

Et
Et
D
Et
L
Et
Et
L

hoïe qui ne vōist a Seclm
t pour ce fust mon cuer enclm
e finer plus tost que plus tart
ar mellusigne que dieux gart
e me dist bien au Departir
e fait mon cuer en Seap partir
t ensemient comme la cure
e fut en lermies fondre et frive



‘Human passion – fairy power’: Gothic rewriting and queer subversion of the Melusine legend in Letitia Elizabeth Landon’s ‘The Fairy of the Fountains’

Greta Colombani

Originally published in the annual Fisher’s Drawing Room Scrap Book of 1835, ‘The Fairy of the Fountains’ is ‘one of Letitia Elizabeth Landon’s most enigmatic and disturbing poems’ and a fascinating retelling of the medieval legend of Melusine, the serpentine fairy that inspired more famous Romantic tales such as Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué’s *Undine* (1811) and John Keats’s *Lamia* (1820).¹ Though Landon was presumably somewhat familiar with both, her most direct – and explicitly acknowledged – source is ‘The Story of Melusine’ in William J. Thoms’ *Lays and Legends of France*, published in 1834 and based on one of the earliest and most influential literary versions of the tale, the 14th-century prose romance *Roman de Mélusine* by Jean d’Arras.² In its basic outline, the plot of Landon’s poem is faithful to the original: Melusina is a half-human, half-fairy princess who lives in exile with her fairy mother after her human father violated a promise to his wife and committed an irremediable transgression.³ After some years, Melusina decides to avenge her mother by entombing her father inside a mountain through a spell. Rather than being grateful, however, her mother curses her to turn into a snake from the waist down every Saturday. When Melusina falls in love with the human knight Raymond, she makes him promise never to see her on those days, otherwise they will be parted forever. But Raymond breaks his oath and spies on his wife while she is in her serpentine form. Melusina must therefore leave him, ultimately becoming a sort of banshee, a spectral presence that returns only to announce the impending death of a member of Raymond’s family.

Though Landon has undergone a fundamental reappraisal over the past few decades, Adriana Craciun is right when she observes that ‘Landon scholarship consistently focuses on the same early poems, most notably ‘The Improvisatrice’ (1824), ‘Erinna’ (1827), ‘The Lost Pleiad’ (1829), and ‘A History of the Lyre’ (1829), and on the themes of female (hetero)sexuality, love, and poetic identity.’⁴ Other works, especially later ones, that move away from Landon’s ‘persona of heartbroken, beautiful femininity’ and make forays into different

territories, such as the Gothic, have been far less explored.⁵ 'The Fairy of the Fountains', with its fairy theme and its Gothic tones, falls into this category.⁶ The poem has received somewhat extensive attention only by Craciun, Kari Lokke, Anne DeLong and Michelle O'Connell and has been overlooked by most studies focusing on the afterlives of the Melusine legend. In *Melusine's Footprint: Tracing the Legacy of a Medieval Myth* (2017), an ambitious volume which aspires to trace 'Melusine's changing role in the French, Germanic, Dutch, Spanish, and English literary traditions', for instance, 'The Fairy of the Fountains' is only cursorily mentioned by Melissa Ridley Elmes and blatantly absent from Misty Urban's chapter on the fate of Melusine in English literature.⁷ The present essay aims to help fill this gap by exploring the innovative, even subversive, ways in which Landon reinterprets the story of Melusine with special attention to her emphasis on the darker, Gothic aspects of her fairy theme.

On closer inspection, Landon's retelling is far less faithful than it first appears. In a brief introductory note to the poem, Landon herself warns the reader that she has taken some liberties with the original tale in accordance with its genre: 'I have allowed myself some licence, in my arrangement of the story: but fairy tales have an old-established privilege of change.'⁸ Although they have never been systematically or comprehensively taken into account by critics, the changes that Landon introduces to the story constitute the ideal – and in a way designated – starting point to illuminate how 'The Fairy of the Fountains' rewrites the Melusine legend. Besides removing any references to specific places – and with them the political, dynastic subtext related to the medieval House of Lusignan – as well as eliminating secondary characters like Melusine's sisters or Raymond's cousin, Landon alters more central aspects of the story. First and foremost, she omits Melusine's monstrous progeny in spite of the key role it plays in the other versions of the tale, so that her Melusina never becomes a mother, a relevant point to which I will return in due course.

A subtler, but potentially even more meaningful, change concerns the curse that Melusina's mother inflicts on her daughter. In Thoms's version and in the long-established tradition behind it, the curse comes with a condition that can break it: Melusine is condemned 'to become every Saturday a serpent, from the waist downwards, till she should meet a man who would marry her under the condition of never seeing her on a Saturday, and should keep his promise.'⁹ For this reason, Melusine goes 'rambling through the world in search of the man' who could 'deliver her' from her mother's spell.¹⁰ In 'The Fairy of the Fountains', instead, the curse is accompanied by no indication of a possible remedy:

Spirit of our spirit-line,
Curse for me this child of mine.
Six days yield not to our powers,
But the seventh day is ours.
By yon star, and by our line,
Be thou cursed, maiden mine.¹¹

When describing the weekly transformation of Melusina, the narrator wonders: 'Hath she then complaint to make, / Is there yet some spell to break?'¹² The implicit answer is no: 'come what will',¹³ a spell there is but not to break. No way of undoing the curse is provided in the poem, but, more interestingly, Melusina does not seem to be looking for one, just as she does not seem to be looking for a human lover: Her encounter with Raymond is fortuitous: the 'youthful warrior'¹⁴ comes across Melusina and her fairy court while they are dancing 'by a lovely river's side'.¹⁵ She 'prays his stay awhile'¹⁶ but the text does not give any clue that she has been waiting or searching for him. She has no pressing reason to do so, for in Landon's tale her fate does not depend on finding a man. This significant detail has been overlooked in the few existing readings of the poem, probably because Raymond is nonetheless forbidden to see Melusina when she transforms. The prohibition remains, but it is not a condition of her mother's curse. She mentions that 'the seventh day is ours',¹⁷ that is, 'yield[ing]' to fairy 'powers',¹⁸ but she says nothing about whether her daughter must not be seen on that day. When Melusina tells Raymond that 'the seventh day must be / Mine, and only known to me' and that 'never must thy step intrude / On its silent solitude',¹⁹ she does so on her own initiative, and his promise (if kept) would have a different outcome than the end of the spell. Her half-serpent body must be kept 'hidden from each mortal eye, / Until seven years pass by'²⁰ and then, she states, 'all my secrets may be known'.²¹ If Raymond respects the taboo, Melusina will finally reveal her serpentine form rather than being freed from it.

In 'The Fairy of the Fountains', Melusina's aspirations and motives differ from those that are traditionally ascribed to her character insofar as she does not seek a remedy to her curse and does not find it in a human husband, but this fundamental difference can be fully understood only in relation to the choices leading her to be cursed in the first place. Melusina's decision to 'avenge the wrongs / Of my mother exiled here'²² by casting a spell against her own father is presented by Landon as the consequence of another fateful decision, that of embracing the fairy side of her hybrid nature at the expense of the human one. Right before announcing her plans for revenge, Melusina asserts:

*It is my right;
On me let the task devolve:
Since such blood to me belongs;
It shall seek its own bright sphere.*²³

The blood she is talking about is not merely her mother's. It is specifically fairy blood, and indeed it is only after claiming that she belongs to this 'bright sphere'²⁴ that she feels her magical powers for the first time: 'When the maiden felt her powers, / Straight she sought her father's towers'.²⁵ By punishing her father through fairy magic, Melusina is not simply avenging her mother out of filial love, as she is believed to do in the original legend. She is also, more specifically, asserting her 'right'²⁶ to fairy power by bloodline, and her revenge 'task'²⁷ appears to derive primarily from such right.

Melusina's choice to reclaim her fairy heritage represents a major departure from the source, not only because it is absent from earlier versions of the story, but also because it subverts one of its central tenets. The legend of Melusine, in fact, typically revolves around the desire of the titular half-fairy to become fully human. For her, finding a man who will comply with the prohibition means not only breaking her curse but also being able to live as a woman perfectly integrated into human society. This appears to be her ultimate aspiration, which she already fulfils, albeit only temporarily, while she is married to Raymond. As long as he keeps his promise, Melusine successfully performs the role of woman according to cultural norms: she is a wife, a mother, an able administrator, and an accomplished courtly lady. As Chera Cole points out in her insightful reading of the Middle English *Melusine*, '[a]s a result of her mother's curse, Melusine's salvation is contingent upon how well she, as a fairy, can "pass" as human, and how well she can convince her human community that she is fully integrated into human society'.²⁸ Cole borrows the concept of 'passing' from queer and race studies, in particular the works of Judith Butler and Suki Ali, where it means being perceived 'as one gender or race other than one's own'.²⁹ More in general, it is a sociological notion indicating the ability of a person to be regarded as a full member of an identity category to which they do not actually belong or belong only in part. It can be effectively applied to Melusine, who attempts to 'pass' as fully human in spite of her hybrid nature and who actually manages to do so for a limited period of time. Melusine's aspiration to pass as, and then actually become, human is often intertwined with her concern for salvation in its Christian sense. Only by marrying a man and renouncing her fairy nature will she be able to acquire the human soul that will allow her to be saved. Melusine's longing for a soul is a recurring theme in medieval and other popular variants of the tale, including 19th-century rewritings such as de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine* and even Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid' (1837).

In all these versions of the Melusine legend, as Cole puts it, 'human society is depicted as both a privileged and desired place to be in the world – the "right" place to be', so that in the end, 'for all of fairy's beauty and allure, humanity is the privileged race in this paradigm'.³⁰ It is precisely this traditional paradigm that 'The Fairy of the Fountains' boldly challenges by telling the story of a Melusina who chooses fairness over humanity. While Melusine typically 'elevates her human heritage above her fairy nature' in the hope of achieving full humanity, her counterpart in Landon's poem does the exact opposite: she reclaims her fairy powers 'with passionate resolve'³¹ and shows no interest in becoming human.³² Throughout the poem, Melusina never attempts to pass as human or integrate into human society, and she never even interacts with any other human being but Raymond. In other words, contrary to the other retellings, 'The Fairy of the Fountains' does not present humanity as an object of desire. Before Melusina proclaims her decision to avenge her mother, the poem seems to suggest the possibility that she might want a taste of human life ('there rose before her sight / The loveliness of life untried. / Three sweet genii, – Youth, Love, Hope')³³ only to immediately discard it. 'But far other thoughts than these',³⁴ the narrator clarifies, 'were, with Melusina

now.³⁵ The syntactic movement of the lines re-enacts Landon's engagement with her source by evoking an aspect of the original tale but then openly departing from it, indeed subverting it, as Melusina proceeds to embrace her fairy heritage instead of her human one.³⁶ In conventional renditions of the story, Melusina's ability to pass as a human woman may be seen to destabilise – and 'queer' – humanity and womanhood by raising the suspicion that they are a 'performance' rather than innate and stable identities, but her wish for assimilation into human society ultimately upholds its normative values.³⁷ Landon's poem offers a more radical queering insofar as it challenges the naturalness and inevitability of humanity's position at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of worth and desirability.

The subversiveness of Melusina's preference is foregrounded from the very beginning of the poem, which opens with the enigmatic line: 'Why did she love her mother's so?'³⁸ The possessive has baffled critics for centuries and Victorian editors often amended the line by substituting 'mother's' with the less problematic 'mother'. I follow Jerome K. McGann and Daniel Riess in maintaining the spelling of the first published version, even though, as Craciun points out, it 'creates more (not entirely undesirable) ambiguities'.³⁹ The ambiguity of the opening line has also been highlighted by DeLong, who considers it a 'cryptic introduction' and wonders: 'her mother's what? Lineage, legacy, religion, race?'⁴⁰ What exactly of her mother did Melusina love? Ya-feng Wu writes that the 'possessive case, "her mother's", refers to her mother's belongings which may include her mother's power and fate', but her insight must be taken a step further.⁴¹ The possessive refers to anything that is 'her mother's' rather than to a specific mysterious thing that the reader is expected to uncover. The point is that Melusina loves whatever her mother has because she loves what her mother is, that is, a fairy. It is being a fairy that Melusina loves – and desires – in a way that the human narrator finds so inexplicable. By introducing her predilection for fairness through a 'why' question, in fact, the narrator presents it as something that requires an explanation, namely an 'accountable action'. According to the sociologist Harvey Sacks, 'what one does with "Why?" is to propose about some action that it is an "accountable action"', that is, an action for which one can be held accountable and asked to provide an explanation or justification, in other words, an 'account'.⁴² Marvin Scott and Stanford Lyman define an 'account' as 'a statement made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior'.⁴³ It is called for 'when activity falls outside the domain of expectations' and deviates from the norm.⁴⁴ The *why* at the beginning of the poem is thus functional to stress from the outset that Melusina's love of fairness is a 'deviant behavior' – one might say, a queer behaviour – defying commonly held expectations about the privileged and desirable status of humanity.⁴⁵

In Landon's poem, such expectations are shared not only by the puzzled human narrator but also by Melusina's own mother, who gives voice to the value system underlying traditional versions of the tale in spite of being herself a fairy.⁴⁶ When she reveals to her the transgression of her father, Melusina's mother repeatedly lays emphasis on her hybrid nature: she calls her '[d]aughter of a kingly line, – / Daughter, too, of race like mine'⁴⁷ and explains

that 'his race is mixed in thee, / With mine own more high degree'.⁴⁸ In spite of this claim of superiority, however, she encourages Melusina to renounce the fairy side of her nature in favour of the human one:

Now thou hast a mingled dower,
Human passion – fairy power.
But forfend thee from the last:
Be its gifts behind thee cast.⁴⁹

She too associates humanity with a chance for Christian salvation and invites her daughter to turn to Christ, so that her 'soul yet saved may be; – / Saved by Him who died to save / Man from death beyond the grave'.⁵⁰ In 'The Fairy of the Fountains', the aspirations that usually motivate Melusine are ascribed to her mother; and when the time comes, Melusina does the opposite of what she advises. She turns from humanity in an unprecedented way and, by turning from humanity, she also turns from the possibility of salvation.

Her rejection of Christian faith aligns her with the demonic connotations that typically characterise both of her non-human aspects: her fairy blood and her serpentine body. As Michael Ostling puts it in the title of his edited volume, fairies and demons have long existed together 'at the margins of Christendom', often overlapping. The widespread demonisation of fairies and 'conflation of devils with local small gods' are the expression of a common 'theological mode of collapsing the distinction entirely into its infernal component'.⁵¹ Snake-women share a similar longstanding association with the devil, which, as many critics point out, extends to the figure of Melusine.⁵² Her demonic aspects are usually countered by 'Melusine's image as an exemplary Christian wife and mother', but this is not the case in Landon's poem where Melusina undergoes no such domestication.⁵³ Her refusal to regard being human as the ultimate object of desire is threefold: it entails the rejection not only of Christianity and of the notion of humanity as the privileged race but also of women's prescribed role in human society. As already mentioned, Melusina is never shown playing such a role as she does in other versions of the story, including coeval ones like de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine* with its transformation of the titular character 'from supernatural figure to domestic housewife'.⁵⁴ Seen in this light, the omission of Melusina's children acquires special significance in that it erases her motherhood, that is, what was supposed to be the ultimate fulfilment of womanhood at the time. It thus contributes to creating an image of Melusina that is distant from the reassuring domesticated half-fairy who desperately longs to be human and is instead far more troubling insofar as it eludes and challenges human societal standards. Even at the end of the poem Melusina resists the narrator's attempt to impose a Christian frame on her story by asking 'our Lady'⁵⁵ to '[p]ardon with her love divine / The fountain fairy'.⁵⁶ The prayer, in fact, does not really seem to seal her fate. In the Gothic setting of an 'ancient tower',⁵⁷ Melusina remains a lingering presence, spectral ('Wringing sad her shadowy hands')⁵⁸ but enduring ('Still is heard that lady's wail'),⁵⁹ a disquieting reminder of unassimilable otherness.

So far particular attention has been paid to Melusina's lack of desire for humanity and its implications, but it is now time to consider what it means for her to embrace fairiness. The specifically fairy dimension of Landon's poem has been neglected by critics, who usually read Melusina as a mermaid figure and lay more emphasis on her hybrid body than on her hybrid lineage.⁶⁰ Her physical hybridity, however, is nothing but the manifestation of her pre-existing double nature. When her mother curses her, she tells her that the seventh day is 'ours',⁶¹ that is, reserved for the fairies, thus implying that there is a relation between 'yield[ing]' to fairy 'powers'⁶² and Melusina's transformation into a half-snake. In Landon's poem, fairiness is consistently associated with power. Melusina's mother had earlier presented her daughter's 'mingled dower'⁶³ in the following terms: on the one hand 'human passion',⁶⁴ on the other 'fairy power'.⁶⁵ While the human side of Melusina's nature is etymologically linked to passivity, the fairy one evokes agency. It is reminiscent of the 'mystery and might'⁶⁶ that Melusina is said to possess from the beginning but that she fully unlocks only by reclaiming her fairy heritage: it is after she magically entombs her father that her 'lot'⁶⁷ is '[c]ast in mystery and power'.⁶⁸ Such fairy power has disruptive and dangerous qualities in that it empowers a daughter to rebel against her own father, thus threatening the patriarchal family hierarchy. As Barbara Leavy points out, 'the anxiety that woman will exercise an ever-present potential for widespread destruction of the social order' is a common concern in animal bride tales, to whose genre the legend of Melusine belongs.⁶⁹ Landon further strengthens this point by focusing on the mysterious and troubling side of fairiness and by drawing on a well-established tradition associating fairies with social threat or deviance.⁷⁰ Her emphasis on the darker aspects of fairy nature, however, does not result in Melusina's demonisation, quite the opposite: if it is true that Melusina's transgression is punished in the story, it is also true that she is presented in a sympathetic light throughout the poem.

Melusina suffers punishment at the hands of her own fairy mother, who acts as guarantor of the human social order. When she encourages her daughter to embrace humanity and Christianity, she does so in terms which emphasise passivity and submission: she should '[k]eep ... a timid eye'⁷¹ and '[b]end [...] with a suppliant knee'.⁷² She also explains that if Melusina had followed the human and Christian path from the beginning, her fairy component would have been something very different from threatening magical powers:

Hadst thou at Christ's altar stood,
 Bathed in His redeeming flood;
 Thou of my wild race had known
 But its loveliness alone.⁷³

If Melusina had been baptised, her *fairiness* would be nothing but *fairness*. She would be reduced to merely something beautiful to look at, an object of the human – and presumably male – gaze: that is to say, the epitome of another facet of what women were expected to be in Landon's time. If being human (more specifically, being a woman) equates to occupying

a passive, submissive position, the only version of a fairy that the human world can accept is the disempowered and objectified image of the supernaturally fair woman. That is how Raymond perceives Melusina when he first looks at 'the lovely scene'⁷⁴ of the fairy court and 'its lovelier queen':⁷⁵ 'He but sees she is so fair.'⁷⁶ This inoffensive version of fairness is reminiscent of the 'mostly female, tiny and beautiful' fairies that, as Nicola Bown points out, started to emerge in the Romantic period and became extremely popular during the Victorian era, when they embodied the 'ideal of Victorian femininity'.⁷⁷

Melusina, however, refuses to be objectified as a lovely sight and have her *fairness* reduced to *fairness*. What she asks of Raymond is precisely not to be seen, to keep 'hidden from each mortal eye'⁷⁸ the visible manifestation of her fairy otherness, which is her serpentine form. When transformed, Melusina is a 'monstrum' according to the polysemous meanings of the term: both a monstrous, frightening creature and a prodigy, a marvel. She likewise encompasses both aspects of the longstanding association between fairies and the Gothic, as defined by Dale Townshend: not only fear and horror, but also wonder and enchantment.⁷⁹ Melusina's half-serpent body is a 'strange and fearful sight',⁸⁰ yet the description foregrounds its dazzling and creative nature:

Bright with many-coloured dyes
All the glittering scales arise,
With a red and purple glow
Colouring the waves below!⁸¹

It is not a passive object to admire: it actively affects what surrounds it by colouring the water with its own hues. It is beautiful but of a different kind of beauty – wondrous, awful, creative beauty – which is the opposite of objectified 'loveliness'.⁸² The latter is embodied by the image of the still, colourless statue, to which Melusina is repeatedly compared: she is '[l]ike an idol in a shrine'⁸³ and '[l]ike a statue, pale and fair'⁸⁴ with a 'marble brow'.⁸⁵ As both Wu and Richard Cronin observe, Landon's poetry abounds in images of statues, 'especially when it refers to the female body'.⁸⁶ Their meaning can be quite complex and multifaceted, but here they primarily represent a nonthreatening, passive type of fairness which stands in contrast to the disquieting yet riveting image of the moving and colourful snake. A statue is *par excellence* something beautiful to look at, an object that cannot reciprocate the gaze. Yet this is exactly what Melusina does when Raymond discovers her monstrous body: 'Melusina sees him there.'⁸⁷ This detail constitutes another meaningful change from the original story. As DeLong points out, 'Landon's climax occurs not when Medusa [that is, Melusina's monstrosity] is revealed, but when Medusa looks back at the viewer'.⁸⁸ While in the traditional versions of the tale Melusine is compelled to leave Raymond because he sees her, in 'The Fairy of the Fountains' she must leave because *she* sees *him*: 'to see him is to part / With the idol of her heart'.⁸⁹ Just as the prohibition was not imposed by someone else but was Melusina's own initiative, so is her final departure.

Once again Landon alters the legend to increase Melusina's agency. She occupies the position of the subject of the gaze that is usually reserved for her husband and, as a matter of fact, is represented in the act of looking from the beginning of the poem, when the reader is told that '[o]nce she saw an armed knight'⁹⁰ and '[w]atching there, saw it all.'⁹¹ Not only does she see but she sees it *all*. Melusina's mother seeks to limit her unbridled gaze after noticing that it reaches beyond the borders of her domain (and power): 'she marked her daughter's eyes / Fix'd upon the glad sunrise'⁹² and 'far off, a world more fair / Outlined on the sunny air.'⁹³ Her attempt, however, fails. Melusina is unwilling to keep 'a timid eye'⁹⁴ and actually tries herself to exert control over Raymond's gaze by means of her interdiction:

if, with suspicious eye,
Thou on those dark hours wilt pry.
Then farewell, beloved in vain,
Never might we meet again.⁹⁵

Similar efforts to escape the eyes of the other or to impose one's gaze upon them are a recurring theme in Landon's poetry, which Harriet Linkin aptly calls 'the competition of the gaze.'⁹⁶ While exploring how Romantic women poets critically engage with 'the manifestation of the beautiful for male Romantic poets as the silent or objectified female', Linkin identifies a tension in Landon's poetry between the objectifying male gaze and the woman's attempts to resist and control it through her poetic performances: 'for Landon, the female in performance initially silences the admiring gazer, whose admiration then fixates the performer as object.'⁹⁷ Cronin makes a similar point when he argues that 'Landon consistently represents the poet as both subject and object, as seeing eye and as object of another; always male, gaze.'⁹⁸ Although Linkin and Cronin both focus on those poems of Landon's that revolve around the figure of the poetess or improvisatrice (such as those mentioned in this essay's introduction), the competition of the gaze and the ambiguous coincidence of passive and active roles can also be found in 'The Fairy of the Fountains'. Melusina's mother attempts – yet ultimately fails – to limit her daughter's all-seeing gaze, while Melusina attempts – yet ultimately fails – to elude Raymond's objectifying one. He violates her prohibition and pries on her while in her 'silent solitude',⁹⁹ but when he does, she looks back at him in his 'mute despair'.¹⁰⁰

The correspondences between the present poem and the ones analysed by Linkin and Cronin actually come as no surprise, for Landon's Melusina is commonly believed to stand for the woman poet.¹⁰¹ Such readings of 'The Fairy of the Fountains' are founded on the fact that Melusina's father is not prohibited from seeing his wife while she is in childbed, as in the original tale, but rather from 'listen[ing] to the word, / Mortal ear hath never heard'.¹⁰² As Lokke points out, Landon substitutes 'the secret of women's biological creativity' with another kind of creativity depending on words, thus suggesting that 'Melusine's magical lineage is that of the female poet'.¹⁰³ Melusina's hybridity would then reflect that of the female Romantic poet who struggles to

reconcile her poetic vocation with her prescribed role as woman.¹⁰⁴ They indeed share the same disrupting potential: as Glennis Stephenson argues, 'the woman poet' posed a threat through 'her very desire to write', for 'her pen could, potentially, be empowered to disturb comfortably established social roles.'¹⁰⁵ Landon herself claims that '[g]enius places woman in an unnatural position.'¹⁰⁶ The dichotomy poet vs woman may thus be added to the other ones that have been identified so far: fairy vs human, power vs passion, subject vs object, snake vs statue.

These polarities, however, are not as clear-cut as they may seem, and 'The Fairy of the Fountains' is less concerned with the antithesis between the two conflicting sides than with their inescapable inextricability. The very monstrous body that should allow Melusina to avoid the objectifying reduction of *fairness* to *fairness*, for example, is described in such a 'decorative' language that, according to Craciun, it actually 'stabilizes [its] dangerous incongruity.'¹⁰⁷ Unlike her, I do not believe that one aspect cancels out the other, just as I do not believe that Landon's wilful choice to 'commodif[y] herself as a purchasable icon of female beauty' through her poetic production means that she is 'entirely complicit in her culture's construction of female beauty', as Anne Mellor maintains.¹⁰⁸ Rather, Landon is aware of the contradictions she inhabits as well as of the impossibility of existing outside of them and explores this painful condition in her poetry, including 'The Fairy of the Fountains'. The image of the fountain is a prime example of how Landon gives poetic shape to the complexities and collapsing of duality. The fountains that are associated with Melusina from the poem's title are not simply an instance of the traditional 'identification of fountains as thresholds between the human and the supernatural'.¹⁰⁹ They are, more specifically, a symbol of the co-existing opposites that define Melusina's hybridity, as the fountain combines the colourless marble of the statue ('In a white and marble bath')¹¹⁰ and the flowing water associated with the snake ('Pours beneath its crystal tide').¹¹¹ This very opposition, however, is complicated and undermined by the fact that the boundary between the two is actually confused: the water is like 'crystal'¹¹² and the marble is nestled in nature ('Far within the forest shade, / Where the mournful fountains sweep').¹¹³ As Craciun argues, Landon's poems are set in landscapes that evoke 'binary distinctions' but are ultimately 'distrustful' of them.¹¹⁴

This questioning and queering of binary oppositions is best conveyed by another dichotomy that runs through the poem: life vs death. The isotopy – that is, the recurring motif – of death is remarkably pervasive in 'The Fairy of the Fountains' and probably constitutes the main contributory factor to its overall Gothic tone. The poem opens with a scene that is as conventionally Gothic as its ending: the night is 'pale sepulchral',¹¹⁵ 'a voice is on the gale, / Like a lost soul's heavenward cry',¹¹⁶ and there is a 'loud and hollow bell'¹¹⁷ that sounds 'like a Christian's knell'.¹¹⁸ Melusina's mother is described in equally deathly terms: she has a 'funeral flame' in 'her dark eyes',¹¹⁹ a 'cheek as pale as death',¹²⁰ and 'black hair, like a shroud'.¹²¹ Melusina appears to have inherited her cadaverous traits, especially when she assumes her serpentine form. Not only does she have '[d]amp and heavy' hair,¹²² a 'fevered cheek',¹²³ and 'hectic blushes',¹²⁴ but she is also lying in a sort of sepulchre:

the gloomy branches spread,
As they would above the dead,
In some church-yard large and drear
Haunted with perpetual fear
...
[d]ark and still like some vast grave,
Near there yawns a night-black cave.¹²⁵

The place is shrouded in 'spectral darkness'¹²⁶ and, even when a light appears, it is

like that strange lamp
Which amid the charnel's damp
Shows but brightens not the gloom
Of the corpse and of the tomb.¹²⁷

Since Melusina shares her deathly qualities with her mother and manifests them mostly when she transforms, drawing a connection between her 'bear[ing] the otherness of the grave and the corpse' and her fairy otherness, as Craciun does,¹²⁸ seems almost a foregone conclusion, a conclusion that is further supported by the longstanding association of the fairies with the dead.¹²⁹

The poem, however, destabilises such a straightforward correspondence. When Melusina decides to reclaim her fairy heritage, her choice could be read as one of life over death. 'Must she be her own dark tomb?',¹³⁰ the narrator wonders, but it is not entirely clear whether the 'dark tomb' refers only to Melusina's state while the 'loveliness' of human 'life' is still 'untried'¹³¹ or may also indicate her suffocated and unused potential until she unlocks her fairy powers. Likewise, in the description of her hybrid body, the deathly connotations that have been pointed out actually refer to her human upper part, while her serpentine tale is endowed with bright colours and animal liveliness. If it is true that Melusina spends her Saturdays as if in a sepulchre, it is also true that inside this sepulchre there is living nature: not only the running water of the 'fountain'¹³² but also 'wild flowers'¹³³ and 'a couch of green moss'.¹³⁴ In a true Gothic fashion, the scene where Melusina's monstrosity is revealed evokes images that are not simply deathly and sepulchral but blur the very boundary between life and death, thus foregrounding their inextricability. Melusina's hybridity turns out to be equally inextricable – and inescapable. The ending of the poem is the same as that of the source, even though the journey leading there is the opposite: Melusina cannot fully embrace her 'fairy power',¹³⁵ just as she cannot fully embrace her humanity in the original tale. She can only turn into half a snake and she cannot get rid of the 'human passion'¹³⁶ that makes her fall in love with Raymond. She suffers – and inevitably succumbs to – the 'wondrous wo'¹³⁷ and the 'curse of grief and pain'¹³⁸ that come from having 'a mingled dower',¹³⁹ be it that of a half-fairy or a woman poet.

In conclusion, 'The Fairy of the Fountains' captures central themes of the Melusine legend – including the 'fluid transformability between ambiguous dichotomies' and the 'revelation of the slippery line between ontological categories' – but, at the same time, questions and subverts its reassuring conservative message.¹⁴⁰ Whereas the traditional narrative 'emphasizes Melusine's human side over that of her serpentine, fairy body, and in doing so, reassures audiences about humanity's central place in the Christian cosmic hierarchy', Landon's poem tells an opposite story where Melusina prefers being a fairy to being human.¹⁴¹ In doing so, she gives prominence to the darker, disrupting, undomesticated side of fairiness, without demonising it, but rather as a way to radically challenge contemporary basic assumptions about the desirability of humanity and of women's place in human society.

.....

Greta Colombani

Notes

1. Kari Lokke, 'Letitia Landon's "The Fairy of the Fountains" and Gothic Narrative', *Pedagogy* 16, no. 2 (2016): 315-22 (315).
2. In the introductory note, Landon states that '[t]he Legend, on which this story is founded, is immediately taken from Mr. Thoms's most interesting collection' (Letitia Elizabeth Landon, *Letitia Elizabeth Landon: Selected Writings*, ed. Jerome J. McGann and Daniel Riess (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1997), 225).
3. I will use 'Melusina' to refer to Landon's character, as it is the name by which she is called throughout the poem with the exception of the last line. I will use 'Melusine', instead, when referring to Thoms's and the traditional versions of the legend.
4. Adriana Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 196.
5. Craciun, *Fatal Women*, 195.
6. Most critics dealing with the poem highlight its Gothic elements: see Lokke, 'Letitia Landon's "The Fairy of the Fountains"', 315; Anne DeLong, *Mesmerism, Medusa, and the Muse: The Romantic Discourse of Spontaneous Creativity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 112; Michelle O'Connell, "'Such Strains as Speak No Mortal Means': Melusine Voices in Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Landon's "The Fairy of the Fountains"', in *Haunted Europe: Continental Connections in English-Language Gothic Writing, Film and New Media*, ed. Evert Jan van Leeuwen and Michael Newton (New York: Routledge, 2020), 36-56 (47).
7. Misty Urban, Deva Kemmis, and Melissa Ridley Elmes (eds), *Melusine's Footprint: Tracing the Legacy of a Medieval Myth* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 8; Melissa Ridley Elmes, 'The Alchemical Transformation of Melusine', in Urban, Kemmis, and Elmes (eds), *Melusine's Footprint*, 94-105 (104); Misty Urban, 'How the Dragon Ate the Woman: The Fate of Melusine in English', in Urban, Kemmis, and Elmes (eds), *Melusine's Footprint*, 368-87.
8. Landon, *Letitia Elizabeth Landon*, 225.
9. Landon, *Letitia Elizabeth Landon*, 287.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Letitia Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 269-74.
12. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 488-9.
13. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 490.
14. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 311.
15. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 281.
16. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 317.
17. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 272.
18. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 271.
19. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 432-5.
20. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 436-7.
21. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 439.
22. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 183-4.

23. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 179-82.
24. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 182.
25. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 201-2.
26. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 179.
27. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 180.
28. Chera A. Cole, 'Passing as a "Humayn Woman": Hybridity and Salvation in the Middle English *Melusine*', in Urban, Kemmis, and Elmes (eds), *Melusine's Footprint*, 240-58 (241).
29. Cole, 'Passing as a "Humayn Woman"', 241.
30. Cole, 'Passing as a "Humayn Woman"', 243, 258.
31. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 178.
32. Cole, 'Passing as a "Humayn Woman"', 256.
33. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 167-9.
34. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 173.
35. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 175.
36. Richard Fantina misreads these lines when he asserts that Melusina 'sacrifices immortality' by 'abandon[ing] herself to' youth, love and hope (Richard Fantina, "'The Maiden Felt Hot Pain': Agency and Passivity in the Work of Letitia Elizabeth Landon", in *From Wallstonecraft to Stoker: Essays on Gothic and Victorian Sensation Fiction*, ed. Marilyn Brock (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 30-48 (36)).
37. Cole, 'Passing as a "Humayn Woman"', 253.
38. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 1.
39. Craciun, *Fatal Women*, 284.
40. DeLong, *Mesmerism, Medusa, and the Muse*, 125.
41. Ya-feng Wu, "'Why Did She Love Her Mother's so?': L.E.L. Forging Corinne", *臺大文史哲學報* 77 (2012): 289-328 (307).
42. Harvey Sacks, *Lectures on Conversation*, ed. by Gail Jefferson, vol. 1 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 4. Interestingly, Sacks's work anticipated some insights of the performative theories of identity to which Chera Cole has recourse. For an insightful and detailed discussion of this topic, see Carmen Dell'Aversano, 'A Research Programme for Queer Studies', *Whatever. A Transdisciplinary Journal of Queer Theories and Studies* 1 (2018): 35-73.
43. Marvin B. Scott and Stanford M. Lyman, 'Accounts', *American Sociological Review* 33, no. 1 (1968): 46-62 (46).
44. *Ibid.*
45. Scott and Lyman, 'Accounts', 62.
46. Craciun makes a similar point: 'Melusine's mother is thus Fouqué's Undine, an earlier generation of mermaid poet who renounces her powers, and advises her readers and her daughter to' (Craciun, *Fatal Women*, 210).
47. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 120-1.
48. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 135-6.
49. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 141-4.
50. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 150-2.
51. Michael Ostling, 'Introduction: Where've All the Good People Gone?', in *Fairies, Demons and Nature Spirits: Small Gods at the Margins of Christendom*, ed. Michael Ostling (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1-55 (5).
52. See Frederika Bain, 'The Tail of Melusine: Hybridity, Mutability, and the Accessible Other', in *Melusine's Footprint*, 17-35 (29); Zifeng Zhao, 'Metamorphoses of Snake Women: Melusine and Madam White', in *Melusine's Footprint*, 282-300 (286, 290); Gillian M.E. Alban, 'The Serpent Goddess Melusine: From Cursed Snake to Mary's Shield', in *The Survival of Myth Innovation, Singularity and Alterity*, ed. Paul Hardwick and David Kennedy (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 23-43 (32).
53. Zhao, 'Metamorphoses of Snake Women', 286.
54. Craciun, *Fatal Women*, 210.
55. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 582.
56. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 584-5.
57. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 572.
58. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 581.
59. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 571.
60. See Craciun, *Fatal Women*; Wu, "'Why Did She Love Her Mother's so?"; Kari Lokke, 'The Romantic Fairy Tale', in *A Companion to European Romanticism*, ed. Michael Ferber (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 138-56.

61. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 272.
62. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 271.
63. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 141.
64. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 142.
65. *Ibid.*
66. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 22.
67. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 186.
68. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 187.
69. Barbara Fass Leavy, *In Search of the Swan Maiden: A Narrative on Folklore and Gender* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 240.
70. Writing about fairies in early modern Britain, Regina Buccola points out that 'early modern popular belief granted fairies the ability to slip out of socially constructed gender and class categories' and that 'the departures from social conventions that appear in popular lore about fairies reveal resistance to standard gender roles and behavior' (Regina Buccola, *Fairies, Fractious Women, and the Old Faith: Fairy Lore in Early Modern British Drama and Culture* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2006), 10).
71. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 147.
72. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 149.
73. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 137-40.
74. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 314.
75. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 315.
76. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 325.
77. Nicola Bown, *Fairies in Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 14.
78. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 436.
79. Dale Townshend had already identified these two main components of the Gothic in his edited collection *Terror and Wonder: The Gothic Imagination* (British Library, 2014), but he explores the specific relationship of this Gothic duality with fairies in his keynote talk "'The fairy kind of writing': Gothic and the aesthetics of enchantment in the long eighteenth century' at the 2021 OGOM Conference 'Ill met by moonlight'.
80. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 556.
81. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 552-5.
82. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 140.
83. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 341.
84. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 370.
85. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 373.
86. Wu, "'Why Did She Love Her Mother's so?'" , 309. See also Richard Cronin, 'Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon, and "Lady's Rule"', in *Romantic Women Poets: Genre and Gender*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Cecilia Pietropoli (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 209-39 (231-3).
87. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 559.
88. DeLong, *Mesmerism, Medusa, and the Muse*, 128.
89. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 560-1.
90. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 3.
91. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 18.
92. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 99-100.
93. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 111-12.
94. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 147.
95. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 440-3.
96. Harriet K. Linkin, 'Romantic Aesthetics in Mary Tighe and Letitia Landon: How Women Poets Recuperate the Gaze', *European Romantic Review* 7, no. 2 (1997): 159-88 (174).
97. *Ibid.*
98. Cronin, 'Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon, and "Lady's Rule"', 231.
99. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 435.
100. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 557.
101. See Craciun, *Fatal Women*, 210; DeLong, *Mesmerism, Medusa, and the Muse*, 126; Lokke, 'Letitia Landon's "The Fairy of the Fountains"', 319; O'Connell, "'Such Strains as Speak No Mortal Means"', 49, 51.
102. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 127-8.
103. Lokke, 'The Romantic Fairy Tale', 153.

104. This is a recurring theme in the works of Romantic women poets: see, for instance, Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 3-11; Brandy Ryan, "'Echo and Reply': The Elegies of Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon, and Elizabeth Barrett', *Victorian Poetry* 46, no. 3 (2008): 249-77; Adriana Craciun, 'Romantic Satanism and the Rise of Nineteenth-Century Women's Poetry', *New Literary History* 34, no. 4 (2003): 699-721.
105. Glennis Stephenson, 'Letitia Landon and the Victorian Improvisatrice: The Construction of L.E.L.', *Victorian Poetry* 30, no. 1 (1992): 1-17 (4).
106. Landon, *Letitia Elizabeth Landon*, 180.
107. Craciun, *Fatal Women*, 218.
108. Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 112, 113.
109. Craciun, *Fatal Women*, 223. See also Wu, "'Why Did She Love Her Mother's so?'" , 307.
110. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 526.
111. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 525.
112. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 525.
113. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 479-80.
114. Craciun, *Fatal Women*, 224.
115. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 4.
116. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 8-9.
117. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 15.
118. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 16.
119. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 90.
120. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 91.
121. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 253.
122. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 536.
123. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 539.
124. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 541. 'Melusine has the "damp and heavy" hair of the dead, and the "hectic blushes" and "fever'd cheek" of pestilent fever' (Craciun, *Fatal Women*, 220).
125. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 498-503.
126. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 511.
127. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', lines 514-17.
128. Craciun, *Fatal Women*, 219.
129. See Katharine Mary Briggs, 'The Fairies and the Realms of the Dead', *Folklore* 81, no. 2 (1970): 81-96; Carole G. Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 41-3.
130. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 172.
131. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 168.
132. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 524.
133. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 530.
134. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 531.
135. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 142.
136. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 142.
137. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 2.
138. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 197.
139. Landon, 'The Fairy of the Fountains', line 141.
140. Zhao, 'Metamorphoses of Snake Women', 283; Urban, 'How the Dragon Ate the Woman', 374.
141. Cole, 'Passing as a "Humayn Woman"', 243.