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WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN FOLKLORE: ROMANCE TROPES

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ABSTRACT

After reading some medieval folklore—*Melusine*, and *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi* in particular—the realization was made that women who possessed the most agency, and were regarded as very important, were women whose beauty was otherworldly, or had some sort of supernatural abilities. These stories were written in the eleventh and fourteenth centuries respectively, from different countries, yet they both seem to follow a similar pattern. A pattern of patriarchal ideology that denotes that these women could have only become as powerful and well regarded as they were because they had supernatural abilities, and were more beautiful than any other women seen before. Or, perhaps that the idea of women being so persuasive and outspoken could only be so if they were extraordinary.

INTRODUCTION

The common theme in European medieval romance is that a noble man is swooned, more or less by magic, and falls in love with an extraordinarily beautiful damsel. In most cases these women are born from magic, like a fairy or goddess, and we usually meet the character later in life without a backstory. They seem to show up in all their beautiful glory with some sort of quest or favor to ask the nobleman.

In *Melusine*, she is born a fairy from a fairy mother and human father, who also happens to be a king. She and her sisters are cursed in the beginning of the story because their father broke their mother's one rule. Their curses are in such a way that their future suitors/partner must obey their one rule or—in *Melusine's* case—will turn into a serpent.

Rhiannon is a main character in *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi (Mabinogion)* where she is a woman of ethereal beauty and wits to match. She has with her enchanted items like a bottomless bag that she uses to capture and trap a man she does not want to marry.



Melusine by Julius Hübner <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melusine>

WHY?

I think that these stories would not be the same if the main characters were not magical or enchanting in some way. If we were to put an ordinary—as in non-magical—woman in place of the aforementioned characters, I do not think the story would have even taken place. In the case of *Melusine*, she was able to create elaborate parties effectively out of thin air. She also had the ability to see into the future, which is what gave Raymondin the upper hand in battle and the opportunity to become wealthy and powerful.



Goddess Rhiannon <https://sacredwicca.com/rhiannon>

METHODOLOGY:

This idea was always running through my head as I read through several European medieval romances. I started with taking note of the fact that the women mentioned here, and many of the other female characters possessed some sort of power. They used these powers to win the hearts of men and women, while doing well to keep it a secret as long as they could.

I then compared *Melusine*, and *Rhiannon* among others and found consistencies in their stories. They both romanced a noble man with magic; whether it be impressive foresight, promise of wealth and power or with their wit and beauty.



Melusine's wedding

<https://jungiangenealogy.weebly.com/melusine-de-alba.html>

CONCLUSION

When we bring all of this information together, we can see that the romance tropes of early European medieval

folklore stay primarily within the realm of fairies and magic. I think this helps embellish stories of men who succeeded in those times. Or perhaps it was to send a message that such endeavors could only be taken on and achieved with the help of beautiful fairies and their magical abilities.

Sources:

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