5. Melusinas, Nymphs, Water Sprites and Undinas

5.1. Melusinas

The representation of the metamorphic qualities of melusinas, undinas, mermaids, and water sprites in Germanic literature will now be analysed, considering how these particular stories evolved variously from myths and legends and their transmission to Germanic literature after 1800. Melusinas and undinas have their predecessors in the bewitching sirens that Odysseus encounters in Book XII of Homer’s *Odyssey*. Odysseus asks his companions, who have protected their ears with beeswax, to tie him to the mast, so that he will not be tempted by the song of the sirens.¹ The sirens that lure sailors to their death on the rocks with their song precede the mythical golden-haired seductress, who is as Zipes points out: ‘very dangerous as the many German legends about Lorelei in the Rhine River attest’.² The Lorelei has a long history of interpretation in German poetry, although these sirens do not metamorphose.³ Melusine is a mythological water nymph with French ancestry, who surfaces specifically at a medieval moment in the history of the myth of the sirens.⁴ Beautiful Melusine is the subject of a French legend of the Middle Ages, and the depiction of mermaids and mermaid lore became particularly popular in 1387 when the story of Melusine was retold by Jean d’Arras as *Chronique de Melusine* in *Le Noble Hystoire de Lusignan*, where she is depicted as the cursed French Countess of Lusignan. Melusine and her sisters attack their father and as punishment are cursed by their mother with changeling deformities. Because of this domestic crisis, Melusine is transformed every Saturday into a hideous monster with a serpent’s tale and her descendants must also bear this curse, and should she ever be seen in her

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changeling form by mortal eyes, the curse becomes eternal and she will never learn the sweet release of death. The myth was first metamorphosed into German form in a prose writing of Thüring von Ringoltingen, entitled *Melusine* (1456) based on a French tale entitled *Coultrette* (1401). The basic myth involved is that Raimund, Count of Poitiers, marries Melusine, accepting the condition that he must not seek her out on a Saturday. One day he transgresses the condition, finds her in the bath, and discovers that her body ends in a fish’s tail and following this embarrassment, she returns to the sea. Here the metamorphic attributes of the nymph are prominent, as in the folktale *Die Historie von einer Frau genannt Melusine, die eine Meerfei und dazu eine geborene Königin gewesen* from *Das Deutsche Volksbuch*, where Melusine hides from her lover her snake’s tail which she assumes every Saturday.\(^5\) Ringoltingen’s tale *Die schöne Melusine* (1474) became the theme of a popular chapbook and was frequently reprinted in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Hans Sachs and Jakob Ayrer subjected the tale to a dramatic revision, and other adaptations include *Das Donauweibchen* (1798) by the Viennese K. F. Hensler and the narratives *Sehr wunderbare Historie von der Melusina* (1800) by Ludwig Tieck and *Die neue Melusine* (1817 and 1819) in Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* (1821-3). Franz Grillparzer’s three-act libretto written in 1823 for Beethoven is a variation on the theme, as is his later drama *Melusina* (1833).\(^6\) Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Theodor Fontane in both his unfinished fragment *Oceane von Parceval* (1882) and the novel *Der Stechlin* (1898) betrays the inheritance of the metamorphic myth in naming one of his female protagonists Melusine.

Delphendahl explains that the fairy-tale motif of the mermaid Undine as an elemental spirit has been of great interest to Germanic writers since the end of the eighteenth century, and nineteenth-century writers such as Fouqué and Grillparzer were able to elaborate on the romantic notion of a water sprite uniting with a human being to acquire a soul that renders her human. The division and attraction of two antithetical realms is a central feature of the Undine myth:

The artistic productions of the German Romantic school constitute a rich source for the study of elemental spirits not only in poetry, but also in philosophical treatises and scientific speculations by Werner, the Schlegel Brothers, Goethe, Novalis, and Schelling. Schelling’s

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\(^6\) Garland, pp. 754-55.