

Elise Darr

Professor Pressman

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“Interconnectedness Between Humanity and the Natural World”

The debate on humanity’s relationship with the natural world has become increasingly relevant in recent years. With climate change becoming a more pressing issue, one can wonder how society so quickly destroyed the beautiful environment we live in. While climate change has led us to believe that the discussion surrounding human’s relationship with the natural world is a contemporary conversation, this has been a topic for centuries. Such conversations can be shown in the legend of Melusine, a tale of an enchanting serpent-like creature who marries a mortal man named Raymondin. Prior to getting married, Melusine imposes a condition on their marriage forbidding Raymondin from visiting her secret chamber on Saturdays. Raymondin ultimately breaks this vow, leading to the couple’s estrangement. Melusine’s story was first put into written form in 1393 by Jean d’Arras; however, in 1920 french novelist André Lebey rewrote the story. Gareth Knight translated Lebey’s text into what is now known as *The Romance of the Faery Melusine*. Melusine’s story provokes an interesting conversation about man’s innate desire to control and conquer nature. The diction used to create vivid depictions of nature in chapter one, paired with the moment Raymondin betrays his sacred vow offers an exploration of the conventional notions of adversity and heroism. The nuance of humans' relationship with nature in this story ultimately suggests that true fulfillment lies not in conquering nature, but in embracing harmony with it.

In the opening chapter of *The Romance of the Faery Melusine*, Knight paints a vivid picture of the relationship between the villagers and the untamed nature surrounding their community. He writes that animals reside “in their lairs” to observe “all that went on around human dwellings” (11). As foxes and wolves emerge “on winter nights” all that can be heard are the “diabolic” sounds of their “howling” and “clawed feet on the paving stones” (11). Through Knight’s choice of words, he portrays nature as wild, ferocious, and potentially threatening. The imagery of “lair,” claws, and sounds that seem “somehow diabolic” paint a picture that is reminiscent of the devil himself (11). In a culture that sustained the prevailing belief in Christianity, this portrayal reflects the natural world as a realm of darkness and danger.

Knight’s diction in describing the environment around the village reflects man’s attitude toward nature at this time. In 1393, when the story of Melusine was first offered in written text, the natural world remained a mystery. Humans had no idea what was residing in forests and oceans alike; so, attempting to confront this territory was thought to be a true test of courage. Knight touches on this fact on page twelve as he writes that “all through the land, evil reigned only if heroes failed to confront its dangers. It seemed that the one existed to give rise to the other, for humans do not show their mettle if left to themselves” (12). At this moment, Knight suggests that adversity is essential for the display of true bravery, as humans often fail to demonstrate their “mettle” when left to their own devices. If the natural world is truly diabolical, then overcoming nature’s challenges is surely the ultimate demonstration of strength.

That said, the moment Raymondin breaks his sacred vow to Melusine challenges the argument that “humans do not show their mettle if left to themselves” (12). Rather, this scene proposes that humans are often the root cause of adversity. Melusine required Raymondin to promise one thing: do not inquire about her whereabouts on Saturdays. Raymondin, eager and

blinded by his “desperate will to know” Melusine’s secret, takes it upon himself to enter Melusine’s forbidden room (120). Notably, Raymondin is also well aware that his actions are one. His “heart [is] pumping” with anxiety and he takes a moment to question “what had happened to all the confidence he had put so spontaneously and naturally in his wife” (121). This moment highlights the self-destructive tendencies in human nature. Raymondin feels that he is entitled to know Melusine’s secret, otherwise, he would not have entered the chamber. By breaking Melusine’s trust, he is displaying his hubris. Within human nature is the embellished view of man that creates a sense of self-importance. Raymondin felt entitled to know what lay behind those doors.

Indeed, Melusine recognizes Raymondin’s actions as a derivative of human nature. Upon discovering Melusine as a serpent, Melusine tells Raymondin that she can “no more live with [him] because of the fault [he had] so grievously committed” (142). This scene juxtaposes Knight’s words from page twelve that argue humans’ “mettle” is shown through external challenges, such as nature (12). Instead, the greatest adversity is human nature. It was Raymondin’s hubris that led to her estrangement. Melusine had no control over her identity as a serpent. This was simply her state of being. It was not until Raymondin let his curiosity get the better of him that her identity as a serpent became a problem— Melusine was fated to live the rest of her life in the sea. Humans are always attempting to control nature as a way to maintain “the extension of human power” (12) while nature exists in balance with itself. This arrogance present in human nature is emphasized as Knight writes the distance between Melusine and Raymondin was a consequence of Raymondin’s attempt to gain control in learning Melusine’s secret: “There was too great a distance between their former happiness and that in which they now lived, and they forgot that each one had been the cause of that. He through his curiosity, she,

without it being her fault, by her very nature” (142). Melusine had no control over her serpent state, however, Raymond had full control over his actions. Raymond’s broken vow suggests that humans are the cause of nature becoming “more and more separated, even enemies” (142).

Knight’s use of the word “enemies” (142) compared with the description of nature in chapter one proposes that nature may only seem “somehow diabolic” (11) because humans fought against the natural world. Nature is seen as “menacing and dangerous” (11) because humans interpret it to be that way. Yes, nature is unpredictable, but humans have not attempted to understand it. Rather, society disrespects nature by attempting to control it. Melusine’s fate as a serpent concludes this point as Christianity often associates serpents with the devil. The couple once lived in harmony, but in Raymondin’s attempt to control Melusine, she was subject to the form of a serpent. Had Raymondin respected Melusine’s vow, and not violated the laws of nature, the couple may have remained at peace. Instead, Raymondin made an enemy of Melusine and created a greater separation between man and nature. The fallout from Raymondin’s broken vow suggests that this separation is consequential and proposes that embracing the natural world will lead to greater fulfillment than conquering it. Raymondin is riddled with guilt and agony following Melusine’s departure. This despair would have been avoided had he respected the laws of nature rather than worked against them in an attempt to prove his bravery.

Ultimately, the legend of Melusine shown in *The Romance of the Faerty Melusine* challenges the notion that nature is humanity’s greatest adversity by highlighting the self-destructive tendencies within human nature itself. The consequences of Raymondin’s actions serve as a cautionary tale emphasizing the importance of respecting nature and embracing the natural world rather than seeking to conquer it. Melusine’s story suggests that true fulfillment lies not in dominating nature, but living in harmony with it. As modern society continues to

discuss humanity's relationship with the natural world, one must keep in mind that humans are the antagonists in this story. Humans need to lead a greater connection with nature to reach not only self-fulfillment but also to protect our beautiful environment.