already described in Jean’s Melusine as irreversible and permanently afflicted. Being a grotesque forces Melusine out of Lusignan after having been treated harshly by the men who once admired her. The author incorporates various perceptions that are incompatible on a personal level, and public pressure as well as slanderous hearsay take control over Melusine’s life. The increased public attention to Melusine and more severe identification of her character in Thüring’s interpretation represent a change from the earlier accounts. Ultimately Melusine is a grotesque image of a cultural outsider that a fifteenth-century community cannot tolerate.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

In the previous chapters, I have shown how four serpent women in four medieval romances are literary representations of medieval grotesques. The women are hybrids, half-serpent and half-noblewoman, whose relationships with knights are initiated only because of their serpent forms. Within this context, each woman’s curious physique brings up issues for debate, something scholarship on medieval subjects has not explored from the viewpoint of the grotesque. When a grotesque occurs, it hints at an obscure, contradictory, and often ironic situation that would not be unearthed by a reading of her as either monstrous or loathly lady – the two labels that scholars have applied to these women so far.

1. Overview of findings per character, in comparison and relation to genre

In the four accounts, we find women of three literary traditions recorded in three vernacular languages. Because the grotesque appears always as a hybrid of incompatible parts that never merge, the serpent figures cannot be taken in as a whole. Instead, the figures have to be broken down into fragments in order to be understood. This fragmentation challenges the identification of the women’s grotesque form. By only identifying the physical aspects of their female torsos attached to a serpent’s tail, one would fail to uncover the deeper meaning found in unexpected details or behavioral aspects of these women.

The individual interpretations became possible through a catalogue of eleven characteristics I identified, including centrality, ugliness, ambiguity/instability, and Otherness, which I consider among the most notable and informative. These characteristics I established allowed me to interpret the women individually within their distinct socio-cultural environments, then to compare them to their literary adaptations and to each other. Read through these lenses, the four protagonists emerge as central, multifaceted, and empowered, with a complex femininity.
that defies physical ugliness and transforms bodily malleability into an instrument of control. The serpent women’s power materializes when their bodies, or the knowledge thereof – as is the case in both *Melusine* tales, in which only the protagonists know their physical constraints – confuse, terrify, and lure knights, who expect the women to be beautiful as defined by their society’s cultural standards.

The women’s individual grotesqueness can only occur when an ideal or standard form is set against it. That is the case in each of the tales: the template for a beautiful maiden includes a normative sequence of actions associated with courtship between knight and maiden as imagined in each text. Within these elaborate readings, the women’s unusual and terrifying bodies – a combination of an animal and a human form – cast them as Other regardless of whether characters within their fictional environments know their true nature. Their characters, constructed out of one part animal and one part young female, contain a wild side not typically associated with the animalistic elements of their bodies, but rather with passion, curious sexuality and joyful pleasure. These wild woman elements are not always overtly expressed, but at times only insinuated through alluring physical features, such as Blonde Esmerée’s and the Lady of Synadoun’s rosy lips or the expressions that Melusine’s mother Presine uses to admonish her daughter for overconfidence and haughtiness. Through their Otherness, each serpent woman fascinates the romance audience and the characters in her surroundings, even if only briefly, as in *Lybeaus Desconus*, when the Lady of Synadoun appears naked in front of the knight after she has turned from serpent into woman in a single moment.

As I discussed in Chapter 1, the Old French poem is the most classical of the romances I analyze. Renaut de Bâgé created a medieval romance – most likely grown out of his knowledge of Chrétien’s work – that tells the story of Gawain’s son Guinglan. Renaut has been lauded for
his ability to play with the conventions of romance, particularly evident in his portrayal of female characters, whose overall development was of great importance to him.\textsuperscript{353} In \textit{Li Biaus Descouneüs}, he composed the most elaborate poetic portrayal of the four serpent women analyzed, in both style and length. Blonde Esmerée appears in monumental and beastly form, and as an illuminating, fire-blazing dragon, more animal than human. She makes a prolonged, spectacular entrance by moving around her gigantic, shimmering tail and bowing coquettishly and unexpectedly to kiss the startled knight. Despite Blonde Esmerée’s terrifying appearance, she is entirely harmless and kind towards Li Biaus, who only benefits from her involvement. Her grotesqueness functions as divine intervention and leads the young knight away from the exquisitely beautiful but otherwise harmful La Pucelle. Blonde Esmerée ultimately returns Li Biaus to the right path to fulfill his mission for the king. Other than her outrageous body and dramatic performance to scare the knight straight, the most outstanding example of her grotesqueness is her ambiguous presence that embodies contradictory imagery.

In Chapter 2, I establish the grotesque characteristics of the daringly sexual Lady of Synadoun, a more down-to-earth, humorous, and bolder version of Blonde Esmerée, who, in contrast to the Old French heroine, has no significant rival in her story. In keeping with the Middle English tradition, this romance is characterized by its swift, action-driven plot developments. It conveys themes, such as female sexuality, in a bolder fashion, without using ornate digressions on physical beauty and tender encounters to generate courtly ambiance as the

\textsuperscript{353} Fresco, xiii.
French tradition does. The Lady of Synadoun was created for a different type of audience that most likely was not as elevated in status as the Old French. Its target audience would not have enjoyed elaborate descriptions of dalliances such as those Renaut provides for his French audience. The Lady of Synadoun is exceptional in her grotesque form. She is the only character who speaks while in her serpent body, and this both humanizes her and reveals her anxious mood. With her speech, the Lady of Synadoun shows that she is aware of her transitory physical condition. She also reveals that the poet did not envision her as an ageless dragon but as an exterior shell under which a woman is hidden. The Lady of Synadoun’s grotesqueness is a contradiction – youthful speech coming from a serpent body – and her spectacular evolution from serpent to naked woman reminds us of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. After she coiled her serpent body around Lybeaus’s neck to kiss him passionately, the lady sheds her serpent skin as though discarding a costume, and stands naked in front of the puzzled knight.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the Middle French character Melusine in Jean d’Arras’s Mélusine ou la noble histoire de Lusignan. Written in prose and including elements of genealogy, history, and chronicle, the story is not classified as a typical romance. The tale’s structure reflects one of the grotesque’s most prominent characteristics, namely that it is a hybrid composed of a hodgepodge of elements. Melusine, however, contains many elements of a romance, including the courtly topics and the cultural milieu in which the tale is set. Melusine is a sophisticated figure with a complex personality, a woman cursed to change into a serpent from the navel down

354 For a discussion of the Middle English romances measured against their French counterparts see Dwyer, 97, n187.

355 For an exploration of the style differences in French and English romances viewed in historical context see Dwyer, 101, n193.
once a week when bathing. Although Melusine is a remarkably talented woman in Lusignan – a politician, a city-builder, a childbearing wife – her success does not last. She is able to keep her duality secret but it destroys her life in the mortal world. Melusine meets another condition I set forth for the grotesque: she learns to collaborate with women and strategize in a world dominated by men.

Of the four tales I examine, *Melusine* offers the strongest representation of the co-existence and interrelation of the human and the supernatural worlds. The protagonist is characterized as grotesque from the start when Jean explains her family history, which takes a toll on her physically and emotionally. Melusine’s path from the fairy world to the world of mortals is predestined and launched by her mother, Presine. The curse was brought upon Melusine for her decision to punish her father, and this ultimately dominates most of the decisions she makes during her life. Hence, here the serpent woman’s physical appearance is neither positive nor negative but rather an expression of her heritage.

Melusine also stands out among the four serpent women discussed because of the way how her husband Remondin treats her. He accuses his wife in public of being a horrible serpent whose evil nature causes of his sons’ violent problems. Remondin’s accusation corroborates Eco’s argument that in the Middle Ages ugliness equated to evil.\(^{356}\) Once Melusine’s husband has publically offended her, revealing to his wife that he broke his oath, and once the public knows that underneath her magnificent exterior she is in fact a wicked serpent, Melusine leaves on her own accord never to come back. She has internalized a judgment of herself. From the

\(^{356}\) See Eco’s discussion of beauty and ugliness in Dwyer, 42-43.
story’s perspective, this action is related to the maternal curse that she cannot escape. From a religious-cultural point of view, her fate relates to the condemning image of the female serpent.

Deeply anti-feminist, Melusine’s story confirms all aspects defined in Russo’s depth-surface model, which argues that a woman is automatically grotesque because of her female body. Melusine’s story also confirms the theory of Miller, who argues that a woman will always be monstrous regardless of whether she has the body of a beautiful, perpetually youthful medieval maiden or an authentically aging woman. No matter how much Melusine achieves for her family and community, she will lose her social status as soon as her physical beauty is lost.

In Chapter 4, Thüring von Ringoltingen’s Melusine presents a more humanized and modern character, another hybrid creature who clashes with a community that exists somewhere between the supernatural world of fiction and the new world of reason and social status. Melusine, who comes from an unknown place, is an Other. The poet struggles to evaluate her, and in doing so burdens her with too many labels, leading to a stronger judgment of her character by the audience. The terms that stand out the most in the poet’s description are ghost/deceptive (gespenst) and strange/foreign (fremd), which Thüring applies countless times as he reworks Coudrette’s version, and which are a unique feature in the Early New High German adaptation. Thüring combines elements of beauty, Otherness, terror, and hostility so frequently in his description of Melusine that he heightens the threat of the danger inherent in her beauty. He does not seem to be the poet-lover that we see in the French romance tradition, but rather someone

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357 See Russo’s discussion on the feminine grotesque and the depth-surface model in Dwyer, 22-24.
with a negative view of women, as he portrays the most negative image of a woman of the four serpent women I discuss.

Thüring’s prose narrative came out of the medieval courtly romance tradition but contains, just as Jean’s *Melusine*, historical and genealogical elements that the poet adapted for the commissioning lords of the area of Bern. *Melusine*, as is traditional with early German prose, rationalizes and demystifies lofty people and ideas of the late medieval era. The romance also tries to create an understanding of supernatural wonders, represented in the portrayal of the main character as Other. The poet’s struggle to explain Melusine and her condition reflects the time in which the romance was composed, when curiosity and rationalization gradually was replacing belief in divine order. These growing exploratory interests of the early Early New Modern culture, revealed in the mixed genre and in Melusine’s existence as Other, makes her portrayal comparable to the late medieval/Early New Modern *Wunderkammer*, where objects of value and curiosity were stored.

2. Similarities and Differences

Thüring’s illustration of Melusine in particular reveals the power of language to influence a reader’s interpretation of a character, and he does so more forcefully than Jean’s or Coudrette’s versions of *Melusine*. Thüring’s ambivalent labeling brings forth a far more negative character than any other serpent woman analyzed. Indeed, the scholarship on the German Melusine has repeatedly analyzed her from the perspective of family violence. In contrast, the Old French romance, in accordance with the genre’s tradition, applies courtly poetics; it treats Blonde Esmerée much more gently despite her frightening, earth-shaking physique. The Middle English Lady of Synadoun wins over her audience through a portrait that shows her as lighthearted, young and excitedly in love, though the romance contains few descriptive passages and develops
her character through fast-pace action. In the Middle French *Melusine*, the classical French style reveals itself again in the elaborate descriptions of Melusine’s beauty and her adoration for her husband, including the courtly descriptions of the relationship between the couple. Jean avoids biased labels for his protagonist and prefers emphasizing Melusine’s positive aspects rather than elaborating on her frightening shape and violent actions.

Generally, the French tradition incorporates a mythological background that evokes the archaic, older world of the grotesque, as Harpham has suggested. Renaut and Jean prefer descriptive images, such as verbal play with the imagery of light and dark or dialogues that reveal the dynamics of the individual relationships that the serpent women have. When explanatory language is used, it brings out the positive aspects instead of condemning the characters. This tendency produces an overall supportive and more sympathetic presentation of the serpent women, despite the fact that the condition itself is burdensome for the women because misogyny was firmly in place at the times when the romances were composed.

Both the Middle English and Early New High German adaptations of the French material humanize the serpent women and demystify their situation or heritage. The trend reflects a shift in fiction writing, standard in Western European by the late Middle Ages, away from portraying a unified supernatural world and toward a Christianized, more rational world where people could advance their social status through hard work. Urban communities evolved and audiences changed in taste and status, both factors which brought forth literary works that increasingly portrayed elements of their day-to-day realities. In the Middle English version, the Lady of Synadoun’s story is concerned with facts that an audience presumably would identify as part of their own lives. Here, for example, the serpent woman hides in a room rather than an armoire, one hears her cry behind the walls, and she is concerned with aging. Conversely in the Old French
tale, Blonde Esmerée’s grotesqueness evolves in contrast to the beautiful La Pucele – both noblewomen of high status, yet one is dreadful and the other beautiful. The imagery describing Blonde Esmerée’s grotesqueness does not contain many details inspired by the real world, but rather divinely inspired images of light and darkness, and supernatural marvels such as glowing gemstones, voices from above, and an enchantress who intervenes. Sexuality in the Old French is found in the relationship between La Pucele and Li Biaus. The descriptions follow the traditional style that praises beauty and chivalry, a contrast to the Middle English romance, in which the lady is portrayed as a bold character who with no trace of shame exhibits her body to the young knight.

The second chapter on Melusine is twice removed from Jean’s original because Thüring closely followed the plot of Coudrette’s Melusine. His version shows a significant shift away from the mythical world, and Thüring presents courtly values in less refined language and characterizes the townspeople’s opinions as gossip. The community has become its own character in the form of a public voice, and the poet uses the opportunity to have it marvel at or doubt his protagonist. This creates public empathy that shifts between praising and condemning the character. The descriptions portray Melusine as a remarkable, stunning woman whom everyone envies, but also as a terrifying sea monster and shameful serpent. This contrast complicates the audience’s impression of her: she is a confusing character. The word “shameful,” used only in the German Melusine, increases the readers’ bias. The adjective is associated with public and personal embarrassment and deprecation, a view which none of the other romances express to that extreme about the noblewoman they portray.

The collective negative terminology contributes to the portrayal of Melusine in the German romance as a more isolated character than in Jean’s version. Thüring presents her as
different, intensifying the fact that, following Coudrette’s example, he does not include
Melusine’s prehistory at Avalon. In contrast, in the Middle French version, Melusine never has
to leave behind all of her fairy nature, which Jean includes at great length. The poet
acknowledges the fairy world as a legitimate place, thus giving the fairy an identity from the
beginning. The German Melusine’s lack of family origin story heightens the romance’s
appropriation of her and adds to her portrayal as an outsider. Her separation from the rest of the
world is accentuated, causing her to become a grotesque Other.

My analysis establishes another essential difference among these various notions of the
grotesque. The first set of Arthurian romances (Li Biaus Descouneüs and Lybeaus Desconus)
intentionally uses the serpent women to promote prosperity for the protagonists, which
guarantees the survival of the Arthurian realm. In contrast, the Melusine romances portray
women affected by a primal curse who help their male partners and communities to gain criminal
immunity, material wealth, political influence, and a family legacy, yet, the women gain nothing
from their efforts. Therefore, their grotesqueness has much more sinister overtones and burdens
the characters with defects they cannot escape no matter how hard they try. Unlike the Arthurian
heroines, the Melusine women do not benefit from a supporting staff of maids, stewards, dwarfs,
and a superior king driven to create a safe, orderly world. In Melusine, the women not only are
alone in the human world, but they do not benefit from an inheritance to sustain them. They own
nothing in their own right and gain everything through marriage and hard work. Eventually they
lose their accumulated wealth again, proving that the security they established through marriage
was only ephemeral. The husbands are not really supporters, but allies tied to the women through
the concealment of their manslaughter. Once they expose their wives, all security immediately
falls away. Thus, the grotesque plays out differently for both sets of tales. In the Arthurian
romances, the grotesque is a temporary, even humorous condition, and its sinister characteristics are diminished by the fact that the romance audience knows that the couple eventually will marry in keeping with the convention of romances to resolve conflicts. In the *Melusine* stories, the grotesque is much darker, detailed in distressing accounts of women who became corrupt and violent, evoking a cardinal sin that can never be redeemed. Their serpent form appears repeatedly in settings in which the women are alone, separated from their spouses, being either violated and stalked or flying through the air.

In the Arthurian tales, the romance’s formal structure sets the adventure into motion, and the serpent women are only once enchanted and then forever released from their curses, although we do not know how long they suffered in their hiding places. Blonde Esmerée and the Lady of Synadoun use their serpent form as a template, like a costume, under which they hide their real identities as maidens. They do not have any significant role in the stories other than putting the quest into motion, appearing as serpents, then marrying their rescuers. In the *Melusine* stories, the female protagonists genuinely struggle from the inside out, as predicted in their mother’s story. Their serpent form cannot be eradicated, only suspended as long as the maidens manage to stay married to protective men. Melusine’s hybrid body, whether seen or unseen, represents her authentic self. The beautiful, perfect woman she is on the outside is a disguise she uses for survival. Once exposed, both protagonists in the *Melusine* tales cannot keep their secrets any longer and show themselves to their communities. Flying away while the community looks on is a bold move suggesting that both characters do not reject and hate their serpent form entirely and finally are able to claim it fully. While the Arthurian ladies weep or complain to the knights about their previous predicaments, Jean’s Melusine splashing in her bath reveals genuine joy in her carnal sexual energy.
The system of Lusignan is open and does not have the protective ideological boundaries of the Arthurian world, which is quintessentially fictitious. Poitou presents is a more realistic account of geography and life at the time. While Melusine carries on her lonely fight against her fate, the grotesque conditions are woven into all her layers. The tight-knit communities of Poitou and the castle of Lusignan regard women suspiciously, but reward them as long as they play by their rules and pass their scrutiny. However, once a woman is known to have transgressed the moral code, she is an outsider. Melusine is grotesque because she transgresses the rules governing how to look, how to behave, and where to come from. Her message is that a woman always needs to obey or she will lose all support and be condemned to struggle alone. Once she becomes ugly, she must leave. For Melusine, the grotesque as shown in the incomprehensible contradictions and outwardly unfair paradoxes when her life’s outcome is compared to the consequences the men have to face, functions as a foreboding image of impending doom that no woman who ever overstepped her limits can escape.

Major differences flow from the function and length of the curses. In the Melusine stories, the curse involves a primal and eternal condition as the mothers’ stories are continuously repeated. Melusine loses her home in the fairy world and in Lusignan. While centrality is a dominant condition observed in all serpent women, for the Melusine characters it has no permanent geographical location because both protagonists live in constant displacement. At the end of their appearances the poets do not even seem to know where they went. The curse analogies are treated differently in the Arthurian romances. They function as a way to connect the characters to a purpose. Here, too, the women suffer but are released permanently and do not lose their homes or reputation. In fact, their conditions are never made public nor do they ever leave the confinements of their castles. In these romances, the women’s role is automatically
elevated because of their service to the Arthurian system. This idea remains constant even when La Pucele, in *Li Biaus Descouneüs*, admits having aided the hero’s mother to orchestrate everything.

Ultimately, however, the curses avail the four women, a unique experience they share in the tales. They experience a period in their lives when they can operate outside of the socio-cultural norms imposed on them. Only during that period can they choose their own husbands and approach the other sex in a forward and active manner, a behavior otherwise associated only with men. Thus, the serpent women chose their own husbands by luring them, then close the deal by proposing to them. This is an advantage gained from their serpent condition. Regardless of how their individual tales resolve, they are able to temporarily suspend the passivity and conformity their communities otherwise expect from them. As serpent women, the protagonists surpass cultural limitations and become empowered to choose within their cultural structures. By enjoying their freedom to seduce the men they desire, Blonde Esmerée, the Lady of Synadoun, and Melusine briefly fulfill the misogynists’ greatest fear: women are temptresses.

3. Synthesis of findings and conclusion

I have proposed a new model for understanding the serpent women: they are empowered while in their serpent form. The grotesque manifests in the various characteristics they share. My joint reading of the women makes it possible to discuss the complex femininity of women who otherwise have been labeled as monsters, loathly ladies, or Other. Reading the women as grotesque allows a broader cultural critique of medieval societies and societies in general, and shows that women are measured by the same standards of sexual attractiveness that controls

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358 See also Dwyer, 223, n349.
them. However, the women in the stories overcome the ideological imprisonment imposed on them for a brief period by accepting a definition that conforms to their unique anatomy and proves to them that their Otherness is acceptable. The women succeed in bringing forth, albeit briefly, an advanced form of womanhood that integrates all parts of their personality and allows them to act more authentically, empowering them to experience sovereignty.

I argue that the idea that ugliness equals wickedness is invalid for one set of characters I have discussed (Blonde Esmerée and the Lady of Synadoun). For the other set (the French and German Melusine), I show that the ugliness could have been overcome had the men been able to withstand social pressure. The grotesque woman is a desiring and enticing woman, a self-sustaining, empowered woman who disappears because she has no other choice but to succumb to the male-imposed social rules that govern her life. Unfortunately, the tales support only two models. Either the women get married and lose their individuality – including their magical powers – and most likely become subordinate to their husbands, or they disappear because they put themselves into self-imposed exile as soon as their communities realize that they are not the beauties they once were. A woman’s grotesqueness is emblematic of the displacement of women in general. They have outgrown the old model of the grotesque earth mother, yet they do not fit either in the human world that measures their attractiveness by grotesque standards of physical beauty.

There is one last aspect that crystallizes my theory of the grotesque in my analysis of these four women. It is patriarchy that defines these serpent women as grotesque. The women are punished for rebelling against the men’s rules. While the women then try to adjust their lives to their new exterior shape, the men become more passive as the women gain strength. This dynamic turns into a vicious cycle, since the men cannot deal with disorderly women with
shifting natures. In order to engender a society’s progress, however, both women and men are needed. Each poet proposes in his own way a new model that describes what happens if women are allowed to surpass social and cultural expectations, even if only temporarily. In the end, the grotesque initiates situations that add up to one grand parallel. In both groups of stories, men and women are challenged to evolve together through the common experience of unusual circumstances.

Ultimately, however, it is the men who fail because they do not learn to adapt. They cannot deal with instability, ambiguity, and lack of information; they become confused but refuse to ask themselves why, because such inquiry would force them to deal with their identity and self. The Arthurian men remain the ambitious, steadfast heroes who help women, fight foes, serve their lord, then marry and move up by accepting a given path and assuming larger responsibility, yet they are intellectually shallow. Nonetheless, these men cooperate as long as the courtly quest model, which helps them to succeed, remains intact. The men in Melusine change for the worse. They abuse their wives and are suspicious of each other. They are nosy, gossipy, and envious. They lie, kill, and betray. Their grotesque women reveal how these men change into unreliable, weak spouses who are incapable of protecting their wives and children. It seems that a shift has taken place once the public opinion became more important than individual honor. The men in the Melusine romances fail because they cannot adapt to a different paradigm and have lost their unity with their wives. Each grotesque woman holds in front of them a mirror that shows the men that it is not their strength and prowess that would save all of them but their flexibility. It raises a provocative idea: the men’s grotesqueness comes from their self-imposed masculinity, a state that renders them so rigid that they do not even see how inflexible their desire for control has made the very system they seek to control.
This study offers a contribution to comparative medieval studies. Although the four romances have been discussed elsewhere, the serpent women viewed together have received little attention for their hybrid forms, transgressive lives, and Otherness. The lure of these singular female characters and the misleading label of monster led me to argue and re-identify the subjects of my research as examples of the grotesque. It is appropriate and novel to apply the term grotesque to these four characters because it allows them to be read within a broader spectrum of geographical incidences and in various languages. Viewing these women together shows how the category of the grotesque can be extended to textual environments that antedate the appearance of the term. My matrix of shared characteristics and my use of the grotesque to compare the female figures demonstrates how a novel category can be defined and then applied to aspects in literature otherwise overlooked and perceived as unrelated occurrences. The grotesque could also expand the theory of medieval monsters, revealing itself as a valuable sub-category for the medieval notion of the Other.
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