

The City of Ladies; a Lady of Cities

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WITHIN TWELVE YEARS three different French texts dealing with women who founded cities were published: Jean d'Arras's prose romance *Roman de Mélusine* in 1393, La Coudrette's metrical version of the Melusine romance in 1401, and Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* in 1405. All three of these texts were written under the weight of the Hundred Years War and its social and economic impact on France. Christine had already directly addressed the war in her allegory *Mutacion of Fortune*, written in 1403, and her biography of Charles V, written in 1404, but in *The Book of the City of Ladies* she references the war through her description of a city that could become a battlefield and thus must be built to withstand sieges.¹ Meanwhile, the two Melusine romances, both the French prose and metrical versions, were composed to champion certain territorial rights under assault because of the war. The most studied of these Melusine narrations is the first, Jean d'Arras's prose romance, written at the request of the Duc d'Berri who claimed Melusine as his ancestor just as he claimed the feudal rights to her city, Lusignan. Similarly, La Coudrette's metrical version was commissioned by Guillaume de Parthenay in order to confirm Guillaume's right of authority over his land; for this reason, at the end of the work, La Coudrette appended an original explanation about "the rightful heritage of the Parthenays"² to rule through the descendants of Thierry, Melusine's youngest son. Thus all three medieval French works, while emphasizing women who built cities, also reflect the political and economic instability caused by the Hundred Years War.

Approximately one hundred years later, both a prose version and a metrical version of the Melusine legend were published in early Tudor England. The Middle English prose version, entitled *Melusine*, and the Middle English metrical version, entitled *The Romans of Partenay* [ca.

1500-1520], draw on the French sources for their storyline and their use of female city-builders, but the Middle English texts manipulate the political material for their own purposes. Both of the French works influenced the English versions of the Melusine legend, although it has been suggested that La Couldrette's version, with its pro-English leanings regarding the Hundred Years War, was a more immediate influence.³ This article focuses on the construction of Melusine's cities, as found in the least studied of the narrations, the late Middle English metrical romance *Romans of Partenay*, within the context of its French analogues and Christine de Pizan's text. It explores how Melusine's city-building, as depicted in *Romans of Partenay*, exposes the concerns raised by a questionable dynasty attempting to establish itself as legitimate in the early Tudor period.

In all of the texts, Christine and Melusine serve as principal city-builders who design and construct their cities using both their brains and hands. They are both architects and physical laborers, designing their cities and then physically laboring to build their walls. These dual roles as architect and laborer clearly establish them as founders of their cities and make their roles far more atypical than what is normally found in medieval society and literature. Christine is commissioned to build her city by God, in answer to her desperate plea questioning why women are viewed as weak and vile. Melusine is cursed by her fairy mother to have a serpent's tail every Saturday until a man vows never to look upon her on Saturdays and keeps his vow. Melusine builds cities as a means of enriching her husband Raymound, an impoverished noble with questionable antecedents who will break his vow, and her ten sons, most of whom suffer from physical deformities but are still considered noble. While medieval noblewomen endowed churches and cathedrals and planned their personal living spaces within castles, rarely were they like Christine and Melusine, in that both of them were the actual architects and physical laborers in the construction of those buildings.

These unusual actions of Christine and Melusine make them what might be termed "authoritative founders" because they participate in the creative act of city-building as well as the physical act of giving birth to these cities. In Christine's book, Christine is an authoritative founder

as the three daughters of God, namely Reason, Justice, and Rectitude, come together to help her build a city of ladies. Together they excavate the field, prepare the masonry and construct the walls of the city. Similarly, while there are narrative variances among the French sources and the English versions of the Melusine story, in all of them Melusine constructs cities and fortresses as corollary celebrations to her marriage and the subsequent births of her sons. This juxtaposition of builder and mother, both acts of creation, makes her position clearly that of an authoritative founder:

Melusine is at one and the same time mother and founder: she stakes out the limits of her domain, builds the family fortress, passes on the name to her husband and to their descendents.⁴

Melusine, like Christine, plans, constructs, and builds her cities; moreover, she does it without the assistance of a higher authority. However, as will be seen, the relationship between Christine's allegory and the Melusine romances extends beyond the unusual circumstances of women building cities to their challenging of politically gendered spaces.

In *The Medieval City*, Norman Pounds describes various aspects of establishing and constructing a medieval town or city. One type of city that Pounds discusses is "the planted city." Planted cities are communities that were "conscious and deliberate creations of territorial lords, always for their own profit."⁵ As Pounds explains, feudal lords were troubled by the freedoms and financial security of urban populations, but the lords also coveted that wealth and wanted access to it and the goods that were bought and sold.⁶ To gain that access the lords created new urban foundations—setting aside land and offering liberal terms in charters to any who would settle in the city. England's government, which was more consolidated than that of other European regions, placed the authority to found these towns with their markets and fairs with the king. But, in all cases, these communities, whether established by feudal lords or the king himself, were authorized by a charter issued by an established political power.

In the case of *The City of Ladies*, the charter to establish a city is granted to Christine de Pizan herself. However, the authority to establish

her city comes not from a temporal king or feudal lord, but rather it comes from the celestial king. The daughters of God grant Christine her charter:

[W]e three ladies whom you see here, moved by pity, have come to you to announce a particular edifice built like a city wall, strongly constructed and well founded, which has been predestined and established by our aid and counsel for you to build.⁷

Reason and her sisters deliver to Christine a charter from God, show her where to build the city, and give her the knowledge and the building materials necessary to construct the city. It is with pleasure that Christine receives this charter:

Thus, with all my strength, I praise God and you, my ladies, who have so honored me by assigning me such a noble commission, which I most happily accept.⁸

The city that Reason instructs Christine to build “will validate women’s virtue, goodness, and strength, and showcase their fundamental contribution to the development of civilization.”⁹ This charter allows for a planned, walled city that will grow in an organized and appropriate manner.

The materials used to build the walls and buildings of these planned cities were critical to the permanence and eminence of the cities. Inferior materials could make the cities vulnerable to dangers such as fire or attack. The walls of these planned cities were usually of masonry, decreed to be a certain thickness due to possible attack or fire hazard; moreover, the walls of adjoining houses had to be of a certain thickness for safety. “Ordinance after ordinance in town after town prescribed the thickness of party walls and the use of stone and tile.”¹⁰ The materials that Reason decrees Christine should use are similar to the materials that Pounds lists in his book:

But the edifice erected by you in this City which you must construct will be far stronger, and for its founding I was commissioned in the course of our common deliberation, to supply you with durable and pure mortar to lay the sturdy foundations and to raise

the lofty walls all around, high and thick, with mighty towers and strong bastions¹¹

Indeed, Reason first has Christine excavate the field in order to rid it of insubstantial, misogynistic debris, such as authors who speak against women to cover up their own vices and weaknesses. This type of material Reason explains would weaken the structure before she begins to build the city's foundation and to construct it with stronger materials that will allow the city to stand.¹² Christine is following the traditional mode of city-building in the Middle Ages: she has a charter; she is commissioned to build the city by a higher lord; and she is to use materials that will create a permanent, secure city. By using the correct materials, Christine ensures that the city she is building under the auspices of her celestial lord and the three sisters will endure longer than the great cities of Troy, Rome, and even the Amazons' empire.¹³

Unlike Christine who is given her authority by the charter that the three sisters issue in God's name, Melusine builds her cities on her own authority. In all four of the medieval Melusine romances, no one grants her a charter. Indeed, she usurps the authoritative power to control the cities' establishment and construction. After Raymound claims land through a trick devised by Melusine, Raymound has deeds written that give him the right to the land. But no mention is made in the deeds of building cities, and certainly no mention is made of cities being built by a woman. Critics' discussions of Jean d'Arras's *Roman de Mélusine* recognized these unusual aspects. Ana Pairet terms Melusine's actions as "transgressive" for defying the political and social conventions of the age.¹⁴ Similarly, in *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, Jacques La Goff discusses Melusine's political and economic importance: 1. "She brings prosperity in a rural setting. . . . Clearings open up under her feet," 2. "[She] is even more a builder. . . . she leaves behind fortified castles and cities."¹⁵ Indeed, in the French prose version, as La Goff clarifies, Melusine often builds these cities with her own hands as the head of the work crews.¹⁶

This usurped authority is further highlighted in the French and English prose versions in two ways: 1) by the feudal lords calling on Melusine, not Raymound, to name the city, and 2) by the feudal lords

asking her to name the city only after she has already built the city. The feudal lords did not give her permission to build the city; instead, once they have met her and seen the city she has built, they declare:

Not one among us shall interfere in this matter, for it stands to reason that since you have succeeded in securing and building this fortress, the most beautiful and strongest that I have yet seen, you should name it as you please.¹⁷

In this translated quotation from Jean d'Arras's text, the lords state that they will not interfere in the matter, which feudal authority would allow them to do if they wished. Instead the lords say Melusine must name the city because she has "more judgment than all of us combined."¹⁸ The lords, while knowing nothing of her lineage, indicate she is superior in her knowledge to them, and thus they yield to Melusine the right to name the city after herself. As Pairet terms it, this exceptional action by the feudal lords recognizes the actual builder of the city and the transgressive behavior that gave Melusine the power to build her city. Indeed, the city and the couple's descendants bear the name "Lusignan," a toponym created from her own name in French, Melusigne. Melusine displaces male authority by building the city and by giving her descendants a maternal family name.

Interestingly the French and English metrical versions do not contain the episode of the feudal lords giving Melusine the authority to name her city—making her even more of a usurper of feudal authority. In the metrical versions, she names the city after herself with no permission from the feudal lords. Not only has she built the cities without a charter, she has also given her male descendants (she only has sons) a maternal surname.

Thus, the nature of the authority to establish the cities in Christine's book and the Melusine romances differs. Christine's book follows the tradition of the "planted community" of medieval times established by a charter from a higher authority; Melusine's establishment of her cities requires no authority. She seizes that right through her advice to Raymound, dispensing with the traditional chain of authority regarding the feudal lords' rights to issue charters to build cities.

Yet, the materials that Melusine uses and the structure of her cities

are similar to those traditional, walled cities of the Middle Ages. As quoted from the Middle English metrical version, first she builds the castle, Lusignan:

The fundementes made thai right profounde,
...
The walles hye deuised she echon
Wel founded was vppon the said uayley;
Too strong toures made with a huge dongun
And Enuiron an hy with wardes strong that day.¹⁹

Then, after finishing the castle, she completes the city after the birth of her first son:

After that tyme made she ful huge honoures,
Fourged the brought in mount of bew-re-pair
The walles bild hye, and als toures,
The goinges and comynge wroughten fair,
All couered and made, non might ben gair;²⁰

This castle and its city are her first architectural feats, but not her last. She goes on to build more cities, churches, and monasteries. Each is made of strong stone, with secure walls and towers. In Melusine's case, she is not given the stone and masonry through her charter from a "feudal lord" as Christine is; instead, Melusine takes the timber, stone, and land as she finds them—when she needs them.

The actions of a woman who usurps authority to build a city are not, however, totally unexplored in Christine's work. In Book One of *The City of Ladies*, Reason speaks to the story of Dido and how she claimed her own land. She tells of Dido's founding of Carthage, praising her for her prudence:

She founded and built a city called Carthage, in the land of Africa, where she was lady and queen. The way in which she founded her city and acquired and took possession of her land demonstrated her exceptional constancy, nobility, and strength, and without these graces true prudence is impossible.²¹

The Dido legend was familiar to the medieval audience through

translations and renditions of Virgil's *Aeneid*. However, Christine's version of the Dido legend deliberately uses Dido's other name, Elissa, and makes no mention of Virgil, perhaps in an effort to salvage Dido's reputation and to celebrate—rather than condemn—her actions, especially with regard to her claiming land and building a city for her people.²²

Interestingly, all of the versions of the Melusine story also draw on the Dido legend. Melusine's early advice to Raymound and her subsequent actions parallel those of Dido. Dido and Melusine share key characteristics as city builders: they commit transgressions, come from outside the territory, and break ground on virgin, untouched land.²³ Melusine's advice to Raymound (whom she plans to marry) on how to claim as much land as possible directly corresponds to Dido's method of claiming land for the city of Carthage.

ye shal se A man come gayn you hastilie,
The hertis skyn being gret and large to eye.
By ye that skyn, I you gyf in charge
What someuere cost, spare not, yif ye large.
After cutte that pece into thwanges smal,
lete it is not be brode, but narrow As may be,²⁴

Both Melusine and Dido use a deer/hart skin cut into thin connected strips to enable them to enclose and claim as much land as possible. As Pairet states, when discussing the similarities between the two women: "Few examples of founding female figures can be uncovered in medieval literature."²⁵ Yet, this parallel extends even further, since both Dido and Melusine are later betrayed by the men in whom they have vested their trust. In Christine's version of Dido's story, Rectitude states: "[E]ven though he had given his pledge never to take any other woman and to be hers forever, he left after she restored and enriched him with property and ease."²⁶ Raymound breaks his vow to his wife to allow her privacy on Saturday mornings and instead spies on her through a peephole when she is bathing. These betrayals, moreover, destroy these city-building women but not the men who betray them: Dido commits suicide in despair and Melusine is cursed to live in unsanctified serpent form. Both men, meanwhile, go on to live honored and successful lives.

The differences between the two land claims are that Dido employs the ruse of the deerskin herself, while Melusine has Raymound utilize the ruse in order to claim land on which to establish a city for themselves and their descendants. Dido did not know Aeneas when she built her city, and thus her city's establishment is not intertwined with her later relationship with him. For Melusine the establishment of the city is directly connected with Raymound, their children, and their lineage--as well as his later betrayal of her and his oath. She even tells Raymound that when he returns to her from enclosing the land with the hart's skin: "For ye shal finde this place fourged and made / In all places ryght As it liketh me, / Where that your lande appere shall to se."²⁷ Melusine, even before they are married, indicates to Raymound that she will be the one to build and create. The land may be his but the creating will be done as it pleases her.

Once the women have built their cities, the next question to be addressed is who rules the city? Christine's city, chartered by God and built with strong, lasting materials by women does more than validate women's intrinsic worth. For not only is this city built for and by women, it also will be run by women. The charter granted to Christine will create "a political structure in which the marginalized become the center of the social system and responsible for its governance."²⁸ Indeed, an entire inversion of the body politic occurs in Christine's book, beginning with Reason's emphasis on pure mortar and strong foundations:

[F]or these lower walls define the configurations of space within which the regendered body politic will be established. The good governance of the city will thus be supported and maintained by capable women who now are associated with the intellectual qualities of head in relationship to men.²⁹

This regendering of the body politic is perhaps the most radical concept found in Christine's allegory. Women do more than maintain the city; they are "responsible for creating the technological and institutional foundations of civilized life."³⁰ A charter, granted by a feudal lord, gives the citizens of the city rights not granted to others within the feudal system: "The primary function of a charter was to allow its citizens to have

their own form of government, separate and distinct from that of the surrounding countryside.”³¹ In most situations, a charter’s terms would allow a city to set up its own courts and government and to regulate the trade which was the primary purpose of establishing the city. No charter issued by a feudal lord or king would name women as the governors of the city. This tension between the traditional feudal charter granted to the city-builder and the transgressive act of granting a charter to women the right to build and govern a city leads to the same questions that face scholars in much of Christine’s works.³² Is Christine accepting the status quo because she has to be granted permission to build the city by her “feudal lord—or is Christine challenging the status quo by building a city of ladies which will be governed by ladies?

Unlike Christine’s text, in which the charter authorizes the women to govern the city, the question of who rules or governs the cities after they are built is not so easily answered in the Melusine narratives. Does Melusine continue to disregard feudal authority and rule the cities herself after she has built them? This element is far more ambiguous in the texts than the question of who built the cities. After her two eldest sons, Uriens and Guy, win heiresses and are crowned kings, Melusine builds churches: “Of our lady A minstre fourged she” and “Thorough All peiters, by hir owne deuyse / Many churches founded in glorious wysse.”³³ Seemingly while Melusine keeps building, Raymound rules the lands. Indeed, after the deeds of their next two sons, Raynold and Anthony, are recounted, the narrative states: “Raymound hym gouerned certain. / Ther full excellently regned he.”³⁴ These statements, coming after the successes of their various sons, indicate a division of labor, in that Melusine builds the cities but Raymound rules them.

However, the answer to the question of governance is not quite as clear as it may seem. While the narrative claims Raymound rules, it seems Melusine has not completely modified her transgressive behavior. When their son Fromont desires to enter the monastery, Raymound and Melusine communicate by messenger—because they are in separate cities. Raymound, unsure what to do, is disappointed that Fromont is not becoming a knight like his brothers, so he sends a messenger to Melusine asking for advice. His statement to Fromont upon receiving her reply is telling:

He saide to Fromont, “thi fader vnderstande;
Sir, for the haue sent thy good moder vnto,
Iff it pleased hir For to be know, and
Where hir will were monke shold be, or no.
Where-of the charge lefte to me hath, lo!
With the cure and charge enfeffed hath me.”³⁵

The irony is that Raymound is impressed, and expects Fromont to be impressed, by the fact that Melusine has left the decision to Raymound. In other words, this action of hers must not be the norm in the Lusignan family—or else it would not be so worthy of comment.

In actuality, from the beginning, Melusine dominates the relationship.³⁶ She approaches Raymound at the fountain; she tells him what to say to his cousin; she devises the plan to claim their land. But while she is in charge of the future, she has Raymound speak to his cousin and the court, and she has Raymound issue the invitation to their wedding. Thus, while there is no doubt that Melusine usurps feudal authority to create cities, she allows Raymound to maintain the façade of being the governing authority within the cities she has built for him. Since she has built these cities and established these lands for her sons and their descendants, it is not surprising that she maintains the veneer of feudal authority in their governance. She wants her family to retain their lands in perpetuity, and she knows the best way for that to happen is for it to appear that feudal authority is being upheld and that the male line (though named after her) is in control. This pretense allows her to appear to be the “proper consort.” As J. L. Laynesmith explains in *The Last Medieval Queens*, fifteenth-century works that offered advice to kings and princes state that queens should be chaste and virtuous, but are not worth listening to because they are “childlike in their reasoning.”³⁷ These “Mirrors for Princes,” by rarely mentioning queenship itself, imply that a queen’s role is no greater than that of any other noblewoman who should not participate in important matters without permission of her lord.³⁸ Melusine, thus, works at appearing to be a proper wife who defers to her feudal lord and husband, while at the same time she alone creates cities and the wealth that comes from them for her family.

Indeed, the prospect of economic success or profit margin was a

crucial reason for the building of medieval planted cities by feudal lords and kings. Certainly, *The City of Ladies* as described by Christine was established for “profit.” In the case of Christine’s city, however, the profit is not financial. Just as the body politic of the city has been re-generated, so has its profit. The city is set up for the ladies “to cultivate virtue, to flee vice, to increase and multiply our City, and to rejoice and act well.”³⁹ These proceeds, while not tangible, enhance the standing of the celestial authority that established the city, just as the temporal cities enhanced the feudal lords’ coffers. By running the city and being in charge of its governance, the women as well as God will profit from the proceeds of the city. Moreover, the motivation for God to encourage Christine to build the city is her despair over the way women are represented in literature and philosophy—which is causing Christine to doubt women’s value. She bemoans that “God formed a vile creature when He made woman . . . [praying], “Oh God, how can this be?”⁴⁰ The daughters of God reveal themselves to her in order to answer her prayer and to demonstrate that women are not vile but rather are of value by building the city of ladies. The spiritual rewards reaped from this city’s construction and governance, for both women and God, can be likened to the economic motivation for founding the planted medieval city as Pounds represents it.

In the case of Melusine, her cities are established as much for the future as for the present; profit, as understood within the feudal system, is what she desires for her family and its heirs. The cities are to reap economic, political, and social rewards for Raymond and for their descendants. Ironically, while transgressing feudal society’s conventions, Melusine is still an active component of that society. As La Goff states: “What Melusina gives Raymond is, above all, children. . . . [she] is the womb that gave birth to a noble line.”⁴¹ Melusine’s focus, from the time she meets Raymond, is on claiming lands and establishing cities for their family and their descendents. La Goff, according to Pairet, even terms Melusine “the godmother of feudal economy.”⁴² After the birth of each son, she builds another fortress and adds to her cities’ beauty and strength. Moreover, even after her serpent nature is revealed and Raymond has broken his oath, the sons, who have married royalty and heiresses, continue for a time to augment their noble lineage and

to enlarge the lands of their ancestors. The first eight sons leave home, fight in various wars, and win royal heiresses as wives. As Pairet states: “Melusine’s sons, who leave their homeland to conquer foreign lands, remember the lesson spelled out in the *Énéas* [French medieval text]: it is not by marrying a queen that one becomes a founder, but rather by stealing away an heiress from a rival”⁴³—again demonstrating a connection between the actions of Melusine and Dido in constructing their cities.

Thus, the issues of who has authority to build the city, the materials used to build the city, the governance of the city, and the profit to be gained by building the cities make it clear that Christine and Melusine challenge some of the feudal traditions of the planted city while advancing those customs that allow them to maintain control of their cities. Christine willingly accepts the charter from a higher, celestial authority and willingly shares the city’s profits with him because these actions give women the authority to build and govern their own city. Melusine usurps the authority to build her cities but willingly dissembles to have Raymond appear to be the governing authority in order for her family to maintain feudal control of its lands and its cities’ profits. Both women draw on the history of Dido as a woman who transgressed her society’s rules and established a city in her own name. Emulating Dido, Christine and Melusine accept the transgressive nature of their actions even as they attempt to make their city-building appear acceptable to others. Finally, all three French texts, composed in the early part of the fifteenth century, mirror contemporary French history and politics. Christine’s development of her allegory recognizes the defensive needs of cities that emerged during the Hundred Years War, while Melusine, in both the French prose and metrical versions, is celebrated as an ancestor whose city-building allows for dynastic and territorial claims articulated during the Hundred Years War.

But for Melusine, and not for Christine or Dido, the founding of cities, in conjunction with the birth of sons to establish a noble lineage is what makes her a founding mother, and it is these actions that make her relevant to the early years of the Tudor dynasty. Melusine’s efforts to create cities and to build a dynasty parallel the efforts of late medieval English queens, such as Elizabeth of York, who founded a chapel dedicated to Our Lady after the birth of her first son, Arthur,

in Winchester.⁴⁴ Both women build to celebrate the birth of sons. For Elizabeth of York, whose lineage was more royal than that of her husband, Henry VII, the birth of an heir meant she finally would be crowned queen since her husband both needed and feared her royal antecedents.⁴⁵ A son established Henry's claim to the throne. Crowning Elizabeth after Arthur's birth meant she was queen because she had given birth to an heir, not because she had a better claim to the throne. In actuality, Melusine and Elizabeth of York were both founding mothers of dynasties whose male founders had questionable, if not specious, claims to their lands and titles.

Certainly, the late Middle English metrical version of the Melusine narrative highlights this and other connections between Melusine and the Tudor dynasty. This metrical romance known as *Romans of Partenay* is the least studied of the four Melusine texts and is the primary focus of the last part of this article. Its date of composition is approximately the turn of the sixteenth century, during the politically unstable times of the early Tudor dynasty. Walter W. Skeat, whose EETS version is the only one available, is extremely critical of the author—viewing him as a rather inept translator and identifying any changes he made as “errors” or “mistakes.” Yet, when considered as an alternative interpretation of the Melusine story, the text is a consistent narrative with changes and modifications, not errors or mistakes, which complement its reading of the legend. The author draws on La Coudrette's allusions to King Arthur and England for his own purposes. He composed his own opening seventy-seven lines in the prologue and the final lines of the epilogue to clarify his approach to the romance. As explained earlier, the purposes of the two French versions were to support various dynastic claims to the Parthenay lands and cities founded by Melusine. But the English author is not telling the Melusine narrative for the purposes of supporting the Parthenay claim, so what is his purpose? An examination of this Middle English metrical version of the romance will make clear that the changes and modifications found in the *Romans of Partenay* are such that they reflect and critique the English political situation of early Tudor times instead of the political situation of France in the late fourteenth century.

The link between Melusine's establishing of cities and her fecundity in producing ten sons is clearly established in the English metrical verse text. Melusine is credited with constructing structures such as Lusignan, built after her marriage (lines 1111-41); a city with a tower known as Trompe, built after the birth of her first son (lines 1170-92); a castle and town known as Mel, later termed Parthenay, after the birth of her second son (lines 1198-1211); and the city of Rochelle and a large bridge built after the birth of her third son (lines 1219-25). Moreover, when news comes of the first two sons' great deeds and successful marriages, Melusine proceeds to build a minster and many other churches (lines 1677-87) both to celebrate her sons' successes and to protect her own soul. The first city, constructed in conjunction with her marriage, is established on the land Raymound has claimed from his cousin with the use of the hart's skin—Dido's trick as discussed above. This construction begins immediately after the wedding: within eight days (line 1111), the foundations and walls designed by Melusine (line 1123) are being erected. The laborers who are building Melusine's structure are of an unknown nation and are extremely well paid. This information, not elaborated upon in the metrical version, adds an air of mystery in the construction of this city; yet the mystery is not as developed in the metrical versions as it is in the prose versions, which uses words such as wondrous and amazing when describing the construction. There is far less emphasis on Melusine's use of supernatural powers and more regard for Melusine's human aspects as builder in the English metrical romance. Both the French and English metrical versions are structured differently from the prose romances, creating a very different persona for Melusine. In the prose romances, Melusine's family history and her fairy connections are revealed immediately, even before her meeting with Raymound, so that all her subsequent actions are judged from the perspective of her supernatural history. In the metrical romances, Melusine's dual nature as woman and serpent is not acknowledged until after the sons have won acclaim and after she has built her cities. Rather, in the metrical versions, Melusine is viewed as a powerful, authoritative but human mother and builder. Melusine herself in the metrical versions seems far less concerned with the fate of her soul (in jeopardy because

of Raymond's betrayal) than she is with her family's patrimony. Her "other worldliness" is not the primary focus here; the focus, instead, is on the significance of the mother as founder of kingdoms and dynasties.

Thus, in the English metrical version, with the perception of Melusine as authoritative and founding human-female rather than fairy-woman, this first city is the prototype for Melusine's later constructions. Greater emphasis is placed on describing the building of the cities than on the awe or marvel the cities arouse. The cities are stripped of their supernatural aspects and instead become imposing projects of an important family of apparently noble lineage.⁴⁶ In most cases, the descriptions of the cities are lengthier and more detailed than the descriptions of the sons themselves. The birth of Melusine's first son, Uriens, is described from lines 1156-59; his birth deformity is described from lines 1160-69; and the city Melusine builds is described from lines 1170-92. The city is described in over twenty-two lines while a total of fourteen lines describe both Uriens's birth and his defect. A similar parallel occurs with the birth of the second son, Oede; his birth and defect are described in seven lines while the city is described in thirteen lines. The cities become more conspicuous representations of both Melusine's fertility and feudal successes than her own sons' births. While the sons are deformed or marred in appearance, there are no such defects in the cities' appearances. The cities, unlike Melusine's sons, are untainted in appearance and in administration. They are Melusine's true legacies to her family and lineage.

The intertwining of city descriptions with lineal successes codifies Melusine as godmother—and grandmother—of a successful feudal economy. Indeed, the intertwining of the acquisition of lands and family continues through the succeeding generations in the *Romans of Partenay*. This relationship between land acquisition, city-building, and lineage is what makes it so pertinent to the early Tudor time period. The lengthy descriptions of the sons' births and the subsequent city building are followed by the details of the sons' adult actions in winning heiress-wives and land for themselves in order to aggrandize the family's (i.e. Melusine's) name—and even the sons' own sons are described with regard to their worthiness in conquering still more lands. Similarly, success in the late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century English economy

was based on the acquisition of land and the patrilineal descent of that property. Indeed, the importance of male descendents is illustrated by the Tudors themselves. Henry VII, having usurped the throne, needed sons to retain his land, and Henry VIII's obsession with securing his throne through legitimate male heirs is documented.

But there is more ambiguity to Melusine's actions than may be originally noted—especially in both metrical romances with Melusine's serpent-like nature hidden for much of the text. The elements of excess and Melusine's transgression of sexual boundaries as founding mother are major characteristics of her extensive city building. The cities and fortresses, built after her marriage and the birth of her multiple sons, probe the questions of a woman's functions as consort, wife, and mother. Her sons are born and cities built before we discover her serpent form that gives her phallic attributes. As can be seen in the English metrical version, *Romans of Partenay*, she is a woman with male clout. Her tail, with its power and form, is indicative of her masculinity:

But A taill had beneth of serpent!
Gret And horrible was it verily;
With siluer And Asure the tail burlid was,
Strongly the water ther bete, it flasshed hy.⁴⁷

Her usurpation of authority goes beyond that of building cities; it extends into her total control of her family and their activities. She is both female and male. She breastfeeds her children and manages her husband. Her lineage is what her children celebrate and her name is what her descendants inherit. Unlike many of the queens found in medieval literature who are childless, Melusine performs her greatest female responsibility⁴⁸—giving birth to ten sons—while performing the most masculine of actions—building cities. With these conflicting aspects, it is not surprising that Melusine loses everything in the end. She has seized control and in doing so has not only defied the conventions of establishing cities in feudal society; she has also seized control of social conventions and upended feudal strictures. These actions seem to decree that her lineage must lose their cities and their land. Like Dido, but unlike Christine, she cannot succeed and her actions cannot be allowed to reap rewards, whether economic, political, or social.

The issue of a female's ability to transmit power or legitimacy to rule was a political conundrum in the English succession to the throne during the Wars of the Roses, indeed ever since Edward III claimed the French throne through his mother. While the York claim was partially through the matrilineal line, the entire Tudor claim to the throne was through Henry Richmond's mother, Margaret Beaufort. Perhaps it is not surprising that it was during this time that the Melusine legend became popular in English literature and was translated into both prose and verse. After all, both the Duc d'Berri and Guillaume de Parthenay commissioned the French versions to support their claims to their lands through Melusine, thus staking conflicting matrilineal claims to their lands. With its reflection of both the power of the female line and the warning of its collapse, the Melusine narrative offers a bifurcated perspective on a female founder of both noble cities and noble lineage. Just as Richmond's claim to the throne is inherited through the stigma of illegitimacy in a matrilineal lineage, Melusine also bears the stigma of being "outside" established social norms while claiming lands. Melusine and her descendants, like the Tudors, usurp the rights to acquire and rule lands without any strong ancestral claims or recognized feudal authority. Through their own strength they lay claim to kingdoms not inherited.⁴⁹ Melusine is the female embodiment of the Tudor claims—and the Tudors understood the implications of claiming a title through a mother's name and lineage. Indeed, to strengthen his claim Henry VII used yet a second female line, by marrying the daughter of Edward IV, the most direct heir to the English throne.

Of course, unlike Dido, Melusine—the founding mother—does manage to pass on both land and title to her descendants, but at great personal cost and sacrifice. But importantly, for the Tudor claim, the text celebrates the cities and structures and these endure beyond the losses suffered by Melusine and Raymond's later descendants. Melusine's questionable usurpation of the male role as family founder of land and lineage is overridden by the permanent worth of her structures and the subsequent appropriation of her lineage by the Duc d'Berri. Henry Richmond similarly appropriates the English throne through his flimsy claim of lineal descent from Edward III. If those cities can endure and the Duc d'Berri and Guillaume de Parthenay can take pride in their

uncanny ancestor, then surely England can put faith in Henry's claim to the throne through his mother, a descendent of the illegitimate son of John of Gaunt and his mistress, Katherine Swynford. Indeed, what we have in *Romans of Partenay* is a politically and economically ambitious family whose character is marked by physical abnormalities and hidden natures. Melusine herself foresees the failure of their ambitions, including their land expansion, before she is permanently turned into a serpent, thus unmasking the family's lack of viability as honorable men. In her role as founding mother she establishes cities and a great noble line; yet she also becomes the scapegoat for her family's lack of honor.

But what does it say that this maternal lineage is both suspect and celebrated at the same time within the text? Is the English metrical version pro- or anti-Tudor in its portrayal of an ambiguous family consisting of an adventurer and his suspect wife? Are their sons flawed because their right to rule is questionable? A woman wields the power, supplies sons and heirs, and creates a kingdom of cities and churches. Yet, that woman ends up condemned to be a serpent and to die unshriven. The ambiguities in the text, e.g. Melusine as sinner and victim, a lineage both suspect and celebrated, even the sympathy felt for Melusine when she is cursed to remain a serpent, reflect the ambiguities found in early Tudor England, while the body imagery offers suggestions of corrupt natures hidden beneath seemingly virtuous forms and a reminder that the head of the state/body can be tainted despite its political acumen and warrior prowess. It is a text replete with the same uncertainties, ambitions, and anticipations found in the early Tudor reign—offering no solutions but many possible outcomes. The cities, however, and by implication for the Tudor line the state itself, survive all those upheavals—and thus the family legacy, marred though it may be, endures.

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END NOTES

1. Judith L Kellogg, "Le Livre de la cite des dames: Reconfiguring Knowledge and Reimagining Gendered Space," in *Christine de Pizan: A Casebook*, ed. Barbara K. Altmann and Deborah L. McGrady (New York: Routledge, 2003), 138.

2. Couldrette, *A Bilingual Edition of Couldrette's Mélusine or Le Roman de Parthenay*, ed. and trans. by Matthew W. Morris, *Medieval Studies* 20 (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), 28.
3. *Ibid.*, 25.
4. Ana Pairet, "Melusine's Double Binds: Foundation, Transgression, and the Genealogical Romance," in *Reassessing the Heroine in Medieval French Literature*, ed. Kathy M. Krause (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 78.
5. Norman Pounds, *The Medieval City* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005), 12.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards (London: Picador, 1982), 10-11.
8. *Ibid.*, 15.
9. Kellogg, "Le Livre," 130.
10. Pounds, *The Medieval City*, 40.
11. de Pizan, *The Book of the City*, 12.
12. Kellogg, "Le Livre," 130-31
13. de Pizan, *The Book of the City*, 11-12.
14. Pairet, "Melusine's Double Binds," 78.
15. Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 218-19.
16. *Ibid.*, 219.
17. translation by Pairet, "Melusine's Double Binds," 76.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *The Romans of Partenay or of Lusignan*, ed. Walter W. Skeat, EETS, orig. ser. 22 (1866; repr., New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), lines 1121; 1128-31.
20. *Ibid.*, lines 1170-74.
21. de Pizan, *The Book of the City*, 91.
22. *Ibid.*, 262.
23. Pairet, "Melusine's Double Binds," 82.
24. *Romans of Partenay*, lines 564-69.
25. Pairet, "Melusine's Double Binds," 80.
26. de Pizan, *The Book of the City*, 189.
27. *Romans of Partenay*, lines 579-81.
28. Kellogg, "Le Livre," 130.
29. *Ibid.*, 136.

30. Ibid.
31. Pounds, *The Medieval City*, 101.
32. A summary of this dichotomy about Christine's position as a forerunner to feminism is given by Rosalind Brown-Grant, "Christine de Pizan as a Defender of Women," in *Christine de Pizan: A Casebook*, 81.
33. *Romans of Partenay*, lines 1682; 1686-87.
34. Ibid., lines 2516-17.
35. Ibid., lines 2612-17
36. As Pairet observes, the three times Melusine and Raymound encounter one another before their marriage as well as on their wedding night, Melusine takes charge of Raymound's destiny and is the first to speak. Pairet, "Melusine's Doubled Binds," 79-80.
37. J. L. Laynesmith, *The Last Medieval Queens: English Queenship 1445-1503* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.
38. Ibid.
39. de Pizan, *The Book of the City*, 257.
40. Ibid., 5.
41. Le Goff, *Time, Work, and Culture*, 219.
42. Pairet, "Melusine's Double Binds," 83.
43. Ibid.
44. Laynesmith, *The Last Medieval Queens*, 119.
45. Ibid., 58-59.
46. This emphasis on city building and expansion is even more interesting considering there was not extensive urban growth in the late Middle Ages. While there is much debate as to the cause of this slowing of urban growth, economic uncertainties due to war, plague, and royal succession definitely played their parts. Yet, in *Romans of Partenay*, there is no concern about overexpansion. The family keeps building as long as sons are being born—they have no concern over royal succession and wars.
47. *Romans of Partenay*, lines 2807-10.
48. Pairet, "Melusine's Double Binds," 78.
49. As noted by S. B. Chrimes, Parliament declared Henry as king, not so much because of inheritance but because of his winning the crown in battle against Richard III, who was slain in battle. Chrimes, *Henry VII* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 50-62.