MONSTERS, THE FEMININE, AND THE DIABOLICAL IN MEDIEVAL CULTURE

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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In the Middle Ages, it was believed that women were inferior to men intellectually, spiritually, and physically to the point where they were seen as a dangerous threat to men. Texts such as *De Secretis Mulierum*, the *Decretum* of Burchard of Worms, the legend of the fairy bride Mélusine, and the *Malleus Maleficarum* illustrate this point, showing that women were viewed as potential monsters. Through this study, I will show how these texts illustrate medieval anxieties about women that painted them as monstrous and inhuman, an attitude that helped create the late medieval and Early Modern witchcraft moral panic. By comparing the accusations made in these texts to female monsters of the Middle Ages, I will show how medieval popular culture thought of women as a monstrous group that was threatening to men.

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To the women who do not fit into the narrow confines society expects of us, may you learn to embrace your monstrosity.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A monster is never just a monster. From the Latin *monstrum* meaning omen or portent, a monster reveals concerns and anxieties of the culture that created it. Monstrous bodies, which defy categorization through liminality and hybridity, are often used to signify a dangerous Other. Symbols of the outsider, chaos, and evil, monsters are utilized to warn against subverting the social order. Throughout history, monsters have used as propaganda to define marginalized groups as subhuman. In the Middle Ages, this tactic was used against Jews, Moors, Muslims, and other groups to dehumanize and in some cases sanction violence against these groups. Living in a universe haunted by demons, the people of the Middle Ages often saw these social groups as aligned with the Devil.

Women were one social group that became associated with the monstrous and demonic in the Middle Ages. Women have been considered lesser than men since antiquity, a view that continued into the medieval period. Fueled by philosophy, medicine, theology, art, and folklore, women became viewed as not only lesser, but dangerous and potentially inhuman. This view led to widespread violence and lasting effects. In the following pages, I will analyze medieval works of medical philosophy, theology, literature, and folklore to show how women were considered monstrous in the Middle Ages. I will show how this view developed into a widespread fear of women in

league with the Devil, a fear that led to a witch hunt moral panic that spanned centuries and resulted in thousands of deaths.

The primary sources I will be working with are *De Secretis Mulierum* by an unknown author, a section of the *Decretum* of Burchard of Worms, *Le Roman de Mélusine* by Jean d'Arras, and the *Malleus Maleficarum*. The earliest of these texts is the *Decretum*, written in the early eleventh century by Bishop Burchard of Worms. The section I will be analyzing is known as the "corrector and doctor," a guide for clergy to determine the appropriate penance for their parishioners. I will specifically be looking at a section of this penitential entitled "women's vices" which discusses sins particular to women and includes examples of women using their bodies and sexuality to create magic that harms others, a theme that can be found in the other texts.

The second text I will discuss is *De Secretis Mulierum*, a text of medical philosophy written by an unknown author but often falsely attributed to Albertus Magnus. Written in either the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, it describes the inner workings of the female body including conception, menstruation, pregnancy, virginity, and birth along with a section on astrology. The text is not concerned with treating diseases of the female reproductive system and instead seems to serve as a text of medical and philosophical observation. *De Secretis* depicts women as innately inferior to men, to the point that they can be threatening via their menstrual blood, which the author claims is venomous. The author and commentators make it clear that the problem with women seems to reside in their reproductive organs, relegating their evil to a sexual purpose. The text, which was reliably reproduced throughout the Middle Ages and into

the Early Modern period, gives insight into how the female body was regarded as dangerous and monstrous.

I will also analyze the popular medieval folktale of the fairy bride, also known as "Mélusine," using mainly the romance written by Jean d'Arras in late fourteenth-century France, which was based on earlier versions of the story. I will also be comparing the Jean d'Arras romance with other romance versions of the Mélusine story written by other authors and translators. The story of Mélusine details how the titular heroine, a woman of human and fairy heritage, is cursed to become a serpent from the waist down every Saturday. She can only be freed from this curse if her husband does not spy on her during or discuss her Saturday seclusion. This folktale, which several medieval royal families, including the houses of Luxembourg, Lusignan, and Plantagenet, claimed as an origin story, depicts Mélusine as caught between two natures: human and monster. While she is potentially dangerous, Mélusine's fairy nature is tempered by the explicit depiction of her Christian nature and her actions as a faithful wife and loving mother. Despite this devout faith, Mélusine is linked to the image of a seductive, magical femme fatale. Because she is eventually doomed by her husband despite her actions as the ideal wife and mother, the story of Mélusine shows that no woman, however perfect she may seem, is above suspicion.

The idea that women were deformed, monstrous, magical, and connected to the Devil came to a head with the next primary text I will work with: the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Written by Dominicans Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger in 1487, the *Malleus Maleficarum* is a text detailing how witches operate and what must be done about them. They define witches as people who create pacts with demonic entities to

work harmful magic, though the *Malleus* is explicitly clear that most witches were women. This emphasis on female witches is not found in later witch hunting texts, though it is not disputed either. Kramer, who is believed to have written most of the text alone, gives detailed explanations of why women are so susceptible to demonic influence, basing most of his reasoning on the medieval belief that women were lustful, insatiable creatures and because of this they were naturally sinful. Kramer also details the works of malevolent magic done by witches, many of them based around perverting the course of reproduction from causing impotence, removing male sexual organs, and offering children to evil spirits by killing them. In my analysis of the *Malleus*, I will show how thoughts about women as lustful, sinful, and monstrous that are found in the earlier texts are also found in the *Malleus Maleficarum*.

I will also discuss the influence of the *Malleus Maleficarum* and its connection to the beginning of the witch hunts of the late medieval and Early Modern periods. I will argue that the witch hunts were the result of a moral panic about witchcraft that was in part started and fueled by the *Malleus* and the views that influenced it. By connecting the ideas about women and monsters found in all of these documents, I will show that the witch hunt panic was not an isolated incident, but a culmination of othering beliefs that led to the executions of thousands.

Understanding how beliefs about women led to the witch hunt panic can help us understand how and why this moral panic developed. It can shed light on medieval attitudes about gender, sexuality, and monstrosity which can in turn give insight into the treatment of women in the Middle Ages, in folklore, art, and reality.

Looking into beliefs about monstrous women can also reveal how medieval attitudes, particularly about gender and sexuality, are relevant in the modern age. Modern moral panics and conspiracy theories have shown that women are still believed to be responsible for monstrosity in their children, as evidenced by the recent case of a father who murdered his children because he believed the QAnon conspiracy theory that told him his wife had passed "serpent DNA" down to their children, making them monsters (Madani). This father's belief in serpent DNA is related to an antisemitic conspiracy theory that believes a secret cabal of aliens known as lizard people are attempting to take over the world by becoming world leaders. These reptilian humanoids are alleged to engage in pedophilia and drink the blood of children (Lewis and Kahn 45). The conspiracy theory, popularized by David Icke, has its roots in charges of medieval blood libel, levelled against Jews, and the nocturnal ritual fantasy, a term historian Norman Cohn uses to describe the witches' sabbath in the Early Modern Witch hunts (Barbezat). Texts such as the *Malleus Maleficarum* and *De Secretis Mulierum* have also been used by recent male writers who deem themselves men's rights activists to prove that women oppress men. This shows that these texts and ideas still have relevance in the modern world, no matter how long ago the Middle Ages may seem.

By comparing medieval women to their monstrous counterparts, I will ask questions such as: what do these monsters reveal concerning medieval beliefs about ordinary women? Why and how were women designated as monstrous and "other"? What threat were women believed to pose? How do these thoughts about women as dangerous connect? How are anxieties about women shown in the witch hunts of the late medieval and Early Modern periods? What do the accusations of witchcraft reveal about

cultural fears? How do these thoughts about women differ from the way women are viewed now? In answering these questions, I will prove a connection from early medieval beliefs casting women potentially magically and sexually dangerous to Early Modern beliefs that women were likely in league with the Devil, to present day beliefs about female inferiority.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several main focuses for this literature review of monster scholarship, including psychological, philosophical, cultural, gender, and moral panics. The psychological theory will be discussed first, as it forms the basis for other theories. It begins primarily with Sigmund Freud's theories about the workings of the human mind, such as his essay "The Uncanny," which characterizes fear. Freud states that the uncanny is an unsettling feeling that results when the human mind comes into contact with something new and unknown that is also strangely familiar, producing fear. In his words, "this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (Freud 74). He argues that the idea of an identical being is uncanny, as is the sensation of being lost in a familiar place, the belief in the evil eye, being in contact with death and the potential return of the dead, proximity to the "castration complex" and the effect of epilepsy and mental illness. Freud also comes to the conclusion that the uncanny is an effect produced when the line between imagination and reality is blurred. While Freud applies this concept to both literature and developmental fears, his theory does apply to the monstrous. Monsters are feared because they are both familiar and unfamiliar, and belief in them creates a liminal space between imagination and reality. Thus, monsters create the effect of the uncanny.

The theory of psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva builds on Freud's frameworks, though not his work with the uncanny. In her essay "Approaching Abjection," part of her larger

work *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, she describes the feeling of abjection. She states that "essentially different from 'uncanniness,' more violent too; abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory" (Kristeva 70). Kristeva argues that the abject is the inverse of anything familiar, existing as repulsive to the self. The abject is that which is cast out and exiled, and she gives examples of food loathing, the feeling of confronting a corpse, and disgust with bodily waste. However, Kristeva clarifies that abjection is not uncleanliness or filth but that which disturbs identity, order, and boundaries. She states that abjection of the self is debased and denies any want. Kristeva goes on to discuss how the abject is related to the sense of perversion because the abject is the opposite of anything seen as ordered or pure. Kristeva states that the abject accompanies religions in the form of taboos and transgressions, arguing that the purpose of religion is to attempt to purify the abject. Kristeva's theory of abjection of abjection as a discarded "Other," something that disgusts and horrifies, is foundational to monster theory.

Margrit Shildrick's essay "The Self's Clean and Proper Body" uses Kristeva's theory of abjection by discussing monstrosity as physical morphological differences as they relate to phenomenology and biomedical ethics. She discusses how, in the Western tradition, the body is seen as being separate from the self, noting that for much of Western history, the ideal human body was male, marking women as the monstrous other. However, this is not Shildrick's main point, as she moves on to discuss how the body is experienced and perceived by the self. She states that a diseased or damaged body "forces itself into our consciousness and…the body is now perceived but is experienced as other." (Shildrick 305). Shildrick notes that in phenomenology, any body that is not

“normal” is difficult to theorize from, and it is seen as a deviation from the norm rather than a valid alternative to it. She posits that the standard of morphology should not be viewed as normal but rather as normative.

Shildrick states that the problem with monstrous or nonnormative bodies in Western thought is that they challenge the boundaries between mind and body and body and body. According to her, the body’s clearest boundary as the limit of the self is the skin, and because of this any physical compromise to the skin may be viewed as monstrous. She states that orifices also signify uncertainty about the “self-contained human being,” which is why any perceived differences in these places eroticizes and others racial differences (Shildrick 309). Quickly discussing the Western philosophical thought on monstrous bodies from Aristotle to the twentieth century, she notes that since antiquity, transgressive bodies have been seen as a sign of moral failure. This leads Shildrick to build on Kristeva’s idea of “the self’s clean and proper body,” stating that the monster causes anxiety because it threatens the status of the ideal body/self model. “The monster, then, rather than simply being an instance of otherness, reminds us always of what must be abjected from the self’s clean and proper body,” she states (Shildrick 310). She says that the abject constantly unsettles the security of humans, and that human monsters function both as the binary opposite, confirming normality, and threaten the binary by being human themselves. As abjection never is never wholly externalized, Shildrick argues that monsters challenge human selfhood by threatening the boundaries of the self. She goes on to prove this point by discussing the selfhood of conjoined twins, turning her argument away from the philosophical and toward the ethics of modern biomedicine.

In order to understand the state of monster theory, it is also necessary to look into the theory of horror. In "The Nature of Horror," a selection from *The Philosophy of Horror*, Noël Carrol discusses the monsters of horror fiction. In order to separate horrific monster stories from stories with monsters in them, Carrol states that the reaction of the characters to the monsters must be analyzed. In horror, he argues, monsters are an abnormality, while in other genres monsters may be constructed as part of the universe. For a story to be a horror story, Carrol states that the characters must react to the monster with revulsion, which then has the ability to generate the same emotion in audiences. He states that in order for this to truly work, monsters must not only be inconceivable to the audience and characters, but also be "unclean and disgusting" (Carrol 29). This revulsion, Carrol argues, frequently gives characters the sense that even touching the monster may have lethal consequences.

Carrol uses these rules for horrific monsters to generate his theory of art-horror. He states that the emotion of art-horror is triggered when these requirements are met: 1. A person must be in a state of abnormal physical agitation 2) this agitation must be caused by a) the thought that the monster is a possible being and the thought that b) the monster is physically, morally, or socially threatening in the ways it is portrayed in fiction and that c) said monster also has the property of being impure where 3) these thoughts are accompanied by a desire to avoid touching the monster (Carrol 30). Carrol states that art-horror requires that the monster be both threatening and impure. He notes that for his purposes, a "monster" is any being that is believed to not exist by contemporary science. Clarifying his idea of impurity, Carrol cites anthropologist Mary Douglas's study *Purity and Danger*. He states that she correlated impurity with

transgressions against cultural categorization. Following this, Carrol states that "an *object* or *being* is impure if it is categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless" (Carrol 34). He argues that monsters can be seen as unnatural because they violate a culture's concept of the natural world, making them cognitively threatening. It is this cognitive threat, Carrol states, that gives monsters the ability to render victims insane or even dead just by seeing them. The sense that monsters have supernatural powers he argues comes also from Douglas's study of impurity. He explains that because culturally impure objects are often imbued with magical powers, so too are monsters because they are also impure.

In his essay "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," Jeffrey Jerome Cohen explains how monsters not only related to but are embodied by cultures. He states that these theses are "a series of breakable postulates in search of specific cultural moments" (Cohen 44). Thesis I states that "the monster's body is a cultural body" (Cohen 44). To Cohen, this means that monsters are created specifically for a culture, to embody fear, desire, and anxiety in a way that signifies something other than itself. Thesis II is that "the monster always escapes" (Cohen 44). He argues that "the monster's body is both corporeal and incorporeal; its threat is its propensity to shift" meaning that whether it returns from the dead in the same tale or a sequel, the monster cannot truly die. Each cultural moment brings a monster back to life. In Thesis III "the monster is the harbinger of category crisis," (Cohen 45). In corollary "the monster always escapes because it refuses easy categorization" (Cohen 45). This is because monsters are hybrids, liminal beings that cannot be categorized as animal, human, or something else. This makes monsters a contested cultural space because their bodies defy traditional systems of reason. Thesis

IV states that “The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference,” meaning that the monster is always the Other, something outside and different from the society it stems from (Cohen 46). Cohen theorizes that “for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual” (Cohen 47). He gives examples where throughout history enemies of the status quo were made into beings less than human. Thesis V is that “The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible” (Cohen 49), stating that because the monster represents the limits of human knowledge, it warns against venturing into territories unknown, much like sea monsters marked on a map. Though monsters do not only police physical boundaries, Cohen notes that they also prevent mobility of social, intellectual, political, and sexual boundaries. The monster is both a boundary against breaking social taboos and a warning of what one might become if they are broken. Thesis VI, “Fear of the Monster is Really a Kind of Desire” asserts that monsters evoke escapist fantasies that make temporary transgression appealing. One example of this that Cohen notes is carnival. However, he argues that “official culture” may create a scapegoated monster and ritually destroy it during an official narrative that acts both as an exorcism of the community and a reaffirmation of faith (Cohen 53). Cohen states that “the monster is the abjected fragment that enables the formation of all kinds of identities” (Cohen 54). His final thesis, Thesis VII “The Monster Stands at the Threshold…of Becoming,” maintains that monsters are the creations of humans and thus, they ask society to re-evaluate its perception of difference and otherness.

While Bettina Bildhauer agrees with Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in that a monster’s body is a cultural body, she disagrees with his idea that physical hybridity is what makes a monster. In her essay “Blood, Jews, and Monsters in Medieval Culture,” she states, “I

shall argue here that it is often not its own misshapen or hybrid body that makes the monster but its relation to other bodies, social or individual" (Bildhauer "Blood" 192). In this essay, she investigates how monsters challenge the boundaries of "inside" and "outside". Bildhauer argues that "Defining monstrosity as physically 'borderline' provides an explanation for the pervasiveness of the concept of the monstrous and its juxtapositions with seemingly unrelated concepts in medieval culture" (Bildhauer "Blood" 193). In this essay, Bildhauer's aim is to connect monsters from thirteenth-century German texts to ideas about blood and Jews. She notes that while it was uncommon for Jews to be explicitly viewed as monstrous and for monsters to be perceived as Jewish, there did exist parallels between the two that were exploited by anti-Semites.

First, Bildhauer looks at the Ebstorf *Mappa Mundi*, a large and complex map of the world thought to have been produced in the thirteenth century. While the map does not conform to normal standards for topographical maps, it instead shows information about the world, its inhabitants, history, theology, and natural philosophy. Bildhauer focuses on the northeast corner of the map, where two naked men clearly eating human flesh are depicted. The caption describes them as Gog and Magog, two biblical cannibals that were meant to destroy the earth with the Antichrist during the apocalypse (Bildhauer "Blood" 195). Bildhauer states that while the tradition of Gog and Magog had its roots in stories of "unclean people" to the northeast as well as the ten "lost" tribes of Israel, by the thirteenth century, they were explicitly seen as Jews. She argues that the two figures are drawn with stereotypical "Jewish" features often seen in medieval anti-Semitic art, and that cannibalism and ritualistic use of human blood were charges often leveled against

Jews. However, Bildhauer also makes it clear that reading Gog and Magog as Jews is only one possible interpretation of the map. She notes that the two figures may also stand for various other types of social outcasts in the medieval world, noting that accusations of cannibalism were not specific only to Jews, but to other social groups and monsters. Bildhauer observes that the two figures are placed at the very edge of the map, which is itself made to be a metaphorical body of Christ. They are both separate from the body of Christ and a part of it (Bildhauer "Blood" 198). This means that they disrupt the body of Christ, according to Bildhauer, because the map "offers no concrete explanation of [monsters'] place in the Christian plan of the world" (Bildhauer "Blood"). As Christ is depicted on the map, Bildhauer draws a comparison between Christ and Gog and Magog: both are associated with blood. She states, "like monsters, blood is in itself marginal and problematic," and argues that there may be a parallel between Gog and Magog's cannibalism and the eucharist, stating that it may be a contrast, analogy, or both (Bildhauer "Blood" 198). She associates this with the accusations of ritual cannibalism that were aimed at Jews. She states, "Gog and Magog are thus not so much Jews as polyvalent monsters situated at the margins of Christendom. Their monstrosity is linked to both Jewishness and blood, but not identical with either" (Bildhauer "Blood" 200).

Bildhauer moves away from the Ebstorf map to discuss the sermons of the Franciscan Berthold of Resenburg. Bildhauer asserts that Berthold's antisemitism "emerges as…complex, anxious and insidious, insofar as he often sees Jews as much more ambivalent figures, not clearly distinguishable from Christians and thus even more dangerous" (Bildhauer 'Blood' 201). She notes that in one sermon, Berthold compares Jewish-Christian interactions to creatures of the apocalypse such as the locust with the

teeth of a lion, a woman's hair, iron armor, a scorpion's tail, and a human face, a monster that represents the greedy, who Berthold found worse than other sinners (Bildhauer "Blood" 201). Berthold called this monster "a Christian by name and a Jew in his deeds," meaning that the Jewish-Christian hybrid is somehow monstrous (Bildhauer "Blood" 201). Bildhauer stresses that in this context, "Jewish" does not describe a social, ethnic, or religious group but rather a kind of behavior that Christians can exhibit. She then moves on to another of Berthold's sermons, where the preacher links Jews not with monstrosity, but with blood. The sermon discusses a field of treasure that a man exchanges everything to have, the metaphor being that the treasure is the Christian's soul and the field Christendom, bought and fertilized by the blood of Christ (Bildhauer "Blood" 201-202). Bildhauer argues that in the sermon, Jews are placed ambiguously both inside and outside the field. The field, she explains is surrounded by three walls: one of silk that represents clerical power; one of iron that represents worldly authority; and a third, heavenly wall that protects everything inside the field. Bildhauer contends that the iron wall is bound to both keep Jews out, as they are nonbelievers, but also to shelter them as Jews were protected under the law. The third, heavenly wall also has this problem of claiming exclusivity as well as universal protection. Bildhauer states

> even on an individual level, Jewishness and Christianity are combined into hybrid entities, as becomes clear in the ensuing image of weeds growing among the wheat in the field. Berthold identifies these weeds as sinners and gives a long list of examples, several of which are figures that are often seen as prototypical Jews (Bildhauer "Blood" 202).

Bildhauer explains that these examples; which included Cain, Esau, and Judas; while Jewish, have a common heritage with Christianity and therefore may be seen as archetypal sinners as the Christian audience is asked to identify with them. Bildhauer stresses again that Jewishness is not a category of people so much as a feared type of behavior that Christians could display. Bildhauer moves on to discuss how the weeds were not only associated with Jews and sinners, but also with blood. Berthold addresses the sinners as blood drinkers, Bildhauer states, showing blood moving rather than being spilled, making it situated between bodies.

Bildhauer argues that in neither the case of Gog and Magog or the cases of the weeds and locust do monsters fully represent Jews. "Instead, blood, Jews, and monsters all occupy a position as an "other" on the margins of the normative Christian body" (Bildhauer "Blood" 203). She contends that this combination of monsters, blood, and Jews was common throughout medieval Europe. Bildhauer notes the presence of blood and behavior that turns Jews into monsters in many accusations against them. Discussing blood further, Bildhauer notes a quote from Pliny's *Natural History*, a source that many *mappa mundi* were derived from, "But nothing…could be easily found that is more remarkable (*monstrificum)* than the monthly flux of women" (Bildhauer "Blood" 204). Bildhauer specifies that menstrual blood is considered monstrous because it violates the body's boundaries by being both part of the body and leaving it simultaneously. This is relevant to her argument because many late medieval texts claimed that Jewish men menstruated, blaming it on a number of factors but mainly stating that it was a punishment for Christ's death on the cross.

The idea of menstruation as monstrous applies to both Jews, who were falsely believed to menstruate, and women. Monstrous women are often categorized so because of their bodies, as can be seen in Barbara Creed's essay "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Objection." Creed draws on the work of Freud, Kristeva, and feminist theory to discuss the presence of female monsters in horror films. She begins by working with Freud's theory of castration anxiety to introduce her idea of the monstrous-feminine, stating that "the concept of the monstrous-feminine, as constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallocenric ideology, is related intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration" (Creed 212). She uses the myth of Medusa to point this out, arguing that the myth is primarily about the difference of female sexuality, a difference grounded in the monstrous and evoking the fear of castration from men. Creed moves on to discuss Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, noting that Kristeva explores how abjection, within patriarchal societies, works to create horror by separating the human and inhuman, the complete subject, and the incomplete subject. Creed states that she will draw mainly on Kristeva's discussion of abjection in this construction of the human subject in relation to her notions of (1) the 'border' and (2) the mother-child relationship. Creed also works with Kristeva's writing on abjection in relation to religion, as she believes that monstrosity in modern horror texts springs from ancient religious ideas of abjection. Creed argues that in horror films, the most popular monsters are "'bodies without souls' (the vampire), the 'living corpse' (the zombie), and the 'corpse eater' (the ghoul)" (Creed 215). She also adds the witch and the werewolf as archetypal, ancient monsters that still find power in horror films. Creed contends that horror films are works of abjection because they show images of abjection, such as corpses; because they show monstrosity

as something that threatens the "border", which is also abject; and because they present the figure of the mother as abject. Creed notes that Kristeva imagines the bond between mother and child as conflicted; the child desires to break away from the mother, who is unwilling to let go of the child. Creed states that in films presenting this relationship, the mother is shown as the monstrous-feminine. The mother is considered dangerous because of what Kristeva calls "the prohibition placed on the maternal body (as a defense against autoeroticism and incest taboo)" (Creed 217). According to Kristeva, who Creed quotes, religious rituals of defilement are meant to deal with this danger. Creed asserts that the two categories of polluting objects in these rituals, excremental objects and menstrual blood, relate back to the mother and maternal authority, the first authority a child learns. She says, "Images of blood, vomit, pus, shit, etc., are central to our culturally/socially constructed notions of the horrific. They signify a split between two orders: the maternal authority and the law of the father" (Creed 219).

Creed argues that modern horror films deliberately point out the delicate balance between the symbolic order of the father and the repressed, bodily, world of the mother. She uses examples from films such as *The Exorcist* and *Carrie*, noting the latter's association with blood. She states,

> The horror film's obsession with blood, particularly the bleeding body of a woman, where her body is transformed into the "gaping wound," suggests that castration anxiety is a central concern of the horror film…Woman's body is slashed and mutilated, to signify not only her own castrated state but also the possibility of castration for the male (Creed 219-220).

Drawing once more on Kristeva, Creed argues that horror films are centrally about confrontation with the abject and eventually purifying it through a modern defilement rite by separating maternal authority and paternal law.

Creed then discusses problems she has with Kristeva's work, stating that it has the potential to be read as prescriptive rather than descriptive. She contends that Kristeva does not explore what her theory would mean with children of different genders, and she does not consider the importance of gender in relation to rituals of defilement. She poses questions using the example of menstruation taboos, asking how women relate to rites of defilement that reflect on them negatively, how women whose reproductive functions are seen as abject relate to themselves, if is it possible to change how women are viewed by society as abject, and is the notion of women as abject required for society. Creed notes, perhaps most importantly, that

> [Kristeva's] theory of abjection could be interpreted as an apology for the establishment of sociality at the cost of women's equality. If, however, we read it as descriptive, as one that is attempting to explain the origins of patriarchal culture, then it provides us with an extremely useful hypothesis for an investigation of the representation on horror film (Creed 221).

Creed moves on to prove this point by discussing the monstrous-feminine in the film *Alien.* She uses Freudian theory of the primal scene to describe the monstrous mother; that analysis is not relevant to my work.

In the introduction to her book, *Monsters, Gender, and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature*, Dana Oswald argues that a monster is always an outlier, its body read against bodies that are considered normal. She states, "I do not seek to reify the concept

of normalcy her, but rather to point to the ways monstrous bodies represent the problems inherent in human bodies, particularly the problems of sex, gender, and reproduction" (Oswald 2). Oswald argues that monsters allow humans to define themselves by presenting what they are not. She discusses how scholars of medieval monsters tend to first look at Augustine's discussion of how the monstrous races are human in nature because they have the potential to be saved by Christ. Augustine comes to this conclusion based on the belief that the monstrous races were "rational" beings, an
idea that Oswald begins to interrogate. She states that for medieval minds, the line between beast and man was difficult to visualize, which made monstrous, hybrid creatures hard to categorize. Looking at the Anglo-Saxon *Liber Monstrorum*, she states

> These lists reveal that both monstrous humans and monstrous beasts can be hybrid, but that those creatures that possess both animal and human features…are still considered human…It seems that monstrous humans are not to be identified as animals; they are, rather, incomplete or over-determined humans" (Oswald 5).
> Based on this, Oswald argues that in order to be monstrous, a creature must exhibit "a clear and usually visible physical difference from that which is 'normal' (Oswald 5).

Unlike other monster scholars who perceive of the monstrous as something imagined, immoral, or fearsome, Oswald proposes this physical boundary to define monstrosity in accordance with medieval thought.

Oswald finds three types of physical difference in the monsters of medieval literature: creatures that are somehow more than human, creatures that are less than human, and creatures that are human with an additional element that is not natural to the

human body. She calls them monsters of excess, monsters of lack, and hybrid monsters. Oswald argues that each type of monstrosity provides a commentary on the human body, indicating vulnerabilities and inadequacies. She notes that the hybrid monster shows how the organization and categorization that drives human society is fundamentally unstable. She moves on to the idea of monstrous behavior, arguing that transgressive behavior alone does not identify a person as a monster. Oswald states that her definition of monstrosity rests on the idea of essential categories, and thus requires agreement on what it means to be human. Drawing on the work of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Oswald says, "monstrous humans, then, reify what it means to be fully human, but they also delimit the possibilities for the human body. Because they are simultaneously human and not human, their very indeterminacy makes the monstrous a location for displacing fears about bodies that are all too human" (Oswald 8).

Oswald then moves on to bring the monstrous into the world of sexuality, gender, and reproduction. She argues that while monsters may represent all types of human fears, the nexus of them is sexuality, stating that racial and social fears can be carried out by monstrous sexuality. However, Oswald finds that terms such as sex, sexuality, and gender are difficult to define as modern theories about biology and behavior are complex and disputed. However, she contends that to the people of the Middle Ages, sex, gender, and sexuality were inextricably related to the point where the body indicated proper behavior. Oswald states that in the following chapters she will argue that "while monsters may perform transgressive genders and sexualities, what makes them truly monstrous is the bodies they possess" (Oswald 10). She explores the limits between the gender binary because masculine and feminine are the predominant social categories in Medieval

literature. She argues that in the literature of the Middle Ages, sexuality and sexual desire of any kind were considered transgressive, to the point where all sexuality could be seen as a perversion therefore linking it to monstrosity.

Oswald moves on to her main argument: that the capacity for reproduction is the most dangerous aspect of monstrous, sexual beings. She states, “the stakes of monstrous sexuality are further pronounced in the reproductive consequences of certain sexual unions. The danger is not that the method of reproduction is so far away from human means, but rather that it is so very familiar” (Oswald 12). Oswald argues that what makes these monsters so dangerous is not that they become more fearsome in numbers, but that by building their own communities they threaten the boundaries of human communities. Even worse is that sexual monsters would then have the potential to invade human communities via reproduction, invoking fears of miscegenation. Drawing on the work of Cohen again along with Barbara Creed, Oswald discusses how male and female monsters terrify in different ways. She states, “For Cohen, the male monster is a creature of excess and violence, a body and masculinity against which men can never compete, and for Creed the female monster is a creature driven by her womb and need to reproduce” (Oswald 13). Oswald says that both male and female monsters terrify through sexualized identity. She states that the capacity for reproduction and transgressive sexuality are what provoke a human response, a response to the idea that there are bodies that humans cannot control. She contends that these creatures merit the response of complete and total erasure, an argument that she then moves into but which I will not explore here.

In her essay “Monstrosity and the Mercurial Female Imagination,” Margo Hendricks discusses beliefs regarding monstrosity and human reproduction by using the

medical text *On Monsters and Marvels* by sixteenth-century French physician Ambroise Paré. According to Hendricks, Paré's text discusses medical monstrosities, "'things that appear outside of the course of nature'" such as a child with one arm or conjoined twins, as well as marvels that are "'things which happened that are complete against Nature'" such as a woman giving birth to an inhuman species (Hendricks 95). She states that Paré believes several things cause monsters such as the will of God, the wrong amount of "seed," "imagination," "posture," illness or disease, "rotten or corrupt seed," or the "mixture and mingling of seed" (Hendricks 95). She notes that Paré sees monsters, the children with what we would call birth defects today, as a result of natural processes, while what he terms marvels are the result of the parents of the child engaging in some form of moral abomination. Hendricks intends to focus on one particular cause of monsters and marvels in Paré's document: the female imagination.

According to Hendricks, Paré and many other theorists of his time believed that women, by simply gazing on something, could give that object's features to their children. Paré uses the example of a tale from Hippocrates of a woman who gave birth to a black child after gazing at a portrait of a Moor (Hendricks 96). Paré's racist belief that Moors constituted "monstrous things" notwithstanding, Hendricks examines his belief that the female imagination had complete power over the reproductive process, an idea that she argues goes against Aristotle's longstanding thought that the male "seed" was the dominant factor in reproduction (Hendricks 97). She states, "Paré's instructions to pregnant women appear to highlight a complex and persistent anxiety about the need for regulation of the female body" (Hendricks 97). She goes on to argue that while women

are required for the continuation of the species, the female imagination's ability to control her body makes her dangerous to patriarchal society. She says

> More importantly, Paré blames the mercurial nature of female imagination on woman's inability to control her 'appetites,' especially her sexual appetite. Women who are prone to excessive frivolity…or those who behave wantonly, inevitably produce monstrosities, or more pertinently, are viewed as monstrous themselves (Hendricks 97).

Hendricks notes that as procreation is the method by which race is imagined in society, and therefore it is within the female body that race is created, allowing those who wished to insinuate social categorization of difference the means to do so. She goes on to discuss her analysis in conversation with other writers from the same volume, ending with the thoughts that Paré locates the monstrous in the domestic space, and that his work shows gender anxiety that links the female directly to the monstrous, suggesting that "the monstrous is a concept inherently predicated upon the female and manifested primarily through the female body" (Hendricks 102).

In her essay "Bloodsuckers: The Construction of Female Sexuality in Medieval Science and Fiction," Bettina Bildhauer discusses the notion of vampires, arguing that these monsters are not a modern invention, but rather a medieval one. She focuses on three medieval texts: *Secrets of Women*, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, and *Daniel of the Blossoming Valley. Secrets of Women*, the translation of *De Secretis Mulierum*, will be discussed later in my work. She states that the "bloodsuckers" in each of these texts are different from the modern conception of the vampire because "they are all explicitly or implicitly gendered female; more precisely, they can be seen as embodiments of

female sexual appetites" (Bildhauer "Bloodsuckers" 105). Bildhauer begins by analyzing the medieval medical text *Secrets of Women*. She explains that in the Middle Ages, semen was believed to be purified blood and was considered the essence of life. She states that in medieval medicine, "all women are considered to be vampiristic insofar as they constantly suck out men's 'life-blood' (semen), with their vaginas during intercourse" (Bildhauer "Bloodsuckers" 105). She goes on to explain that this transference of bodily fluid made the woman stronger and caused the premature death of the man. Bildhauer argues that this type of discourse "allocate[s] to femininity the role of a hostile 'other,' a negative foil against which the male subject is defined" (Bildhauer 106 "Bloodsuckers"). She contends that any contact with this 'other' is dangerous for men; however, this danger is unavoidable because sexual intercourse is required for reproduction. According to the text, Bildhauer notes that the risk to the male's health can be regulated if he is in control of the woman's desire. This leads Bildhauer to the conclusion that, "it is only unchecked, insatiable female desire that jeopardizes this guarded contact and encroaches upon the masculine subject, both physically and by usurping his dominant position" (Bildhauer "Bloodsuckers" 106). Bildhauer states that in medieval belief, the fetus is considered an extension of the male, which means that the fetus, like the male, is always under threat from the female. Bildhauer argues that throughout pregnancy and even after birth the fetus is at risk from its mother through abortion, her movements, her eating habits, and the "evil eye" (Bildhauer "Bloodsuckers" 106). She argues that the baby is also considered at risk through breastfeeding. Milk, also seen as purified blood, had the potential to pollute or corrupt the baby through its mother (Bildhauer "Bloodsuckers" 107).

Bildhauer moves on to her second text, *The Flowering Light of the Godhead*, which depicts a mystic drinking blood from Christ's wounds. She states that like many mystical texts, the narrator is a female soul, depicted as a lover, longing to unite with a male God. Bildhauer notes that the author of the text, Mechthild of Magdeburg, describes the relationship between the soul and God in sexual terms, after which the Virgin Mary tells the story of salvation in terms of her breastfeeding. Significantly, the soul is described as being breast-fed not only by Mary, but also by Jesus' wounds. Bildhauer argues that by depicting the feminine soul as drinking blood from the wound of her male sexual partner, the text invokes the same image of the bloodsucking woman as seen in *Secrets of Women*. However, Bildhauer points out that this bloodsucking is not seen in a negative light in *The Flowering Light of the Godhead*, rather the blood is freely given and both male and female desire is shown. Bildhauer states that, "in this account written from a woman's perspective, female desire is not seen as a threatening encroachment upon the male, but as fully reciprocated by the man's similar urge to give" (Bildhauer "Bloodsuckers" 108). She argues that by representing the female soul as bloodsucking, Mechthild shows this conception of femininity as a way of becoming one with God.

Bildhauer then turns to her third text, the Arthurian romance *Daniel of the Blossoming Valley*, written by Der Stricker. In this text, Bildhauer finds that bloodsucking is separate from the female body and is instead projected onto the bodies of monsters. These monsters are described as genderless giant heads with arms and legs attached, and they feed exclusively on blood. Although these beings are described as genderless, Bildhauer argues that they are conflated with the feminine: "These bloodsuckers…in their display of the same lust for life-blood as the women in the

Secrets, can again be read as representations of life-threatening female desire in spite of their lack of apparent gender credentials" (Bildhauer 'Bloodsuckers' 108). She states that they share characteristics with women from *Secrets* and other medieval texts such as the possession of the evil eye. She also argues that, as it was a woman's desire that Daniel, the story's hero, fight the monsters, "the bloodsucking monsters and female desire thus further become conflated in this text" (Bildhauer 'Bloodsuckers' 108). Bildhauer contends that this interpretation of the bloodsuckers as female is proven by repetition of this pattern in the rest of the work. Bildhauer describes these two instances, noting that in both, female desire requires Daniel to face monsters. In the latter incident, Bildhauer observes that the woman in question is clearly sexual, something that Daniel is apprehensive about rather than encouraged by. Bildhauer states that in this text, "women are presented not as the passive objects of men's desires which we would normally expect to find in courtly love, but, as we have seen in the *Secrets*, as having desires of their own that ultimately pose a danger to men" (Bildhauer 'Bloodsuckers' 109).

Bildhauer notes that in each text, female desire is conditioned by gender imbalance that sees women as lesser than men. She states that this lack leads to a demand to share men's power. In each text, Bildhauer argues, this demand is seen differently: in *The Flowering Light of the Godhead*, female desire is used as a way of becoming one with the divine; in *Secrets of Women*, men are obligated to reproduce and therefore engage in sexual intercourse; in *Daniel of the Blossoming Valley*, Daniel is bound to aid the women because of his knightly code of honor. Bildhauer says, "in all three scenarios, the danger arises when women disrupt accepted gender roles by enforcing their own

desires, by taking control or by actively manipulating the system" (Bildhauer "Bloodsuckers" 110)

In one final analysis, Bildhauer turns to a discussion of the evil eye, a phenomenon found in two of the texts. She states that in medical texts, the evil eye was thought to be a way of polluting children with the poisonous vapor of menstrual blood coming from women's eyes. Bildhauer argues that the evil eye can be seen as an extension of female sexual desire, as in *Secrets of Women*, evaporated menstrual blood coming from a woman's eyes is thought to be the cause of her sexual desires. Bildhauer contends that her analysis of these texts proves that there were vampiric monsters in the Middle Ages. She states that these vampires often appear in Middle Ages texts where the masculine is defined only by that which is not feminine, saying, "This feminine is thus constructed as the 'other,' which is then established as the object of fear" (Bildhauer "Bloodsuckers" 112). Importantly, Bildhauer does note that women were not the only people demonized in such a fashion in the Middle Ages, mentioning that Jews and other groups were similarly targeted. She claims that "it could well be that the notions of bloodsuckers as discussed here, combined with similar ideas of bloodthirsty, child-eating and man-eating women helped to lay the foundations for the persecution of millions of women as witches in Early Modern Europe" (Bildhauer "Bloodsuckers" 112). Bildhauer ends by stating that this idea of women as vampiric monsters has never really left, being still present in the representation of female vampires today.

Together, all these texts allow for an understanding of how monsters are formed in culture, what constitutes a monster, and what makes something an object of fear. They

also grant insight into how women can be considered monstrous and shed light on ideas of monstrosity in the Middle Ages.

CHAPTER III

THE MONSTROUS BODIES OF MEDIEVAL WOMEN

In the Middle Ages, it was commonly believed that women were biologically inferior to men. This belief led to others, namely the belief that women were physically dangerous to men. In order to understand these beliefs, we must first understand the thought process behind them.

Medieval philosophers and physicians based a great deal of their study on the work of Aristotle. Aristotelian logic held that in the process of conception, the female partner held the "raw matter" for the generation of the fetus, while the male partner held the activating seed, rendering the female a passive vessel for the male vital force. However, this logic held that the strength of the male was likely to pass on and create another male, leaving the question of how female infants are produced. Aristotle and his philosophical descendants believed that if the male seed developed perfectly in the womb, the resulting child would also be male. If something went somehow awry, a female child would develop. As one medieval commentor states, "If a female results, this is because of certain factors hindering the disposition of the matter, and thus it has been said that woman is not human, but a monster in nature" (Ps-Albertus 106). One infamous phrase born from Aristotle's ideas and passed down through the likes of Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas in the Middle Ages was the idea that woman is a *mas occasionatus*, a "misbegotten" or "deformed" male (Caciola 142). However, other scholars, such as

Michael Nolan have debated this translation, stating that it is "simply not correct to quote [Aquinas] as saying *sans phrase*, that the female is a defective male" (Nolan 157). The word Aquinas uses to describe women, *occasionatum*, has been translated as "misbegotten," though Nolan argues that "anomalous" is a better translation of Aquinas's intent, as Aquinas viewed the production of a female child to be unintentional but not accidental (Nolan 157). It should therefore be noted that though Aquinas and his contemporaries viewed the generation of female infants to be a failure of the reproduction of male seed, they viewed the generation of both sexes as a more perfect order because God had created both (Caciola 142). While this makes it less likely that women were viewed as outright monsters by nature of their birth alone, the fact that the idea of woman as a medical anomaly had survived Aristotle and through several generations of the Middle Ages proves that a derogatory attitude about women was present. This attitude could be seen in medical beliefs about the female body and the four humors.

The four humors were believed to be present in all human bodies, with each humor corresponding to a particular element. Yellow bile indicated fire, blood corresponded with air, phlegm with water, and black bile with earth. The balance of these humors differed by individual, though it was thought that the sexes had distinctly different balances. Males were thought to be dominated by the "nobler" elements of fire and air, and thus were governed by yellow bile and blood; while women were thought to have a higher balance of phlegm and black bile, connecting them to "baser" elements of water and earth (Caciola 142-143). Menstruation was seen as proof of this claim, as it proved that the female body was "unable to absorb or process as much blood as the male body; and the thick quality of menstruum was attributed to its debasement through

admixture of women's overabundant phlegm" (Caciola 143). Because of this association with water and earth, women were also known as damper and colder than men.

These beliefs and others are illustrated in the philosophical and medical text known as the *De Secretis Mulierum*, translated as *Women's Secrets.* The document was written in the thirteenth century by an anonymous author long thought to be Albertus Magnus and now believed to be one of his students. Pseudo-Albertus, as he is known, discusses the processes of pregnancy from conception to birth, menstruation, astrological influence over birth, chastity and virginity, and the production of sperm. The document also contains commentary from two unknown medieval writers known only as Commentary A and Commentary B. While the discussion does concern the physiology of the human body, Pseudo-Albertus is not concerned with the practical treatment of reproductive ailments, and instead is focused on discussing why they occur. His main sources include Aristotle and Avicenna.

De Secretis Mulierum paints a negative picture of women as a gender. Not only does it subscribe to Aristotle's idea of woman as an incomplete man, as seen in the commentary, it takes great pains to discuss ways in which women and their bodies are by nature harmful. This can be seen in the text's discussion of menstruation. It is taken as a given that menstrual fluid is venomous, and therefore lethal to anyone other than the menstruating woman. Pseudo-Albertus states that this is because "the venom does not act in itself but rather in its object. Therefore, as women are naturally poisoned they do not poison themselves. Another reason is that they are used to poison" (Ps-Albertus 130). The text details the number of ways in which the menstrual fluid could harm, noting that

having intercourse with a menstruating woman would cause leprosy in any resulting child and potentially cause cancer in the penis (Ps-Albertus 131).

Menstruation as an object of horror is not a new theory. According to Julia Kristeva, loathing of bodily waste is common because it is abject. The abject is that which disturbs order, boundaries, and identity. This loathing of bodily waste is abject because bodily fluids are both part of and not part of the body, the self. For Kristeva, the body is a border, and anything passing that border becomes abject. She states, "It is no longer I who expel, it is 'I' expelled. The border has become an object. How can I be without border?" (Kristeva 69). Menstrual blood, because it is within and without, both of and not of the body, is something abject, something to be abhorred. Kristeva argues that bodily fluids are also abject because they remind us of death. She states

> A wound with blood or pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death in the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without any makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live (Kristeva 69).

Menstruation, a literal reminder of the absence of pregnancy, of life, is abhorrent because it must be cast aside for life to continue.

However, fear of menstruation does not come about only because it is abject. Menstruation is also seen in many cultures as impure and defiling. In her book *Purity and Danger*, anthropologist Mary Douglas makes note of several cultures where menstruation and childbirth are seen as dangerous not for women, but for the men around them. Pollution by blood, Douglas states, was a common belief in Christianity in the early

Middle Ages. She cites one penitential from Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury as requiring from women "40 days of purgation after the birth of a child, and enjoins penance of three weeks' fast on any woman, lay or religious, who enters a church, or communicates during menstruation" (Douglas 67). This suggests that blood from women was seen as corrupting the sanctity of a church. Douglas argues that "defilement is never an isolated event," stating that pollution only makes sense within a systematic order (Douglas 49). Pollution and dirt are the opposite of order, according to Douglas, who defines dirt as "matter out of place" (Douglas 42). Menstruation then can be seen as polluting and impure because it is bodily matter that does not stay within the body.

Menstruation, then, is a type of bodily pollution, which Douglas links to taboos of sex pollution. She states, "What goes for sex pollution also goes for bodily pollution. The two sexes can serve as a model for the collaboration and distinctiveness of social unit…Sometimes bodily orifices seem to represent points of entry or exit to social units, or bodily perfection can symbolize ideal theocracy" (Douglas 12). This idea of bodily perfection links to the medieval idea of the female body as incomplete or imperfect. A woman's body is not only imperfect because it is not male, but is also impure because of the Biblical interpretation that menstruation and pain in childbirth were the punishment for Eve's sin as "menstruation distinguishes women from men, as well as from other female animals. It is a specifically womanly mark of the Fall" (Cadden 174). Therefore, it makes sense that people in the Middle Ages would believe that menstrual blood was not only impure, but dangerous, as is shown in *De Secretis.*

De Secretis Mulierum blames menstruation for several societal ills. One passage notes that during their menses, women ought to hide their hair, because it too is

venomous and can be transformed into serpents under the right conditions, a process known as spontaneous generation. Pseudo-Albertus writes, "Take the hairs of a menstruating woman and place them in the fertile earth under the manure during the winter, then in spring or summer when they are heated by the sun a long, stout serpent will be generated" (Ps-Albertus 96). Commentary B goes a bit farther in explaining this phenomenon, stating

> The reason for this is that hairs are made from vapors that have risen to the cerebrum, and these humors are undigested in women, and they are poisonous because of the cold that remains in them. Therefore, from this type of rotting a serpent is generated. A woman who has her menstrual period ought to hide her hair, because in this time her hair is venomous. It is naturally cold and humid because during the menses the defect of natural heat tends to move to the rear of the body. Serpents cannot be generated from the hairs of males because the humors in men are well digested so their hair is not poisonous (Ps-Albertus 96).

Perhaps most startling is the accusation that older women could cause infection by simply looking at an infant:

> It should be noted that old women who still have their monthly flow, and some who do not menstruate, poison the eyes of children lying in their cradles by their glance…This is caused in menstruating women by the flow itself, for the humors first infect the eyes, then the eyes infect the air, which infects the child (Ps-Albertus 129).

This sickness caused by only a glance is remarkably like the ancient and widespread folk belief in the "evil eye," where the vulnerable, particularly children, are sickened by a

malevolent gaze. The idea of women targeting infants is also similar to folktales common in the Middle Ages about female demons who preyed on newborns, such as the Lamia demon and the Jewish Lilith.

While Lilith comes from ancient Judaism, her legend grew in popularity and detail during the Middle Ages. Ancient Hebrew literature depicts Lilith as a vague creature, a demon that strikes by night. It is early Rabbinic literature that paints her as a female nocturnal demon and gives her the features of a monster by giving her hybrid, animalistic features such as wings (Kosior 114). The change in perception of Lilith began in the Middle Ages with the writing of the *Alphabet of Ben Sirah*, a Hebrew and Aramaic text written between the eighth and tenth centuries CE. The third part of the composition known as the *Taledot Ben Sira* is a satirical hagiography of the Jewish figure Joshua ben Sira, who was believed to have written the non-canonical Book of Wisdom (Kosior 114). This third part of the text has an impact on the medieval imagining of Lilith as it gives her an origin story. It explains that Lilith is Adam's first wife, who refused to be sexually submissive to him. When the couple could not reconcile, Lilith flew away into a wasteland where God sent angels after her. Lilith explained to them that she was "created only to cause sickness to infants. If the infant is male, I have dominion over him for eight days after his birth, and if female, for twenty days" (Kosior 114). The passage also explains that Lilith, using a demonic partner, became the mother of demons. This image of Lilith is connected to earlier interpretations of Eve as the mother of all things both good and evil. It is important to note that in both stories, the first woman is responsible for transgressions that bring evil into the world, marking womankind as sinful. Therefore,

the monstrous Lilith of the Middle Ages connects to a belief in the wicked nature of all women, a belief expressed in *De Secretis Mulierum*.

While *De Secretis Mulierum* discusses ways in which women are dangerous unintentionally, it also gives examples of women as intentionally monstrous. In one instance, Pseudo-Albertus states

> O my companions you should be aware that although certain women do not know the secret cause of what I shall describe, many women are familiar with the effect, and many evils result from this. For when men have sexual intercourse with these women it sometimes happens that they suffer a large wound and serious infection of the penis because of iron that has been placed in the vagina, for some women are harlots instructed in this and other ill deeds (Ps-Albertus 88).

The commentary makes it clear that this evil act is done only during a certain phase of the moon, with the goal of creating an incurable illness in the man. Commentary B further clarifies what is meant by the term "iron," stating that there may be two things to which Pseudo-Albertus is referring: "The first type consists of corrosive medicines such as alum or lime that cauterize the flesh or another member which they are designed to treat. The second type is actual, such as an iron instrument with which an incision is made" (Ps-Albertus 89). Commentary B then states that he believes Pseudo-Albertus is referring to the first type of iron. The commentary also states that the purpose of creating a wound is to infect the man with venomous menstrual blood:

> When women have their menstrual periods, the commentators claim, out of vindictiveness and malice they wish to injure the penis of the men who have sexual intercourse with them. Since there is menstrual blood in the vagina it

> enters the wound on the penis and infects it with its venom, because the penis is a porous and thin member which quickly absorbs this matter; and because all veins come together there, it is quickly dispersed through the body (Ps-Albertus 89).

Pseudo-Albertus is not alone in believing that women used their bodies for sinister magical purposes. Centuries earlier, Burchard of Worms, the eleventh-century bishop of Worms wrote a document on the canon law of the Catholic Church known as the *Decretum*. The nineteenth book of this text is known as the "Doctor" or "Corrector," as it is a guide for priests to determine penance for various sins. Many of the sins within the text arguably represent pre-Christian folk practices such as the belief in Diana and the Fates. However, when forming the "Corrector," Burchard took many of his examples from older penitentials, some of which date back to the seventh century. Thus, it is important to note that the sins Burchard claims priests were dealing with in the eleventh century may not have accurately represented popular folk belief of the time. However, the inclusion of these supposed beliefs in the text would have influenced the clergy reading the *Decretum*, fueling the belief that people did commit such sins.

While much of the "Corrector" concerns sins that could pertain to men or women, there is a specific section of the text dedicated to sins committed by women titled "Women's Vice." Many sins in this section are concerned with crimes pertaining to motherhood such as abortion and infanticide, though a not insignificant number of sins deal with magical acts that women may do or believe in. Several of these are concerned with women coercing men to love them through magical means:

> Have you done what some women are accustomed to do? They take a live fish and put it in their vagina, keeping it there for a while until it is dead. Then they cook or roast it and give it to their husbands to eat, doing this in order to make the men more ardent in their love for them. If you have, you should do two years of penance on the appointed feast days (Burchard 469).

It is important to note the use of the woman's body for nefarious magical purposes in this case. Another sin makes use of menstrual blood, stating:

> Have you done what some women are used to doing? They take their menstrual blood, mix it into food or drink, and give it to their men to eat or drink to make them love them more. If you have done this, you should do five years of penance on the appointed fast days (Burchard 47).

In these cases, the woman's body is a place of danger not because she may directly harm a man, it is dangerous because she is using it for purposes diametrically opposed to Christianity. However, some of the sins Burchard relates are more dangerous, sins that include women using their bodies to kill.

> Have you done what some women are accustomed to do? They take off their clothes and smear honey all over their naked body. With the honey on their body they roll themselves back and forth over wheat on a sheet spread on the ground. They carefully collect all the grains of wheat sticking to their moist body, put them in a mill, turn the mill in the opposite direction of the sun, grind the wheat into flour and bake bread from it. Then they serve it to their husbands to eat, who then grow weak and die. If you have, you should do penance for forty days on bread and water (Burchard 471-472).

Unlike Pseudo-Albertus, Burchard does not elaborate on the nature of these crimes. However, given that these practices all somehow involve women as sexual beings, it is clear that their bodily sexuality is the underlying thread connecting all of them. A woman's body, according to Burchard, has the potential to cause a man to love them or even kill. The fear, then, is not of women committing these very specific acts, it is of women using their bodies to control or harm men.

Female bodies have the potential to be both monstrous and sexual. These two aspects of the feminine combine to form another threat: reproduction. Dana Oswald states

> A creature that exceeds the rules of 'kind' in terms of physicality threatens the boundaries of humanity, but one that does so and is also capable of propagation is far worse. To possess a frightening body is terrifying, but to use that body to make more monsters is far more dangerous (Oswald 12).

However, the ability to make more monsters is not what makes monstrous reproduction so frightening:

> Reproductive monsters cannot be conceived of, reductively, as animals who act on instinct, but instead they seem increasingly human. They no longer exist in isolation, but possess communities and connections, and even social orders—indeed, through reproduction, they have something to protect, nurture, and perpetuate, an impulse that is not just animal but also human. Therefore, it is those monsters whose bodies bear markers of sex and sexuality that most clearly threaten the boundaries of human communities precisely because they are capable of creating their own communities (Oswald 12).

The reproductive body is a sexual body, and it is clear that the female sexual body was feared. However, it is not only monsters with the capability for reproduction who were viewed with such horror, but also those who already had reproduced: the monstrous mothers.

The most well-known monstrous mother of the Middle Ages comes from the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*. In the poem, the titular hero must battle first the monster Grendel, and then, after Grendel is dead, he must face a reckoning with a female monster known only as Grendel's mother.

Grendel's mother is a liminal figure in the poem, existing in a hybrid status as many monsters do. Oswald states that feminist scholarship of the poem tried to enforce a binary onto Grendel's mother, making her transgressively masculine and monstrous or interpreting her as a woman who is not monstrous because she existed within acceptable gender norms (Oswald 78). However, Oswald argues that she exists beyond these binaries: "she is a woman, she is a mother, and she is a monster" (Oswald 78). The language of the poem seems to highlight this hybridity, describing Grendel's mother with words such as *aglæcwif*, which could mean either monster-woman or female warrior; the related term *aglæca*, which has been glossed as both monster and fiend or formidable opponent and is applied to Grendel, his mother, and Beowulf in the poem; *ides*, which means lady; *merewif mihtig*, mighty mere-woman; *brimwylf*, water wolf, and *grundwyrgenne* which could be either female monster of the deep or, more literally, female outlaw. All of these terms make it clear that Grendel's mother is neither just a monster or just a woman, she is both. Grendel's mother is an archaic mother, an example of what Barbara Creed terms "the monstrous feminine."

According to Creed, the monstrous feminine "as constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallocentric ideology is related intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration" (Creed 212). Creed draws on Julia Kristeva's work on abjection in relation to the borders mother-child relationship. Grendel and his mother both function as abject figures in *Beowulf*, existing beyond the borders of human society, but they also threaten and cross that very border by coming into Heorot, though Grendel's mother, by virtue of her transgressive body, is abject in another way.

Grendel's mother functions as the psychoanalytic archetype of the archaic mother. Creed argues that fear of the archaic, primal mother relies on fear of her capability to give life (Creed 222). In the case of Grendel's mother, Grendel's male parentage is not known, and with the existence of Grendel's mother comes the fear that she may possess a body that is capable of procreation on its own, making her body transgressive and monstrous. Her potential to reproduce without a male partner threatens the patriarchal order:

> She serves as an abject figure; a woman, especially a mother, whose body must be rejected and excluded in order to establish patriarchal and patrilineal identity. Grendel's mother must be defeated here not simply because she is a physical threat to Heorot like her son, but because she, as a singular origin, disturbs the patriarchal social order through her excessively sexual and reproductive body (Oswald 83).

Though human women do not have the ability to reproduce through parthenogenesis, their reproductive bodies were still seen as transgressive and monstrous because they had the ability to create monstrous offspring.

Through these various texts from the Middle Ages, it becomes clear that the female body was considered something dangerous and fearsome. Mothers of monstrous sons had the capability to infect human communities with further monstrosity, and in the case of Grendel's mother could be seen as transgressive because of this. Likewise, the absence of pregnancy, menstruation, was also seen as abject by men of the Middle Ages such as Pseudo-Albertus and his anonymous commentors, who saw menstruating women as a physical danger. The female body could also be used outside of reproduction for magic utilizing sexuality to create love or death spells, as is seen in the *Decretum* of Burchard of Worms. Together, these texts show that women, primarily because of their sexuality and reproductive capabilities, were viewed with anxiety, believed to be capable of great evil.

CHAPTER IV

MÉLUSINE THE CHRISTIAN MONSTER

The popular medieval fairytale known as "Mélusine" features a woman whose identity is caught between human and monster. Following the folktale motif of the Supernatural or Enchanted Wife, Arne-Thompson-Uther tale type index numbers 400-424, a supernatural woman marries a human man under one condition that he inevitably breaks, causing her to reveal her supernatural nature and leave him forever. In Mélusine stories, the woman turns into a serpent, mermaid, or dragon depending on author, country, and time. The earliest surviving versions of the tale come from Walter Map in *De Nugis Curialium* and from Gervase of Tilbury in the *Otia Imperialia*, both written in the early thirteenth century (Bain 21). These were likely based on earlier oral versions of the tale that have since been lost.

The first written version of the folktale in which the supernatural wife is named Mélusine comes from Jean d'Arras's *Le Roman de Mélusine*, a medieval French prose romance written around 1393. In 1401 the prose romance was rewritten by the poet Coudrette as the *Roman de Parthenay*. Coudrette's version was later translated into Middle High German prose in 1456 by Thuring von Ringoltingen. These versions, along with later translations into other languages such as English and Spanish, were widely read, allowing the story of Mélusine to spread across Europe throughout the Middle Ages and into the Early Modern era (Zeldenrust 2).

The Mélusine legend remains mostly the same throughout these versions. Mélusine is cast as the heroine and founder of a dynasty, though she is a figure caught between humanity and monstrosity throughout the tale. The story begins when Mélusine meets her husband Raymondin, Lord of Forez, at a fountain in the forest. She is otherworldly, beautiful, and she immediately knows the details of Raymondin's life, even those he has told no one about. She tells him not to be afraid, as she is a Christian woman, and promises to make him the most powerful man of his lineage if he takes her as his bride. Raymondin agrees, though Mélusine makes him swear an oath that he will never see her on Saturdays. Over the years, Mélusine builds Raymondin both a fortune and the kingdom of Lusignan, bearing him many sons. Raymondin staunchly believes his wife, never doubting her, until his brother convinces him that she is either unfaithful or a demon and that he must break his oath and spy on her during her Saturday seclusion. When he bores a hole in the door to Mélusine's bath chamber, Raymondin sees his wife, a beautiful woman from the waist up, with a serpent's tail from the waist down. It is at this point that Raymondin knows his wife is not human but fairy in nature. While this is Raymondin's first betrayal, it is not his last. Mélusine forgives her husband for spying on her, and the two stay together for years. It is only after one of their sons burns down a monastery and Raymondin blames Mélusine, telling everyone what she truly is, that she is forced to leave him forever. In some versions, Mélusine turns completely into a dragon, while in others she is forced to remain half-serpent, half-woman for eternity. In either case, Mélusine's fairy nature wins over her humanity, as she tells Raymondin that she lost her chance of gaining a human soul and must remain trapped as a monster until Judgment Day.

In Jean d'Arras's version of the story, the reader is told of Mélusine's nature from the beginning. Mélusine is introduced as the daughter of the fairy Presine and the human king Elinas of Scotland. Before the birth of Mélusine and her two sisters, Presine gives her husband a prohibition similar to the one Mélusine will later give Raymondin: Elinas may never see Presine while she is giving birth. Like Raymondin, Elinas breaks the prohibition and Presine leaves him, taking their daughters with her. As revenge, Mélusine and her sisters kill their father by entombing him alive in a mountain. Presine punishes her daughters by cursing them, though as the leader in killing their father, Mélusine's punishment is the harshest: she will become a serpent from the waist down every Saturday. The conflict between Mélusine's fairy nature and humanity is made clear by this passage as Presine tells Mélusine, "The power of your father's seed would eventually have drawn you and your sisters toward his human nature, and you would soon have left behind the ways of nymphs and fairies forever" (Jean d'Arras 25). Presine explains that should Mélusine marry a man who keeps his promise to never look at her on Saturdays and never speak of it, Mélusine will die as a human woman. If her husband breaks his oath, Mélusine will not be forgiven for her actions and will remain cursed until Judgment Day. The reader is told all of this before Mélusine even meets Raymondin. Her fairy heritage is not kept secret. This is not true of Coudrette's version and the subsequent translations of it. There, Mélusine's fairy nature is only hinted at until the pivotal moment where Raymondin spies on her, and the story of how Presine cursed her is only alluded to later in the poem when one of Mélusine's sons finds the mountain where Elinas is entombed (Zeldenrust 33). This framing of the story serves to highlight Mélusine's Christianity by shifting the narrative away from the supernatural (Zeldenrust 36). In both

narratives, there seems to be an opposition between Mélusine’s fairy heritage and her Catholic faith.

In the Middle Ages, belief in fairies was common. Fairies were seen as liminal supernatural entities that existed beyond the boundaries of everyday life, often found in the wilderness and away from civilization. Fairies were believed to be beautiful, but also dangerous and capable of harming humans who wronged them. There was never a true consensus as to what fairies actually were, though it was clear that they existed outside of the established cosmology set by the Catholic Church. This caused the Church to see belief in fairies as a threat to its power to the point that it attempted to convince the populous that fairies were neither appealing nor harmless, and that believing in benevolent fairies was heretical. Instead, the Church stated that fairies were in truth demonic entities meant to trick humans into sin (Green 15). Fairies that took humans as lovers were associated with demons known as the incubus and the succubus to the point that the term “incubus” was often believed to mean “fairy” (Green 79). While the Church mainly concerned itself with male fairy lovers who were occasionally blamed for pregnancies out of wedlock, vernacular romances such as the story of Mélusine often cast their fairy protagonists as female. Vernacular tradition never fully accepted that fairies were demonic; however, they were never seen as fully harmless or benevolent either. Without an easily definable nature, fairies exist as uncategorizable monsters. Mélusine takes this monstrosity one step farther by becoming a hybrid, never existing fully in the fairy realm or as a human woman.

Mélusine’s snakelike features immediately engender the idea of the serpentine devil and the association of fairies with demons. Medieval French writer Peter Comestor

argued that the serpent in the Garden of Eden must have taken on the guise of a woman-snake to tempt Eve, and for centuries the image of the serpent with a woman's face tempting Eve flourished in art and iconography. Though this image was never officially supported by Church authority, it supports the idea of both serpents and women as symbols of duplicity and temptation (Bain 28). In the middle of the sixteenth century, Paracelsus explicitly associates Mélusine with the demonic in *Liber de Nymphis, Sylphus, Pygmaeis et Salamandris* by stating that her curse of being a serpent on Saturdays was "her pledge to the devil for helping her in getting a man" (Bain 29). This element is not present in any of the romances. Paracelsus defines Mélusine creatures as having a desire to obtain a human soul by marrying a human man, though in the romances, Mélusine's curse is not incompatible with her Christian faith (Zeldenrust 32). In fact, Mélusine's main motivation in marrying Raymondin is not to gain a human soul but to redeem her own in order to find salvation. Mélusine is marked as different from previous tales of supernatural serpent brides through her Christianity. Jean d'Arras's positioning of her serpent form as a curse allows the story to follow the same plot as other stories of supernatural women without implying that Mélusine herself is of demonic origin (Bain 30).

However, though Mélusine is not demonic in the romances, that does not mean her hybrid form is not dangerous. In the tradition of chivalric romances, brave knights are meant to fight dangerous monsters and animals, often serpents and dragons, and save beautiful women, marrying them as a reward. The figure of Mélusine complicates this expected dynamic; she is both the dangerous serpent and the beautiful woman in the same body. In most romances, there is a clear delineation between creatures that must be killed

and human beings with immortal souls whose lives are sacred. Mélusine challenges these boundaries, making both reader and characters question the difference between human and animal and forces them to decide what it means to truly be human and have an immortal soul (Zeldenrust 28). In her hybrid form, there is no resolution for Mélusine. She is trapped in a liminal state, neither fully human nor fully inhuman, both capable of redemption and yet depending on others to earn it.

Mélusine's hybridity is treated differently by different authors and translators. This can be shown in two pivotal moments: the scene of Mélusine in the bath and her final transformation. In Jean d'Arras, the voyeuristic scene is first shown with a sense of eroticism as he describes Raymondin piercing a hole in a wall with hole in a door with his sword and the initial beauty of Mélusine combing her hair, though this soon turns humorous as he sees Mélusine's tail: "extremely long and thick as a herring keg, and splashing the water so hard that it splattered the vaulting of the chamber" (Jean d'Arras 181). By comparing Mélusine's potentially monstrous features with something as mundane and amusing as a herring barrel, Mélusine's otherness is deflected instead of used to engender fear. Coudrette presents Mélusine's hybridity differently, describing her as having "a serpent's tail, large and truly horrible, chiseled in siler and blue; she moved it and splashed water all over" (Prud'Homme 70). Where in Jean d'Arras, Raymondin reacts to seeing his wife's hybridity by immediately regretting spying on her, in Coudrette he reacts with horror by making the sign of the cross to ward off evil (Prud'Homme 70). In Ringoltingen's translation of Coudrette, techniques to both recognize the horror of Mélusine's hybridity and deflect it by comparing it to the everyday are used. He describes her tail as a "long and ghastly tail of a snake, with blue

and white colors sprinkled and interspersed with drops of silver, as is commonly the appearance of a snake" (Prud'Homme 70). In this version, Raymondin exhibits a clearly terrified response, though whether he is afraid because he broke his promise, as he is in Jean d'Arras, or if he is afraid of Mélusine herself, as he is in Coudrette, is unclear. In all of these versions, Mélusine's hybrid form marks a clear change in how her husband views her. Either Raymondin regrets his transgression and fears losing his wife entirely, or he becomes afraid of her monstrous nature. Both scenarios eventually lead to the downfall of their relationship and Mélusine's permanent transformation.

The duality of Mélusine's nature in the ending of the story also differs between authors. In Coudrette, Mélusine's hybridity is resolved entirely. Once Mélusine transforms fully into a serpent in this version, she loses all signs of her humanity and becomes entirely animal. There is no longer a question of Mélusine's soul and potential salvation; as an animal, she is no longer made in the image of God and therefore lost a human soul. Jean d'Arras treats Mélusine's final transformation differently by suggesting that even though Mélusine's form is fully animal, her human soul is still present within her. After her transformation, she is suggested to take on human from when caring for her youngest children in secret, and when she reappears in serpent form, she is said by the narrator to be emotional and able to briefly transform back into a human woman. In this way, Jean d'Arras never truly resolves Mélusine's hybridity. Mélusine's humanity remains even when her human body does not, granting her a more sympathetic ending with the potential for hope that she may one day be saved. In the German translation, Mélusine's monstrosity becomes permanent, as she is eternally trapped in her hybrid form, never resolving the tension between her human and fairy natures.

While Mélusine's fairy nature is signaled by her serpentine body, her Christianity complicates her identity, making her into a marvel of God rather than a monster. In all versions of the story, Mélusine acts as an intermediary for her husband and sons, guiding them to do the will of God. When she first meets Raymondin, she directly tells him that she was sent by God to guide him. When advising her sons on how to become knights, she insists that they be faithful Christians and that they must "love and serve God" (Zeldenrust 29). When she hears of their successes, the first thing she does is pray for them and thank God for their victories. After she is forced to leave Raymondin she tells him, "I feel a hundred thousand times more sorrow at our separation than you do, but it must be so, because He who can make and unmake everything so desires it" (Jean d'Arras 193). In Jean d'Arras, Mélusine repeats this sentiment several times, stating that she is only leaving because God wills it. At the end of the romances, Raymondin recognizes the divine role Mélusine has played in his life, remarking that everything God gave him came through her. In Jean d'Arras's prologue, the narrator states that marvelous creatures are real and part of God's creation, and that by understanding marvels humans can grow closer to God. Extending this argument to Mélusine means that she is not a dangerous monster, but a marvel connected to the divine (Zeldenrust 33).

The emphasis on Mélusine's Christianity makes her more palatable to a Christian audience and makes her fairy nature less of a threat while setting her story apart from tales of other fairy brides. This can be seen in the Jean d'Arras version where in the prologue, the narrator explicitly compares the story he is about to tell with other stories of fairy brides who turn into serpents. The narrator cites the opinion of Gervase of Tilbury who believes "it is because of some transgression, hidden from the world and displeasing

to God, that He punishes [the fairy brides] with these afflictions so secretly that no one knows of it except Himself" (Jean d'Arras 21). This is not the case with Mélusine, whose punishment comes from her mother and not some divine judgment. In other, earlier versions of the story, such as the one given by Walter Map, the fairy bride is repulsed by the power of Christianity. She leaves the Church when Eucharist is given and flies through the roof when sprayed with holy water. Mélusine, who is married by a bishop and sleeps in a blessed wedding bed, does not exhibit this problem. Mélusine's Christianity makes her more palatable by mitigating the danger of her fairy identity. Any magic that Mélusine uses to aid her husband and sons is put into to a Christian perspective as a power allowed by God instead of Satan. This is important because several noble families, including the House of Anjou, the House of Plantagenet, the House of Lusignan, and the Luxemburg dynasty, all claim descent from Mélusine. Claiming a legendary ancestor was popular for many medieval dynasties, including families of kings and physicians, granting them an air of legitimacy and longevity (Maddox 3). Claiming Mélusine specifically as a powerful ancestor set these noble houses apart from others, though unlike other claims of legendary ancestry, these noble houses claimed a woman as their progenitor. While the claim of descent from Mélusine gave prestige to the noble houses in question, claiming that the right to rule was the will of God while declaring descent from a fairy could have been seen as a contradiction. The Church insisted that fairies were creatures of the Devil, and these noble families would have wanted to avoid accusations of being founded by a demon. By emphasizing Mélusine's Christianity, these families gained the fame of being descended from a famous magical woman without earning the ire of the Church.

Claiming descent from Mélusine was not just a way for these noble families to gain the notoriety of having a legendary founder, it also gave their rule legitimacy. Jean d'Arras's patron, Duke Jean de Berry, had reclaimed the fortress of Lusignan back from English forces in 1374, though by the time Jean d'Arras was commissioned to write the story of Mélusine in the 1390s, the region was once again fought over by the French and English (Maddox 11). Jean de Berry was instrumental in keeping the region under French control. However, local tradition stated that the castle of Lusignan could only be truly claimed by a descendant of Mélusine. Through his mother, Bonne of Luxembourg, Jean de Berry could claim legitimate descent from Mélusine. Jean d'Arras makes it clear that his patron is Mélusine's heir by citing eyewitness reports that the fairy herself had been seen in dragon and human form when the English ceded control of the fortress to Jean de Berry in 1374 (Maddox 12). Descent from Mélusine was also important to Coudrette's patron, Guillame Larchevêque, the Lord of Parthenay. Larchevêque supported the English claim to Lusignan and at one point held the region in their stead before converting to the French side in 1372 and supporting Jean de Berry's claim (Maddox 12). Coudrette argues that Larchevêque is descended from Mélusine's youngest son Thierry, and praises his new patron, Larchevêque's son, as an heir of Mélusine as well (Maddox 13). This shows that not only is Mélusine's story treated as legitimate history for the writers of the romances and their patrons, but it was also used to gain and keep political power over the region of Poitier and the fortress of Lusignan. This prestige would not have been possible without the emphasis on Mélusine's Christianity.

Along with her Christianity, Mélusine is presented as non-threatening because she acts as an ideal wife and mother. At every opportunity, she fulfills her promise to

Raymondin by creating marvels on his behalf, granting him status and power. Medieval women were expected to be meek and powerless, deferring to their husbands in everything. Mélusine, who is magical, is not powerless, though she consistently uses her magic to benefit her husband and sons. Despite all her magic and power, Mélusine is still as dependent on her husband as a normal human woman. Her key to gaining salvation relies on Raymondin; despite all her faith and good works she cannot break the curse on her own. In Jean d'Arras's version, Mélusine tells Raymondin:

> Alas, if only you had not betrayed me, I would have been redeemed, exempted from pain and torment, and I would have lived out the full course of a mortal woman's lifetime and died naturally…. Now you have cast me back into the dark abyss of penance that had held me hostage for so long on account of one misdeed. And now I must endure and suffer it until Judgment Day, all because of your betrayal (Jean d'Arras 192).

Raymondin's inability to see past Mélusine's monstrosity is what damns her. Even though she has given him power and wealth, Raymondin does not trust that his wife could be from God until after she leaves him.

Mélusine is forced to leave Raymondin because he blames her after their son Geoffrey burns down an abbey killing everyone, including his brother Fromont. When he learns of this, Raymondin says of Mélusine, "By my faith in God, I believe that woman is nothing but a phantom, and that no fruit born of her womb can reach the perfection of goodness. Every one of her children was born with some strange mark" (Jean d'Arras 189). As a sign of their mother's supernatural heritage, every one of Mélusine's sons bears a physical deformity. In the Middle Ages, physical malformations, otherwise

known as “monstrous births,” were often seen as signs of wrongdoing on the part of the mother (Hendricks 96). While some of Mélusine’s sons are devout Christians, others meet their terrifying appearances with terrible actions. Mélusine tells her husband that Geoffrey is capable of redemption, but another one of their sons, Horrible, is not and must be killed. Horrible, a seven-year-old child, is noted to have already killed two wet nurses, and Mélusine states that if allowed to live, he will “do such damage that the loss of twenty thousand men would be as nothing compared to it, for he would destroy everything I have built, and warfare would never cease in the lands of Poitou and Guyenne” (Jean d’Arras 193). As a woman, Mélusine is responsible for the monstrosity of her children. While she adhered to the duty of a wife by giving her husband heirs, her ability to bear children only others her by making it clear that she was never fully human, a fact that Raymondin was unable to forget.

Because Raymondin could not see Mélusine as truly good, her hybrid nature is never resolved, and she is destined to remain a monster. Her legend clearly echoes prevailing medieval thought about human women as monstrous and sinful, as despite her status as the ideal courtly wife and mother, Mélusine’s salvation was always dependent on men. Even in human form, Mélusine’s female body was never seen as perfect and her transformation into a serpent only makes this more obvious. Her monstrosity was passed on in such a way that some of her sons became monstrous themselves. Had Horrible been allowed to live, he would have undone every good work of his mother and had the potential to do even more harm by reproducing and creating even more monstrous children. The danger of Mélusine, then, is in her feminine and reproductive capabilities. Though her bloodline became illustrious and founded several noble houses, her fairy

blood had the potential to pollute her sons enough that the future of Lusignan was at risk. Mélusine’s alleged descendants were clearly proud of her legend, though the stress of her Christianity makes it clear that while they wanted the allure of a magical ancestor, they did not wish to associate their names with the demonic. This indicates that even though she was viewed as an illustrious founder by the people of the Middle Ages, she was viewed with ambivalence about her true nature. While Mélusine cannot be said to represent the entirety of the female gender, her story still shows anxieties about women in the Middle Ages. Outwardly the perfect wife and mother, Mélusine hides a dark secret from her husband. Her beautiful face belies her secret serpentine body, and it is only through subterfuge that her husband ever finds the truth of his wife’s nature, an event that happens years after they are married. The story of Mélusine, then, shows that men could not trust their wives, as women had the potential to reveal themselves as monstrous even when they seemed like good Christian women.

CHAPTER V

WOMEN, WITCHES, AND THE *MALLEUS MALEFICARUM*

Fear about monsters in the Middle Ages eventually translated itself into fear of the Devil, which in turn, led to panic about people, specifically women, who made pacts with the Devil for their own ends. These people, known as witches, became widely feared throughout Europe. Though most witch hunts took place in the Early Modern period, medieval attitudes fed into ideas about witchcraft and helped to create a moral panic that lasted centuries.

Witches, unlike other monsters, were explicitly human. However, one thing ties them to the otherworldliness that other monsters demonstrate: ties to the diabolic. As fear of the devil grew throughout the Middle Ages, witchcraft and sorcery became an ever-increasing concern to the Christian Church:

> The formulation of beliefs in active witchcraft and the ensuing persecution of accused witches may be said to have coincided with a new emphasis on the suffering of Christ and the "strengthening" of the devil that emerged in literature and art between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries…With a new emphasis on the suffering of Christ came also a sense of the fearsomeness of the powers of the devil (Kors and Peters 9).

According to Christian theologians of the Middle Ages, demons had the power to tempt humans into becoming servants of Satan, making them heretics and idolators. Demons could

> secure both present and future service by written contracts with humans, leave distinguishing marks as tokens of that service on the bodies of their human servants, gather their servants into nocturnal assemblies called "sabbats" to pay homage to the devil and plan new assaults on the human community, have sexual relations with humans, and give humans the powers of flight and morphological change (Kors and Peters 8).

These human servants of the devil later became witches and sorcerers—beings capable of working with demons to use harmful magic against innocents.

The witch was seen as a monstrous figure, and often, a female one. Witches could be of either gender, though women were four times as likely to be accused, convicted, and executed (Kors and Peters 17). France was the exception to this statistic. Though men were also targeted during witch hunts, witch hunting manuals such as the *Malleus Maleficarum*, translated as *The Hammer of Witches*, described witches as mainly female and brought to mind the image of the monstrous female witch.

The *Malleus Maleficarum*, published in 1487, was written by Heinrich Kramer, also known by the latinized name Henricus Institoris, and Jacob Sprenger. It is believed by scholars that Sprenger's contribution to the manuscript was minimal, and that the document was mainly written by Kramer (Broedel 18-19). Kramer had spent most of his life working as an inquisitor for the Catholic Church, rooting out heresy throughout Europe. He eventually became concerned with witchcraft and began prosecuting

suspected witches. In particular, the acquittal of Helena Scheuberin in 1485, a woman accused of witchcraft who publicly held contempt for Kramer, infuriated him. At the trial, Kramer focused on accusations of Schueberin's sexual immorality, a trait that was to him obviously tied to workings with the Devil, though the lawyer for the defense disagreed and accused Kramer of procedural errors that led to the case's dismissal (Broedel 3). This disagreement illustrated a fundamental difference of opinion on what a witch was, and on how one could be recognized (Broedel 3). Because of this humiliation, Kramer became intent on writing a document that would defend his beliefs about witchcfraft, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Broedel 3). According to Hans Peter Broedel

> Institoris and Sprenger wrote the *Malleus* with several stated objectives: first, it was to refute the critics who denied the reality of witchcraft and hindered the persecution of witches; second, it was to provide arguments, *exempla*, and advice for preachers who had to deal with witchcraft on the pastoral level; and third, to lend detailed assistance to judges engaged in the difficult work of combating witchcraft through legal prosecution. In broad terms, each of the book's three sections deals with one of these issues, while also addressing two problems central to the work: "what is witchcraft?" and "who is a witch?" (Broedel 20).

According to *The Malleus Maleficarum*, a witch was a person who, in league with an evil spirit, uses magic to cause harm to others (Kramer 56). Throughout the text of the *Malleus*, it is clear that Kramer believed that most witches were women.

Kramer begins the section of the *Malleus* that discusses female witches by asking, "With regard to the first question, why are there more workers of harmful magic found in the female sex, which is so frail and unstable, than among men?" (Kramer 74). Kramer

states several reasons for why women are more prone to dealing with evil spirits. Some reasons are from popular belief, and others he attributes to nature. He first states

> Other people give reasons why one finds a larger number of superstitious women than of [superstitious] men. The first is that women are inclined to be credulous, and because the main aim of the Evil Spirit is to pervert and destroy Faith, he prefers to attack them…The second reason is that the way they are made makes them naturally prone to leak, and this renders it easier for individual spirits [*spiritus*] to make an impression on them by giving them revelations. This constitution of theirs means that, when they use it well, many women are good; but when they are wicked, [it makes them worse]. The third reason is that they have a lewd, slippery tongue, and have difficulty in concealing from fellow-women those things they know by means of their evil skill; and because they do not have physical strength, they find it easy to assert themselves in secret through acts of harmful magic (Kramer 75).

Kramer goes on to discuss how nature makes women more prone to becoming witches:

> The reason determined by nature is that [a woman] is more given to fleshly lusts than a man, as is clear from her many acts of carnal filthiness. One notices this weakness from the way the first woman was moulded, because she was formed from a curved rib, that is from a chest-rib, which is bent and [curves] as it were in the opposite direction from [that in] a man; and from this weakness one concludes that, since she is an unfinished animal, she is always being deceptive (Kramer 75).

Here the translator, P.G. Maxwell-Stuart, notes that Kramer seems to be discussing the entire ribcage, stating "If a 'male' bone comes, let us say, from the front, the 'female'

bone will come from the back, and thus indeed curve in the opposite direction" (Kramer 75).

This image of the female body as lesser from the beginning is not unique to the *Malleus*. Though the souls of men and women were deemed equally made in the divine image, there was a difference in their bodies. While the male was seen as a reflection of the divine, the female was not. "A man's physical participation in the image of God constructed his body as more fully resistant to the physical invasions of unclean spirits than the female body. Vincent of Beauvais…directly attributed the Fall to Eve's lack of the divine image and her consequent vulnerability to demonic persuasion" (Caciola 139). This calls to mind the idea that a woman's body was lesser and imperfect. This type of language that accuses women of being more inherently evil that exists in the *Malleus* also exists in the medical texts of the Middle Ages, including the previously discussed *De Secretis Mulierum*. In fact, the *Malleus* references the same phenomena of the "evil eye" in old women that is present in *De Secretis*: "it is demonstrated that outcomes stemming from harmful magic can be procured by elderly women [*vetulae*] without the activity of evil spirits" (Kramer 37). Kramer believes so insistently that harmful magic is the domain of women that he argues that "it should not be called the heresy of men who do works of harmful magic [*malificorum*], but of women who do works of harmful magic [*maleficarum*], so that the derivations is taken from the party with the better claim to it" (Kramer 77).

Kramer argues in the *Malleus* that women's faithlessness and greater aptitude for evil has one cause: fleshly lust, which he states can never be truly satisfied (Kramer 76). He states that in order to assuage this sexual hunger, witches make a pact with evil spirits

by engaging in sexual intercourse with them. Kramer specifies that, as mentioned in a papal bull written in 1484, that there are seven types of harmful magic that can be created through sexual intercourse with demons:

> First, by changing people's minds towards excessive love, etc.; secondly, by obstructing the power to procreate; thirdly, by taking away the parts of the body which are appropriate for that act; fourthly, by using the art of illusion [*praestigiosa arte*] to change people into the forms of animals; fifthly by destroying the power to procreate, which belongs to females; sixthly by procuring a miscarriage, seventhly by offering small children, but not other animals or the fruits of the earth, to evil spirits, thereby enabling them to cause all kinds of harm (Kramer 77).

Kramer saw the women who committed these acts as less than human, as something monstrous and in league with the devil. However, it is important to note that no other witch hunting manual so forcefully links misogynistic views about the nature of women with a natural propensity for witchcraft, though these other texts do not refute the idea that women are more likely to be witches. However, in order to understand why Kramer's general misogyny was tied to witchcraft, it is important to understand why what he believes they do is so evil.

The first sin that Kramer accuses witches of is changing the mind of someone to love or hate. Kramer explains that this is possible through the use of evil spirits, who change the mind in two ways "by letting the imagination work naturally, or by preventing people from using their powers of reason" (Kramer 80). He states that they may do this "either by means of an act of harmful magic without a witch, or with a witch, but without

the act of harmful magic" (Kramer 80). Kramer then explains that when this is done through a witch, it is an act of harmful magic because of the pact between the evil spirit and the witch, though he refuses to give examples, as they involve too many members of the clergy and laity. However, Kramer does give one anecdote of this type of harmful magic:

> I know, according to a story which everyone knows and is being repeated even today by all the brothers in a particular monastery, that not only did an elderly woman subject three abbots in succession to acts of harmful magic, she also killed them, and, in similar fashion, drove a fourth out of his mind. She herself confessed publicly and was not afraid to say. 'I did it, and I am still doing it and they won't be able to leave off loving me because they have eaten this much of my shit'—and she demonstrated how much by stretching out her arm (Kramer 80).

This example gives Kramer the proof he needs to argue that witches, when using evil spirits to change the minds of others, can do great harm, including kill people and drive them to madness. Notably in this anecdote, the witch explicitly victimizes men.

The second way witches were able to inflict harmful magic was, according to Kramer, by impeding the power of procreation or sexual intercourse. Kramer goes on a long explanation of how, exactly, evil spirits can do this by using the writings of Pierre de la Palud, a French Dominican and later Patriarch of Jerusalem. The ways in which an evil spirit can impede sexual intercourse and procreation are listed as: the evil spirit placing itself between two people so that they cannot touch, the evil spirit arousing a man and then freezing him, the evil spirit confusing a man and rendering his partner hateful, the

evil spirit causing impotence, and the evil spirit preventing the flow of semen. This section too, focuses more on the harm done to men than to women, though Kramer justifies this by stating that it is easier for an evil spirit to prevent a man from having intercourse than a woman (Kramer 82-83).

Kramer moves on to the next evil act of witches, which also keeps men from having intercourse, albeit in a more drastic manner. According to Kramer, witches had the ability to make it appear as if a man's penis had simply disappeared from his body. Kramer insists that this is simply an illusion that seems very real to the victim. He states that this is the work of an evil spirit. These spirits can deceive people in five ways: by moving something from one place to another; by putting something between two objects, therefore blocking one from view or causing confusion in the mental images people have; by the spirit showing itself as something else; by confusing the eyes to see things that are not there; by forming mental images that confuse the victim's senses (Kramer 86-87). Later in the *Malleus*, Kramer gives specific examples of demons hiding penises from men by the work of witches. The first anecdote is of a supposedly verifiable account from a Dominican priest, whom Andre Schnyder argues is Kramer (Smith 89). As is stated in the *Malleus*

> A certain venerable Father from the [Dominican] convent in Speyer, a man with a great reputation in the Order for the integrity of his life and for his learning, used to give an account of something similar. 'One day,' he said, 'while I was busy hearing confessions, a young man came and, during the course of his confession claimed that he had lost his penis in a distressing fashion. I was astonished,' said the Father, 'and unwilling to give easy credence to what he had said…Experience

> has taught me to use my eyes, and I saw not a thing when the young man removed his clothes and pointed out the place [where his penis used to be]. So I exercised my judgment and common sense and asked whether he suspected any young woman of inflicting any kind of magical injury on him (Kramer 150-151).

The rest of the anecdote involves the Father telling the young man to find the woman he suspects of magically injuring him, with the young man eventually coming back to say that he had been cured. The point of this anecdote, which stresses the reliability of the source, was clearly meant to make Kramer's audience believe that this was a common type of magical harm that witches practiced.

Kramer's next question asks if witches can use deception and trickery to change people into animals. He explains that this too is an illusion, using the same explanation as he does for the illusory missing penises before coming to his last and most damning accusation against witches: that midwives not only cause miscarriages, but when they are involved in a live birth, they offer the children to evil spirits. He states,

> [Canon lawyers] say it is not only an act of harmful magic [to prevent] someone from being able to perform the carnal act (and I discussed this earlier), but also [to prevent] a woman from conceiving, or, if she does conceive, to make her miscarry. To these one may add a third and fourth thing they do: (a) they do not procure a miscarriage at that time, and (b) they devour the child, or offer it to an evil spirit (Kramer 92).

Kramer goes on to argue that witches are "accustomed, against the inclination of human nature…to devour and feast on children" (Kramer 92). He writes of an account from the Inquisitor of Como, who, according to Kramer, came across a man whose child had been

stolen in the night. The man had seen "some women who had gathered together during the night-time, and he came to the conclusion that they were slaughtering a child, drinking its blood and then devouring [the flesh]" (Kramer 92-93).

This charge of ritual cannibalism on the part of witches was not new in the Middle Ages. Centuries before the *Malleus* was written, similar charges had been levelled against Jews. Accusations now known as blood libel charged Jews with ritually killing, eating, and drinking the blood of Christian boys. One reason for these accusations was the Christian idea of the malevolent Jewish sorcerer, a figure similar in many ways to witches. One of the defining features in the Christian idea of the Jewish sorcerer was the connection to the devil: "The allegiance to Satan, attributed to Jews with an insistence that almost drowned out its true implication, was not a form of invective or rhetoric. Satan was the ultimate source of magic, which operated only by his diabolic will and connivance" (Trachtenberg 7). Jews were therefore dehumanized on a widespread level; they were not seen as people, but as agents of the Christian devil. As James A. Arieti states, "once a person or group has been diabolized (i.e., identified with the devil), it frequently happens that every abomination is attributed to that person or group. Since the devil is *evil embodied*, the diabolized person or group becomes a composite of every form of evil" (Arieti 199). As witches were seen as servants of the devil, this statement is true for those accused of practicing witchcraft as well as Jews accused of blood libel.

The image of the cannibalistic witch either devouring a child or giving it to the devil is a subversion of the natural order, diametrically opposed to the one woman whom Kramer explicitly praises: the Virgin Mary. This activity instead associates witches with the medieval belief in the monstrous *lamiae*, female spirits believed to enter houses at

night and kill children. According to medieval author Johannes de Juana, these beings had “the faces of people but the bodies of beasts” (Broedel 104). Medieval author William of Paris states that these creatures appeared to be old women, though they were truly evil spirits, and that while they seemed to devour the children, they could not. He states that these demons were, however, allowed to kill children to punish their parents (Broedel 104-105). While belief in these monsters was once a folk tradition among peasants, later writers conflated these beings with human women, resulting in the image of the cannibalistic witch (Broedel 107).

Kramer’s work turns witchcraft salacious by explicitly linking it with sex, casting female sexuality as sinful and diabolic in the process. Kramer argues that one reason women become witches is because of “fleshy lust, which in [women] is never satisfied” (Kramer 76). He links this to the idea that the mouth of a woman’s womb is always seeking male seed, which comes from biology based in Aristotelian thought. Kramer states that women, “rouse themselves to vigorous action with evil spirits in order to assuage their sexual appetite,” directly arguing that female sexuality is so ravenous that women’s natural course is to not only commit the sin of fornication, but to commit that sin with demons (Kramer 76). This idea of female sexuality as voracious turns all women into potential witches capable of deviant sexual acts.

The status of women in the Middle Ages was explicitly connected to their role as wives and mothers. Women were expected to be subservient to their husbands. In domestic relationships “man is the head of the woman,” as stated by Thomas Aquinas (Cadden 193). A woman’s body was considered dangerous, not only physically but spiritually as well in that their bodies tempted men into spiritual ruin. In order for a

woman to be considered good, she would be fully clothed and chaste, though she would only be considered "pure" if she neither was tempted by nor tempted the opposite sex (Polinska 49). It was also believed that all women, including those who dedicated their lives to God as nuns, were "enemies of Chastity" (Cadden 178). For a woman to be considered godly, then, she would emulate the Virgin Mary; she would be eternally chaste, modest, and would never tempt men into sin. With this impossible standard, it was far easier for an ordinary woman to be seen as wicked, and therefore suspected of witchcraft. A witch follows none of the standards set for a good medieval woman. She fornicates with demons, engaging in deviant sexuality outside of marriage that makes her subservient to the devil instead of a husband. A witch also had the ability to keep other women from fulfilling their purpose as mothers by blocking sexual activity and conception. This links the witch with the malevolent women seen in the *De Secretis Mulierum* and the *Decretum* of Burchard of Worms. The women in those texts use their sexuality and their bodies to manipulate and harm the men around them, so too is the witch a figure of malevolence to everyone in her community.

After the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the witch hunting panic grew, fueled by other writings on witchcraft such as King James I's *Daemonologie* and *The Discovery of Witches* by Matthew Hopkins. Fear of witches spread throughout the whole of Europe, a moral panic that caused the deaths of approximately 50,000 people, though this number is often questioned. One in four of those tried, convicted, and executed were women (Kors and Peters 17).

Thanks to the *Malleus Maleficarum*, women in the later Middle Ages became suspected of witchcraft. Though the text attempts to state that some virtuous women do

exist, it is heavily implied that all women have the potential to become witches by their very natures, which are intrinsically sexual and sinful. Witches used their bodies and their sexuality to create harmful magic by working with demons, becoming heretics who not only turned away from God but attempted to bring the downfall of other Christians. Powerful figures, witches were alleged to be able to force people to fall in and out of love, stop procreation, magically remove sexual organs, change people into animals, cause miscarriages, and sacrifice babies to evil spirits. These charges were echoed in earlier texts such as the *Decretum* and *De Secretis Mulierum*, indicating that fears about manipulative, magically powerful women had been growing throughout the Middle Ages. Unlike earlier female monsters such as Mélusine who were partially inhuman and therefore outsiders, witches were explicitly human and members of the community, a fact that cast ordinary people into suspicion. The *Malleus Maleficarum* fanned the flames of existing anxieties about women, creating a moral panic that lasted centuries.

CHAPTER VI

MONSTROUS WOMEN AND THE WITCHCRAFT MORAL PANIC

The witch hunts of the late medieval and Early Modern periods are often described as "the witch craze" or "the witch hysteria." Mass hysteria, now referred to as mass psychogenic illness or collective obsessional behavior, is a popular explanation for the American witch trials in New England, particularly in Salem, Massachusetts, at the end of the seventeenth century. A difficult to define term, mass hysteria has no true medical diagnosis or definition, though it is commonly thought to occur when a cohesive group of people exhibit physiological and behavioral illness without a clear physical cause. The mass hysteria explanation allows modern scholars to believe they are intellectually superior to the people of the Middle Ages and dismiss their beliefs as mere "superstition." It is important to understand that the people of the Middle Ages were not unintelligent or mentally ill. It was not irrational for them to believe that magic and the Devil were real forces in the world. The Devil and his servants were part of the cosmology taught by the Catholic Church, giving these beliefs the weight of official authority. Therefore, dismissing the witch hunts as instances of mass hysteria or other mental illness places the blame for the execution of innocent people on mental illness, ignoring the surrounding culture as a potential cause.

The term moral panic is better suited to help explain what happened during the witch hunts of the late medieval and Early Modern eras. A sociological phenomenon,

moral panics have occurred throughout human history. The term was first used in the 1970s by sociologist Stanley Cohen in his book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. Cohen defined a moral panic as a period when "a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests" (Cohen, S. 1). He argues that the target of moral panics is often perceived deviants in society who become what he terms "folk devils" throughout the course of a panic. In a recent edition of the book, Cohen emphasizes that "calling something a 'moral panic' does not imply that this something does not exist or happened at all and that reaction is based on fantasy, hysteria, delusion and illusion or being duped by the powerful" but that it does require the assumption that the harm caused by the subject of the moral panic has been exaggerated and/or that it has been compared with other, more severe social problems (Cohen, S. vii). Cohen states that in some cases, the subject of a moral panic is new, while in others it is something that has existed in culture for a long time. This second case would be what happened during the witch panic, as witches had been part of the culture of medieval Europe centuries before the witch hunts began.

Cohen posits five stages to a moral panic. In the first stage, something, an event, condition, episode, persons, or group of people, is defined as a threat to society. The second stage requires that the threat be distributed by mass media. This threat must be presented in stereotypical fashion, appealing to prejudices present in the population and creating a mentality of evil folk devils against the victimized majority. This threat would create the third stage of a moral panic, which is a pervasive sense of anxiety among the public about this perceived threat. The fourth stage involves "right-thinking people" such as editors, religious leaders, politicians and others pronouncing their solutions to the

threat that eventually lead to ways of coping with it. The final stage of a moral panic is that the perceived threat deteriorates and disappears from society. Over time, the truth of the threat will become more visible (Cohen, S. 1).

These stages would act as follows during the witch panic: First, witches, the folk devil in this situation, were defined as a threat to society. Second, the media of the time presented witches in a stereotypical and negative light, using prejudices against women and Jews to enhance the danger of the perceived threat. Evidence of this can be seen in texts such as the *Malleus Maleficarum* and other witch hunting documents. Third, widespread anxiety about witches became common. Fourth, the morally righteous such as religious leaders and politicians spoke out about witchcraft, proposing solutions and implementing laws against witches. There is evidence for this in the records of trials against witches conducted throughout the late medieval and Early Modern periods, as well as in records of laws against witchcraft. Finally, the witch hunt moral panic died out. This was a gradual process, as countries throughout Europe went through the panic at different times, though in general witch hunts were abolished by the end of the eighteenth century.

In Cohen's theory of the moral panic, there are several agents at play, the first of which is the mass media. While mass media as it is known today did not exist in the Middle Ages or Early Modern era, the earliest form of print media had just come into fruition in the form of the printing press. While books remained too expensive for the general public, this invention did allow for publication on a much larger scale. The invention of the printing press allowed works such as the *Malleus Maleficarum* to reach wider audiences, helping to instigate the witch hunt panic.

Cohen reasons that mass media is key in the early stages of a moral panic, as it is responsible for defining social problems, stating, “The media have long operated as agents of moral indignation in their own right: even if they are not self-consciously engaged in crusading or muck-raking, their very reporting of certain ‘facts’ can be sufficient to generate concern, anxiety, indignation, or panic” (Cohen, S. 10). He argues that the media’s focus on deviance is not just to entertain but instead serves the purpose of defining the boundaries of right and wrong in a society. By identifying those who fall outside these normative boundaries and portraying them in an inflammatory and stereotypical manner, the mass media increases societal reactions against these perceived deviants. Cohen argues that there is an inventory of tactics the media uses to raise a moral panic consisting of three processes: first, the exaggeration and distortion of events surrounding a moral panic, making them seem much more dire than they are in reality; second, by predicting, whether implicitly or explicitly, that there will be dire consequences in society for failing to act against the perceived threat; and third, by using the power of words and symbols to create mass stereotypes, distorting events and people to fit the public’s preconceived notions. These three processes together “allow for full-scale demonology and hagiography to develop” and create folk devils (Cohen, S. 41).

While the mass media is essential in the creation of folk devils and moral panics, it does not act alone. Three other groups are necessary for a moral panic: moral entrepreneurs, societal control culture, and the public. Cohen uses sociologist Howard S. Becker’s term “moral entrepreneurs” to describe the people and groups who target deviant behavior within a moral panic. There are two types of moral entrepreneurs: rule enforcers and rule creators. Rule enforcers are typically groups such as law enforcement

and are concerned with enforcing the rule because it is their job but are not concerned with what the rule enforces. The rule creator is a more complex figure. Cohen states, "The prototype of the rule creator is the moral crusader or crusading reformer; he is the man who, with an absolute ethic, sets out to eradicate the evil which disturbs him" (Cohen, S. 141). The moral crusader believes that they are righteous and define deviance as views that oppose their own. However, Cohen makes it clear that there is a darker side to the profile that can lead to authoritarianism, cynicism, destructiveness, extreme punitiveness, puritanism, racial prejudice, and projection (Cohen, S. 148). Often, moral crusaders are powerful members of society, and include clergy and lawmakers. While not essential to a moral panic, they can be present. Based on the *Malleus Maleficarum*, Heinrich Kramer can be considered a moral crusader.

Drawing on the theories of sociologist Charles Lemert, Cohen defines the third actor in a moral panic, societal control culture, as "the laws, procedures, programs and organizations which in the name of collectivity help, rehabilitate, punish or otherwise manipulate deviants" (Cohen, S. 77). Societal control culture includes unofficial models of understanding deviance such as shared morality as well as official institutions. This shared morality is perhaps the more powerful force, as

> Most people are seen to share common values, agree on what is damaging, threatening or deviant, and to be able to recognize these values and their violations as they occur. At times of moral panic, societies are more open than usual to appeals to this consensus…The deviant is seen as having stepped across a boundary which at other times is none too clear (Cohen, S. 78).

While common values are important in the public's identification of deviance, the conception and stereotypes given by the media influence societal control culture by swaying the beliefs about deviance in a way that allows for the justification and rationalization of treating deviants a certain way (Cohen, S. 79). While the media turns deviants into folk devils, moral entrepreneurs work to further target them, and societal control culture ultimately causes the social pressure required to fuel a moral panic. Together, these three agents influence the fourth, the public. For a moral panic to occur, the media must influence public opinion enough to agree to take the action called for by moral entrepreneurs and societal control culture.

The witch hunt moral panic of the late medieval and Early Modern periods did not occur without warning. As can be seen in texts such as *De Secretis Mulierum*, Burchard of Worms's penitential, and the Mélusine romances, the people of the Middle Ages were consistently concerned about women. These texts display the attitude that women are dangerous, particularly to men. *De Secretis Mulierum* makes the argument that the female body, by its very nature, is deviant and capable of harming men, specifically their genitals—a fear later echoed in the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Burchard of Worms details how women have used their bodies in secret to create magic that works against their husbands. These texts show an anxiety surrounding the female body and female actions when women are away from male supervision. The story of Mélusine echoes both anxieties, as her true nature is only revealed when she is nude and in private. All of these texts depict women as monstrous, though they stop short of causing outright panic. *De Secretis* and the Burchard of Worms's penitential are careful to not deem all women evil. While Pseudo-Albertus does state that all women who menstruate can use the poison in

their bodies to harm sexual partners, he notes that only those with malevolent intentions actually try to do so. Burchard of Worms points out that some women have been known to use magic to create poisons or love spells and states the necessary penance for those who do, though he does not accuse all women of having done so. The legend of Mélusine shows her as dangerous and monstrous, a fairy creature with magic, but it also goes out of its way to mitigate this danger by casting her as the heroine and explicitly stating her Christianity. It also does not cast Mélusine as representative of ordinary women. The consensus of these texts, then, seems to be that while women can cause great harm, for the most part they do not act on this capability. This perception of women seems to change with the *Malleus Maleficarum*.

The *Malleus Maleficarum* presents a tipping point from a general concern and anxiety about the nature of women into a full moral panic. Heinrich Kramer's witch hunting manual acts as the mass media in this moral panic, fulfilling all processes that Cohen describes. The text exaggerates events surrounding the witch panic by giving examples of second-hand anecdotes that come from anonymous sources and present witches, particularly female witches, as explicitly evil because of their sinful sexuality. These anecdotes have the effect of making it seem like the demonic magic Kramer describes is real and all too common. Kramer invokes fears present in earlier texts, such as the evil eye, cannibalism, blood magic, and magical castration, though by describing them in an explicit and lurid manner, he adds a sensationalist element to the narrative that makes circumstances seem much more dire. Kramer pontificates about the danger to society if witches are not dealt with, arguing that they are capable of harming entire communities and that their sin is the greatest, for they are not only heretics against God

but treacherous apostates who give themselves over to the Devil (Kramer 101). While not stated outright, it is heavily implied that should witches be allowed to live, not only would they harm innocent laypeople, but they would also damage the Church itself. Beyond these dire warnings, the *Malleus* also creates stereotypes of witches that would show up in later witchcraft accusations. In particular, the images of the sexually powerful, seductive witch and the murderous, cannibalistic figure of the evil mother witch have endured throughout the centuries. The second stereotype, analogous to the figure of the cannibalistic Jew, became increasingly common in artwork from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries. While the two stereotypes bled into one another, they came from profoundly different fears:

> While the murderous Jew was a terrifying projection of European fears of the other, the savagery of witches could function as a far more inclusive symbol. Witches were not external to European Christian society, but were firmly within it. Each individual, and especially each woman, could be perceived as a potential witch—and by virtue of that, also as a potential destroyer of the innocence and integrity of Christian community (Zika 101).

This fear that society could be torn down from the inside by a malevolent woman is at the heart of the *Malleus Maleficarum*. By creating exaggerated claims of the harm witches were capable of, by insinuating the potential downfall of the Church if witches were allowed to go on unchecked, and by giving the public stock descriptions of what a witch could be, the *Malleus Maleficarum* fueled a moral panic that caused the executions of approximately 50,000 people.

At its root, a moral panic can be seen as a vehicle for control. This works by branding folk devils responsible for any number of societal problems and convincing the public, through the words of mass media and moral entrepreneurs, that suppressing and controlling the folk devils is the key to solving these problems. The *Malleus Maleficarum* uses witches as a scapegoat for multiple societal ills, from illnesses to bad weather. It helped to convince people that if the local witches were executed, these uncontrollable forces of nature would somehow be bent back in their favor. When this line of thinking inevitably proved false, the people would be convinced that it failed to work because there was another witch among them and did not think that perhaps witches were not responsible for illness and death because the Church, the greatest authority in their lives, told them so. The people of the late Middle Ages and Early Modern periods deeply believed that if they could control witches and stop them from using their deadly magic, they could regain some amount of control over their lives. In the witch panic, the method of control most often used against alleged witches was imprisonment and execution. More often than not, those accused of witchcraft were women.

While witchcraft was not an explicitly female crime, despite what the *Malleus Maleficarum* said, women made an easy scapegoat for witch hunters. In a study of the witch trials of Lucerne, the typical victims of witch trials were described as

> generally mature women, often poor, who came from elsewhere or had long been suspected by their neighbors, and who also exhibited disliked traits, such as insolence, quarrelsomeness, or aggressive behavior, who spoke publicly about sexual matters—their own or others'—and who had a bad reputation. Unmarred or widowed older women whose neighbors had suspected them, often for a long

time, of causing harm to people or property by particular means…seem to have been the most frequently accused, tried, and convicted (Kors and Peters 19).

These women did not fit the ideal image of pure, demure wives and mothers who emulated the Virgin Mary. By exhibiting traits of unrepressed sexuality, aggressiveness, and by not being under the direct control of a man, these women became othered by their communities. Already seen as dangerous because of their bodies, their place in society made them particularly vulnerable to becoming folk devils.

The witchcraft panic of the late medieval and Early Modern periods is an example of a widespread moral panic that often targeted women. While popular thought had grown against women for some time, the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum* and its subsequent distribution via the printing press allowed a moral panic that painted all women as potential monsters to bloom. Following Stanley Cohen's theory, the elements of a moral panic can be found in history and literature of the period. This panic lasted several centuries and had a widespread effect across Europe and even reaching several colonies. Though the panic eventually died out, the witch hunt epidemic had a lasting effect on Western culture that carried through into the modern world.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Monsters signify the fears of society, and the most common fear they represent is the fear of the other. Historically, this fear has caused groups of people to be turned into monsters, either by creating imagined monsters that represent these groups or by demonizing these people outright. At times, this has led to real world violence and persecution. From ancient times, women have been marginalized in societies run by men. In the Middle Ages, prevailing thought from medicine, Christian theology, literature, and folklore cast women as liminal beings who were potentially inhuman and capable of monstrosity. The consensus seemed to be that female bodies, sexuality, and spirituality were not only inferior to men, but dangerous to them. This line of thinking eventually influenced the late medieval text the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a virulently misogynistic witch hunting manual that espoused the belief that most witches were women. In turn, the *Malleus* became an inciting factor in the witch hunt moral panic that lasted into the mid eighteenth century.

In the early eleventh century, Bishop Burchard of Worms wrote the *Decretum*, a book on canon law including a chapter called "Corrector," a penitential of popular sins meant for clergy to decide appropriate penance. Included in this list was a section exclusively on sins committed by women, some of which described specific magical rituals using the female body to manipulate men. These rituals, which include acts such

as placing a fish in the vagina, using menstrual blood to create a love spell, or rolling naked in honey and grain to bake bread that will kill a man, are explicitly sexual in nature. This indicates that female sexuality was believed to have a dangerous potential.

The dangers of female sexuality and the female body are explained in detail in late thirteenth century text *De Secretis Mulierum*, a medical philosophy treatise on the secrets of female physiology. Written by an anonymous author and often attributed to Albertus Magnus, the text details the workings of the female reproductive system, chastity, virginity, defects in the uterus, and the effects of astrology on an unborn child. The text takes on an unfavorable view of its subject, using the views of Aristotle that women were biologically inferior to men and that they were sexually insatiable. In discussing menstruation, the author demonstrates the belief that menstrual blood was venomous and could be used to give men cancer, cause leprosy in infants, and cause women's hair to turn into snakes. The commentaries on the text and the author make it clear that they believed menstruation made women malicious and used iron in the vagina to infect men with their poisonous blood and cause an incurable illness. Using the theory of abjection by Julia Kristeva and the idea of sexual pollution from Mary Douglas, it can be seen that menstruation was a feared process believed to make women unclean, as is shown in this text. *De Secretis Mulierum* was a popular treatise, republished and translated throughout the centuries and into the Early Modern period, indicating that it influenced later thought about the female body.

The female body was seen as monstrous in part because of its reproductive capabilities. Using the theories of Dana Oswald and Barbara Creed, it can be shown that women who were monstrous had the terrifying ability to bear monstrous progeny, though

this was not always the case as can be seen in the story of Mélusine. While she bore two sons who committed atrocities, with one being put to death lest he destroy everything good his mother had built, Mélusine was still seen as the progenitor of multiple powerful medieval families. Notably, these families only traced descent from Mélusine's more virtuous sons. However, Mélusine's own monstrosity is mitigated by her Christianity, something she passes on to her children. This is not the case with other monstrous mothers, such as Grendel's mother, who through both her son and her own actions becomes a threat to society.

The legend of Mélusine also illustrates the belief that women were potential monsters. A half-fairy, half-human woman, Mélusine was cursed to remain a fairy rather than become fully human, something shown by her transformation into a serpent from the waist down every Saturday. This placed her dual natures in constant conflict with one another, forcing her to stay a liminal being. Despite her monstrosity, Mélusine's danger is mitigated by emphasis on her Christianity. Throughout the course of the story, her immortal soul is in jeopardy. Her curse could only be broken if her husband did not spy on her during this time and did not speak of it to anyone. If he succeeded, Mélusine would die as a human woman and presumably go to heaven, but if he betrayed her, she would be forced to surrender to her fairy nature and remain a monster until Judgment Day. This shows that despite any of her good deeds, Mélusine's salvation was dependent on a man, echoing popular thought of women as inherently more sinful than men. Dangerous both in body and sexuality, Mélusine bore children with monstrous marks and several of them displayed evil natures that had the potential to destroy her legacy. While viewed as a proud ancestress to several prominent noble and royal families, Mélusine's

liminal nature forced her to be regarded as an ambivalent figure whose monstrosity was never fully resolved. This shows how even a woman who was the ideal courtly wife according to medieval society still had the potential to be monstrous, indicating that no woman was above suspicion.

The medieval ideas about women as dangerous in body, mind, and spirit affected the attitude towards women throughout the Early Modern era. They became monsters who were not fairy or otherwise inhuman and somewhat removed from the world, but witches capable of destroying society. Unlike the Christian Mélusine, witches were explicitly aligned with the Devil. This made witches heretics and apostates, explicit enemies of the Church. Though witches could be men or women, one text had a hand in painting most witches as women, and witchcraft as an explicitly female crime: the *Malleus Maleficarum*.

Written in the late fifteenth century by Dominican inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, the manuscript had several objectives: to convince critics that witchcraft was a real problem, to provide arguments and examples of witchcraft as well as advice for preachers, and to assist judges working against witchcraft in the legal realm. The *Malleus*, which was mainly written by Kramer, considered a witch to be any person working with an evil spirit to use magic to harm others. Kramer explicitly cast most witches as women stating that because women are more superstitious, are more susceptible to evil spirits, are prone to gossip, are physically weaker than men, are more lustful than men, are "unfinished" animals, and are naturally deceptive, they are more likely to conduct acts of harmful magic. This reasoning has echoes of Pseudo-Albertus's writing in *De Secretis Mulierum*, particularly the idea that women's sexual hunger is

ravenous. Kramer argues that this insatiability can only be cured by making a pact with and then having intercourse with demonic spirits and cites seven types of magic that can be caused by this: forcing people to fall in or out of love, causing impotence in men, magically removing the penis, using illusion to change people into animals, causing infertility in women, causing miscarriages, and offering children to evil spirits. The *Malleus* paints witches as lustful, sinfully sexual women who could lead men astray and even emasculate them. It also gives the stereotype of the witch who kills and cannibalizes infants and children, a crime also attributed to Jews. While no other witch hunting document so explicitly blames women, the idea that women were more likely to be witches was not refuted. The *Malleus* became the igniting spark of a moral panic that spread throughout Europe and lasted centuries, resulting in the executions of approximately 50,000 people.

While commonly called an event of mass hysteria, a term which implies that the people involved in witch hunts and trials were mentally ill or intellectually inferior, the surrounding culture that helped incite the witch hunts allows for the explanation of a moral panic, using Stanley Cohen's description and theory. Moral panics are times of crisis in society where an event, condition, person, or group of people become defined by broader society as a threat. Those targeted are known as folk devils. There are five stages of a moral panic. All stages are found in the witch hunt panic: witches were defined as a threat, the media presented witches in a stereotypical light using preconceived public prejudices to enhance the perceived danger, widespread anxiety became common among the public, moral leaders such as politicians and religious leaders offered solutions against witchcraft, and eventually the threat of witches died out and the panic ended. The

agents at play in a moral panic, the mass media, moral entrepreneurs, societal control culture, and the public were also present. The *Malleus Maleficarum*, which presents a tipping point into moral panic, acts as part of the mass media in this case.

While the witch panic did not exclusively target women, as a marginalized and maligned group in society, women presented an easy target for scapegoating. Women, perceived as capable of monstrosity and magic in the Middle Ages, came to be thought of as potential witches by the Early Modern era. There exists direct line of thinking present in the works of Burchard of Worms, Pseudo-Albertus, the writers of Mélusine romances to Heinrich Kramer's *Malleus Maleficarum*, a text that in turn helped fuel a moral panic that ended in thousands of innocent deaths. Understanding this helps change the perception that the witch panic was a sign of mass mental illness caused by people who were intellectually inferior to people today. The truth is that the witch panic did not occur without warning and that prevailing cultural thought reflected the beliefs of the panic centuries before any trials occurred.

Together these texts show a lasting perception of women as dangerous and monstrous beings. The female body was considered incomplete and ill-formed with aspects of their physiology viewed as a venomous result of Eve's curse. Seen as inherently more sinful than men, women's sexual appetite was believed to be so voracious that it needed to be controlled. They were considered responsible for any defects in their children, and the idea of female magic clearly revolved around sexuality and reproduction. This shows a pattern of anxiety about the female body, female sexuality, and female reproduction in medieval Christian culture.

These anxieties about women have not disappeared from culture and many of them still exist in the modern world. The female body still holds many "secrets," as Pseudo-Albertus terms it, to the medical field. Stemming from the Aristotelian idea of the male body as perfection and the female body as inferior that was so popular in the Middle Ages, women have long been understudied by medicine. Women have long been left out of medical studies entirely because female bodies are seen as more complicated than male bodies. This "complication" mainly derives from hormonal changes women face throughout their lives because of their reproductive systems. In research where women are studied alongside men, they are compared to a male standard, and symptoms that differ from those seen in men are deemed atypical. Health problems that disproportionally effect women are also understudied, in large part due to medical bias that tends to dismiss female symptoms as psychosomatic. Because the medical community still sees the male body as "default," the female body is misunderstood, and female patients are treated less humanely.

In the modern world, the female body is still seen as inferior, negative, something shameful to be hidden away. Though most no longer rely on the Church's explanation of Eve's original sin as reasoning for believing women to be weaker, the belief that men are superior still exists. As can be seen in *De Secretis*, many negative beliefs about the female body hinge around menstruation. Though menstruation is no longer thought to make women venomous, it is still treated as a cultural taboo. Menstrual blood is abject and polluting, and therefore any indication that a woman is menstruating is considered shameful. Women are taught to hide menstrual products from view and are discouraged from discussing their periods in mixed company. Many men also do not understand how

menstruation functions and are prone to believing negative stereotypes about it. Menstruation is used as a tool against women to accuse them of being irrational and incapable. While women are no longer believed to be able to kill men with menstrual blood as they were in the Middle Ages, cultural taboo around the female body still exists.

Along with the female body, female sexuality is still viewed negatively. While medieval thought held that women were more lustful than men, the opposite view seems to be held now. Women are thought of as gatekeepers to sex who must be persuaded or even tricked into it. However, the idea of a sexually free woman still makes people uncomfortable. This can be seen in attempts to prevent women from accessing birth control, safe and legal abortions, and sexual healthcare in general. While women are no longer accused of witchcraft, any woman who does not want children and in particular women who have abortions are maligned by modern society, an echo of Kramer's witches who caused miscarriages and killed children.

Women who do not conform to modern society's expectations of womanhood, and in particular white womanhood, are often targeted and labelled as "other." Women of color, fat women, disabled women, LGBTQ+ women, and women who otherwise do not conform are all at risk of being labelled as monstrous or dangerous, much like they were in the witch hunts. Monsters are a sign of what happens when boundaries are pushed too far, and transgressive bodies and behavior are often taken as signs of monstrosity. Like Mélusine, a woman can act as a perfect wife, a perfect mother, and a perfect Christian, but if she steps beyond the boundaries of what society expects of her, she can still be condemned.

Women in the Middle Ages were thought of as inferior to men. Considered closer to sin, they were dangerous and deceptive in nature. Their bodies were thought to be venomous and mysterious, and they could be used for magic that could change the hearts of men or destroy them entirely. Thought of as potential monsters, they were reliant on men for salvation even when they were thought of as powerful progenitors of noble bloodlines. Women were both beholden to men and a danger to them, a thought echoed throughout the centuries by clergymen, poets, and students. With the *Malleus Maleficarum*, these anxieties solidified into a panic that claimed the lives of thousands. Even when the witchcraft panic faded, the idea that women were aberrant and inferior refused to die and is present still in modern society. The figure of the witch, the femme fatale, the seductive fairy, the monstrous woman still exists in modern consciousness, revealing that perhaps our fear is not of women themselves, but what horrors they are capable of.

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