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THE REAL GAME OF THRONES? MYTHICAL DIMENSIONS OF MEDIEVAL TALES[1]

> *"A child may well believe a report that there are ogres in the next county; many grown-up persons find it easy to believe of another country; and as for another planet, very few adults seem able to imagine it as peopled, if at all, by anything but monsters of iniquity."*
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> J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*[2]

Introduction

Since J.R.R. Tolkien created his fantasy world of Middle Earth, medieval Europe has served as the default world for fantasies. Decades before, "the age of the historical novel" had conjured up a "return of the Middle Ages", in fact one of a row of revivals that defines the modern era as Umberto Eco has argued.[3] Today, perhaps the Middle Ages increasingly lend themselves to fantasy appropriation because this period is so little-known that, for many people, it is in the process of becoming a mythical past, a place in an otherworld that is akin to yet substantially different from ours. There is a fascination and a danger in this shift from fact to creative playground. Fantasy worlds that use medieval Europe as a canvas on which to project themselves can be exciting and at times feed a curiosity that may remind us of our childhood when fairy tales enchanted us. Medievalism in this creative way, that is the imagining of a medieval past inspired by history but not bound to accuracy, can be aesthetically and intellectually pleasing. At the same time we can also see politicised and instrumentalised forms of medievalism, for example when groups of the alt-right movement use runic symbols to claim a medieval, white, male, European past.[4]

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[1] A preliminary version of this paper was held at the conference "Mittelalterrezeption in der Gegenwartskultur" at the Collegium Carolinum in Prague in November 2019. I would like to thank the organizers, especially Johannes Gleixner, and also Martin Schulze Wessel for his important feedback. I am also grateful to Eleanor Goerss for her inspiring thoughts and Sarah Bowden for her significant suggestions.

[2] *Tolkien,* J.R.R.: On Fairy-Stories. In: *Tolkien:* Tree and Leaf. Including the poem Mythopeia. London et al. 1988. 2nd edition, 9-73, here 38. "On Fairy-Stories" is based on an Andrew Lang Lecture delivered in 1939 and was first published in 1947 in *Essays presented to Charles Williams* with Oxford University Press.

[3] *Eco,* Umberto: Dreaming of the Middle Ages. In: *Eco:* Travels in Hyperreality. San Diego/California, New York/New York, London 1986, 61-72, here 63. See also p. 66: "Immediately after the official ending of the Middle Ages, Europe was ravaged by a pervasive medieval nostalgia."

[4] One example is the so-called Nordic Resistance Movement, the Nordiska Motståndsrörelsen, a political party in Sweden which follows a proto-national and ahistorical idea of

In contrast to such falsely homogenous pictures of the past, the Middle Ages — including the European Middle Ages — were diverse: societies were complex and migration was common. People in the Middle Ages travelled, and, whether or not deliberately, merchants, pilgrims, and crusaders brought about cultural exchange. The Middle Ages were more diverse than popular belief often holds. The discrepancy between distorting medievalist stereotypes and what scholars think the Middle Ages were probably like has caught the media's attention.[5] The impact of this public debate has begun to affect academia in turn, with societies issuing statements against the appropriation of the medieval past for political agendas, responding to racism in society, and changing their names as a consequence of a more reflective understanding of the study of the Middle Ages.[6]

In fact, a disparity between historical research and popular perception is partly due to the way Medieval Studies itself is structured. A lingering problem of our field, "Medieval Studies", has been the term itself and the geographical implications it entails. The problem with periodisation is that the term "Middle Ages" is mostly (though not only) used in connection with European history.[7] In discussions about the time the medieval period spans, one factor has traditionally gone unperceived, and that is intersectionality: societies never move *en bloc,* never shift unitedly or entirely, meaning that we would be more accurate were we to consider in addition to geographical areas also different groups of society. Take for example children's

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the North. – Politicised forms of medievalism correspond to Eco's sixth type of thinking nostalgically about the Middle Ages, the Middle Ages of "national identities", which celebrates a supposed past grandeur, see *Eco:* Dreaming of the Middle Ages 70 (cf. fn. 3).

5 For example when Dorothy Kim writes about the need to reclaim the history of the Viking Past which white supremacists abuse for their imaginary past, see *Kim,* Dorothy: White Supremacists Have Weaponized an Imaginary Viking Past. It's Time to Reclaim the Real History. In: TIME, online, 15.04.2019. URL: https://time.com/5569399/viking-history-white-nationalists/ (last accessed 12.08.2020). Other opinion pieces raise the awareness for a more widespread misuse of the Middle Ages that also concerns academia. See also *Gabriele,* Matthew/*Rambaran-Olm,* Mary: The Middle Ages Have Been Misused by the Far Right. Here's Why It's So Important to Get Medieval History Right. In: TIME, online, 21.11.2019, URL: https://time.com/5734697/middle-ages-mistakes/ (last accessed 12.08.2020).

6 See The Medieval Academy Blog, URL: http://www.themedievalacademyblog.org/medievalists-respond-to-charlottesville/ (last accessed 12.08.2020). See also the organization Medievalists of Colour, URL: https://medievalistsofcolor.com (last accessed 12.08.2020); The Public Medievalist series "Race, Racism, and the Middle Ages", URL: https://www.publicmedievalist.com/race-racism-middle-ages-toc/ (last accessed 12.08.2020). The formerly called "International Society of Anglo-Saxonists" changed its name to "International Society for the Study of Early Medieval England", "in recognition of the problematic connotations that are widely associated with the terms 'Anglo-Saxon' and 'Anglo-Saxonist' in public discourse", see URL: https://isasweb.net/AS.html (last accessed 12.08.2020).

7 Scholars have started to inquire new ways periodising the Middle Ages by questioning geographical definitions, for example *Kulke,* Hermann: Das europäische Mittelalter – Ein eurasisches Mittelalter? Berlin, Boston 2016 (Das mittelalterliche Jahrtausend 3). However, central Asia is often overseen, as criticizes Yücel *Sivri* in his book review of Kulke's study, in: Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur 146 (2017) 3, 384-388. – Also, the Centre for Medieval Literature facilitates work on networks extending beyond the European space, see URL: https://cml.sdu.dk (last accessed 26.08.2020). See also the volume *Cohen,* Jeffrey Jerome (ed.): The Postcolonial Middle Ages. New York 2000.

rights, women's rights, or equality before the law regardless of religion or ethnicity: while some things may have changed for educated and wealthy Christian men in Europe from the sixteenth century onwards, for large parts of the same population, the medieval reality ended at various different points in the centuries to come.

In my class on the "Real Game of Thrones", which I taught at Harvard University in 2017 and 2018, I tried to communicate this kind of complex view of what we call the Middle Ages, inviting undergraduates to test and challenge their assumptions about the period that they often describe as the "Dark Ages". Quite often they feel informed enough to pass judgements on the past based on fantasy shows and video games, or historical fiction at best, but these forms of entertainment do not supply a filter for how to distinguish history from fantasy; they are not interested in it, and besides, that's not their task. In my opinion, for the researcher and teacher it then is all the more important to help students to navigate their experiences and impressions in a sea of medieval revivals.[8] One of the most important insights in this regard is that medieval narratives are in a way medievalist themselves, as they appropriate historical and geographical stereotypes, and abstract them. These appropriations are seldom free of moralising judgement and can lead to othering effects. In this sense, to quote Jeremy Cohen, "[t]ime and history are always-already colonized and never an inert, innocent Otherness waiting to be excavated".[9] Looking at mythical dimensions in medieval narratives, the aim of this paper is to show – by discussing monstrosity in conjunction with femininity and orientalism respectively – that medievalism, which is not automatically a purely creative preccupation with the past, needs our critical attention. This is therefore a call for critical medievalism.

Our current medieval revival is evidently not the first; medievalism has come in waves, and the way it functions – I would like to argue – takes its roots in mythical thinking (a certain perspective on the world and on history explained in more detail in the coming paragraphs), for which we have the most extraordinary examples in medieval culture itself, when in art and literature stories from the past were retold and reshaped in instructive and entertaining ways. This paper looks at two such medieval tales, probing once more the idea of mythical dimensions as an interpretative avenue for the study of historical writing. It is linked to the HBO series *Game*

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[8] The undergraduate lecture course spanned fourteen weeks with two lectures each week. More than half of the time was dedicated to the study of medieval history, equipping students with some understanding of medieval society, encompassing culture and religion, in order to understand how stories build new worlds that may tell you more about the world for which the stories are built rather than about the story world itself. We looked among others at the relationship between Church and State in the Middle Ages, economic development, gender roles, religion, representations of the world (including maps and diagrams); we also dealt with concrete groups such as the Vikings and the Mamluks and asked how they may or may not have served as inspiration for the Ironborn and the Unsullied respectively in *Game of Thrones*. Moreover, we considered the study of medievalism, with special emphases on the Romantics as well as Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* and on twentieth-century fantasy literature, as layers upon layers of medievalist reimagining precede the popular show *Game of Thrones*.

[9] *Cohen,* Jeffrey Jerome: Introduction: Midcolonial. In: *Cohen* (ed.): The Postcolonial Middle Ages 1-17, here 5 (cf. fn. 7).

of Thrones (2011–2019), itself based on the novels *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996–current) by George R. R. Martin, to the extent that it concentrates on two topics that are both particularly significant in the show as well as prominent in the study of medieval narratives: they concern the conjunction of femininity and bestiality on the one hand, and the exoticization of the East on the other. Both of these topics – often intertwined – are negotiated on levels that could be described as mythical. Mythical worlds feed on various interlocking mechanisms and themes. In order to investigate how mythical dimensions function in medieval narratives I will explore the two strands femininity/bestiality and orientalism – both of which are important structural elements in *Game of Thrones* – by discussing two bestsellers of the High and Late Middle Ages, the tales of *Mélusine* and *Duke Ernst.*

The term "mythical thinking" stems from Ernst Cassirer's work on *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. According to Cassirer, in the mythical worldview ("Weltauffassung und Welterklärung"), spaces are filled with metaphysical meaning: "Each particular spatial determination thus obtains a definite divine or demonic, friendly or hostile, holy or unholy 'character'".[10] Boundaries in the mythical space also mean symbolic limitation;[11] they are a kind of threshold ("Schwelle") which can only be crossed in specific pre-ordained ways that function as rites of transition.[12] In addition to this spatial definition, Cassirer also discusses temporal aspects in the mythical world: when placed in the temporal distance – into the "depths of the past" – a narrative not only confers upon itself a holy – a mythical and religious – meaning, but the setting itself justifies the myth through an archetypical temporality.[13] There is no objectifiable historical time in a mythical "consciousness" ("Bewußtsein"), but instead time evolving in this prehistorical world is undifferentiated: Cassirer speaks of a "timeless consciousness" ("'zeitloses' Bewußtsein").[14] This kind of temporality confers a cosmic potency to fate.[15] The mythical consciousness of time correlates to

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[10] *Cassirer,* Ernst: Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Vol. 2: Das Mythische Denken. Berlin et al. 1925, 125: "Jede einzelne Raumbestimmung erhält je einen bestimmten göttlichen oder dämonischen, freundlichen oder feindlichen, heiligen oder unheiligen 'Charakter'." Translation by *Manheim,* Ralph: The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Vol. 2: Mythical Thought, by Ernst Cassirer. New Haven/Connecticut, London 1955, 98. Translations, if not indicated otherwise, are supplied by Racha Kirakosian.

[11] See *Cassirer:* Philosophie der symbolischen Formen 127 (cf. fn. 10).

[12] *Ibid.* 131-32. For a translation of the passage, see *Manheim:* The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 103-104 (cf. fn. 10).

[13] "Erst dadurch, daß ein bestimmter Inhalt in zeitliche Ferne gerückt, daß er in die Tiefe der Vergangenheit zurückverlegt wird, erscheint er damit nicht nur als ein heiliger, als ein mythisch und religiös bedeutsamer gesetzt, sondern auch als solcher g e r e c h t f e r t i g t [emphasis in the original]. Die Zeit ist die erste Urform dieser geistigen Rechtfertigung." *Cassirer:* Philosophie der symbolischen Formen 133-34 (cf. fn. 10); *Manheim:* The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 105 (cf. fn. 10): "By being thrust back into temporal distance, by being situated in the depths of the past, a particular content is not only established as sacred, as mythically and religiously significant, but also justified as such."

[14] *Cassirer:* Philosophie der symbolischen Formen 135 (cf. fn. 10).

[15] See *ibid.* 142; *Manheim:* The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 112 (cf. fn. 10): "Only thus seen as destiny does mythical time become a truly cosmic potency – a power binding not only man but also the demons and gods, because only in it, and through its inviolable measures and norms, are the life and action of men and even of the gods made possible."

a certain emotional dynamic, that is, an intensity of present, past, or future to which the subject is submitted.[16]

What do mythical dimensions entail for the story world in which they are set? Like Tolkien's novels, *Game of Thrones* uses tropes from medieval literature, enhancing them with fantastical elements. It is no secret that George R.R. Martin has been inspired by medieval life and history.[17] Moreover, the myths belonging to medieval literary repertoire have been explored in the fantasy world of *Game of Thrones*, first and foremost myths about dragons as fear-inducing creatures of an "Other-world".[18] A mythical element can be an ill-defined time, space, object, or figure. Fairy tales, for instance, operate in mythical dimensions to create excitement set in the "Perilous Realm".[19] Since mythical worlds are constructed so as to have no clear order of time or space, navigating them is only possible for mythical creatures who are part of that world. They may also have what we call supernatural powers that are, according to their internal mythical world order, natural to them. Narratives set in a fantasy world employ their own mythical "sub-worlds"; for example, when in Tolkien's *Hobbit* Bilbo Baggins encounters magic and creatures on his unexpected journey that he only knew from hearsay and that he did not necessarily believe in previously, he discovers the myths of his world to be true.[20] In *Game of Thrones,* the White Walkers, whose past and presence remains mysterious for most characters, belong to a mythical world: no one really knows where they come from and what their plan is as they create an apocalyptic atmosphere. Encounters with a mythical world order challenge the characters of the story worlds and push them whilst also driving the plot.

One predisposition of such hybrid worlds which mix the ordinary with the extraordinary is mythical thinking. Many medieval narratives, as well as forms of medievalism – that is the imaginary view of the Middle Ages – are based on mythical thinking. Despite the caveats that Cassirer's philosophy bears for the study of medieval text (the theory was developed within the frame of a history of ideas and not with medieval literature in mind),[21] the spatio-temporal aspects of mythical

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16 *Cassirer:* Philosophie der symbolischen Formen 150 (cf. fn. 10).

17 Numerous publications deal with the medieval inspiration for the world of *Game of Thrones*, to name but a few: *Larrington,* Carolyne: Winter is Coming: The Medieval World of Game of Thrones. London 2015. – *Pavlac,* Brian A. (ed.): Game of Thrones versus History: Written in Blood. Hoboken/New Jersey 2017. – *West,* Ed: Iron, Fire and Ice: The Real History that Inspired Game of Thrones. New York 2019.

18 *Tolkien:* On Fairy-Stories 40 (cf. fn. 2), writes about the fascination with fantasy creatures who make an "Other-world", confessing that he "desired dragons with a profound desire".

19 The "Perilous Realm", conceived as some kind of a country, is another term from *Tolkien:* On Fairy-Stories 14 (cf. fn. 2): "Most good 'fairy-stories' are about *adventures* [italic in the original] of men in the Perilous Ream or upon its shadowy marches."

20 On secondary worlds, see *Tolkien:* On Fairy-Stories 18 and 36 (cf. fn. 2).

21 *Kiening,* Christian: Arbeit am Absolutismus des Mythos: Mittelalterliche Supplemente zur biblischen Heilsgeschichte. In: *Friedrich,* Udo/*Quast,* Bruno (eds.): Präsenz des Mythos: Konfigurationen einer Denkform in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit. Berlin et al. 2004 (Trends in Medieval Philology 2) 35-58, at 36 questions Cassirer's dichotomies and criticises the implications for epistemological psychology and evolutionary history.

thinking turn out to be useful tools when investigating the tales of *Mélusine* and *Duke Ernst* with regard to femininity/bestiality and orientalism. We will see that the mechanisms of distant (or removed) space and time are used to build story worlds which play with genre expectations, mixing the real with the fantastical, and the imaginable with the supernatural to create intricate and complex plots.[22]

Mélusine

There are many stories related to the French tale of Mélusine.[23] One, which could be considered one of the most canonical, was compiled and composed by Jean d'Arras in 1393. In this version of *Mélusine* (or *The Noble History of Lusignan*), we can study the conflation of history and mythical worlds, the dragon motif in genealogical myths, and the connection of femininity with bestiality.[24] All of these elements also appear in *Game of Thrones,* where they relate to the central figure of Daenerys Targaryen, also known as Dany and Daenerys Stormborn.

Daenerys, the younger sister of Rhaegar and Viserys Targaryen, is the paternal aunt of Jon Snow, her confidant and lover. As the youngest child of King Aerys II Targaryen, who was ousted from his kingdom during Robert Baratheon's rebellion, she bears a claim to the Iron Throne – a claim she is determined to follow through. Her character development brings strong leading qualities to light which other characters come to notice and fear. A sinister and mysterious side to Daenerys fuels rumours about animalistic traits that seem to be confirmed when she passes a Dothraki pregnancy ceremony, some kind of a fertility test, in which she eats the raw heart of a stallion to a ritualistic chant.[25] A report about the disfigurement and lizard-scaled skin of her still-born son further reveal elements of bestiality in connection with her motherhood, which is perceived as unnatural.[26] When Daenerys later on – after her dragon eggs have successfully hatched – calls herself the Mother of Dragons she adopts a bestial epithet herself, one that is tied to her femininity as genealogy here is not defined by human relations and surpasses natural bonds. On top of these aspects, Daenerys has one major physically dragonic quality: fire does not harm her,

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[22] One point of view is to take myth to be the counterpart to reason ("das Andere der Vernunft"), as *Friedrich,* Udo / *Quast,* Bruno: Mediävistische Mythosforschung. In: *Friedrich / Quast* (eds.): Präsenz des Mythos ix-xxxviii, here x, contend (cf. fn. 21). However, I think that the hybrid character of mythical story worlds suggests a more dialectic understanding of myth, one that is closer to Hans Blumenberg's notion (see below).

[23] For a study on the mythical dimension of the mid-fifteenth-century German version by Thüring of Ringoltingen, see *Quast,* Bruno: "Diß kommt von gelückes zuoualle": Entzauberung und Remythisierung in der Mélusine des Thüring von Ringoltingen. In: *Friedrich/Quast* (eds.): Präsenz des Mythos 83-96 (cf. fn. 21). See also *Kiening,* Christian: Zeitenraum und "mise en abyme". Zum "Kern" der Melusinegeschichte. In: Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte 79 (2005) 1, 3-28.

[24] Many of these issues are discussed in the volume *Urban,* Misty / *Kemmis,* Deva F. / *Elmes,* Melissa Ridley (eds.): Melusine's Footprint: Tracing the Legacy of a Medieval Myth. Leiden, Boston/Massachusetts 2017 (Explorations in Medieval Culture 4).

[25] Season 1, Episode 6.

[26] Season 1, Episode 10.

suggesting that her skin behaves as if it were made of scales, a rough leather suited to withstand dragon's breath. She is bound by a destiny she cannot escape, and her blood-line is considered mythical in the world of *Game of Thrones:* since Daenerys's family has its origins in Valyria – a mythical and barely accessible place on the map – she is a kind of mythical figure, too. Stories and poems coalesce around Valyria – a country regarded as a world of the past by the figures of Westeros.[27] Daenerys learns to exploit her origins, creating fear and awe, and solidifying her claim to power through this mythical background. Her final failure to maintain power culminates in her betrayal by her only surviving blood relative, Jon Snow.

The figure of Daenerys was possibly inspired by folkloric tales about women who are half-human half-beast or fairy, and more specifically by those about Mélusine. Mélusine is a legendary figure whose stories emerged in the High Middle Ages, the oldest transmissions of the material dating back to the twelfth century.[28] The core of the legend as it originated in the oral tradition tells the story of how a beautiful woman gets married to a knight under the condition that he is not allowed to look at her on certain days, when she needs to hide away her true appearance from him. In most legends she is a water fairy with a serpent body, a reptile-like creature with supernatural powers. Once the conjugal bond is made, she becomes the source of the knight's wealth and reputation until he breaks his promise and spies on her, at which point his success comes to an end.

In the earliest texts that have come down to us, the woman is a demon, but in later courtly romances she grows to be the ancestor of many noble families.[29] The adaptation begins with her having a human father (and a fairy mother), a mixed heritage that gives her human features. Relationships between humans and superhuman creatures are known from ancient myths in which gods and goddesses create demigods with humans. With this shift towards a half-human nature, existing aristocratic families began to seek ties to the story as they proclaimed her as their ancestor. In particular, the Lords of Lusignan, who lived near Poitiers, promoted this myth. This female founding figure was nameless until Jean d'Arras gave her the name "Mélusine" in 1393.

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[27] Most vividly described in the show by Tyrion and Jorah who travel there: Season 5, Episode 5.

[28] On the development of the tale, see *Le Goff,* Jacques/*Le Roy Ladurie,* Emmanuel: Mélusine maternelle et défricheuse. In: Annales 26 (1971) 3-4, 587-622. See also the groundbreaking works of Laurence Harf-Lancner: *Harf-Lancner,* Laurence: Une Mélusine galloise: la Dame du Lac de Brecknock. In: Mélanges de littérature du Moyen Âge au XXe siècle offerts à Mademoiselle Jeanne Lods. Paris 1978 (Collection de l'Ecole Normale Supérieure de Jeunes Filles 10) 323-338; *Harf-Lancner:* Les Fées au Moyen Âge. Morgane et Mélusine ou la naissance des fées. Genève 1984 (Nouvelle Bibibliothèque du Moyen Âge 8); *Harf-Lancner:* Littérature et politique: Jean de Berry, Léon de Lusignan et le roman de Mélusine. In: *Buschinger,* Danielle (ed.): Histoire et littérature au Moyen Âge: Actes du Colloque du Centre d'Études Médiévales de l'Université de Picardie (Amiens 20-24 mars 1985). Göppingen 1991 (Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik 546) 161-71.

[29] For an overview of the tale's text history including sources that Jean d'Arras used for his version, see *Vincensini,* Jean-Jacques: Introduction. In: *Vincensini* (ed.): Jean d'Arras, Mélusine ou La Noble Histoire de Lusignan. Paris 2003, 7-98, at 8-31.

Mélusine's most compelling feature is her fairy heritage and the consequences it bears on her life and that of her offspring. Her origins remain vague to most characters in the story world, but the reader knows the story of her parents, the spell that her mother cast on her as a punishment for imprisoning her father in a mountain, and Mélusine's non-human genealogy and bestial condition. The latter means that she turns into a serpent from the navel downwards every Saturday. She is able to keep this secret quite successfully, leading to her husband Raymondin's prosperity while she triumphs as a powerful, intelligent, and generous leader. Mélusine, a beautiful woman as we are told, is shrouded in mysteries, her source of ingenuity and riches being inexplicable to the people around her. The demonic spell she manages to keep in check, however, manifests itself in the disfigurement of all but two of her children: eight sons are born with visibly abnormal facial features. These abnormalities – five concern the senses, three are of an animalistic nature – are not necessarily negative, neither are they automatically perceived as monstrous (though they are in three-eyed Horrible); instead they are marks of distinction or – as Jean-Jacques Vincensini puts it – "blessures qualifiantes".[30] In this way, the boys' mythical ingredients – signs of Mélusine's origins from an otherworld – are counterbalanced. To cut a long story – which encompasses the sons' adventures; Raymondin's fleeting doubts about Mélusine's weekly enclosures; and the foundation phase of the Lusignan dynasty, including the erecting of fortresses – very short: Mélusine's serpentine secret is made public by Raymondin in a moment when he is overcome by his emotions. Transforming into a dragon she bemoans her fate – trapped in that penitential shape until Judgement Day – and flies off, only to return occasionally and furtively to visit her two youngest boys.

In fifteenth-century manuscripts these tragic scenes are depicted vividly. In illustrations accompanying Jean d'Arras's account, Mélusine transforms into a fully-fledged dragon (as in British Library, Harley 4418, fol. 214v).[31] In Coudrette's verse text *Roman de Mélusine,* dating from roughly a decade later after Jean d'Arras's prose romance, Mélusine takes on her sabbatical hybrid shape retaining her human upper half of the body (mirrored visually in Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Français 24383, fol. 30r; Fig. 1). In terms of composition, both illustrations – Harley 4418 and Ms. Français 24383 – combine multiple scenes into one space. There is only one dragon in the story (rather than two) and the beholder is required to see it jump off the window sill and fly away (Mélusine's stepping on the sill is outlined specifically by Jean d'Arras). Likewise there are two young boys (rather than four) who await the reunion with their mother in the illustration supplementing Coudrette's *Mélusine.*

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[30] *Ibid.* 40.

[31] London, British Library, Harley 4418 dates from c. 1450; for an online reproduction of the miniature showing Mélusine as a dragon escaping from the window, see URL: https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid& IllID=28498 (last accessed 21.08.2020).

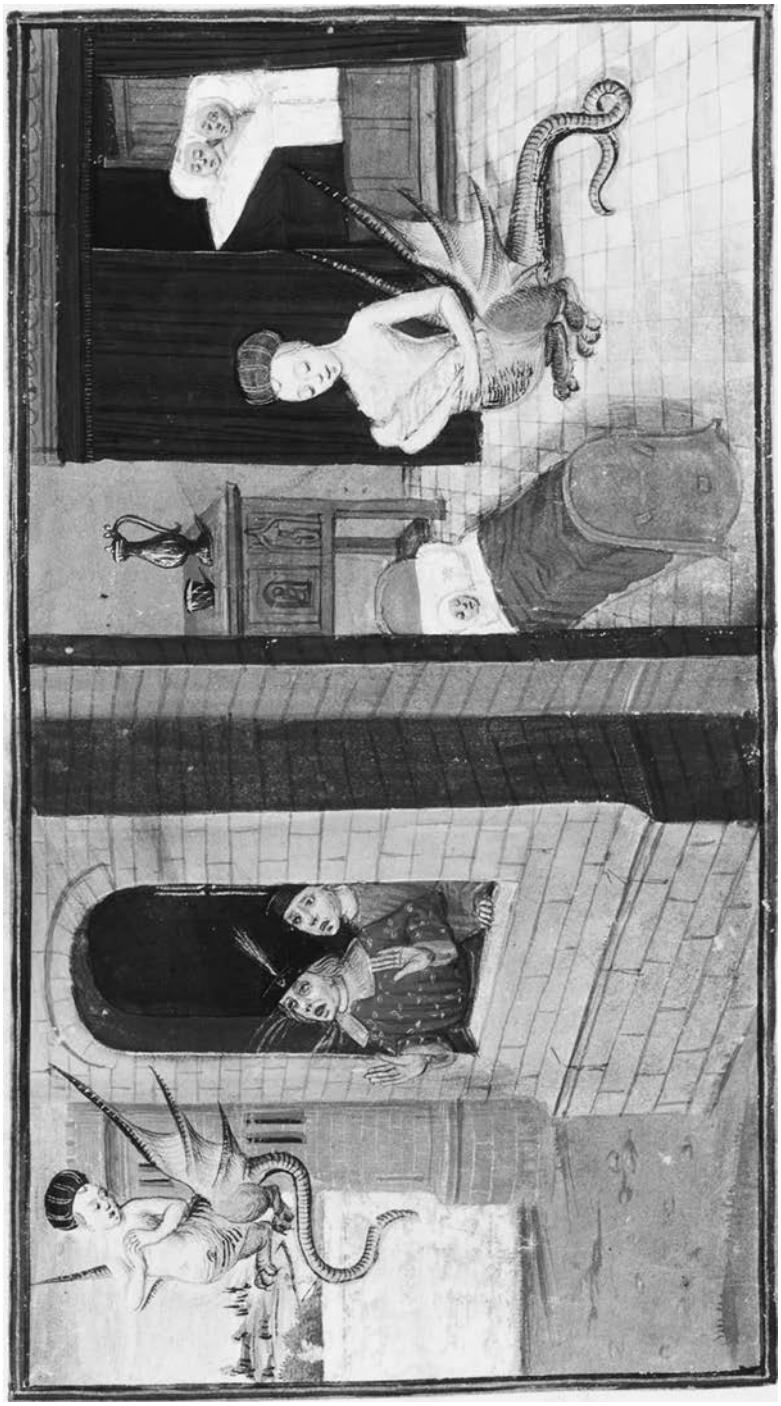

Fig. 1: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Français 24383, fol. 30r, c. 1490, Coudrette, *Roman de Mélusine.* URL: https://gallica. bnf. fr/ark:/12148/btv1b105258709/f63.image (last accessed 21.08.2020).

Mélusine's solitary life as a penitent, her on-going care for her family, and her political legacy manifested in the buildings she constructed all underline her character as a benevolent, pious, and wise ruler. With these positive qualities she offsets her hereditary status as a half-fairy and of someone capable of patricide in her teenage years (the murderous act of imprisoning her father in a mountain).[32] Jean d'Arras, in upgrading Mélusine's image, continued a trend that had started before the fairy founder of the Lusignans had received her name. The Christian re-evaluation of the female serpent-like figure aimed at her redemption and simultaneously portrayed her descendants as morally righteous heirs. This shift is all the more interesting if we take into account late medieval depictions of the Fall in the Garden of Eden. In around 1300, the Biblical scene was typically visualised with two human figures and a serpent: in the illustration of British Library, Royal 15 D II (fol. 2r) the serpent has a reptile body though its face is rendered female.[33] By the late Middle Ages, the serpent is further visually conflated with Eve, as seen for example in Bavarian State Library, Cgm 8010a (Fig. 2) where the reptile shape begins from underneath the neck. Eve's guilt is coded through the mirror-image of the serpent's face, the serpent's crown adding the connotation of the temptation through so-called "Lady World".

Images that grotesquely superimpose Eve's face on that of the serpent often appear in typological picture bibles that are bound to salvation narratives, where they illustrate the bestiality of the archetypical woman in ways that remain much less explicit in texts. The serpent is discernibly a dragon-figure, and as such its equally noticeable female head contributes to the role Eve's sin plays in constructed schemes of Christian salvation history. These images, set in Eden, suggest that woman was always corrupted and bestial, while man had a prelapsarian state. They became standard with the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, a book that was already immensely popular before it was printed in at least eleven different editions in five different languages; it juxtaposes Lucifer's rising up against his creator and subsequent expulsion from heaven with human's disobedience and expulsion from Eden.[34] Eve's inherent bestiality, represented in the image of the half-woman half-monster, associated with the distant past but ever present, became Mélusine's image as well.

Dating from the same time as Cgm 8010a, another manuscript in the holdings of the Bavarian State Library, which portrays the Fall, has the serpent – whose human counter-image again is Eve – piercing Adam through the chest (Fig. 3). The serpent's human arms hold the spear in Cgm 598; the artist did not neglect, however, to com-

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[32] She fulfils the duties of a just ruler according to fourteenth-century "miroirs des princes", handbooks for lords of which Jean de Berry, who had commissioned *Mélusine,* had plenty that he certainly also shared with the author Jean d'Arras; for details on the library of Jean de Berry, see *Vincensini:* Introduction 26-27 (cf. fn. 29).

[33] London, British Library, Royal 15 D II dates from c. 1310; for a reproduction of the miniature showing the Fall of Adam and Eve, see URL: https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IllID=34956 (last accessed 21.08.2020).

[34] See the Warburg Institute Iconographic Database for an introduction, summary, and images of the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis,* URL: https://iconographic.warburg.sas.ac.uk/vpc/VPC_search/Speculum_intro.html (last accessed 26.08.2020).

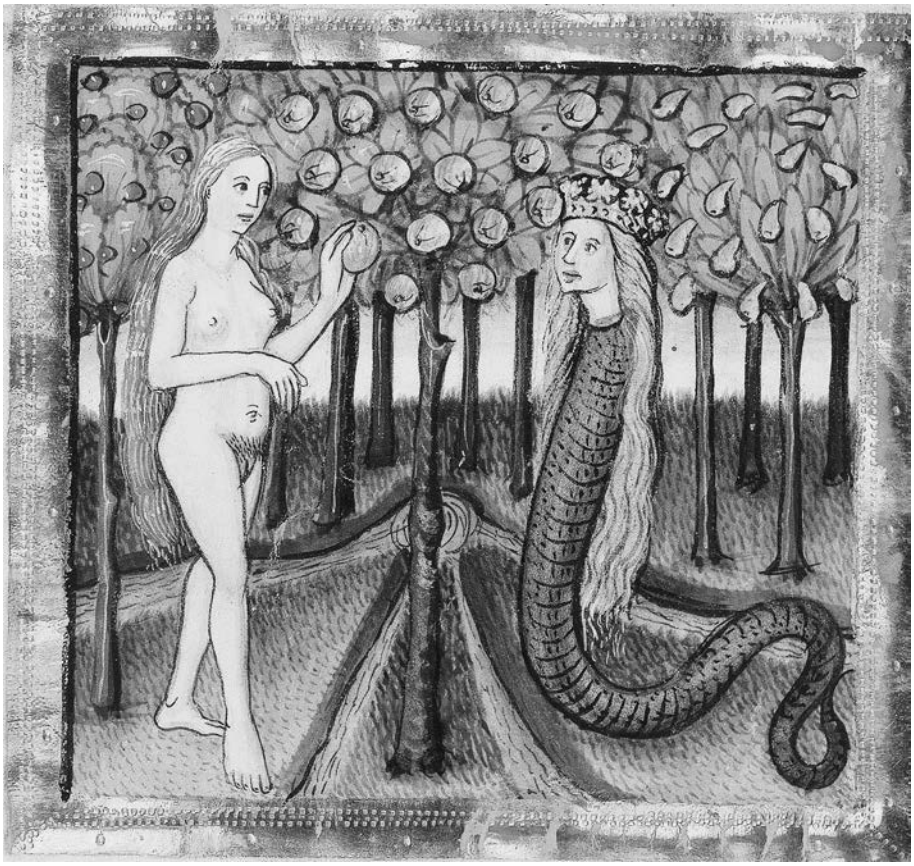

Fig. 2: Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cgm 8010a, fol. 10r, c. 1465–70, Eve and the Serpent, Furtmeyr-Bibel, urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb00045292-3.

plement the serpent with female breasts. Femininity – coded in facial features, very long hair, and breasts – becomes interwoven with a kind of bestiality that is connotated with demonic power. Together with the only perceptibly injured party being Adam, the allying elements between Eve and the spear holder imply a pact between Satan and woman. Images with this message were ubiquitous: they informed associations of woman being responsible for the Fall of mankind and fuelled the idea of the Old Testament being some kind of mythical past with monstrous ladies.

The comparison to illustrations of the Fall elucidates a conflation of femininity and bestiality, a conflation which is central to the tale of *Mélusine.* Yet, while Jean d'Arras tries to reconcile the serpent woman with the Christian idea of salvation, in fifteenth-century depictions of the human Fall, the serpent, for whom there is no salvation, is modelled after Eve. Despite important differences between telling the story

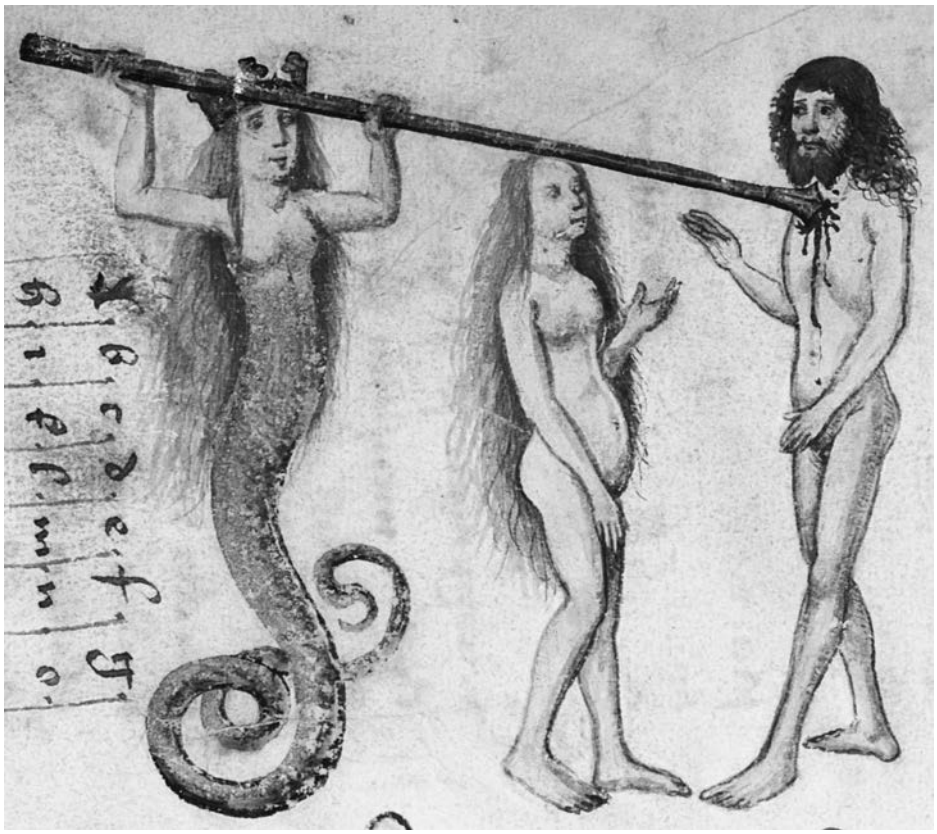

Fig. 3: Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cgm 598, fol. 2r, c. 1470, The Fall of Adam and Eve, Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit, urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb00016775-9.

of humankind's need for salvation and telling the story of one woman's redemption, we may still conclude that, regardless of their ambiguous characters, both Eve and Mélusine are landed with an aspect of fatal monstrosity.[35]

In the tale of *Mélusine* as recounted by Jean d'Arras, Mélusine's bestial side forms part of a mythical heritage. Turning to the tale's mythical dimensions, we first can observe that history and fiction are entangled in the folkloric tradition about Mélusine, and that her figure comes to embody the foundation myth of a particular aristocratic house: the Lusignans. It seems that, a priori, a half-demon as ancestral mother should be problematic, but her figure became less and less off-putting as the

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[35] For a comparative analysis between Mélusine and Eve, including the figure of the Virgin Mary, see *Zhao,* Zifeng: Metamorphoses of Snake Women: Mélusine and Madam White. In: *Urban/Kemmis/Elmes:* Mélusine's Footprint 282-300 (cf. fn. 24).

legend developed to furnish an illustrious family with an even more illustrious founding figure which would set them apart from other elites.[36] In Jean d'Arras's romance, the fairy character of this ancestral figure functioned as a myth that buttressed the claims to power of Jean de Berry, the man who commissioned this new version to be composed.[37] Jean de Berry, known as Duc de Berry, was the brother of King Char-les V, who in 1372 had reconquered Poitiers from the English and installed Jean as the Count of Poitou, a position Jean had very briefly held in 1356 before the French defeat in the Battle of Poitiers. Poitou's most important fortress, Lusignan, which in the tale of *Mélusine* is built with supernatural aid, had once belonged to the Lusignans whose last male heir, Guy de Lusignan, died in 1308. After his death it was annexed by King Philip the Fair and so went over to the French Crown. It now had to be won by a nineteen-month siege before it finally came into Jean's possession in October 1374.[38]

According to the region's tradition, as outlined by Benedictine monk Pierre Bersuire in the 1340s, the Lusignan's dragon ancestor would reappear whenever the fortress was about to change lordship.[39] Jean d'Arras sets up his *Mélusine* to allow him to draw on this oral tradition in order to legitimise Jean de Berry's possession of the fortress on mythical grounds. This set-up begins with Mélusine's mythical origin. Her mother Presine, a fairy, takes her triplet girls away with her after their father, Elinas King of Scotland, breaks his promise not to look at her in childbirth or in childbed.

L'ystoire nous dit que quant Presine party de Elinas atout ses trois filles qu'elle s'en ala atout elles an Avalon, nommé l'Ille Perdue, pour ce que nulz homs, tant y eust esté de foiz, n'y sauroit rassegner fors par aventure.[40]

The story tells us that when Presine left him [Elinas] she took her three daughters to Avalon, which was called the Lost Isle because no man, however many times he had been there before, could ever find it again except by chance.[41]

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[36] Similar supernatural foundation myths are found for other families of the time, see *Vincensini:* Introduction 21 (cf. fn. 29).

[37] For an overview of the motives and Jean de Berry's need to legitimize the claim, see *Maddox,* Donald/*Sturm-Maddox,* Sara: Introduction. In: *Maddox/Sturm-Maddox* (eds.): Jean d'Arras, Mélusine; or, The noble history of Lusignan. University Park/ Pennsylvania 2012, 11-12. For a historically more critical account, see *Vincensini:* Introduction 17-23 (cf. fn. 29).

[38] Perhaps Jean was trying to relate himself to the Lusignans via his maternal grandfather Jean of Luxembourg, King of Bohemia. So think Maddox and Sturm-Maddox, see *Maddox/ Sturm-Maddox:* Introduction 11 (cf. fn. 37), who take Jean of Luxembourg to be a Lusignan descendent. In *Mélusine,* one of the sons, Antoine becomes Count of Luxembourg. In reality the picture is different: historians have found no connection between the family from Poitou and Luxembourg. See also *Vincensini:* Introduction 23, fn. 1 (cf. fn. 29).

[39] Reductorium morale, Prologue to Book XIV. Quoted after *Vincensini:* Introduction 8 (cf. fn. 29).

[40] *Jean d'Arras:* Mélusine, ed. *Vincensini* 130 (cf. fn. 29).

[41] *Jean d'Arras:* Mélusine, ed. *Maddox/Sturm-Maddox* 24 (cf. fn. 37). The translation is based on the older edition by *Stouff,* Louis (ed.): Mélusine: Roman du XIVe siècle par Jean d'Arras. Dijon 1932 (Publications de l'Université de Dijon 5). However, Vincensini's edition, which I have chosen to quote from, is not only equally based on the oldest extant

The place of Mélusine's upbringing is concealed to most people; it is a mythical land within the story world. After the punishment by her mother (the metamorphosis into a serpent from the navel down each Saturday until she marries a man who loves her and never wants to know her secret so that she can die naturally as a mortal woman), Mélusine cultivates another side which manifests itself in religious words and deeds. Her speeches, given to admonish her sons before they travel abroad, echo sermons and deploy a catalogue of Christian virtues. In addition, she has prophetic vision: she knows Raymondin's past when they first meet and she continues to have access to hidden knowledge about past, present, and future. She still is incapable of escaping her fate when she fails to become a mortal woman. Awaiting the Last Judgement and longing for the salvation of her soul (much like Adam and Eve in limbo according to Christian tradition), she continues to appear to people of the region.

Her mythical nature is saturated with Christian morals. Her prophetic qualities, Jean d'Arras informs us, remain in service of the people she once governed as she predicts – for them – the status of a changing lordship. Presine's spell specifies that

> Et t'apparras trois jours devant que la forteresse que tu feras et nommeras de ton nom devra muer seigneur et aussi quant ly uns des hoirs qui de ta lignie ystront devra mourir.[42]
>
> And whenever the fortress that you shall build and endow with your name is to change lords, or whenever one of your descendants is about to die, you shall reappear there three days beforehand.[43]

On the basis of Presine's curse, Jean d'Arras, at the very end of his *Mélusine* following two epilogues, adds various eye-witness reports of people who had allegedly seen a dragon just before Jean de Berry took possession of the castle. The description of the dragon's tail, azure and silver, resonates with the earlier portrayal of Mélusine's serpent part.[44] That the Duc de Berry should be considered the rightful ruler is beyond doubt for Jean d'Arras, who notes that he has acquired the fortress Lusignan "by right and by the sword".[45]

The history of the Lusignans and the mythical world of Mélusine were – certainly in Jean de Berry's conviction for whom it bore personal importance – intertwined through and through. In the romance, this standpoint is supported by a narrative strategy that mixes the story world, including its mythical dimensions, with a chronicle style. In this way, Jean d'Arras is not only a memory-preserving storyteller, but someone who records the most recent, present history as well. His fascinating

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manuscript Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal 3353, but it also considers more text variants from other manuscripts.

42 *Jean d'Arras:* Mélusine, ed. *Vincensini* 136 (see also 770) (cf. fn. 29).

43 *Jean d'Arras:* Mélusine, ed. *Maddox/Sturm-Maddox* 26 (cf. fn. 37).

44 See *Jean d'Arras:* Mélusine, ed. *Vincensini* 812 ("…une serpente grande et grosse merveilleusement, et estoit la queue longue de .vii. a .viii. piéz, burlee d'azur et d'argent") and 770 ("Et avoit la queue longue ą merveilles, toute burlee d'azur et d'argent") (cf. fn. 29).

45 *Ibid.* 808: "par raison et par conqueste d'espee" (cf. fn. 29). Translation *Jean d'Arras:* Mélusine, ed. *Maddox/Sturm-Maddox* 227 (cf. fn. 37).

account, as much as it aimed to entertain, was clearly also intended to achieve recognition for the Duc de Berry's lordship in Poitou. It is not surprising then that Mélusine's presence can also be found in the most famous book commissioned by Jean de Berry, *Les Très Riches Heures* (c. 1412–1416), where the illustration for the month of March depicts the castle of Lusignan with a dragon flying above it.[46] Whether a deliberate visual connection to the story of Mélusine as in Musée Condé Ms. 65, or eyewitness accounts about her most recent apparitions as in Jean d'Arras's romance, instances of mythical presence are used to explain historical events. To paraphrase Hans Blumenberg, who stands in the Horkheimer-Adorno tradition of the dialectic of enlightenment, we could say that the myth serves to tame reality and channel it, to render the unnameable controllable.[47] It is used to explain, not to frighten, or – in Blumenberg's words – a function of myths is "to create distance to the uncanny".[48] For the myth to be instrumentalised in this way, it is important to acknowledge that "it does not depend on the fact that the written story [or: history] is true, but rather on the fact that it must be true".[49] Jean d'Arras, in confirming time and again the accuracy and truth of the events described, including all the "marvels", is aware of the necessity that his tale – to put in Tolkien's words – "should be presented as 'true'".[50]

To sum up, many parallels could be drawn between *Mélusine* and *Game of Thrones,* but what I have hoped to highlight is that the link between femininity and bestiality is established by creating a mythical atmosphere surrounding female figures with supernatural abilities. No one really knows where they come from and why they are so powerful. In the respective story worlds they oscillate between being admired and being despised. Their mythical source of power does in fact not fit into the polar categories such as bad or good, real or imaginary.[51] In mythical fashion, the border between historiography and storytelling is blurred, which confers a patina of truth rather than fiction.

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[46] For a reproduction of the miniature in Chantilly, Bibliothèque Musée Condé, Ms. 65, fol. 3, see *Lognon,* Jean/*Cazelles,* Raymond/*Meiss,* Millard: Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry. London 1969, plate 4; see also URL: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Les_Très_Riches_Heures_du_duc_de_Berry_mars.jpg (last accessed 21.08.2020).

[47] See *Blumenberg,* Hans: Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos. In: *Fuhrmann,* Manfred (ed.): Terror und Spiel: Probleme der Mythenrezeption. München 1971 (Poetik und Hermeneutik 4) 11-66.

[48] *Blumenberg,* Hans: Arbeit am Mythos. Frankfurt am Main 1979, 132: "Beide Phänomene, das der Ausmerzung von Ungeheuern in der Welt und das der Übergangsgestalten zum menschlichen Eidos hin, müssen mit der Funktion des Mythos zu tun haben, Distanz zur Unheimlichkeit zu schaffen."

[49] *Ibid.* 141: "Es kommt nicht darauf an, daß die geschriebene Geschichte wahr ist, sondern darauf, daß sie wahr sein muß." (cf. fn. 48).

[50] *Tolkien:* On Fairy-Stories 18 (cf. fn. 2).

[51] Leading over to the next topic, orientalism, I shall not leave unmentioned that crusader tales are inserted into *Mélusine.* With men of the historical Lusignan dynasty furnishing kings of Jerusalem, Cyprus, and Armenia, a dynastic outreach is explored in the adventure tales of Mélusine's sons in Jean d'Arras's romance.

Duke Ernst

Mythical worlds do not necessarily express themselves as remote fairy lands; what has formerly been called the "orient" has in the past been also mystified to a degree that resembles a mythical treatment.[52] The medieval tale of *Duke Ernst*, a heroic epic with elements borrowed from crusader narratives, illustrates how the othering of what is considered to be foreign is achieved through mythical dimensions. Though the contentious concept of "the orient" had not been invented then, racialised discussions of "the East" already existed in the medieval period, as has recently been argued by Geraldine Heng.[53] Against this background of long-standing traditions of othering I aim to consider the notion of orientalism as an interpretative avenue for the examination of medieval narratives.

The concept of orientalism goes back to Edward Said who, studying western views of the so-called "orient," specifically the Arab world, found that discourses by Europeans were prejudiced against that region and that stereotypes and misleading projections of Islamic regions enabled and reinforced colonial policy.[54] The orientalism discussed by Said concerned primarily the Middle East and Egypt, whereas today the study of orientalism can span more groups and areas encompassing Muslims and Jews, and the regions of East Asia. Although Said's work has not always met with approbation, his general notion of orientalism "has had wide utility and application when treated as a tool for interpreting 'certain' western representations of subjected cultures, especially in literature and the visual arts, rather than as a reliable guide to entire branches of scholarship".[55] It is in this sense that the theoretical foil of mythical dimensions can be applied to what has been termed orientalism in the tradition of Said's concept.

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[52] Mechanisms of othering used to demarcate demons from humans were also used to defame Non-Christians, namely Jews and Muslims, in medieval narratives and art with orientalist undercurrents. Connections between othering effects and depictions of Jews and Muslims in medieval culture are fairly acknowledged. See for example the following studies *Cohen,* Jeremy: Synagoga conversa: Honorius Augustodunensis, the Song of Songs, and Christianity's 'Eschatological Jew'. In: Speculum 79 (2004) 2, 309-340; *Strickland,* Debra Higgs: Saracens, Demons & Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art. Princeton/New Jersey, Oxford 2003; *Rubin,* Miri: Ecclesia and synagoga: The Changing Meanings of a Powerful Pairing. In: *Yuval,* Israel Jacob/*Ben-Shalom,* Ram (eds.): Conflict and Religious Conversation in Latin Christendom: Studies in Honour of Ora Limor. Brepols 2014 (Cultural encounters in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages 17) 55-86; *Akbari,* Suzanne Conklin: Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100-1450. Ithaca/New York 2009; *Burge,* Amy: Representing Difference in the Medieval and Modern Orientalist Romance. New York 2016.

[53] *Heng,* Geraldine: The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages. Cambridge 2018. See also *Sivri,* Yücel: Mitteldeutsche Orientliteratur des 12. und 13. Jahrhunderts: Graf Rudolf und Herzog Ernst: Ein Beitrag zu interkulturellen Auseinandersetzungen im Hochmittelalter. Frankfurt am Main 2016 (Beiträge zur Mittelalterforschung 28). Sivri translates "othering" as "soziokulturelle Stigmatisierung" in German (p. 29).

[54] *Said,* Edward W.: Orientalism. New York 1978.

[55] *Phillips,* Kim M.: Before Orientalism: Asian Peoples and Cultures in European Travel Writing, 1245-1510. Philadelphia/Pennsylvania 2014, 16.

As scholars have shown, the tendency to exoticize what lies East of western Europe has a long tradition: centuries before, and continuing into, the age of colonisation, medieval and early modern travel literature fuelled the imagination of a "Wild, Wild East".[56] Fictional travel literature was extremely popular in the late Middle Ages, first and foremost the *Travels* attributed to the pen name John Mandeville.[57] This Anglo-Norman French text was written in the 1350s and was often copied as an illustrated book. Illustrators dwelt on imaginary monstrous creatures that stand in the tradition of Pliny and medieval bestiaries. There was no shying away from depicting grotesque scenes either, which could include cannibalistic giants and so-called blemmyae, headless creatures with faces on their chests, as seen in British Library, Harley 3954 (fol. 42r).[58] Mandeville's projections of the East do not only list imaginary creatures; he also aligns Jews with an apocalyptic threat of the Antichrist.[59] The author of the *Travels*, "whose identity and motive remain uncertain" as Kim Phillips reminds us, barely travelled himself, the possibility of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land notwithstanding.[60] Rather he drew heavily on well-known Latin sources for his descriptions of distant places. Nevertheless, Mandeville's book caught readers' imaginations all across Europe, and was quickly translated into eight further vernacular languages: English, German, Italian, Dutch, Spanish, Irish, Danish, and Czech. Nearly 300 manuscripts survive today, proving the appetite for an exoticized East. No major library lacked this book; for example, Jean de Berry possessed a copy which most certainly was consulted by Jean d'Arras.[61]

We do not need to turn to the Middle Ages, however, to find examples for an exoticized treatment of "the orient": vibrant scenes from *Game of Thrones* play with stereotypes rooted in an orientalist world view, for example, when masses of people of colour appear to worship their white liberator.[62] The episode closing Season 3 sparked an important public debate about colonialist undercurrents in the show. Despite the saviour figure being Daenerys Targaryen, and hence not strictly Wes-

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[56] See for example the study by *Khair,* Tabish: A Multiplicity of Mirrors: Europe and Modernity in Travel Writing from Asia and Africa. In: Indian Literature 52 (2008) 6 (248), 211-222. See also *Sivri:* Mitteldeutsche Orientliteratur 13-29 (cf. fn. 53).

[57] See *Tzanaki,* Rosemary: Mandevilles Medieval Audiences: A Study on the Reception of the Book of Sir John Mandeville (1371-1550). Aldershot, Burlington/Vermont 2003.

[58] British Library, Harley 3954, is from the second quarter of the 15th century; the image on fol. 42r can be consulted online, URL: https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMINBig.ASP?size=big&IllID=16707 (last accessed 21.08.2020). – For a critical analysis of these fantastical creatures, see *Mittman,* Asa Simon/*Kim,* Susan M.: The Exposed Body and the Gendered Blemmye: Reading the Wonders of the East. In: *Classen,* Albrecht (ed.): Sexuality in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Times: New Approaches to a Fundamental Cultural-Historical and Literary-Anthropological Theme. Berlin, New York 2008 (Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture 3) 171-216.

[59] See *Mittman,* Asa Simon: Mandeville's Jews, colonialism, certainty, and art history. In: *Frojmovic,* Eva/*Karkov,* Catherine E. (eds.): Postcolonising the Medieval Image. London, New York 2017, 91-119.

[60] *Phillips:* Before Orientalism 45 (cf. fn. 55).

[61] See *Vincensini:* Introduction 20-21 (cf. fn. 29).

[62] Season 3, Episode 10.

terosi herself, structurally orientalist features are concentrated and visualised in this hotly debated climatic scene. Another orientalist aspect of the show that is often commented on is that characters of Essos speak English with thick accents suggesting their foreignness. Some moments in the show resonate with orientalist art, in which the supposed debauchery and sexual freedom of the so-called orient is depicted in flamboyant colours, exuberant fabrics, and Islamic architecture. The similarities between images from Jamie Lannister's visit to Dorne (Season 5, Episode 9) and orientalist paintings such as *The Harem Dance* by Giulio Rosati (1858–1917) are astounding, though not surprising when considering existing clichés about an Arab-influenced medieval Iberia, the region which served loosely as the projection foil for Dorne.[63]

Medievalism and orientalism share patterns and, moreover, they are historically intertwined. John Ganim has argued that portrayals of the Middle Ages and of the exoticized East reveal an identity crisis in the idea of a western civilization, the counterfoil to medieval and East being modern and West. Humanists perceived large parts of medieval culture, in particular Gothic architecture and epic romance, "not only as a record of a national past, but also as foreign, and particularly Eastern, in conception".[64] This tendency gets reinforced in the Romantic period where assumptions about a "foreign past" and about Eastern influences are theorized despite all of the idiosyncrasies contained in such connections.[65] My purpose here is not to add anything new to the body of scholarship that deals with the cultural appropriation of a fantastically chivalric Middle Ages coinciding with the fetishization of "the orient"; that medievalism and orientalism have critical aspects in common suffices already to convince why they deserve to be analysed together. Rather, I have found mythical thinking as expounded by Cassirer to be a useful category when studying medieval narratives within the larger question of how story worlds in a pre-national era create an orientalist perspective.

The tale of *Duke Ernst,* next to other crusader tales from the same period, offers itself for such a study, and scholars have already pointed out intrinsic orientalist elements.[66] The earliest extant version, though only transmitted in fragments, was composed by an anonymous poet of the Lower Rhine in the second half of the twelfth century. It remained one of the most popular narratives of the German Middle Ages

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[63] *Rosati,* Giulio: The Harem Dance. Christie's Auction on 20 June 2002, Sale 6562: "19th century European art including Ottomans & Orientalists", thumbnail reproduction online, URL: https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/giulio-rosati-italian-1858-1917-the-harem-3934830-details.aspx (last accessed 21.08.2020).

[64] *Ganim,* John M: Medievalism and Orientalism: Three Essays on Literature, Architecture and Cultural Identity. London, New York 2008, 5 and 20.

[65] *Ibid.* 28-29.

[66] *Stock,* Markus: Knowledge, Hybridity, and the King of the Crane-Heads. In: Daphnis 45 (2017) 3-4, 391-411. – *Goerlitz,* Uta: '. . . Ob sye heiden synt ader cristen': Figurationen von Kreuzzug und Heidenkampf in deutschen und lateinischen 'Herzog Ernst'-Fassungen des Hoch- und Spätmittelalters (HE B, C und F). In: Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik 156 (2009) 4, 65-104. – *Lazda-Cazers,* Rasma: Hybridity and Liminality in 'Herzog Ernst B.' In: Daphnis 33 (2004) 1, 79-96. – *Sivri:* Mitteldeutsche Orientliteratur (cf. fn. 53).

until the seventeenth century, regaining newly found interest after 1800 in the wake of the Romantics' fascination with medieval culture. The attraction of *Duke Ernst* had many reasons as it appealed to different audiences across the ages; one factor of success is without doubt the entertaining aspect of the wondrous travels which unfold in a complex plot structure.[67]

At the outset, the protagonist Ernst, a Bavarian duke, is introduced as a heroic character. Ernst is the emperor's stepson who, envied by a Count, is unjustly insulted and punished by Emperor Otto. Taking his revenge, Ernst beheads his antagonist, the Count who caused the calumniation, and is ousted by his stepfather in return. Ernst has to go into exile and decides to sail off to join a crusade with his men. The reader follows the hero's itinerary as he passes the King of Hungary and the Byzantine Emperor who both help him on his voyage. On their way to Syria, Ernst having gathered all his men on one boat, they are swept into a violent storm which separates them from other crusaders. After three months they reach land; an adventure-cycle in foreign lands with human-like but exoticized creatures commences. Named countries in this "wondrous East" are Grippia, where crane-heads (with human bodies) live, and Arimaspi, which is populated by cyclopes. In the interim, Ernst and his companions experience two more interspersed episodes, the Magnet Mountain and Griffin Valley. Eventually, Ernst reaches the Holy Land after liberating Christians from "Babylonian" tyranny; finally he returns home where he manages with his mother's help to restore his affairs.

Early research on *Duke Ernst* focused on its relationship to history, as some scholars suspected a political stance with respect to the Empire politics of the Hohenstaufen period.[68] The material lends itself to such assumptions due to numerous mentions of historical figures and events. However, no matter how much hints in *Duke Ernst* may invite us to regard the text as a political comment, historical associations remain fuzzy, and in contrast to Jean d'Arras's *Mélusine*, no clear political motive for why it was written in the first place can be determined. Also, the story's basic structures – a family conflict and the second crusade – are common motifs in high medieval literary repertoire. Without going into the complex transmission history of *Duke Ernst*, which has been explored extensively already,[69] some of the lit-

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[67] As put by *Carey,* Stephen M.: "Undr unkunder diet": Monstrous counsel in 'Herzog Ernst B'. In: Daphnis 33 (2004) 1, 53-78, at 54: "The fantastic and the monstrous, the potpourri of medieval and ancient legends of people and places on the outer edge of the known world, would seem to play the deciding role in the dynamic appeal and longevity of this story."

[68] *Dussère,* Carolyn/*Thomas,* J. W.: The Legend of Duke Ernst. Lincoln/Nebraska 1979, 2. See also an overview of historical interpretations in *Carey:* "Undr unkunder diet" 53-56 (cf. fn. 67).

[69] *Weber,* Cornelia: Untersuchung und überlieferungskritische Edition des Herzog Ernst B: mit einem Abdruck der Fragmente von Fassung A. Göppingen 1994 (Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik 611). – *Behr,* Hans-Joachim: Herzog Ernst. Eine Übersicht über die verschiedenen Textfassungen und deren Überlieferung. Göppingen 1979 (Litterae 62). For the relation between the Latin and German redactions, see *Ehlen,* Thomas: Hystoria ducis Bauariae Ernesti: Kritische Edition "Herzog Ernst" C und Untersuchungen zu Struktur und Darstellung des Stoffes in den volkssprachlichen und lateinischen Fassungen. Tübingen 1996, 30-49. For Herzog Ernst, recension D, see *Rosenfeld,* Hans-Friedrich (ed.): Herzog

erary sources for the tale deserve mentioning: there are crossovers to Mandeville's *Travels*, namely sources relating Isidor of Seville and other medieval encyclopaedias. Furthermore, the cultural exchange brought by pilgrims, merchants, and crusaders facilitated a certain resemblance of *Duke Ernst* to two Arabic stories, that of the Prince of Karisme and the Princess of Georgia, both of which are sometimes transmitted in *A Thousand and One Nights*.[70]

Although attempts to anchor *Duke Ernst* historically may be futile, the text itself still maintains a claim to authenticity. The narrator reasons that the story must be true because it was put down in Latin, the language of the learned, of chronicles, and of authoritative accounts. Here we can detect an awareness for the ambivalence between myth and history: broaching the topic of truth may tell us about a necessity for legitimacy as the narrative is distinguished from fiction. More importantly, however, claiming it to be true is part of the genre rather than a serious attempt to convince the reader of accuracy. Using this historicising trope helps to create a half-ground of myth and truth, a strategy we have encountered in Jean d'Arras's *Mélusine* that aims to rationalise the myth.[71]

Among the many deictic bridges in *Duke Ernst* that are built between the narrative and the reader's world there is one particular object, a stone – found by Ernst in a rock and now to be seen in the imperial crown – which is mentioned before reference is made to Latin sources:

> Ernst der edele wîgant
> einen stein dar under sach
> den er ûz dem velse brach.
> der stein gap vil liehten glast.
> den brâhte sît der werde gast
> ûz der vil starken freise.
> dâ von er wart der weise
> druch sîn ellen genant.
> er ist noch hiute wol bekannt.
> ins rîches krône man in siht.
> von diu liuget uns daz buoch niht.
> ist aber hie dehein man
> der diese rede welle hân
> vür ein lügenlîchez werc,
> der kome hin ze Babenberc:
> dâ vindet ers ein ende
> ân alle missewende

Ernst D (wahrscheinlich Ulrich von Etzenbach). Tübingen 1991 (Altdeutsche Textbibliothek 104).

[70] On the literary sources, see *Brunner,* Horst: Annäherungen: Studien zur deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit. Berlin 2008 (Philologische Studien und Quellen 210) 21-37.

[71] The existence of hybrid creatures such as half-serpents half-humans (as in *Mélusine*) or crane-heads (as in *Duke Ernst*) are similarly elements that create a mythical world; see *Blumenberg:* Arbeit am Mythos 131 (cf. fn. 48): "Der Mythos repräsentiert eine Welt von Geschichten, die den Standpunkt des Hörers in der Zeit derart lokalisiert, daß auf ihn zu der Fundus des Ungeheuerlichen und Unerträglichen abnimmt. Dazu gehören die Übergangsgestalten zwischen Tier und Mensch […].".

von dem meister derz getihtet hât.
ze lâtine ez noch geschriben stât:
dâ von ez âne valschen list
ein vil wârez liet ist.[72]

Among them [the stones] Duke Ernst saw one which was very bright, broke it free from the rock, and brought it with him out of the frightful peril. The stone glitters with such radiance that is called "the orphan" and is well known today since one can see it in the imperial crown. That proves the story is true. However if anyone still thinks this tale has been invented, let him come to Bamberg, and the master who set into verse will put his doubts to rest without any falsehood. Moreover, it has been written down in Latin and is therefore a true story with no lies.[73]

With this passage in mind, Seraina Plotke has argued that the narrator at this instant is not only using a stylistic device to authenticate his narrative but that the references also serve as metadata. Supplementing information about the source material signals a self-awareness for the textual culture behind the tale as there exist in fact Latin redactions of *Duke Ernst*.[74] Despite this evidence, romances are "full of wonder but not of information".[75] Arguing with Tolkien, the successful narrator creates a world that "your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world".[76] In the case of *Duke Ernst*, the secondary world seeks factual connections to the reader's world not to undermine the mythical dimensions; rather, it belongs to the nature of myths that they "should be presented as 'true'".[77]

The story's frame, set in the Holy Roman Empire with a classic plot structure of family conflict, intensifies the authentication. Its familiarity functions as a stabilising ground for what follows: the crusading pilgrimage in an otherworld, an adventure cycle moving into a mythical realm. In this narrative core (the nested structure itself seems to jeopardize access to the mythical world), imaginary and fantastic elements appear to be – even if peculiar – quite normal. Mythical lands are hard to travel to; they cannot be deliberately navigated towards and the threshold leading to them has to be overcome in special ways. The violent storms Duke Ernst and his people have to pass are such transitions from one world to another, the sea being a turning point in epics.[78] Constantinople is the last city in the known world: the sea is a gateway to

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[72] *Bartsch,* Karl/*Sowinski,* Bernhard (eds.): Herzog Ernst (B). Stuttgart 2009, 250, vv. 4456-76.

[73] The Legend of Duke Ernst, ed. *Dussère/Thomas* 109 (cf. fn. 68). The translation uses the edition by Bartsch but is not literal as "[s]ome of the more obvious rhyme fillers and line fillers have been omitted in the translation under the assumption that the medieval author would not have used them if he had written in prose.", The Legend of Duke Ernst, ed. *Dussère/Thomas* 60, fn. 40 (cf. fn. 68).

[74] See *Plotke,* Seraina: Die Stimme des Erzählers. Mittelalterliche Buchkultur und moderne Narratologie. Göttingen 2017, 108-110.

[75] *Tolkien:* On Fairy-Stories 9 (cf. fn. 2). For Tolkien, romances are fairy-stories, see 64.

[76] *Ibid.* 36.

[77] *Ibid.* 18. Tolkien refers to fairy-stories but the same discursive notion for truth is discussed in scholarship dealing with mythology, for example *Blumenberg:* Arbeit am Mythos 141 (cf. fn. 48).

[78] More generically, elements from Greek epics such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are reflected in this concept of the sea. On topography in *Duke Ernst* and the semantics of space, see *Sivri:* Mitteldeutsche Orientliteratur 103-105 (cf. fn. 53).

a strange world, and attempting to go ashore to another known part of the world (the Holy Land) takes them through the unknown.[79]

Interestingly, the second violent storm brings Duke Ernst and his men back from the Holy Land to their home: the mythical border has shifted to include mappable places, Jerusalem and Acre, not just the wondrous lands: the mythical East and the geographical orient merge.

A glance at a geographical map elucidates the restricted range of real-world places referred to in *Duke Ernst* (Fig. 4). Needless to say, this map is misleading as it stands

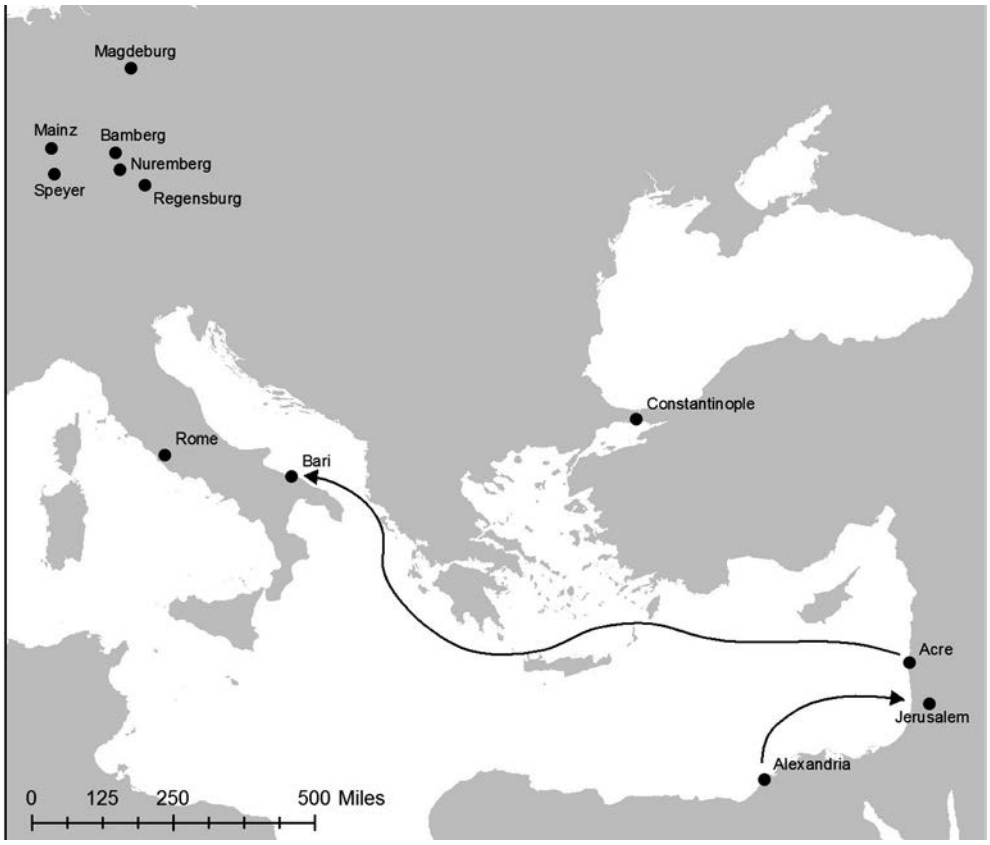

Fig. 4: Duke Ernst's mappable sea travels. Map created by C. Scott Walker, Digital Cartography Specialist, Harvard Map Collection.

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[79] This can also be read as a journey of the soul, an inner pilgrimage: time and again, the crusaders say prayers and preparations for dying. For a discussion about the itinerary's structure and the "voyage to the orient" (*Orientreise*) as a hermetic motif, see *Ehlen:* Hystoria ducis Bauariae Ernesti 49-76 (cf. fn. 69). See also *Blamires,* David: Herzog Ernst and the Otherworld Voyage: A Comparatistic Study. Manchester 1979 (Publications of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Manchester 24) 18-28.

in stark contrast to the descriptions of the places beyond any map. The existing cities mentioned pertain to the action in the empire — Magdeburg, Mainz, Nuremberg, Speyer, Regensburg, Bamberg — and to the crusader's route — Rome, Bari, Constantinople, Jerusalem, Acre, Alexandria. Historical empires and kingdoms are mentioned too, including Hungary, Bulgaria, the Grecian Empire (Macedonian Empire of Alexander the Great), and Constantinople (Greeks). Apart from these locatable places, the "Wondrous Lands" lie somewhere in an unlocatable Middle East. One could also map gender on this topography: we find that men go into foreign countries, while women stay at home. The only woman away from home, a kidnapped Indian princess, awaits a cruel doom by being stabbed to death with the human-like crane-heads' beaks.[80] Unexpected dangers and risks are only manageable for men; they are the ones who can discover and tame mythical worlds.[81]

The unknown East in *Duke Ernst* contains sundry orientalist elements which are fuelled by mythical components; in turn real places are blurred into wondrous lands. On their way to Syria, Ernst and his men, having survived the storm, come to a place called Grippia. They marvel at the splendid city which is surrounded by a river, some kind of a natural moat; as they find out later, this is part of a refined waterway system with canals and pipes. The people of Grippia are crane-heads, ridiculed by Ernst, who says: "I have to laugh at their thin necks."[82] They eventually fight them and manage to escape, a scene often depicted as for example in early print editions (Fig. 5).

Back at sea, Ernst and his men come to a land called "Arimaspi", a kingdom with many "beautiful" cities and where cyclopes reside. The travellers learn the language within a year: Ernst helps the local king against the "Flat Hoofs" (called thus because of their swan-like feet) who live next to Arimaspi. As with the crane-heads, their bestial features define them.[83] Those with long ears are simply called the "Ears" (*Ôren*);[84] furthermore, in Prechami live the smallest people on earth who are terrorized by cranes. A race called the Canaanites consisting of giants is described as savage. Ernst keeps specimen of all these tribes in a sort of cabinet of curiosities:

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[80] On the murder scene in Grippia, see *Bowden,* Sarah: A False Dawn: The Grippia Episode in Three Versions of 'Herzog Ernst'. In: Oxford German Studies 41 (2012) 1, 15-31, here 27-30.

[81] Gender and homo-eroticism are topics worth scrutinizing in *Duke Ernst,* as has recently been done by *Marshall,* Sophie: Vom Queering zu den Dingen: Vektoren des Begehrens im Herzog Ernst B. In: Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte 92 (2018) 3, 287-316.

[82] The Legend of Duke Ernst, ed. *Dussère/Thomas* 93 (cf. fn. 68); Herzog Ernst, ed. *Bartsch/Sowinski* 166 (cf. fn. 72), vv. 2948-2949: "ich mac des wol gelachen/ daz in die helse sint sô kleine."

[83] On identity-defining body features in *Duke Ernst,* see *Stein,* Alexandra: Die Wundervölker des Herzog Ernst (B): Zum Problem körpergebundener Authentizität im Medium der Schrift. In: *Harms,* Wolfgang et al. (eds.): Fremdes wahrnehmen – fremdes Wahrnehmen: Studien zur Geschichte der Wahrnehmung und zur Begegnung von Kulturen in Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit. Stuttgart, Leipzig 1997, 21-48.

[84] The Legend of Duke Ernst, ed. *Dussère/Thomas* 112 (cf. fn. 68); Herzog Ernst, ed. *Bartsch/Sowinski* 270, v. 4822 and 272, v. 4853 (cf. fn. 72).

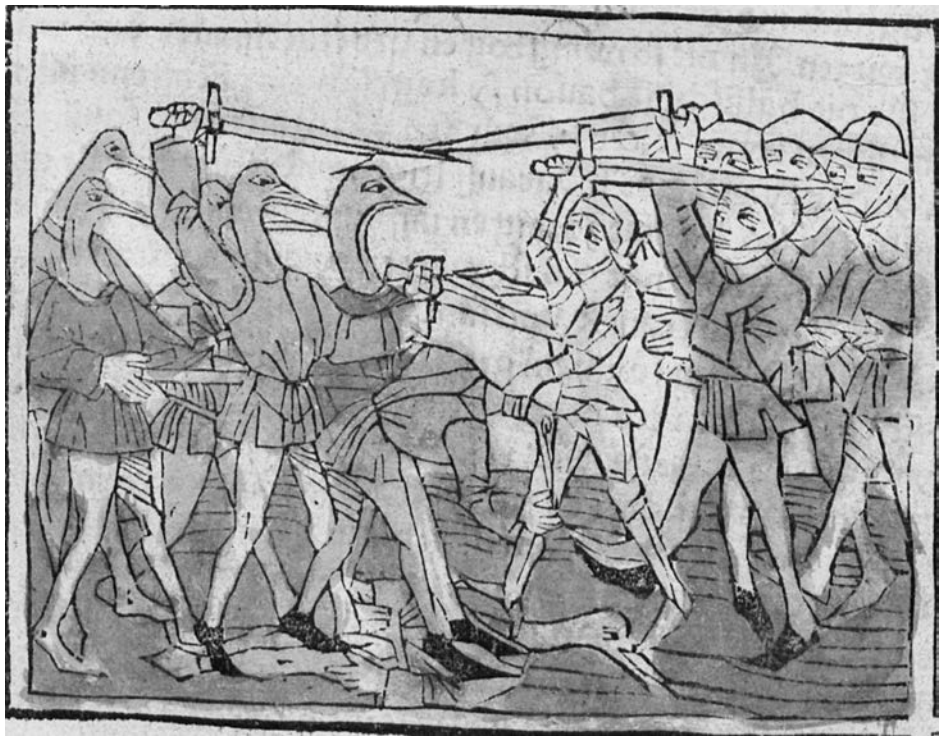

Fig. 5: Battle scene Crane-heads against Ernst and his men 1476/77 edition by the Augsburg-based printer Anton Sorg, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Ink H-296 (GW 12534), urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb00027897-1.

nu het der fürste lobesam
in sînem hove den Gîgant
und zwên von Perkamêren lant,
vil Ôren und manigen Plathuof.
der fürste in flîzeclîche schuof
swaz sie haben solden
und mêre dan sie wolden.
er hâte sie vür im durch wunder.
disiu seltsæniu kunder
vertriben im vil dicke sît
mit kurzerwîle die lange zît.[85]

Besides the giant, there were now at the court the two men of Prechami and many Ears and Flat Hoofs, all of whom got whatever they wanted and more from their lord. He kept them with him as wonders, and in afteryears these strange beings often made long hours short and pleasant.[86]

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[85] Herzog Ernst, ed. *Bartsch/Sowinski,* 298, vv. 5322-32 (cf. fn. 72).
[86] The Legend of Duke Ernst, ed. *Dussère/Thomas* 118 (cf. fn. 68).

The "races of people" are objectified; they are only identified through the beholder's gaze, and are called "marvels". There is a missing representative side to mythical creatures, if we follow Cassirer's elucidation about the lack of an abstract notion of images in the mythical understanding.[87] In *Duke Ernst,* this means that various curious people (*wunderlîch volc*) are taken at face value, and their bodily qualities do not invite any particular non-figurative interpretation. Their identification through the beholder's gaze is a fetishizing and orientalist feature achieved through a mythical dimension. For once they belong to an otherworld; moreover, their exterior is all there is to say about them, meaning that a deeper underlying and independent sense to their existence is denied.

While Ernst and his men are in Arimaspi, merchants from *Môrlant* (which Dussère/Thomas translate as Ethiopia but could also refer to Mauritania)[88] reach them seeking refuge and aid as they are terrorized by the *künic von Babilonje* (according to Dussère/Thomas this is the King of Egypt; yet the designation of Babylon leaves much more room for interpretation: it is not only geographically vague at the time of the composition of *Duke Ernst*; also in terms of time, it creates the sense of a Biblical past hereby adding more mythical feeling to the entire episode).[89] People from other places and kingdoms have some kind of access to the wondrous land of Arimaspi, meaning that Arimaspi is a mythical place that can be reached by other travellers too. The narrator expounds that the people from *Môrlant* are Christians; the ones appearing before Ernst have escaped because they feared to be turned into "unbelievers and heathens", which is according to medieval nomenclature a common circumscription for Muslims. Ernst sets off to fight against these men. We read that the army of the King of Babylon wears no armour but is good on horses; they are defeated, literally "like cattle".

> Die Kristen werten wol ir lant.
> der herzoge und sîn Gîgant
> sluogens als daz vihe nider.[90]

The Ethiopians defended their country well. The duke and his giant struck down their foes like cattle […].[91]

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[87] According to Cassirer, taking events and descriptions at face value is a crucial step in the analysis of the mythical world: "Das 'Bild' stellt die 'Sache' nicht dar — es *ist* [emphasis in the original] die Sache; es vertritt sie nicht nur, sondern es wirkt gleich ihr, so daß es sie in ihrer unmittelbaren Gegenwart ersetzt. Man kann es demgemäß geradezu als ein Kennzeichen des mythischen Denkens bezeichnen, daß ihm die Kategorie des 'Ideellen' fehlt und daß es daher, wo immer ihm ein rein Bedeutungsmäßiges entgegentritt, dieses Bedeutungsmäßige selbst, um es überhaupt zu fassen, in ein Dingliches, in ein Seinsartiges umsetzen muß." *Cassirer:* Philosophie der symbolischen Formen 51 (cf. fn. 10).

[88] See Môrlant. In: *Lexer,* Matthias: Mittelhochdeutsches Handwörterbuch. URL: http://woerterbuchnetz.de/cgi-bin/WBNetz/wbgui_py?mode=Vernetzung&hitlist=&patternlist=&lemid=LM02779&sigle=Lexer (last accessed 12.08.2020).

[89] Herzog Ernst, ed. *Bartsch/Sowinski* 298, v. 5339 and 308, v. 5506 (cf. fn. 72).

[90] Herzog Ernst, ed. *Bartsch/Sowinski* 312, vv. 5579-81 (cf. fn. 72).

[91] The Legend of Duke Ernst, ed. *Dussère/Thomas* 121 (cf. fn. 68).

The ascribing of bestial features harks back to an earlier use in Duke Ernst. The same expression, "like cattle", is used previously for killing the crane-heads from Grippia, when Ernst says to his best friend, Count Wetzel: "…we'll cut them down like cattle and drown them in their own blood" (*wir slahens als daz vihe nider/[…] wir trenkens mit ir bluotes flôz*).[92]

The semantic conflation between what it is like to kill the hybrid crane-heads and what it is like to kill Muslims could be read as an analogy between the killing of a monstrous race and the killing of humans who are conceived of as monstrous. The simile to "be killed like cattle" is not less strong in the case of killing humans just because they are less cattle-like than the crane-people. Again, I do not mean to apply our modern-day notions of racism to the medieval era; instead I want to work with the mythical dimensions contained in such a juxtaposition. Both crane-people and Babylonians receive the same cattle-like value; and that they are aligned through use of identical language strengthens a mythical melding of the two, a process we could, with Cassirer, term "analogy magic" ("Analogiezauber").[93]

Ernst, after defeating the King of Babylon, makes peace between Muslims and Christians, bonds with all of them, and ironically receives the protection of the King of Babylon who provides him with escorts to Jerusalem, where Ernst offers his "marvels" to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and where he fights many "heathens", and brings "them much harm and shame" (*die wile frumte er, daz ist wâr,/ den heiden manic ungemach*).[94] After his return home and upon his reconciliation with the Empire, some of the living "marvels" (wunder) he has collected are passed on to his stepfather as gifts.[95] The mythical realm in the disguise of the "orient's wondrous creatures" has reached Bavaria where, subjugated and bereft of any agency, it can be passed on.

The tale of *Duke Ernst* remains strongly rooted in a crusader's mentality. Surely the time spent on crusading in the known East is remarkably brief in comparison to the Grippia episode; this latter, however, bears clear crusading analogies. More importantly for this study, the orientalist elements are constructed through the mythical lens of space and threshold, and also by means of analogy. *Duke Ernst* shows how mythical places get conflated with the Middle East in a tale that presents itself as true. The study of this tale makes us aware of orientalism and of how it is constructed through mythical elements. The line between an entertaining myth and a problematic depiction of Eastern worlds, both real and mythical, is very fine.

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[92] The Legend of Duke Ernst, ed. *Dussère/Thomas* 97 (cf. fn. 68); Herzog Ernst, ed. *Bartsch/Sowinski* 186, vv. 3295 and 3297 (cf. fn. 72).

[93] *Manheim:* The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 68 (cf. fn. 10). *Cassirer:* Philosophie der symbolischen Formen 87 (cf. fn. 10). Analogies in mythical worlds, according to Cassirer, are not hierarchically structured but constitute a complete identity.

[94] The Legend of Duke Ernst, ed. *Dussère/Thomas* 122 (cf. fn. 68); Herzog Ernst, ed. *Bartsch/Sowinski* 318, vv. 5688-89 (cf. fn. 72).

[95] Herzog Ernst, ed. *Bartsch/Sowinski* 334, vv. 5982-5989 (cf. fn. 72).

Final remarks

> Fantasy can, of course, be carried to excess. It can be ill done. It can be put to evil uses. It may even delude the minds out of which it came.
>
> J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*[96]

One cannot map the fantasy world of *Game of Thrones* onto the Middle Ages, nor onto the history of art production, including literature. One connection that nevertheless is worth scrutinizing is between medievalism and orientalism. In addition to drawing from inspiration from history, *Game of Thrones* uses long-standing stereotypes, archetypes of mythical repertoire. Narratives in medieval societies may have functioned similarly with fantasy and historical model being entangled in creative tales. In Jean d'Arras's *Mélusine*, a historical past is intertwined with an otherworld, and bears political implications. Women with power are perceived as supernatural, one daresay unnatural. In *Duke Ernst*, existing places are muddled with orientalist appropriations of an otherworld. These and other intricate medieval narratives escape clear genre boundaries and they challenge our thinking about how we stand vis-à-vis stereotypes, partly because they are so entertaining.

Most people I know enjoy *Game of Thrones*, and other fantasy worlds such as *The Lord of the Rings.* And some might actually like orientalist paintings and find them oddly attractive. This, however, should not stop us from reflecting upon what we are actually enjoying. Behind medievalist divertissement we may be "wondering about our basic problems" or, more impactfully, "supporting, perhaps without realizing it, some new reactionary plot".[97] We can and should be conscious and reflective consumers, which entails looking into the past, realizing that cultural appropriation has a long tradition, and challenging existing stereotypes. It also means that academics, at a time when university budgets are cut, must stand their ground and call for a more rigorous understanding of the past. In the introduction to this paper, I contended that Europe's medieval past is gradually becoming treated like a mythical landscape; I am not at all opposed to fantasy set in a world modelled after the Middle Ages, far from it. Creative outlets like these are a way to navigate our own world; they are processes that partake in rationalising efforts, as Blumenberg once observed. And they have always been, as medieval examples testify. But when the line between fact and fake news is suspended outside the framework of entertainment, and when history descends into myth, then we are facing a potential threat to a reflected understanding of the past. This is not a new problem, though; in the wake of fascism,[98] Cassirer sharply observed that "[t]oday it is openly asserted that no clear logical division can be made between myth and history and that all historical understanding is and must be permeated with mythical elements".[99]

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[96] *Tolkien:* On Fairy-Stories 51 (cf. fn. 2).

[97] *Eco:* Dreaming of the Middle Ages 72 (cf. fn. 3). See also *ibid.:* "So, before rejoicing or grieving over a return of the Middle Ages, we have the moral and cultural duty of spelling out what kind of Middle Ages we are talking about."

[98] Cassirer wrote his work only five years before Alfred Rosenberg, who has been called "Hitler's Chefideologe" (Ernst Piper), published his "Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts", a fascist and German nationalist appropriation of the past.

As I have discussed in this paper, medieval depictions of the past and of the East employ mythical elements in imaginative ways. That such processes are not necessarily innocent nor harmless can be seen in late medieval typological bibles where Eve's assumed bestiality is associated with adultery (in the sense of Eve cheating with the serpent and hence breaking her "marriage contract" with Adam and God) as well as with a supposed monstrosity of Jews.[100] Narratives of salvation, as for example the fourteenth-century illustrated *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, tell the story of a bestial Old Law, manifest in Jews, that needs to be defeated and overcome. Concomitantly but not coincidentally to the rising popularity of such defaming depictions, antisemitic intolerance and violence increased in medieval Europe.[101] That medieval narratives deprecated marginalised groups despite the fact that they were produced within diverse societies cannot be contested. These narratives were powerful then and we can sometimes still feel their impact now.[102] Processes of westernisation through othering, are not a novelty in the modern era; they begin in the Middle Ages.[103]

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[99] "Schon wird unverhohlen die Ansicht laut, daß zwischen Mythos und *Geschichte* [emphasis in the original] sich nirgend eine klare logische Abtrennung vollziehen lasse, daß vielmehr alles historische Begreifen mit echt mythischen Elementen durchsetzt und an sie notwendig gebunden sei. Besteht diese These zu Recht, so wäre damit nicht nur die Geschichte selbst, sondern das gesamte System der Geisteswissenschaften, das auf ihr als einem seiner Fundamente ruht, dem Gebiet der Wissenschaft entzogen und dem des Mythos anheimgegeben. Solche Eingriffe und Übergriffe des Mythos in den Kreis der Wissenschaft können nur dann erfolgreich abgewehrt werden, wenn man ihn zuvor innerhalb seines eigenen Bereichs nach dem, was er geistig ist und geistig vermag, erkannt hat. Seine echte Überwindung muss auf seiner Erkenntnis und Anerkenntnis beruhen: nur durch die Analyse seiner geistigen Struktur lässt sich nach der einen Seite sein eigentümlicher Sinn, nach der anderen seine Grenze bestimmen." *Cassirer:* Philosophie der symbolischen Formen XII-XIII (cf. fn. 10). Translated after *Manheim:* The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms xvii (cf. fn. 10): "Today it is openly asserted that no clear logical division can be made between myth and history and that all historical understanding is and must be permeated with mythical elements. If this thesis were sound, history itself and the entire system of the cultural sciences grounded in it would be withdrawn from the sphere of science and relegated to that of myth. Such infringements of myth on the province of science can only be prevented if we can know myth in its own realm, can know its essence and what it can accomplish spiritually. We can truly overcome it only by recognizing it for what it is: only by an analysis of its spiritual structure can its proper meaning and limits be determined."

[100] See *Lipton,* Sara: Images of Intolerance: The Representation of Jews and Judaism in the Bible moralisée. Berkeley/California, Los Angeles/California, London 1999.

[101] See *Cohen,* Jeremy: Christian Theology and Anti-Jewish Violence in the Middle Ages: Connections and Disjunctions. In: *Abulafia,* Anna Sapir (ed.): Religious Violence between Christians and Jews. Medieval Roots, Modern Perspectives. Basingstoke, New York 2002, 44-60.

[102] See *Green,* Todd H.: The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West. Minneapolis/Minnesota 2015, especially Chapter 2 "The Historical Foundations of Islamophobia". See also the volume *Davis,* Kathleen/*Altschul,* Nadia (eds.): Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World: The Idea of "the Middle Ages" Outside Europe. Baltimore/Maryland 2009.

[103] Eco pointed out that the Middle Ages can be viewed as the period of infancy for the

In today's popular culture, accelerated and proliferated through mass-media, the medieval past is arguably increasingly turning into a mythical world. The same creative space seems to be exploited for projections about a supposedly racially homogenous past when nostalgic feelings about the Middle Ages colonise the past with the agenda to rebuild an alleged but lost "good old world". Such unsubstantial statements are attempts of self-justification through the transposition to a mythical self-regulating plane.[104] Or in other words, by placing utopic ideas no matter how destructive into the depths of time they are made to appear justifiable enough.

Whether such ideas are rational, however, should be contested. Tolkien, quoted separately at the beginning and end of this paper, only hinted at the dangers of fantasy and Cassirer was fully aware of the abuse of mythical thinking in his own days. Eco, in a fragmentary note on dreaming about the Middle Ages, bemoaned that "[w]e have already generated too many monsters".[105] I have come to believe that it is the increasingly mythical character of the reception of the Middle Ages which facilitates processes of a creative cultural appropriation; because when there is so little knowledge about pre-modernity, it descends into a mythical past which can be (ill-)used imaginatively, and also – deplorably – politically. In order to confront such increasingly noisy pseudo-scientific voices who merge myth and history, we first need to understand how mythical thinking operates.[106] Only then we can counter politicised forms of medievalism, when we are equipped with profound knowledge about what is generally termed the Middle Ages.

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Fig. 5: Battle scene Crane-heads against Ernst and his men 1476/77 edition by the Augsburg-based printer Anton Sorg, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Ink H-296 (GW 12534), urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb00027897-1.

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modern West: "the Middle Ages turned us into Western animals"; *Eco:* Dreaming of the Middle Ages 65 (cf. fn. 3).

104 According to Cassirer, mythical places do not need justification because they lie in an undeterminable past; *Cassirer:* Philosophie der symbolischen Formen 133-134 (cf. fn. 10).

105 *Eco,* Umberto: Dreaming of the Middle Ages: An unpublished fragment. In: Semiotica 63 (1987) 1-2, 239.

106 Cassirer called for a more thorough understanding of mythical thinking; *Cassirer:* Philosophie der symbolischen Formen XI 11 and 7 (cf. fn. 10); Eco warned that "there is no special reason for amazement at the avalanche of pseudo-medieval pulp in paperbacks, midway between Nazi nostalgia and occultism". *Eco:* Dreaming of the Middle Ages 62 (cf. fn. 3).