

*Mélusine, Medusa, and the Mermaid: Scaly Ladies and Monstrous
Esthetics in 19th- and early 20th-century French Literature*

A Dissertation Defense by Loïc Lerme

The mythology and literature of Ancient Greece generated a plethora of female monsters who still haunt our modern imaginations, fantasies, and nightmares. Most of those monsters were related to water—quite a few were begotten by two primordial divinities, namely the sea gods Phorcys and Keto (Κητώ, meaning “sea monster,” hence the word “cetacean”)—and they almost always exhibited reptilian anatomic traits as well (Hesiod, *Theogony*). This assimilation of the reptile and the fish, both characterized by their scales and their undulating motion, is what I have come to term “reptilomorphism.” My research focuses on the multifaceted representations of these female “reptilomorphic” monsters (physical or psychological) or “scaly ladies” in 19th- and early 20th-century French literature. I contend that these monsters and entities function as metaliterary tropes that point toward a reflection on the process of inspiration and the enterprise of writing. More specifically, I argue that they embody the esthetic principles of the works in which they are incorporated and, most of the time, pinpoint problematics attached to poetic/literary genius. As a matter of fact, these “scaly” ladies more often than not turn out to be Muses and, as such, enable the authors or their personas in the texts to confront their own inspiration, grapple with it in the process, and examine the devices they handle and the *modus operandi* they opt for on the way to literary creation. At the crossroads of gender studies and intermediality, my work foregrounds the significance of animal and posthuman studies in the advent of modernity in French literature.



**3:00pm, Wednesday,
April 4th, 2018
IMU, Maple Room**

Committee

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French and Italian*

*Hall Bjornstad
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