2020

The Vanishing Lady: Mélusine, Emblems, and Jacques Yver's *Le Printemps d’Yver* (1572)

Joshua M. Blaylock

*Independent Scholar*

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**Recommended Citation**


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In the opening pages of Le Printemps d’Yver (1572), the narrator evokes Mélusine, the cursed half-snake fairy queen, as the architect of the idyllic castle that serves as the locus amoenus of the novella collection. And yet, as suddenly as she appears, Mélusine vanishes from the text with only one other explicit reference to her at the transition point between the third and fourth novellas. While literary scholars have analyzed the two explicit references to Mélusine in Le Printemps as well as Yver’s emblematic prose, none has systematically explored the possibility that her presence pervades the novella collection in ways beyond the two explicit references to her. Viewing Yver’s work through the dual lenses of Mélusine and emblems, this paper suggests that although she is largely absent from the textual surface, like the vanishing point of a painting, Mélusine’s invisible presence pervades the work.

INTRODUCTION

In 1572, Le Printemps d’Yver by Jacques Yver, a collection of five novellas surrounded by an elaborate frame-tale, burst onto the French literary scene. Le Printemps recounts the story of six nobles, who, in order to escape the violence and misery following the Third War of Religion, gather in an opulent castle and tell a series of five tales. The five stories are framed by debates and discussions between the storytellers that are modeled on novella collections such as the Decameron and the Heptaméron. In Le Printemps, Yver vastly develops the frame-tale structure established by these anterior models by combining poetry, prose, detailed ekphrastic description of the architecture of the locus amoenus, and humanist discourses on topics such as love and fortune. Yver’s work was both popular and influential for his contemporaries with more than thirty separate editions of the text appearing from 1572 to 1635.1 One contemporary translation of the work also appeared in English by Henrie Wotton in

1 Yver, Le Printemps d’Yver, IX and 540-4.
1578 entitled *A Courtlie controversie of Cupids Cautels: Conteyning five Tragicall Histories, very pithie, pleasant, pitiful and profitable.* However, around the mid-seventeenth century, it dropped out of sight and remained relatively obscure until the mid-1970s. Since then, *Le Printemps* has received more attention from scholars.

In the opening pages of *Le Printemps d’Yver*, the narrator designates Mélusine, the legendary cursed half-snake fairy queen, as the architect of the idyllic castle, the titular *Le Printemps*, in which the narrators of the five novellas find shelter to tell and debate their stories. This reference to Mélusine as the architect of the *locus amoenus* of *Le Printemps* evokes a legend extending deep into medieval folklore and tradition. A prose version of the tale commissioned by Jean de Berry, Jean d’Arras’s *Mélusine ou la noble histoire de Lusignan*, appeared in 1393. A second poetic version by Coudrette, *Le Roman de Mélusine*, appeared in 1401. A rich tapestry that weaves together chronicles of war, genealogy, and conquest with supernatural and otherworldly events, the Mélusine legend was widely disseminated in Europe during the sixteenth century starting with Thüring von Ringoltingen’s illustrated German translation of the legend first published in Basel by Bernhard Richel in 1473/74. Given her important place in the cultural and literary landscape of Europe from the fifteenth century to the present, Mélusine has generated a substantial field of contemporary scholarship.

As the company of storytellers moves through the castle of *Le Printemps*, they view and interpret several pieces of Mélusine’s architecture that are constructed as emblems, which inspire their stories. This essay argues that to read Yver’s text from the perspective

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2 Yver, *Le Printemps*, CXI.

3 For an extensive bibliography see Yver, *Le Printemps*, 691-706.

4 For an exploration of the importance of Richel’s woodcuts on the iconography of Mélusine that would influence the reception of her legend in Europe, see Zeldenrust, “Serpent or Half-Serpent: Bernard Richel’s Mélusine and the Making of a Western European Icon,” 19-41.

5 For a recent bibliography of the scholarship on Mélusine, see *Melusine’s Footprint: Tracing the Legacy of a Medieval Myth*, 405-428.
of Mélusine and emblematic narrative processes is to reveal that her invisible presence permeates the novella collection. After first pausing to examine Mélusine’s initial appearance and subsequent disappearing act in *Le Printemps*, this essay will follow traces of her legend that appear in Yver’s work in the Third Day’s tale. The essay will conclude by analyzing Mélusine’s reappearance in a magical grotto following the Third Day’s novella. The analysis presented in these pages argues that the two references to her are more important than they might appear. Closer inspection reveals that Yver’s innovation consists in the invention of a technique of emblematic and symbolic layering that borrows from a number of traditional and subversive forms that may have appealed to both Catholic and Protestant readers in a moment of burgeoning optimism immediately preceding the marriage of Henri IV and Marguerite de Valois in 1572.

**MÉLUSINE, ARCHITECT OF *LE PRINTEMPS***

In the opening pages of his work, Yver explicitly describes Mélusine as the architect of the castle, *Le Printemps*, stating that it was, “Built in the past, as we know for certain, by the famous fairy, Mélusine, in order to show the excellence of her hidden arts, leaving within it several traces of her miracles, interpreted by prophecies, which I will not attempt to narrate.”

Drawing upon Mélusine, the narrator evokes a legend that has deep roots in the medieval French literary tradition and would have been readily recognizable to a sixteenth-century audience. Along with the explicit mention of Mélusine, the narrator also focuses the reader’s attention on several important characteristics of the fairy queen. First, he evokes the central theme of invisibility and visibility at the heart of the Mélusine legend juxtaposing the expressions “monstrer [to reveal]” and “cachez [hidden]” on either side of her arts, thereby placing Mélusine’s architecture precisely between what is hidden and what is revealed. Angela Weisl aptly notes:

6 Yver, *Le Printemps*, 22-3. “Basti jadis comme on tient pour certain par la tant renommée Fée Mellusine, pour montrer l’excellence de ses arts cachez, y laissant plusieurs marques de ses miracles, interprétées par prophéties, que je ne deduiray.” All translations the author’s unless otherwise noted.
Her narrative might be said to be the frame or the margin—her story is revealed at the start in Jean’s version and at the end in Coudrette’s—and yet she is the preoccupying concern of the narrative and the critical tradition that follows. She demands the most attention while not occupying the most space.\(^7\)

This theme is further reinforced by the narrator’s use of preterition to indicate that he is keeping a number of her marvels hidden from the reader’s gaze. Second, he emphasizes Mélusine’s supernatural nature identifying her as a “Fée [fairy].” He further amplifies Mélusine’s magical and otherworldly qualities using the term “miracles” to describe the architectural marvels that constitute “traces” of her in the castle and grounds around it. The narrator suggests that Mélusine is also divine, a point driven home by the mention that her miraculous traces must be interpreted through “prophetie.”

What does the allusion to Mélusine at the outset of Yver’s text mean in the sixteenth-century French context? Marie-Ange Maignan points out that in Yver’s novella collection, the castle, Le Printemps, “comes to replace the real castle of Lusignan (situated approximately twenty kilometers from Poitiers) that is linked to the legend of this fairy, presented under the guise of magician and prophetess.”\(^8\) For Maignan, Mélusine’s magical and prophetic nature are linked to the fictional castle of Le Printemps, which is nevertheless anchored in the real world because of the fairy queen’s association with Lusignan and Poitou. The Mélusine legend, as Jacques le Goff and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie note in their seminal article on the subject, has deep roots in French folklore and legend stretching back to at least the twelfth century. Le Goff and Ladurie argue that one of the most important transitions from the medieval myths and legends in Arras’s text is her role as architect and builder.\(^9\) Alexandra Hoernel presents an overview of the ways in which a diverse range


\(^8\) Yver, 22, n. 21. vient supplanter le bien réel château de Lusignan (situé à une vingtaine de kilomètres de Poitiers) lié à la légende de cette fée, présenté sous sa figure de magicienne ("arts cachez") et prophétesse.

of authors referenced and deployed recognizable iconography from the Mélusine legend in sixteenth-century France. Hoernel points out, “We know that the transmission of the novel is a success, that the fairy becomes the emblem of enchantment and interests both a learned public and a popular one. In parallel, the fictions of the Renaissance make frequent allusions to the melusinian story.”

In addition to enumerating a number of humanist writers who portray Mélusine in their works, such as Rabelais, Aneau, Brantôme, and Du Fail, Hoernel points out three major modes of reception of her tale in sixteenth-century France: a strong regional identification with Poitou, the central importance of the staging of the forbidden during the bath scene, and the syncretic combination of humanist with medieval fiction in works that reference her. All of these characteristics are operative in Yver’s *Le Printemps*. For her part, Margaret Harp, whose recent essay explores the influence of Virgil’s *Eclogues* on the descriptions of the bucolic castle and monuments in *Le Printemps d’Yver*, also notes the allusion to Mélusine pointing out that “[e]vocation of the well-known Mélusine establishes, moreover, a sense of female ambiguity. [...] Yver does not repeat this legend – one which would have been well-known to his readers – but its theme of secrets and suspicion between lovers fits in well with the tales about to be told.”

While there are no woodcut illustrations in *Le Printemps d’Yver*, Yver uses the literary technique of *ekphrasis*, or a description of an object, to display for the reader the monuments, architecture, and gardens of the castle, which are so filled with supernatural wonder that they inspire the stories of the collection. Yver’s ekphrastic descriptions are also constructed as emblems and the *devisants* often allude to emblematic images that circulated in the period.

10 Hoernel, “La fiction et le mythe, lectures humanistes du récit mélusinien (1517-1560),” 162.
Additionally, like the classic emblem tripartite structure of title or *inscriptio*, woodcut picture or *pictura*, and accompanying verse or *subscriptio*, at their most basic level, Yver’s emblems consist of an ekphrastic *pictura*, which is often a description an object such as a painted scene, architectural structure, or statuary, a *subscriptio*, which explains the meaning of the enigmatic scene or object, and an *inscriptio*, which gives an ideological “frame” to the image and takes the form of a pithy saying or adage.

Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to fully explore the interaction between the iconography of the hybrid fairy and emblem literature in Europe or in France generally in the sixteenth century, it is worthy to note that one of the primary figures associated with the development of emblem literature in France, Barthélemy Aneau, mentions her twice. Aneau first alludes to Mélusine his 1549 translation of Alciato’s *Emblemata* entitled, *Picta Poesis*. In this work she appears in a commentary added to Alciato’s emblem “Sur le Blason des armes Mylanoises.”

Mélusine is also the central figure in *Alector ou le coq* (1560) where she appears in disguise as the character Priscaraxe. Marie Madeleine Fontaine has noted, “The mental relationship between emblem collections and the text is so evident that we have been able to speak of it as a working emblem dictionary.” With Mélusine as the liminal emblem, Aneau’s work shares striking similarities to Yver’s *Le Printemps*, where the fairy queen is also evoked at the beginning of the text.

Fittingly, Fradin’s publisher’s mark on the title page of the first edition of *Alector* features Mélusine in an elaborate woodcut (fig. 1), which Marie-Madeleine Fontaine proposes was perhaps suggested to Fradin by Aneau.


14 For a detailed exploration of the ways in which Aneau’s text reappropriates many of the themes associated with the Mélusine legend that circulated in humanist fiction in sixteenth-century France, see Hoernel, “La fiction et le mythe, lectures humanistes du récit mélusinien (1517-1560),” 173-7.

15 Aneau, *Alector ou le coq: Histoire fabuleuse*, XCIX. La relation mentale entre les recueils d’emblèmes et le texte est si évidente que nous avons pu parler d’un dictionnaire d’emblèmes en ordre de marche.

The image presents Mélusine with wings and looking up. Her right hand holds her twisting snake tail, the shape of which combined with her gesture calls to mind the Ouroboros, which has a long history of symbolism related to infinity, renewal, and return. Her left hand conveys Mélusine’s primary association as builder and architect because it rests upon a foundation inscribed in Greek. The top word of the inscription, Fradin, is transliterated in the accusative case. Fradin also has a rare adjectival sense of understanding, wise, or shrewd. The bottom word is the nominative, logos, which has a range of meanings related to writing and speech. The middle word is the verb present active indicative, and it has a range of meanings that gives the following translations “logos takes up Fradin,” “logos destroys Fradin,” or perhaps “logos makes away with Fradin.” These multiple meanings in onomastic wordplay also appear to mirror some of the multiple senses of Mélusine’s proper name and the ambiguities of her character as well as those found
in Yver’s title, *Le Printemps d’Yver*. The alchemical and enigmatic resonances abound in this image, particularly since Paracelsus, who was censored in France for his writings critical of the Church, had placed Mélusine’s elemental association to water at the heart of his conception of the alchemical process.\(^{17}\)

Having explored the importance of this first mention of Mélusine in Yver’s work and its implications in the sixteenth-century context, it is important to highlight several themes and episodes of the tale that are central to the “melusinian vulgate” to which Yver alludes in *Le Printemps d’Yver*.

**MEDIEVAL MÉLUSINE**

Jean d’Arras’s *Mélusine ou la noble histoire de Lusignan*, recounts the mythological foundation of the historical Lusignan dynasty, which, at the height of its power had held territories in Jerusalem and Cyprus in addition to its regional holdings centered around the castle at Lusignan. Mélusine’s punishment is the first important element to highlight in relation to Yver’s novella collection. After she and her sisters imprison her father in a mountain in Northumberland, Présine, her mother, curses Mélusine to assume the form of a serpent from the waist down every Saturday. However, along with the imposition of this curse, Présine tells her daughter that she will find happiness should she marry a man who promises to respect the taboo and never reveal her secret. From this moment forward, Arras firmly establishes her hybridity as the defining trait of Mélusine’s character.

The meeting of Raymondin and Mélusine is a central episode that will influence later writers. The episode begins as Raymondin and his uncle, the Count of Aymerie, who had left Poitiers to hunt, come upon a ferocious wild boar. At the tragic climax of the battle, Raymondin tries to aid his uncle and kill the boar with his spear. However, “glancing off the animal’s back, the boar spear slipped from Raymondin’s grasp; its blade then entered, at navel level, the belly of the count—now fallen to his knees—piercing him through and through.”\(^{18}\) Arras describes with precision that Raymondin’s sword pierces his uncle through the belly button, killing him. However,

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this accidental parricide also perversely fulfills his uncle’s prophecy, a fact that Raymondin recognizes and links to Fortune’s role in the murder, “Alas! Treacherous Fortune, how can you be so perverse? You’ve made me kill the one who loved me so, the one who had been so good to me!” As early as 1500, Mélusine was listed amongst a number of figures associated with death caused by “Accident” or Fortune. This association hinges upon the death of Raymondin’s uncle in the boar hunt. Hoernel further points out that the allusion to the boar ensures that Mélusine will also be associated with Venus because of the oblique reference to the tragic death of Adonis.

Perhaps the most famous scene of the legend occurs when Raymondin, jealously acting upon his brother’s suggestion that she may be engaged in adultery, bores a hole in her door and:

saw Melusine in the basin. Down to her navel, she had the form of a woman, gracefully combing her hair. But from the navel down, her body had the form of a serpent’s tale. As big around as a barrel for storing herring, it was, and tremendously long. She lashed the water so forcefully with the tail that it made it splash all the way up to the vaulted ceiling of the chamber.

The central thematic of vision structures the description of Raymondin’s first transgression in several ways. First, Arras places emphasis on the voyeuristic monocular eye piercing into the hidden and invisible space of Mélusine’s transformation. Second, the roundness of the eye and the hole are reflected in the description of Mélusine’s bath as a “cuve [basin],” her belly button, which echoes the hole in the doorway and is situated at frontier of her hybrid form, and her tail, which Arras describes using a simile of a large round “tonne [barrel]” that holds herring. Third, the narrator amplifies the detail of the violence with which she is agitating the

19 Arras, A Bilingual Edition, 88-9, “Hee, faulse Fortune! Comment es tu si perverse que tu m’as fait occire cellui qui tant m’amoit, cellui qui tant de bien m’avoit fait!”


water with her tail describing with spatial precision that the water reaches the vaulted ceiling of her bath chamber. Finally, as Caroline Prud’homme has pointed out, the scene is tinged with a humorous tone because “the eroticism of the metaphoric penetration and of the seductive mermaid sharply contrasts with the workaday barrel of salted fish. Jean completely deflects Melusine’s Otherness; he defuses any frightful response or a devilish interpretation by amusing his readers.”

All of the elements of this primal episode of the legend are found in an illustration from the first printed French edition of the legend edited by Adam Steinschaber and published in Geneva in 1478 (fig. 2).

Figure 2. Jean d’Arras, Mélusine ou la noble histoire de Lusignan, Geneva: Adam Steinschaber, 1478, fol. 116r. Image courtesy of the Bibliothèque Mazarine.

Introduced by a title text summarizing the episode, the woodcut is divided into three parts from left to right. In the first

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third of the image, Mélusine’s nudity and her gesture of covering herself demonstrate the betrayal of her secret. The artist has chosen to change some details from the episode in order to make the image embody the key moments of this episode. First, Mélusine is neither combing her hair nor is her tail violently agitating the water. Instead, the direction of her gaze clearly signals that, being supernatural, she is aware of her betrayal and ashamed at her exposure. Like the aperture of a camera obscura, which inverts the image projected on its inner surface, the hole in the door penetrates the divide between the invisible, dark, secret, and supernatural world and the visible, luminous, exposed, and mundane one, which the crescent moon shaped aperture reinforces because the initial meeting of the pair at the Fountain of Thirst occurred while “the moon glowed brightly.”

Situated at the boundary between the two worlds, the opening serves as a focal point of the viewer’s attention and also evokes perspective.

In spite of his betrayal, Mélusine forgives Raymondin for this transgression because it did not violate the totality of her taboo, namely that Raymondin did not reveal her secret to anyone else. However, tragically, he does just that in the episode that constitutes the final important one for the analysis of Yver’s Le Printemps. After their son, Geoffroy la Grande-Dent, who is a ferocious warrior with one boar’s tooth, commits fratricide by killing his brother, Fremont, along with one hundred of his fellow monks at the Abby of Maillezais, Raymondin blames Geoffroy’s crime on the monstrous animal nature inherited from his mother. In a fit of rage, he tragically reveals Mélusine’s secret and blames her for the war crime exclaiming, “Ah! Sordid serpent! By God, thou and all of thy actions are naught but sorcery! Never will any child born of thy womb come to any good end!”

His accusation carries a double meaning of betrayal because he reveals her serpentine nature but also couples it with an accusation tinged with religious overtones because “faux” means

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24 Arras, A Bilingual Edition, 596-7. “Hee, tres faulse serpent, par Dieu, ne toy ne tes fais ne sont que fantosme, ne ja hoir que tu ayes porté ne vendra a bon chief en la fin.”
perfidious or cruel in Middle French. Raymondin’s pun on the word “faux,” which also means the part of the human body where the chest torso meets the pelvis, the boundary of Mélusine’s hybrid form, functions as a fundamental rebuke of her humanity because he denies her sex, which had produced his lineage. The replacement of “faulse Fortune” with “tres faulse serpent” establishes a direct parallel between the key episodes in which Raymondin loses someone precious to him.

THE THIRD DAY OF LE PRINTEMPS D’YVER

After having participated actively in the various dances and eaten, the company in Le Printemps d’Yver comes upon one of Mélusine’s architectural marvels, an emblematic fountain composed of statues and inscribed tablets, which is dedicated to Leander and Hero, a tragic tale from Greek legend. The company’s subsequent discussion of the legend inspires Bel-Accueil, one of the male storytellers, to frame his novella as an exemplum of Fortune’s responsibility in the vicissitudes of love. His tale, the third of the collection, recounts a tragic love triangle between Clarinde, Adilon, and the Seigneur d’Alègre set in the Italian Wars.

In stating that his novella will serve as an exemplum for Fortune’s role in tragic love, Bel-Accueil both makes Fortune the center of the narrative and also activates an entire iconographical field of emblematic representation. A good example of emblematic representations of Fortune can be found in the first emblem book in the French vernacular, Guillaume de la Perrière’s Le Théâtre des bons engins (1539) (fig. 3).

25 Huguet, Dictionnaire de la langue française du 16e siècle.
In this emblem, the *pictura* presents a nude woman and man with their eyes blindfolded. The winged woman is shown leading the man to danger, symbolized by the large pit, which reinforces the precariousness of the situation. The woman’s lifted left leg, the wings on her feet, and the billowing sail all combine to give a sense of movement to the scene. The forelocks, the wings, the nudity, the winged feet, the sail, and the blinded figures are all tied to common iconographic representations of the period that conflate Fortune, Nemesis, Occasio, and Venus. The position of the woman’s left hand is strikingly close to the male figure’s genitals, which further suggests that Eros, who was also often depicted blindfolded, and thus...

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26 For a detailed exploration of the changing representations of Fortune in the early modern period, see Kiefer, “The Conflation of Fortuna and Occasio in Renaissance Thought and Iconography,” 1-27.
sexual desire are staged in this densely layered woodcut as well. The subscrip
tio
poem on the facing page both explains the image and serves as a warning to those who would follow Fortune blindly.

With the iconography of Mélusine and the emblematic representation of Fortune in mind, this essay can now turn to Bel-
Accueil’s tale, the third novella, which begins by introducing Adilon, one of the main rivals for the affection of Clarinde, the niece of the Duke of Mantua, whose castle forms the setting for the tragic tale. Acting upon the bad advice of his friend, Lucidan, Adilon hides his desire for Clarinde and insinuates himself into the household through flattering her mother, which engenders a great degree of disgust on the part of Clarinde. Into this situation of unrequited love and bad friendship, the narrator introduces the Seigneur d’Alègre, who lost his father, was captured after the disastrous defeat of marauding French forces at Ravenna, and is held prisoner by Clarinde’s uncle, the Duke of Mantua. The meeting of the Seigneur d’Alègre and Clarinde constitutes the first link in the inexorable chain of events that will lead to the tragic deaths of all three main characters. The scene occurs when Clarinde’s uncle:

brought him hunting in the woods near his castle, where the two of them chased after a deer that had run away with such speed that they lost all of their company without thinking about it, and, without any cares other than who would be the first to kill the beast. And they were quite astounded when, totally lost, they found themselves near a beautiful and delectable fountain, so well covered with foliage that the entry was totally blocked from the sun.27

The narrator chooses to tinge the description of the scene with imagery that echoes the Mélusine legend in several ways. First, while the two men’s prey is a deer rather than a boar, the description of their haste and wandering in the forest without their company mirrors that of the scene in which Raymondin accidentally kills his uncle. Third, Alègre and Clarinde meet at a fountain, which, coupled

27 Yver, Le Printemps, 268, “le mena chasser en un bois prochain de son chasteau, où tous deux ils coururent un cerf desparqué de si vive affection, qu’ils perdirent tous leurs gens sans y penser, et sans avoir autre soucy que à qui seroit premier à la mort de la beste. Et furent fort esbahis quand tous egarez ils se trouverent pres d’une belle et delicieuse fon
teine, si bien couverte de feuillade que l’entrée en estoit totalement deflendue au soleil.”
with the previous description of hunting, resonates with echoes of the Mélusine legend. This scene also reveals Yver’s technique of allusion by arranging elements to be just noticeable to resonate with iconography from the Mélusine legend while at the same time modifying elements such as the deer replacing the boar to attenuate the tone of the scene making it more romanesque and sentimental, which would have presumably appealed to a readership steeped in works such as *Amadis de Gaule*.

After several more episodes recounting the rivalry between the Seigneur d’Alègre and Adilon as well as the courtship of Clarinde, the tragic love story builds to a pivotal scene, another example of Yver’s emblematic narrative technique that calls forth an oblique allusion to Mélusine. The scene is structured around Clarinde unwittingly confessing her love for the Seigneur d’Alègre to Adilon. Because he has the confidence of her mother and can come and go in the castle as he pleases, Adilon, “whilst frequenting the private quarters, it happened that one day, traipsing from chamber to chamber, he spied the child alone, combing her beautiful thick hair in the sunlight.” At the outset of this key scene, a fragment alluding to the Mélusine legend emerges because Clarinde is brushing her hair in front of a mirror, which is the first element that Arras describes in the scene of Raymondin’s transgression. Overcome with a desire to play a trick on her, Adilon runs into the room, seizes Clarinde from behind, and covers her eyes. Her response to his gesture troubles him because while shocked at first, she immediately assumes that Adilon is the Seigneur d’Alègre because of the playfulness of his gesture. Blinding her and thus masking his identity, Adilon finds himself in a double bind in that he is suddenly privy to the secret of her love for Alègre. And yet, he cannot reveal his identity now for he would compromise Clarinde’s reputation. Bel-Accueil describes Adilon’s dilemma:

If the poor prince was surprised at such words, and very much ashamed, having found what he had not been looking for through his curiosity, I will leave it to you to judge. But it is easy to assume that he would have liked to be far from there; and he did not even know by which path to escape, for he knew that the embarrassment that the princess would feel in seeing him, could only damage him, as the counter-example of Gyges and Candaules showed him. And so, deprived of any good council, he did not know of anything better to do to save his honor than to continue holding the blond head of the princess.29

Thrust into the midst of a situation that, until this moment, had been merely a suspicion, Adilon wishes to leave immediately to protect both the princess and his own position of power. And yet, Adilon is trapped because he knows that if he tries to leave, he risks revealing his identity and thus engendering “dommage [harm]” to his own reputation. More importantly, the description of Adilon’s shame and surprise is quite similar to the description of Raymondin’s reaction upon seeing Mélusine in her Saturday bath.

Bel-Accueil further reinforces the dangerous position of both Adilon and Clarinde by invoking their plight as an inversion of the story of Gyges and Candaules, a story that is structured around a love triangle, secrecy, and the gaze, found in Herodotus’s Histories.30 Herodotus recounts that after having praised the beauty of his wife and wishing for Gyges to see this beauty with his own eyes, King Candaules arranges for Gyges to hide in the Queen’s bedroom in order to see her naked. After seeing the Queen naked, Gyges attempts to slip out of the room unseen but the Queen notices him. She tells him that he must either kill King Candaules, his friend, and assume the throne with her as his wife, or die on the spot for his transgression. He chooses to kill the King and assumes the throne ruling for 38 years. In alluding to Gyges and Candaules and stating that Adilon is the contrary exemplum, the narrator is thus

29 Yver, Le Printemps, 283-4. “Si le pauvre Prince fut estonné de tels mots, et bien camus ayant trouvé ce qu’il ne cherchoit pas par sa curiosité, je le vous laisse à juger. Mais il est facile à presumer qu’il eust voulu estre bien loing de là, et se ne sçavoit par quel chemin en sortir, sçachant que la honte qu’en recevroit la Princesse, le voyant, ne luy pourroit tourner qu’à dommage ; comme le contraire exemple de Gigès et Candalles luy donnoit tesmoignage. Parquoy destitué de tout bon conseil, ne sçavoit faire autre chose pour sauver son honneur que tenir toujours la teste dorée de la Princesse.”

30 Herodotus, The Histories, 5-8.
evoking a number of themes that have striking parallels with the Mélu- sine legend such as voyeurism, secrecy, broken fraternal bonds of friendship, and the woman, who perceives the violation of her intimate space.

The pivotal scene between Clarinde and Adilon exhibits several other striking emblematic characteristics. Although there is no explicit ekphrastic description working as a *pictura*, the episode of mistaken identity is structured in highly visual terms, which are cemented as the action slows and stops as the two characters, with Adilon’s indecision, become frozen in a kind of “tableau vivant.” The use of a contrastive simile cements the scene’s status as an emblematic image and thus functions as a *subscriptio*. Also, like the emblem of Fortune presented earlier (fig. 3), this scene demonstrates the ability of emblematic representation to conflate several layers of recognizable imagery. First, the narrator explicitly links the scene to Herodotus’s tale. Second, by also evoking the motif of “blindness” because Adilon has covered Clarinde’s eyes, Bel-Accueil links her to an iconographic image of the blindness and nudity of Fortune (fig. 3), the ideological frame of the tale, because Clarinde’s intentions are now transparent to Adilon, whom the narrator describes, “if he went away quite troubled in his thoughts, he didn’t leave the Princess surprised, for as soon as she had suddenly turned her head in order to see the one fleeing, wasn’t able to perceive him, on account of the veil that her hair, which covered her face, created.”

Like Fortune, Clarinde is exposed and thus symbolically naked but also literally blinded by her own hair, which adds a somewhat comic aftermath to the revelation that echoes the scene in Mélusine. Third, the scene also suggests a parallel with the episode where Raymondin spies upon Mélusine in her bath chamber because Clarinde immediately suspects that it was Adilon, whose devious character she has already discerned in the novella, and not the Seigneur d’Alègre as the narrator describes: “And what made her more angry was the suspicion that

31 Yver, *Le Printemps*, 284. “s’il s’en va bien troublé en sa pensée, il ne laissa la Princesse moins estonnée, qui combien qu’elle eust soudain tourné la teste pour voir le fuyard, ne le peut appercevoir, pour le voile que luy donnerent ses cheveux qui luy entournoient la face...”
it was Adilon, whom she hated more than he loved her.”32 Adilon thus comes to represent an ambiguous Gyges, the blind fool guided by Fortune, and Raymondin, while Clarinde becomes the Queen in Herodotus’s and Plato’s texts, Fortune herself, and Mélusine. However, Yver’s use of the story from *The Histories* as *scriptio*, in true emblematic fashion, contains a surprising twist: Clarinde, unlike the Queen from Herodotus’s *Histories*, is at the mercy of the man who will witness her unwitting confession. In this moment, Clarinde shares uncanny similarities to Mélusine because the fairy queen was also at the mercy of Fortune. Because of her mother’s curse, Mélusine risks exposure when bathing and she is undone by her husband’s jealousy, the ensuing transgressive voyeurism, and his public denunciation of her, which culminates in the tragic denouement of her legend.

Yver’s tale also ends tragically, Adilon, crazed with jealousy, decides to murder the Seigneur d’Alègre using an apple saturated with poison. In this scene, the narrator chooses to make the apple symbolize the hand of Fortune in the tragic conclusion of the story because Adilon’s murderous plan goes awry when Alègre decides to give the beautiful apple to Clarinde, leading to her slow laborious death. Clarinde’s murder is the final episode in the novella that summons forth two additional fragmentary allusions to Mélusine. When Alègre realizes Adilon is responsible, the narrator compares him to a boar stating, “This wretched one deserved the payment for his misdeed, for, like the boar feeling savage throws itself furiously upon he who had delivered the blow, in the same way the Seigneur d’Alègre, although he was troubled by his furor and the resolution of his death, had no sooner seen his poisoner than he ran towards him with his sword in hand.”33 First, in this final example, Alègre taking on a hybrid animal form through the evocation of the boar

32 Yver, *Le Printemps*, 285. *Et qui plus la faschoit estoit le soupçon que ce fut Adilon, qu’elle hayoit plus qu’il ne l’aimoit.*

33 Yver, *Le Printemps*, 291. *ce miserable cerchoit le payement de son mesfaict, car comme le sanglier se sentant feru se gette furieusement sur celuy qui luy a donné le coup, ainsi le seigneur d’Alegre, bien qu’il fut troublé de sa fureur et de l’arrest de sa mort, n’eust plustost veu son empoisonneur qu’il luy courut sus l’espée au poing.*
activates one of the central motifs of the Mélusine legend linked to Fortune. Second, the choice of the apple is laden with symbolic, religious, and iconographical significance. Bel-Accueil drives home the importance of the apple with his description of the funerary monument, which Jerome Schwartz has analyzed for its emblematic associations and qualities,34 that represents the trio with a kneeling Alègre “presenting to the Princess an apple of the same stone, as if it were an Adam tempting Eve. And the figure of Adilon, whose body had been returned to his country, had his shoulder pierced from behind and was spraying venom upon this fruit.”35 The mention of venom and the apple call forth a final oblique allusion to Mélusine’s serpentine attributes and also activates biblical imagery associated with temptation and snakes.36 However, like the camera obscura that inverts the projected image, Yver makes clear through a rather ironic inversion that the gender roles of this other primordial biblical scene are reversed.

MÉLUSINE REDUX

After hearing the tale, the devisants of the frame-tale retire for the evening and meet the next day to debate Bel-Accueil’s story. However, the debate begins only after they stumble upon another emblem, one more example of Mélusine symbolism, that summons forth the second mention of her name. As the narrator states:

under the conduct of their Sybil (who was the lady of the place) they entered into a rustic grotto, so well and perfectly elaborated that Nature confessed itself vanquished by human artifice. For the snails, lizards, beavers, frogs, crayfish, shells, stones, with all of the terrestrial and aquatic animals were represented in such living likeness.37


35 Yver, Le Printemps, 302. “présente à la Princesse une pomme de mesme pierre, comme si c’ estoit un Adam voulant tanter Eve ; et la figure d’Adilon (duquel le corps fut porté en son pays) est par le derriere (avec son espaule percée) qui respandoit le venin sur ce fruict.”

36 For an exploration of the representation of the woman-headed serpent in relationship to temptation and sin, see Burns, “A Snake Tailed Woman,” 191-213,

37 Yver, Le Printemps, 320-1. “sous la conduitte de leur Sybille (qui estoit la dame du lieu) ils entrent en une grotte rustique, si bien et naïvement elaborée que Nature se confesse vaincue par l’artifice humain. Car les limasses, lesard, taupes, grenoilles, sauterelles, coquilles, cailloux, avec tous animaux terrestres et aquaticques, estoient representez si au vif.”
In the company of “Sybil,” an allusion resonating with melusinian connotations because Yver had described the architecture of the castle using the word prophecy, the devisants find themselves in a cave, an iconic local of poetic inspiration, and surrounded by a myriad of water animals that include snails, the company savor the craftsmanship that has sculpted an allegory of the four seasons. At this point, Yver mentions Mélusine stating, “And one cannot even compare to this invention, the very well-known work of the Tuileries, of Meudon, or of Anet, or the quite artificial garden of Liencour, in Normandy. For as I have already mentioned, the Fairy Mélusine who built this castle had employed all of the demons and small hobgoblins, who are most expert in the arts of pottery and sculpture.”

This second mention of Mélusine is further amplified by the narrator’s direct intervention in the scene using the first person and emphasizing his previous mention of her at the beginning of the text. The festive autumnal harvest scene representing Bacchus and his entourage dancing in revelry is yet another example of Yver’s emblematic technique. Described by the narrator through an ekphrastic *pictura*, the sculpted scene is accompanied by a poetic inscription representing the dancing company’s song. The song takes the form of a Ronsardian strophic ode consisting of 14 heptasyllabic *huitains*, which are “escrite en fueilles de pampre avec la bave des limassons (323-4)”

In mentioning Meudon and drawing upon Ronsard for his model, it appears that Yver is making an oblique comparison of his rustic grotto to another poetic grotto described by Ronsard in *Eclogue III ou chant pastoral sur les nöpces de Monsieur Charles Duc de Lorraine, et Madame Claude, Fille Deuxième du Roy Henri II* (1559). In addition to the allusions to Ronsard, the emblematic resonances in this passage are striking. While formally similar to

38 Yver, *Le Printemps*, 321-2. “Et ne faut comparer à ce figment, le tant renommé ouvrage des Tuileries, de Medon, ou d’Anet, ou le jardin tant artificiel de Liencour, en Normandie. Car comme j’ay desja dit, la Fée Mellusine qui bastit ce chasteau avoit employé tous les demons et farfadets plus experts en l’art de potterie et sculpture.”

an emblem with an ekphrastic description and accompanying poetic text, Yver uses an iconic emblem of secrecy, a snail, to communicate through its secreted slime, which would presumably have a shiny or mirror-like appearance, the celebratory song of praise to Bacchus.

Snails and secrecy are represented in a superb emblem, “Secrecy is to be praised.” (fig. 4) from Gilles Corrozet’s *Hecantographie* (1543). In this emblem, Gilles Corrozet fashions an elaborate *mise-en-abyme* of the relationship between visual perception and secrecy, which is central to both the Mélusine legend and Yver’s *Le Printemps*.


In the *pictura*, a snail emerging from a small cave occupies the center of the woodcut. The roundness of the spiral snail shell is further reflected in the dark or veiled cave opening situated directly away from which the snail is moving. The two subsequent verse *subscriptio* that follow the *picture* connect the snail with the themes
of discretion and defense in secrecy. In her recent analysis of this emblem, Elizabeth Black points out that the emblem evokes the need to protect the household through discretion and secrecy. Implied in this emblem then is a hidden and secret feminine space that the snail protects with its shell. The emblem thus stages male anxiety about the slippery and dangerous nature of secrets because *louer* can mean “praised” but also “rented”.  

Tom Conley has pointed out that the emblem creates a dissonance between the image and the text because a snail is typically identified with motifs such as *festina lente* or Zeno’s paradox. This dissonance invites the emblem reader to focus more specifically on the woodcut revealing that the snail is also an eye. In fact, “[t]he cave and snail are part of a zoomorphic landscape in which what is seen is what sees. The ocular snail becomes an event: a monocular shape takes form to suggest that its greater body is found elsewhere or beyond the limits of the frame.”

One cannot help but see certain resonances between Corrozet’s emblem and Yver’s appropriation of the snail motif into Mélusine’s emblematic grotto. With the mention of snail slime, Yver condenses emblematic imagery and form represented by the snail with a direct evocation of Mélusine’s chthonian creation (a cave) alongside her association to water, one of the foremost folkloric attributes of Mélusine and also her central elemental aspect according to Parcelsus’s alchemical treatise.

**CONCLUSION**

Although Mélusine is explicitly mentioned only twice in *Le Printemps*, these evocations occur at highly significant moments at the beginning (or edge) and the middle (or visual center) of the text, forming, to push the metaphor a bit further, “lignes de fuite [projection lines]” gesturing towards the episode at the center of the narrative structure where all the details suggest, yet also, obfuscate her presence. Mélusine’s presence permeates the text because she

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40 Black, “Mirror/Window, Reflection/Deflection: Regulating the Gaze Inside and Outside the House in Gilles Corrozet’s *Blasons Domestiques* (1539),” 129-30.

leaves traces of herself in the architectural marvels of the frame-tale and in the third novella. Mélusine plays a prominent yet mostly invisible role in *Le Printemps* making it appear as if Jacques Yver was a canny reader of Jean d’Arras. Like Mélusine’s hybrid body, Yver’s appropriation and reassembly of various contemporary literary genres along with artistic and philosophical discourses makes *Le Printemps d’Yver* a hybrid work. The primal episode of the bath represented as a *camera obscura* also appears to find an echo in Yver’s inverted design. The “fictional” novellas more directly reflect the violence and social upheaval during the Wars of Religion while the frame-tale, which is anchored in Poitou during the actual historical moment of peace from 1570-1572, turn out to be more fantastical than “realistic.”

Mélusine’s legend contains many enigmas that remain unresolved at the end of her tale. Similarly, Yver’s text is also filled with ambiguities and enigmas that remain unresolved. For example, the “dame” of the Château or “Sybil’s” identity remains ambiguous. Are there more traces of Mélusine to be found in other novellas such as the fourth tale that her cave inspires? Yver’s text ends with the promise that this “dame” will finish the narrative project by telling a tale that will capture the true essence of perfect love. However, the story ends with the promise unfulfilled. Like the vanishing point, the *devisants*’ stories as well as their interpretations pivot around the absence of the mysterious hybrid maternal presence of Mélusine, the vanishing lady, at the heart of the narrative structure.

Given that the genesis and publication of *Le Printemps* posthumously before the events of Saint-Barthélemy corresponded to period of war and peace that culminated in one of the most horrific moments in the Wars of Religion, the Saint Barthélemy Day Massacre, scholars have debated Jacques Yver’s religious sympathies. Marie-Ange Maignan’s recent and thorough excavation of the historical record and publication history of this bestseller has convincingly argued that he moved amongst protestant as well as catholic circles. She writes, “his constant political belief which manifests itself finally with an insolence that is both joyous and
melancholy in the flippancy of the hero of the last story. The writers who erred between the two clans and who know the pleasures of the court, while living much longer than Yver, are legion, and Jacques Yver seems to us to be one of those.”42 In his address to the reader, Yver explicitly evokes nationalism and the literary polemics, which Du Bellay’s La Deffense, et illustration de la langue françoyse (1549) and Barthélemy Aneau’s response in another of his works, the Quintil Horatien (1551), provoked. Given that the narrator uses architectural metaphors that owe their power to a fairy queen from medieval French legend throughout Le Printemps d’Yver, it seems that he is also using Mélusine in a way that reflects a nuanced position in the call to create a national language to rival Italian and Latin.

This line of inquiry seems all the more compelling given Lusignan and Poitou’s central role in the Wars of Religion, to which Yver makes repeated references throughout his work. Mélusine appears in a variety of forms throughout a diverse range of authors who shared Evangelical and Protestant sympathies such as Paracelsus, Aneau, Rabelais, and Du Fail before the events leading up to the publication of Le Printemps. Mélusine’s hybridity and alchemical attributes as an elemental force seem to be particularly suited to Yver’s own syncretism. In the buildup to the royal wedding of Henri of Navarre to Marguerite de Valois in August of 1572, a book such as Le Printemps would have appealed to a publisher looking to promote accord between the factions. However, writing in a way that would appeal to this readership was also a fraught enterprise because those suspected of Huguenot sympathies faced assassination, which was the case for Aneau in Lyon in 1562, or exile. That Yver would need to deploy covert literary tactics is not all that surprising when one further considers that his work appeared in the period after the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye (1570), and, as Andrea Frisch has shown, authors of the period used coded language and oblique references to reference contemporary events in the face of religious censorship.

42 Yver, Le Printemps, 38-9. “son sens politique constant, qui se manifeste finalement avec une insolence aussi joyeuse que mélancolique dans la désinvolture des héros de la dernière Histoire. Les écrivains qui ont erré entre les deux clans et connu les plaisirs de la cour – en vivant beaucoup plus longtemps qu’Yver – sont légion, et Jacques Yver nous semble de ceux-là”
and a Royal program of total amnesia.\textsuperscript{43}

This flowering optimism post-1570 was short-lived and would soon give way to the Saint Barthélemy Massacre and the subsequent cycle of war, famine, and violence that followed it. In 1575, the Lyonnais publisher Benoist Rigaud published a pamphlet entitled \textit{La Complaine et lamentation ou prophétie de Melusine à la France}. In it, Mélusine prophesizes the destruction of the Lusignan castle and France.\textsuperscript{44} This suggests that there is more to Yver’s mention of the fairy queen than meets the eye. However, \textit{Le Printemps d’Yver} was published in early 1572 one year after Ronsard’s \textit{Franciade}, in a period of heightened optimism for peace. Phillip John Usher has characterized Ronsard’s epic, “Upon publication, readers were faced with a text that, more than just delivering royal genealogy or celebration thereof, was actually like a Renaissance château full of beautiful objects” (159). This description of Ronsard’s epic, which was his attempt to fulfill Du Bellay’s call for a national epic, also seems suited to a description of \textit{Le Printemps}. The work overflows with beautiful objects that combine visual and textual elements represented through ekphrasis, verse, and prose. However, this beautiful literary château has as its architect and founder the hybrid fairy queen that was a source of regional and national interest in the period. In the final analysis, one of the author’s major innovations seems to consist in his syncretic appropriation of visual and literary sources from sanctioned authors such as Virgil, Ronsard, and Belleau while also incorporating more subversive elements of the French literary landscape such as Mélusine and emblem literature in order to reach a wide readership. Yver’s own proclamations about the ephemerality of existence in his final address to his book seem all the more prophetic when one considers that this masterpiece may not have made it down to us through the centuries had it been published in Paris three years later in a reactionary climate that appears to have targeted Mélusine, the vanishing lady of Yver’s masterpiece, leading

\textsuperscript{43} Frisch, “Montaigne and the Ethics of Memory,” 23-31.

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Remontrances, prophéties et confessions de femmes (1575-1650)}, 5.
to the fulfillment of her prophecy. In 1575, the castle at Lusignan was razed to the ground on the orders of Henri III and visited shortly after by Catherine de Médicis in an episode related by Brantôme.\textsuperscript{45} The Château of Lusignan’s destruction suggests that merely three years after the publication of \textit{Le Printemps d’Yver}, Mélusine’s association to Lusignan had been subsumed by the Wars of Religion for the castle had become a Huguenot stronghold and was thus a perceived threat to royal power.

Joshua M. Blaylock is currently an independent scholar living in Massachusetts. He received his Ph.D. in French Studies from Brown University in 2014. He has taught most recently at Texas Christian University and College of the Holy Cross. His research explores the intersections between the visual arts and French literature in the sixteenth century. His research has most recently focused on the interplay between the novella genre, the visual arts, court culture, and secrecy. Recent articles on Marguerite de Navarre’s Heptaméron (1559) have appeared in Sixteenth Century Journal, The Journal of Early Modern Studies, Modern Language Notes, and Esprit Créateur.

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\textsuperscript{45} For a discussion of the historical castle at Lusignan, see Maignan’s comment in Yver, \textit{Le Printemps}, 22. For a discussion of the episode in Brantôme, see Le Goff and La Durie, “Mélusine Maternelle,” 606-7.


