

The Legend of Mélusine

Mélusine is a Breton faery a woman usually represented as half-fish or half-serpent. The most famous literary form of the Mélusine tale, that compiled by Jean d'Arras as *Le Roman de Mélusine*, was translated into English about 1500, and often printed in the 15th and 16th century. The tale is related below:

Elianas, king of Albany (Scotland) was recently widowed and to divert his attention from the loss of his wife he amused himself hunting. One day, whilst at the chase, he went to a spring to quench his thirst. As he approached he heard the voice of a woman singing and as he approached he saw a mysterious, fey, girl who was named Pressine. Though Elianas enquired of her as to who she was she would neither tell him of her ancestry nor from whence she came. But, after some time the fair woman bestowed her hand upon him, on the condition that he should never visit her at the time of her lying-in. She gave birth to three daughters, Mélusine, Meliot and Palatine. Nathas, the king's son by a former wife, hastened to convey the joyful tidings to his father, who, without reflection, flew to the chamber of the queen, and entered as she was bathing her daughters. Pressina, on seeing him, cried out that he had broken his word. She cursed him and declared that her descendants, with the help of her sister, the Queen of the Lost Island, would avenge her. Then she disappeared, taking her daughters with her to the Lost Island.

The Island of the Lost was so called because it was only by chance any, even those who had repeatedly visited it, could find it. Here she reared her children, taking them every morning to a high mountain, whence Albany might be seen, and telling them that but for their father's breach of promise they might have lived happily in the distant land which they beheld. When the children were fifteen years of age, Melusina asked her mother particularly of what their father had been guilty. On being informed of the truth of the matter she conceived a design for being avenged on him. Engaging her sisters to join in her plans, they set out for Albany. Once there they they took the king and all his wealth, and by dint of her charms she shut her father away in an inaccessible part of the Brandebois mountains. On telling their mother what they had done she flew into a rage because they had taken vengeance without her. Pressine laid curses upon them all, with the worst curse of all reserved for Mélusine as the instigator of the plot. Meliot was to be imprisoned in an Armenian castle, Palatine in a mountain together with her father, while Mélusine was cursed to become a 'serpent from the waist down' every Saturday. This would be her fate until she met a man who would marry her under the condition that he never saw her on a Saturday.

Mélusine left the Lost Island and began roaming the world where she passed through the Black Forest, and that of Ardennes, and at last she arrived in the forest of Colombiers, in Poitou, where all the fays of the neighborhood came before her, telling her they had been waiting for her to reign in that place. It just so happened at this time that Raimond de Lusignan, having accidentally killed the count, his uncle, with a deflected blow from his boar-spear was wandering that night in the forest of Colombiers. He arrived at a fountain that rose at the foot of a high rock. A fountain which the local people called Fountain of Thirst, or the Fountain of the Fays, on account of the many marvellous things which had happened near it.

Raimond reached the fountain at the time when three ladies were diverting themselves there by the light of the moon - the principal one being Mélusine. Of course, her preternatural beauty and her impeccable manners quickly won Raimond's heart. She soothed him, concealed the deed he had done and married him on condition that he never try to find out what she did every Saturday. Promising him that if he breached his oath he would forever be deprived of she who he loved so much. From her great wealth she created for him the castle of Lusignan right next to the Fountain of Thirst, where they had first seen each other.

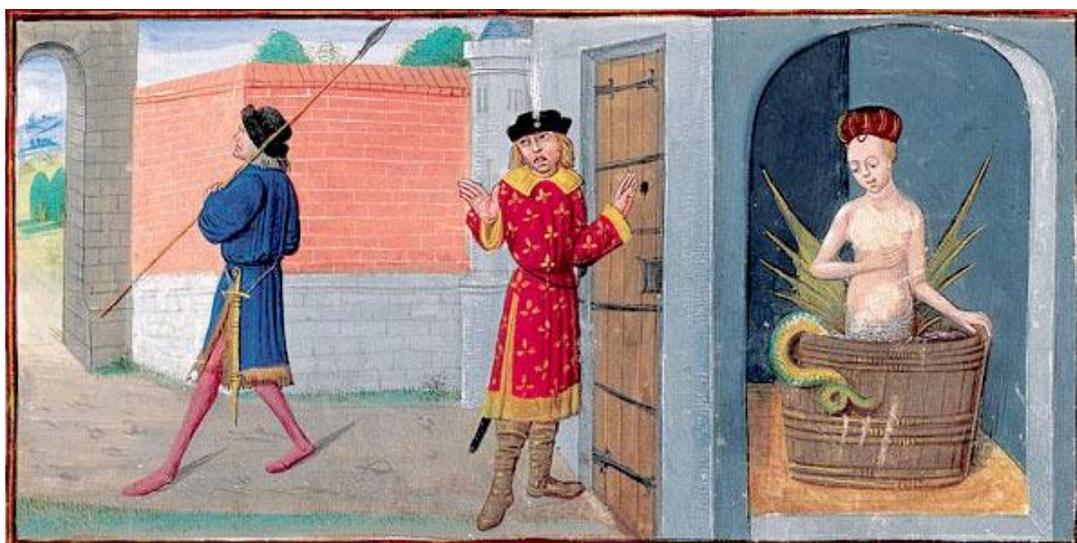
Ten boys were born of their union but all were afflicted with strange physical defects. For example, one of Urian's eyes was in the middle of his cheek, and Geoffrey had a very long eye-tooth, which was why he came to be nicknamed Geoffrey Big-Tooth. But still Raymond's love for his beautiful wife remained unshaken.

But one day Raimond could no longer contain his curiosity. For he had noticed that each of Mélusine's absences coincided with the apparently magical building of a castle, a monastery or a church. So he followed his wife into the cave to which she withdrew every Saturday. There he saw Mélusine in her true form. For the lovely form of Melusina ended below the waist where it became serpentine with scales of grey and sky-blue mixed with white bathing in a green marble tub. But it was not horror that seized him at the sight, it was infinite anguish at the reflection that through his breach of faith he might lose his lovely wife forever. When she realised she had been found out Mélusine wept and stretched out her arms, which turned into wings; finally, she disappeared into the air, uttering these words: 'One thing will I say unto thee; that thou, and those who for more than a hundred years shall succeed thee, shall know that whenever I am seen to hover over the fair castle of Lusignan, then will it be certain that in that very year the castle will get a new lord; and though people may not perceive me in the air, yet they will see me by the Fountain of Thirst; and thus shall it be so long as the castle stand in honor and flourishing - especially on the Friday before the lord of the castle shall die.'

Mélusine is generally taken to be one of the Les Dames Blanches (White Ladies). These were primarily associated with the Normandy region in France. The French believed that these fairies crowded the forests of Normandy and lurked near streams, bridges, and ravines, where they would accost lost travelers. The White Ladies were generally known as being irresistibly beautiful, yet they were also cruel and furtive and like Mélusine in the tale above they could foretell a man's passing. In this respect Les Dames Blanches are similar to the Irish Beansidhe and the Cymric Gwrach-y-Rhibyn or the La di Wen.

Interestingly Rabelais described Mélusine in his Quart Livre (XXXVIII) as: 'Visit Lusignan, Pathenay, Vouant, Merant and Pouzauges in Poitou... There you will find witnesses of great age who will swear on the arm of St Rigome that Mélusine, their first founder, had a a female body as far as the breasts, and below that a snaky sausage, or even a sausagey snake. Yet she had a bold and elegant gait, of the kind still imitated by Breton clowns dancing their trioriz [dances in treble time].'

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Melusine Discovered: Le Roman de Mélusine: Gillebert de Mets circa 1410