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Mythological Character in Spells: Latvian 'Saint Maidens' – Skin Sores

Personification of illnesses is a typical phenomenon in spells of many traditions. The participation in spells of various anthropomorphous characters, which embody the illnesses and simultaneously cure them, also is not a rarity. Among these characters there are most often the female mythological beings (as Virgin Maria and other possible saints, especially popular in the Western tradition, like anonymous grandmas, maids, fevers and other). These characters perform certain actions resulting in patient's healing (the bleeding stops, the erysipelas disappears, the wound skins over).

However cases where illness is fully associated with a mythological character, are rare enough (for example, Old Indian spells against malicious demons or the Polish and Czech spells against 'white (cold) people', but in these cases the etiology of illnesses is rather unclear).

In this context the 'saint-maidens' (*svētas meitas*) plot in Latvian spells seems remarkable. The 'saint maidens' are independent mythological characters (data about them can be found not only in spells, but also in popular beliefs, folk tales, dainas); they send and personify illnesses. It is considered that 'saint maidens' are a unique reason for the severe skin disease (blisters, sores, lumps). These formations are called 'saint maidens', both the mythological characters, and the illness. A similar plot and such direct identification are not found in any of the neighboring traditions (West and East Slavic, Lithuanian).

Here are some examples of similar Latvian spells:

Es svētājām meitām aņņemu riņķi apkārt ar adatu, – svētas meitas vidū balts, visapkārt sarkans. Svētas meitas nīkones, iznīkst kā rīta rasa, kā vecs mēnesis, kā vecs pūpēdis.

'I lead round a needle circle of saint maidens, – in the middle the saint maidens are white, around they are red. Saint maidens, wither; (they) will pine as morning dew, as old moon, as old puffball' (Трейланд.№ 220).

Mīļās svētās meitas, māsiņas, atraiķītes, sieviņas, meitenītes, kas jūs esit, es jūs lūdzu, atstājat nost no to cilvēku N. kājas. Eita tur avota lejē, apakš alkšņa krūmiņa. Tur varat vērpēt un šūt, rakstīt, ēķelēt. Es jūs lūdzu, esit tik žēlīgas, atstājas nost no tās Jāņa kājas.

‘Lovely saint maidens, sisters, get rid, women, widows¹, who are you, I ask you, lag behind feet of this person N. Go in a spring, downwards in an alder bush. There you should spin and sew, embroider, knit. I ask you, be so kind, lag behind feet of this Janis’ (Straubergs).

Svētās meitas, māsiņas, eita kārklienā jaktēties; ņemta to lūku banti, sasienat, lai tas kārklu kūlis nokalst tā kā Līzes augums.

‘Saint maidens, sisters, go on willows to play about, take a bast lace, fasten, let this willow sheaf dry up, as Lize’s body’ (Straubergs).

Latvian mythological tradition provides some versions of the origin of the ‘saint maidens’. According to one version, a ‘saint maiden’ is a soul of the young girl who has refused affinity to the furious German lord who has tortured her in a cellar. The unfortunate girl was shut up in a dungeon, was regretted by a passerby who has stretched to her in a window a yarn which she spun until her death. In other legends they are the souls of the maidens working (especially spinning) at night on Sunday and holidays for manufacturing their dowry. According to the third version, ‘saint maidens’ are the inhabitants of the castles which have fallen under the earth, they leave on walk through ‘chimneys’ sticking out from under the earth (‘small red young ladies’) (Трейланд:137, footnote).

The functions of ‘saint maidens’, besides sending illnesses, are mainly related to spinning (when at night it is clearly heard how the beetles bore wood in a wall of a house, it is said that ‘saint maidens are spinning’, Трейланд:137, footnote), in this case the similar sounds foretell death to someone of the inhabitants of the house. ‘Saint maidens’ also help women to spin and kidnap their children (the changed child is whining and ugly and quite often turns to a birch log).

Place of their dwelling is first of all the space of the house: more often they live in cracks between logs, in the corners, in the base, in a fence, behind an oven (Straubergs). According to popular beliefs, ‘saint maidens’ live in home fire and if someone puts out the water there, they will spit their poison and will infect the person by sores (Šmits:29945). They also appear if someone spits into the fire (Šmits:29946). However, according to some beliefs, ‘saint maidens’ appear on the trees (especially on the birches) and can be seen only at night of summer solstice (Straubergs).

They are connected with the wood locus also because the mushrooms-tinder growing on stumps or rotten trees are called ‘saint maidens’ (it is considered that

¹ ‘Saint Maidens’ in spells can be called also ‘girls, young ladies, dames’, can be in singular and in plural, and also can be not called at all. In one spell against ‘Saint Maidens’ there is a male character (‘black little man’).

the person who has touched them can become ill with a skin disease of the corresponding name). The same outgrowths on trees is also called ‘the vomit of witches’. There are legends in which ‘saint maidens’ come from another world and graze ‘dark blue cows’, if one sees such a herd and throws a cloth above on the ‘saint maidens’, they can remain in this world (Šmits:29938).

‘Saint maidens’ are dangerous for health. Besides sending skin diseases they also entangle the hair of women in mats which are called ‘manes of Laima or Mara’. If these mats are cut off, they will grow again, but in addition the eyes will become ill (Šmits, VI, 32, 1). For treatment of skin abscesses fats (ointments, sour cream, grease) and ashes of the burned grasses and plants (for example, mountain ashes), and also tobacco were used. It was considered that water (wetting of ulcers) could aggravate the illness and if someone with these sores goes to a bath, it will be very difficult to get rid of them. It is strange, that despite an interdiction to wash in a bath to the persons with this illness, the motive of a bath is very popular in spells from ‘saint maidens’. It will be told about it below.

Thus, we can see the contamination of ‘saint maidens’ with several characters of the lowest mythology. We will present these connections in the form of the table (in this table there are only those lines of characters which have crossings with an image of ‘saint maidens’):

	appearance	origin	functions	location
Mermaids		unnatural and premature death	spinning, kidnapping	wood, trees, ponds
Laume ²			spinning, substitution of children	wood, trees, ponds
Laima ³				bath, threshold
Mara ⁴			cattle pasture	bath
“ban-nik”			substitution of children who turn to a birch log	bath
gnomes	small growth			underground

² A character of Baltic lower mythology, connected with spinning and substitution of children, has zoomorphic or partially zoomorphic appearance (with chicken feet) and has distinctive features: long matted hair, protruding eyes and long breasts which are hanging down to the earth.

³ Baltic goddess of destiny patronizing women (especially women in childbirth).

⁴ Latvian goddess patronizing women, by her functions similar to Laima.

As we can see in the table in spite of the fact that ‘saint maidens’ have similarity to many characters (first of all with mermaids and Laume though they differ from them by location), they do not coincide completely with any of them.

Some researchers of Latvian mythology argue that ‘saint maidens’ have not developed into a separate character and incorporate features of multiple other mythological beings. P. Šmits considers them to be a new phenomenon in the Latvian mythology as they are seldom mentioned in popular songs. Moreover both words in their name (‘saint’ and ‘maiden’) are loans, from Russian and German, respectively (Šmits:28). However, in spells the image of ‘saint maidens’ is so impressive that it deserves special attention.

It is worth mentioning that spells reflect almost all mythological concepts of this character:

Kidnapping, spinning, connection with Laima:

Maza maza jumpraviņa, tā bij bērnu nesējiņa; piecas meitas jūriņā zīdu diegu šķeterē; pirtī zili dūmi kūp, cauri spiežās pasekņiem. Svētas meitas, jumpraviņas, atstāj nost no (vārda) miesām! Eitat dziļā jūrā, tur dancojat, plātaties; man atnāk Laimas māte, mīksta slota padusē, - tik mīksta kā zoses s..., tik šķīsta kā tītara s...

‘The small, small young lady – here is she who carries children! Five maidens in the sea twist a silk thread; a dark blue smoke goes out of the bath, gets through the bottom row of beams! Saint maidens, young ladies, lag behind the flesh of (name of person)! Go away in the deep sea, dance there, disperse; the mother Laima comes to me, (she has) the soft bunch of bath under her arm, – it’s as soft as the shit of goose, it’s as liquid as the shit of turkey’ (Трейланд:№ 211)

Spinning, connection with trees:

Svēta meita, svēta meita, svēta meita, ko tu vērp, ko tu šķeterē? Zīdu šķeterē melnā alkšņa kokā, apsē. Amen

‘Saint maiden, saint maiden, saint maiden, why do you spin, why do you twist a thread? Twist a silk thread in a black alder tree, in an aspen. Amen’ (Трейланд:№ 222).

Connection with a space of a house:

Mūc, mūc svētā, svētā meita, tav pieder istaba, tav pieder ugune, tav pieder ūdens tav pieder krāsne.

‘Run, run, the saint maiden, the log hut belongs to you, the fire belongs to you, the water belongs to you, the stove belongs to you’ (Šmits:29947).

Connection with a bath, gnomes:

*Redz, kur zili dūmi kūp pirtes pamatā, – mazs vīriņš, melna cepure galvā;
redz, kur zili dūmi kūp pirtes pamatā, – melns vīriņš, melna cepure galvā;
redz, kur zili dūmi kūp pirtes pamatā, – mazs vīriņš, melna cepure galvā.*

‘Look, where a dark blue smoke is going out of the bottom of the bath, – the little man, a black cap on his head; look, where a dark blue smoke is going out of the bottom of the bath, – the black little man, a black cap on his head; look, where a dark blue smoke is going out of the bottom of a bath, – the little man, a black cap on a head’ (Трейланд:№ 209).

A small (black) man with a black cap on a head is probably the association with sores on a body, but simultaneously (in connection with a bath) black color can correspond to the coals from the burned tree. Compare the spell in which ‘saint maidens’ put out a burned stub:

Trīs jumpraviņas brien pa jūru, baltas zeķes, melnas kurpes, viņas uziet vienu liepas celmu, to viņas apspļauda, apdzēs, paliek melus kā bijis, – ar Dieva palīgu sadzist.

‘Three maidens wade sea, (they have) white stockings, black boots; they find one lime (burned) stub, they cover it with spittle, put out it, it remains black as it was, – it heals with the help of God’ (Трейланд:№ 217).

Here the extinguishing of a burning (burned) stub which becomes black corresponds to the treatment of illness.

In general comparison of illnesses (especially skin illness, which appear in the form of inflammations) with fire is very often. Therefore extinguishing, blowing out the fire can associate with illness treatment, as here:

Trīs vērgu sievas nāk; viena uguni nes, otra uguni pūš, trešā uguni dzēs. Jūs svētas, svētas, svētas, eitat savu ceļu, jums še nekāda dzīve nav!...

‘Three women-slaves come; one brings fire, another blows fire, the third extinguishes fire. You, saint, saint, saint, go your own way, here there is no life for you!...’ (Трейланд:№ 219).

Mīļā svētā jumpraviņa, nāc ar abām rociņām, apspļaudi, apspļaudi, appūš, nodzēs visas mana bērna vāītes projām...

‘The lovely saint girl, come and stroke with both hands, cover with spittle, blow, clean all sores of my child...’ (Šmits:29948).

Thus the symbolism of a bath and steam, arising everywhere in spells against ‘saint maidens’, becomes clear: a fire, which is associated with illness, is extinguished in a

bath (is put out by water) and turns to steam, that is connected with the disappearance of the illness ('disappear as a smoke of a bath'). Thus the water is the hostile element to 'saint maidens' (compare also the belief that if the person pours out water after washing child in that place where 'saint maidens' live, they can attack the person, i.e. send illness, Šmits:29936). Nevertheless they (as well as many characters of spells) are standing in the sea and are sent to the sea:

Maza maza jumpraviņa, tā bij bērnu šautējiņa; piecas meitas jūriņā, zīdu diegu šķeterē; zila zaļa uguntiņa caur pīrtiņas paseķniti. Atstāj nost, svētā meita, no (vārda) miesām! Ej dziļā jūrā, uz dziņas laivas vēlogiem, uz laumes vēmekļiem!

'The small, small girl – here is she who flogs the children! Five maidens twist a silk thread in the sea; the blue, green spark (gets) through the bottom of a bath. Lag behind, the saint maiden, from the flesh of (name of person), go to the deep sea, on the sails of the big ship, on vomit of Laume!' (Трейланд:№ 210)

In this text 'the blue, green spark' is mentioned. It is necessary to tell that colours of 'saint maidens' in spells are various: 'in the middle they are white, around they are red', 'they have white stockings, black boots', they take steam in a bath by 'silver bunch, with gold leaflets'. The bright colours are probably associated with fire burning, and the dark ones – with extinguishing of fire:

Zili melni dūmi kūp Garām piertes pamatiem; Raibas kaķis dancoja Ābola kalnā; Skrej pa kalnu kalniem, Pa leju lejām, Pa jūdžu jūdžēm.

'The dark blue black smoke go out by the steam from the bottom of a bath. The motley cat dances on an apple mountain. Run on valleys of valleys, on mountains of mountains' (Straubergs).

The occurrence of a motley cat dancing on an apple mountain in this spell must be noted. Probably, it is a certain association with flame (dancing) and smoke (motley). It is possible that the image of a cat is also connected with the bath (we can notice that Slavic 'bannik', spirit of the bath, could turn, in particular, to a cat, СД 1:138). The last spell is interesting also because the illness is sent simultaneously to the mountains and valleys (i.e. both up and down). The mountain as a stayig place of 'saint maidens' appears also in other spell:

Trīs māsiņas pirti kūra triju kalnu stārpiņa

'Three sisters heated a bath between three mountains' (Трейланд:№ 215).

Having united all motives of these spells, we can build a semiotic model of the image of 'saint maidens', based on the main oppositions:

LIGHT–DARKNESS:		
bright colors: white, red, green, blue	– motley –	dark colors: dark blue, black
TOP–BOTTOM:		
mountain	– trees – (alder tree, aspen, willows, stub)	sea, valley, bottom of a bath
WATER–FIRE:		
spring, sea	– steam, smoke, bath –	sparks, ashes, oven, hearth
ONE’S OWN – ANOTHER (SPACE):		
house (hut, table, bed, cradle, hearth)	– bath –	sea, mountains, wood

As we can see in this table, the image of ‘saint maidens’ is full of connotations connecting them not only with poles of oppositions, but also with their intermediate values. It must be noticed that we derive all this data only from texts of spells without other folkloric sources. Spells in this case give us the richest material, showing a full image of the character, which is identified with illness and at the same time an independent mythological being with rich associations.

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