A l b r e c h t  C l a s s e n

LOVE AND FEAR OF THE FOREIGN

Thüring von Ringoltingen’s *Melusine* (1456).
A Xenological Analysis

Summary

The example of Thüring of Ringoltingen’s *Melusine* powerfully illustrates the dialectics of the binary opposition between Other and Self. Although Melusine’s husband fears his monstrous wife once he has discovered her true identity, he also feels deeply attracted to her, both in her familiar and her unfamiliar appearance. Nevertheless, his intellectual and emotional weakness makes it impossible for him to accept the Other as an important element in his life, which leads to the destruction of his marriage. As various other sixteenth-century chapbooks, such as the *Historia D. Fausten* and *Wagnerbuch*, indicate, the Other grew in importance, and by then represented a crucial catalyst for early modern sciences.

As Alixe Bovey’s recent publication of *Monsters and Grotesques in Medieval Manuscripts* (2002) impressively demonstrates, medieval artists and writers were deeply fascinated by the confrontation of self and other. Indeed, they perceived the emergence of the monstrous and grotesque as a unique heuristic vehicle to investigate fundamental tensions not only between the self and other, but also between the body and the spirit as well as between good and evil.¹ The pantheon of medieval monsters was influenced by religious symbolism and, simultaneously, by an intriguing aesthetic playfulness, both of which undermine our traditional taxonomy of medieval society and literature. Although vast numbers of monsters populate the margins of medieval manuscripts and crawl all over the facades, roof tops, and capitals of Gothic cathedrals, some of the fundamental questions pertaining to their epistemology have remained obscure.² Bizarre sculptures of gargoyles and attractive images of wild

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¹ Alixe Bovey: Monsters and Grotesques in Medieval Manuscripts. Toronto and Buffalo 2002.
men and women, scenes of a topsy-turvy world where nothing seems right according to traditional human categories, and Hellish scenes with enormously fanciful monsters occupy medieval fantasy and characterize medieval culture at large. They profoundly challenge modern assumptions about two of the most representative icons of the Middle Ages: chivalry and courtly love. Chivalry represented the struggle against evil outside forces, whereas courtly love constituted the highest ideal within medieval society. Monsters, however, indicated that there were many layers of (human) existence that required very different responses than those offered by chivalry and courtly love.

The great scholastic theologian Bernard of Clairvaux, in his *Apologia ad Guillelmmum Abbatem* (1125), vehemently protested against the rich iconography of monsters in church art, but his public criticism did nothing to diminish the ever growing popularity of these creatures in paintings, sculpture, and literature. In fact, some of the best medieval art work can be found in depictions of monsters in paintings, in grotesque sculptures, and in grotesque marginal drawings.

Many possible explanations for the phenomenology of medieval monsters have been adduced, but no ultimate and all-encompassing interpretation has been possible so far. Undoubtedly, the monsters’

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