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IRISH BANSHEE AND RUSSIAN RUSALKA: THE COMB-MOTIF – ITS MEANING AND GENESIS¹

0. Introduction: Who is Banshee?

Banshee represents a specific figure of Irish folklore: it is a female spirit whose cry foretells death of a family relative or a neighbour.

"The Banshee tradition is peculiar to the Gaelic world", writes D. Ó hOgain (1991: 45) in his *Encyclopaedia of the Irish Folk Tradition*; indeed, many scholars believe that *Banshee* is a specifically Irish and Scottish folklore character, some kind of a national symbol that has no correspondence in popular beliefs of other traditions. But this is not quite true. Furthermore, our attempt to define the character of Banshee as a certain function by describing it as *a supernatural mythological female image that materialises in the vicinity of the Irish aristocratic houses and whose mournful weeping heralds the imminent death* (my italics – T.M.) is not devoid of difficulties. First of all, the denotation "Banshee" is far from being found in every Irish and Scottish county (e.g. Lysaght 1996: chapter 1). Secondly, a figure of the Banshee may turn into a bird or any other creature; and, thirdly, according to some Irish family memorates, the function of foretelling the imminent death may be attributed to other personages, for example, to a white cat or a mare.

Banshee is characterised by some supplementary attributive features as well. For example, she is often described as sitting on the river bank. Similar character of the Irish folklore is known as Bean Nighe ("The Washing Woman"), who, according to K. Briggs (1976: 19), can also fulfil the Banshee's function of foretelling death. Banshee has some "secondary characteristics" that associate her with other characters of the Celtic folklore. However, let us note that some of these characters may be the invariants of the Banshee and can also obtain the Banshee's main trait – the

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ability of foretelling the death, even in case when all other features have nothing to do with her (cf. Welsh Cyhyraeth and Breton Ancou; Sikes 1880; Mikhailova 2002; Muradova 2002). It is quite possible that Banshee is not very much a character, but rather an unbalanced nucleus of various features; its functionality and proportions vary from one region within the Celtic zone to another. In order to be able to explain the Banshee's character in one word, one may suggest introducing the term "linguistic continuity" here. However, as a rule, any given linguistic community demonstrates a considerable degree of a historical and social homogeneity – which is not applicable to the range of popular beliefs subject to multiple loan features and exempt from any standard.

1. The figure of *Banshee* and its counterparts in other folklore traditions

On the one hand, one may take it for granted that Banshee (Mod. Irish *Bean Si*) represents a specific Irish folklore character and has no parallels in other narrative traditions. But if we look at the image of Banshee on the whole, we will find some features that could associate her with Russian *Rusalkas*² as well as with other female characters of the European folklore tradition.

No description of Banshee's facial features is found in the Irish folk tales, in contrast to their specific reference to her unnatural cry. The only significant trait of the death-messenger's appearance upon which the folk tradition is usually focused is the attention to her long hair. As Patricia Lysaght (1996: 91) points out,

It is mentioned, or implied, in many records that the beauty of Banshee is especially due to the long yellow or golden hair... It is possible that some of the informants who state that the being had long or flowing hair, without stating that it was beautiful, have imagined it to be so. Long blonde hair is in Ireland a stereotype to denote female beauty. But other stereotypes found in Irish literature expressing the beauty of women, such as snow-white hands, cheeks red, pearl-like teeth or eyes hyacinth blue, are conspicuously absent from the records. This is in keeping with the absence of amorous and erotic element in the death-messenger tradition.

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² In Modern Russian, the word Rusalka has two meanings: firstly, a female demon, a ghost dwelling near the water, *cf.* the Greek *nymph*; secondly, it is a Russian equivalent of the English *mermaid* – a female spirit with a fish tail living in the water.

The motif of combing the hair is also encountered in beliefs and memorates concerning Banshee. The material from which the comb is made varies in the testimonies of Banshee. The comb can be described as golden, silver, iron, wooden and even – made from the skeleton of fish. In most instances, the description of the comb proves that it belongs to a non-human being and cannot be a property of an ordinary woman. In all the legends concerning Banshee, the comb represents a dangerous object and a strict taboo is imposed to pick it up from the ground if she has lost it. What is the reason?

As it is mentioned in the Irish folk-stories, if she lost her comb, Banshee will come to the house where her comb is and will try to take it back. Patricia Lysaght notes that the so-called "comb legend" is the most developed plot among other interference legends concerning the figure of Banshee. In the fabulates, the story focuses on the manner in which the stolen comb is retrieved by Banshee.

In one story, for example, a man ran after a strange woman dressed in white and she dropped her comb. He took it and brought it home. When he was in bed at night, he heard somebody knocking at the window. It was Banshee. He got up, put the comb into the tongs and then – out of the window. When Banshee was retrieving the comb, she took half of the tongs with her (Lysaght 1996: 154). Also, in Irish villages there is a tradition to tell to the children: "Don't pick up the comb, it belongs to Banshee, you must know it!"

But how can one explain that the Irish death messenger, Banshee, has long hair and a comb?

The combing motif can be listed among other beliefs which are firmly rooted in folk tradition and are commonly associated with supernatural female characters. The Slavonic Rusalkas also enjoy spending time combing their long hair with a comb (in every instance, it is made of a different kind of material). It can be golden, silver, wooden, made of horn, of fish skeleton and the fabulates point out its magic power. Rusalka's hair is sometimes depicted as green or golden, as very long and as perpetually wet: by combing, Rusalka dries the hair.

If we were to shift to the Asian traditions, we can find the same motif of the long hair and of the lost comb attributed to such mythological personages as the Turkish *Albasta* (especially among the Tatars of Kazan), whose primary function in the folkloric tradition is to kill a man in the night and to drink the blood from his heart (Kajum-Nasyrov 1880: 245). The Tatar *Syu-Anasy* ("The Water's Mother") combs her long hair sitting on the bank of a river or a lake, and generally she is considered to be kill-

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ing imprudent walkers and eating their flesh. But sometimes she also loses her golden comb and if a man picks it up and takes it with him, she will find him and will try to take it back by her hand of a thief, just like Banshee (Koblov 1910: 445–47).

The Komy-Permyat water girl *Shishiga* is not a malicious creature; she is told to be sitting on the border of a bog or on the hummock, combing her long hair with an iron comb. She has no dress and covers her body with her long white or green hair. Once a fisherman noticed her sitting on the hummock in the bog and braiding her tresses, she leaped into the water and lost his comb on the hummock. The fisherman took it with him to his wooden hut. At night, Shishiga came to his house and started crying, groaning and lamenting so loud that nobody could sleep. The fisherman threw the comb out of the window; Shishiga took it and retreated (Zyelyenin 1995: 222–23).

In the European tradition, we find similar images of a supernatural maiden combing her long hair with a golden comb, her image may be more attractive and pleasant, but in one way or another she is connected with death. The famous Lorelei comes to our mind, a beautiful maiden, who committed suicide because of an unfaithful lover. After she has done it, one could see her sitting on a rock, combing her long golden bright hair and luring the fishermen to their doom in the dangerous whirlpool of Rheine. We can remember the famous image depicted by Heinrich Heine:

> Die schönste Jungfrau sitzet Dort oben wunderbar, Ihr goldnes Geschmeide blitzet, Sie kämmt ihr goldenes Haar. Sie kämmt es mit goldenenem Kamme Und singt ein Lied dabei; Das eine wundersame, Gewaltige Melodei. (Heine 1949: 15)

The loveliest maiden is sitting, up there wondrous to tell. Her golden jewelry sparkles, as she combs her golden hair. She combs it with a golden comb and sings a song as she does; A song with a peculiar, powerful melody.

The Germanic Undines and the Scandinavian Holdres, as well as the Serbo-Croatian Vilas (esp. the so-called Croatian Velebitska Vila),

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the Polish *Wiła*s are all beautiful maidens and are the Slavic versions of nymphs; they are naked or dressed in white and usually comb their long hair with a comb. The Serbian fairy of the fate, known by the name of *Pripoldnica* ("The Midday Woman"), who is usually seen in the midday in a long white dress near a river or a lake, also combs her hair with a golden comb and sometimes loses it. The person who takes the comb will be unlucky till the end of his life.

Furthermore, a water spirit known as *Glastyg* of the Scottish folklore also has a comb: sometimes, she combs her long curly hair together with her male "brother", a water-horse spirit *Glastyn* (Briggs 1976: 191).

It can be no doubt that the attribute of combing the long hair (and looking in the mirror) can also be found with the mermaids. As Katharine Briggs (1976: 287) pointed out in her *Dictionary of Fairies*,

According to the set of beliefs, the mermaids are like beautiful maidens from waist upwards, but they have the tail of a fish. They carry a comb and a mirror and are often seen combing their long and beautiful hair.

For example, Gwen Benwell and Arthur Waugh in their book on mermaids tell the story about a man who had never seen a mermaid, and was frustrated because his father had been privileged twice to do so. But once he took a mermaid by surprise, for "she was seating upon a rock combing her long hair so intently that she was unaware of this man's approach" (Benwell & Waugh 1961: 142).

The Russian *Vodyaniha* ("The Water-woman") is also described combing her hair with a comb. She is not beautiful at all and she is always totally naked, exhibiting her long big breasts. Vodianiha covers her body with long green hair that she combs sitting on the river bank. As a rule, she is not a malicious creature, but in case a male person is approaching, she may leap into the water, and sometimes before leaping she can recite an evil prophecy to him. Picking up her lost comb may also bring him a trouble or a sudden death. If a fisherman takes a comb belonging to Vodianiha, he will have no fish, because she will tear or spoil his fishing nets (Vinogradova 2000: 18).

In Russian region of Zabajkal'ye (a district to the East of the lake Baikal), similar stories are told about a Water-woman. She can be beautiful and ugly, but she has always long black hair and a bronze comb, and she combs her hair sitting near the water. Her comb has a magic power and if a man succeeds in stealing it, the comb will bring him luck in marriage and in hunt.

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Let us finish with the Russian Rusalka who is presented as a supernatural woman seating on the branches near the water and spends her time combing her long hair.

As the Russian folklorist Dmitrij Zyelyenin noted at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Russian Rusalka cannot be considered a pure mythological character, but rather a human being who did not die of a natural cause. They may be the drowned girls, and moreover, the girls who committed suicide. Therefore, Rusalkas can be classified within a group of *zalozhniye pokojniki* ("the trapped deceased persons"), which have no strict parallels in the Western folklore tradition. They are not spirits but the corpses, thus, it would not be correct to associate them with the Germanic *Wiedergänger* or the French *Revenant*. We suppose that the closest parallel would be the Icelandic *Draugr* who is however much more aggressive than its Russian counterpart.

2. Messengers of death in early Irish sagas

Let us leave for a while the folklore tradition and turn to the early Irish saga-material. The similar motif can be found in the Irish tale "The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel". Etain, a woman of a fairy mound (OIr. síd), is described as standing on the edge of a well, with long golden hair and "a bright comb adorned with gold". She is firstly described as having "two golden-yellow tresses with a plait of four strands in each of them, with a bead of gold at the point of each strand", and, few lines below, "she is undoing her hair to wash it" (Knott 1936: 1, 2). The two descriptions quite concur with each other: Etain's posture, the motif of washing the long hair, and the idea of a precious comb - all go hand in hand. What is more, these details do not play any role in the plot of the tale, and serve the narration representing a relic of an old tradition. Her image has a special function: such description recreates a female person of the Otherworld: it is cruel and is non-resistible owing to her extreme beauty. Her beauty and Otherworld's attraction are provided to explain the second stage of the development of the plot of the saga: "Longing for her seised the king Eochaid straightaway". Needless to say, the king was dead after a short time.

3. Contemporary folklore data relating to the motif of a female death-messenger

The stability of this motif in folklore can be proved by the new data, such as memorates from the recent folklore expeditions and the new

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pseudo-folkloric tales. We will provide only four of such characteristic examples.

3.1. Expedition to the Altay Kumandins

The ethnological expedition carried out during the summer of 2002 in the district of the Kumandins in Altay region collected some tales on the so-called "Water-mistress". Her name was *Shalag*, and as the informants explained, it represented the noise of water. Shalag is the mistress of fish and water birds. In Altay region, prior to hunting the birds, the hunter must ask Shalag's permission. He performs a special rite, offering her some presents. In the folk stories, Shalag is presented as a naked woman with the long hair that covers her body. She sits near the water combing her hair with a golden comb (Nazarov n.d.). F. A. Satlayev also indicates that "Kumandins depicted the 'Water-mistress' as a naked woman with long hair who enjoys sitting on the river-bank combing her hair with a golden comb" (Satlayev 1974: 150).

3.2. Long-distance drivers' memorates

The stories from the repository of memorates of the so-called *dal*nobojshiki (long distance drivers in Russian) also deserve some attention. These drivers travel from one region of Russia to another. Their life is full of dangers, and such respondents can provide plenty of memorates and superstitious accounts. Stories about Belaja baba "The White Woman", take a significant part in them. She is a very beautiful woman dressed in white who sits on the side of the motorway. She has a comb and guite typically she combs her long hair with it. Her hair is bright and shines in the darkness. If the car ever stops, she gets into it and tries to strangle the driver. The driver can save his life if he throws her out of the car, but as a rule an accident can happen later as a result of his contact with the supernatural woman. Similarly, if a driver finds a comb on the side of the road, he must not take it, otherwise he will die in a car crash. There are no stories about the return of the white woman to demand her comb back, unlike the Irish Banshee, the Russian Rusalka and other narrative traditions (oral testimony, informant – Sergej Zuyev, born 1953).

3.3. Modern folklore imitations

Modern imitations of a folk fairy-tale tell about Rusalkas and a Queen of Rusalkas, who has a very long hair and a special magic golden comb. The brother of the heroine who is called Dashutka falls in love with Rusalka,

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and Dashutka recognises that this love will be her brother's doom – he will be drowned in the lake, as some other men of her village were. She goes to see a wise woman who informs her that the force of Rusalka lies in her comb. Dashutka steals the comb that belongs to the Queen of Rusalkas. Inevitably, the Queen looses her seductive force soon after that, and the young boy is saved. We could add that the magic force of the comb is also present in stories about British mermaids and can play a role of the key to the water-realm (Kortes n.d.).

3.4. Data collected during the Kurgan expedition

In the year 2006, an interesting report by Dmitrij Gromov about his expedition to Kurgan region, a lake district in Russia, was published. Seven informants reported on having seen a Rusalka; all their stories followed the same pattern: early in the morning or late in the evening (in the dusk), they have seen a female creature sitting near the water and combing her long hair with a comb. When Rusalka sees an approaching person, she leaps into the water and sometimes her comb is lost near the lake. Valentina Prohorova (born in 1940) reports:

I remember I was a little girl, some people would tell about Rusalka, that she is sitting and combing her hair. And one morning I have seen her, she was naked and had very long hair. She was combing it so quickly that the comb was shining in her hand.

Lubov Ugrenina (born 1930) tells that one day she found a comb near the lake, she brought it home, and late in the night Rusalka came to her house and said: "Give me back my comb, give my comb or misfortune will come to you". But Lubov didn't, and only next morning she came to the lake and put it near the water and hid herself behind the trees as she wanted to see what Rusalka would do. But she did not see anything save for a strange wind and the waves on the lake and after that the comb disappeared. In the third story collected by the expedition, the informant tells of the time when she was a young girl. Once she had found a comb near a lake, and brought it home with her. At the midnight, somebody started knocking the window with the words "give my comb". Her father asked the girl if she took the comb. She admitted she did. "But why?!", said the girl's father, opened the window and threw the comb away. When the question was asked what would have happened if her father had not returned the comb, the informant answered: "I don't know what, maybe Rusalka would have returned every night to ask for her comb, disturbing the people". Sometimes the possession of the comb can bring good luck. Fifty-year old man speaks of a comb he had found many years ago.

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However, he left his village and Rusalka never came to him. Some time after he asked a wise Gypsy woman if the comb can bring him any troubles, and got an answer: "No, you will die of your own natural death and the comb on the contrary will bring you good luck". But this can be an exception rather than a rule, according to which the comb represents a dangerous object, a taboo (Gromov 2006: 11–13).

4. The motif of dangerous long hair/foretelling death vs. the attribute of malicious comb: Various approaches to their interpretation

We could provide other examples from the folklore traditions of Eurasia, but we suppose it is rather appropriate to ponder upon the following questions. Does the motif of the long hair and a comb of a supernatural female represent a wondering (or migratory) motif or is this a kind of a psychological *universalia* and must be interpreted typologically? It is not that easy to answer any of the above questions for a reason that the motif of combing the hair by a supernatural female creature must be divided into two separate concepts. The first is the long hair of a female supernatural creature connected with danger. The second is the taboo of taking the magic comb as a dangerous object.

Where do the images of the comb and of the long hair come from? What do they symbolise?

We suppose that the concept of long hair appears from its association with water, in particular – with the falling water. At the first sight it could be interpreted on the basis of the visual similarity that exists between the image of the falling water and that of the long hair. However, to our opinion this connection is more complicated and profound, it may date back to such archaic Indo-European oppositions as "man ~ woman, life ~ death, fire ~ water, right ~ left etc." (see Tolstoj 1995: 155–159) and to the special water symbolism: "water is an environment, an agent and a principle of universal conception and birth" (in Russian: *вода – это среда, агент и принцип всеобщего зачатия и порождения*, Averintsev 1980: 240).

The long hair of our characters can represent a mark of their beauty, for they are trying to charm the men to death and, by the same token, their appearance – though beautiful – can be also portentous and disastrous. Why do the long hair and the act of its combing have this special attractive character? It is difficult to answer this question: it may well be that the clue can be provided by the psychological basis of the masculine

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sexuality. This explanation is very tentative and this problem requires further investigation.³

Other questions are: what is the genesis of the comb-motif and what is the reason that it represents a powerful taboo? In her research in relation to mermaids, Juliette Wood holds that "the comb and mirror appear in medieval Church carvings (not any earlier). These attributes symbolize feminine pride and vanity and are common symbols in classical carving, sometimes as attributes of Venus. From sculpture they move into folklore" (Wood n.d.). It is difficult for us to agree with her opinion. As we have demonstrated, the image of a woman from the Otherworld combing her hair is extremely universal, and it is difficult to deny that this motif is of considerable antiquity.

On the contrary, Margaret Dobbs, speaking about the Irish female character Etain, pays attention to her coral comb:

Coral comb is significant. Like amber it was thought to have great magical properties and was used as a charm against danger... I suggest that the description of Etain at the well is a memory of well-worship and of rites performed there with sacred vessels marked with magic symbols (Dobbs 1954: 202, 203).

Some time ago I proposed a symbolic interpretation of the comb, explaining it as a kind of *vagina dentata*, an extremely widespread motif symbolising male defloration (Mikhailova 1998). Our present analysis by no means contradicts the former interpretation.

Patricia Lysaght provides a didactic explanation to the prohibition of appropriating the comb found in the field or in the forest:

The legend (of the comb) also teaches good behaviour in general and it warns against a number of actions and activities considered asocial and improper. People should not steal or interfere with the property of others. One should not accost another, least of all a defenceless woman. If it should transpire that the woman is a Banshee and is able to defend herself such aggressors will be properly punished (Lysaght 1996: 179).

The French ethnologist Evelin Sorlin presented another interesting interpretation in relation to the figure of Banshee in so far as the comb of this

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³ Significantly, in modern media advertising, the long, wavy and bright hair appears to be a sexually attracting feature of a woman, unlike her slim body and absence of wrinkles which would rather be attributed to such characteristic as her medical health. The nice complexion is more important to a woman herself, while her hair washed with a special shampoo usually attract the eyes of men.

creature represents a symbol of menstrual blood: "La valeur d'utilité du peigne de la Banshee est sous ce rapport des plus 'limpides'. Peigne menstruel, symbole de sa nature féminine, il sert à purifier son état cyclique venimeux" (Sorlin 1991: 500). This interpretation is quite attractive. It corresponds to the motif of taboo of menstrual blood which was quite widespread in archaic societies (Douglas 1966). Another interpretation provided by Sorlin proposes that the comb is a kind of musical instrument used by Banshee and assisted by the Irish wind: "En faisant courir le peigne de beauté dans ses longs cheveux, la Banshee va le tender à la manière de cordes lisses et raides (expérience connue de toute femme dont la chevelure s'emmêle au vent, et l'Irlande est un pays venteux!) pour le faire vibrer" (Sorlin 1991: 104). Such interpretation contradicts the fact that the comb of a supernatural being is also widespread in other countries.

In the folklore indices of the folk motifs, the long hair and the comb do not represent an independent motif. In Thompson's *Index of Folk Literature* (Thompson 1955–1958) one can only find:

G.219.4 - Witches' hair reaches to ground

F.555 – Remarkable hair (with no mention of mermaid's long green hair)

C.543 – Taboo touching comb

B.81.9.1. – Mermaid's hair touches her waist.⁴

This strange neglect to such a widespread motif is quite understandable, because the modern indices of motifs of the folk literature are mainly concerned with the tales and the story-telling:

In order to compare folk tales and understand their distribution, they are classified by an indexed system called *Types of Folk Tale.* Generally tales are made up of a number of specific elements in order to make them work as tellable tales. These elements are known as motifs. To be accepted as a motif the element needs to be an identifiable unit of the tale's makeup or character and... one can quickly access similar motifs, seen where they occur and how common they are... A mother as such is not a motif. A cruel mother becomes one because she is at least thought to be unusual... (Thompson 1955–1958).

Long hair and comb, therefore, are not motifs but only attributes of the female supernatural beings. Thus, as a first function, the Irish Banshee obtains the function to foretell the death of a person (motif M.301.6.1:

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⁴ One can add that according to Thompson, the mermaid is an animal!

"fairy as portent of misfortune")⁵ and, in the Irish tradition, her comb only represents an "interference legend" (Lysaght 1996: 154 ff.). But the lost comb of the Comb Legend-tradition within the Banshee-tradition represents "a specific element of a tellable tale", and, by extension, receives a status of a motif (C.543).⁶ The difference between a motif and a constant attribute lies in the difference between the genres of the folk narrative tradition: a folklore attribute is provided with some detail, then it is generalised, and becomes a constant feature, and, finally, can receive a status of a motif on its way from a memorate to a fabulate and, finally, to a fairy tale (Table 1):

Table 1:

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memorate \rightarrow	fabulate \rightarrow	fairy tale
detail \rightarrow	attribute \rightarrow	motif

The erosion of the borders existing between the narrative genres of the folklore tradition as well as the clear gradual (but not a discreet!) tendency of a folklore narrative towards presenting its story-line as authentic does not fully support our interpretation. In this case, the question to define a folkloric character as such arises: to what extent its function prevails over its constant attributes? And is there any connection and interdependency between them? If the character of Banshee always foretells death, and this very motif defines the plot of the Banshee type of story and distinguishes her from other female characters of the Irish folklore, "why would such figures as Vodyaniha, Chertovka, Leshachiha, Hitka etc. be classified as Rusalkas? It looks as if Zyelyenin took such features of Rusalka as the leading ones: 1. their female appearance; 2. they are bound with water; 3. the motif of combing hair is attached to them" (Vinogradova 2000: 17).

On the other hand, the marked groans and lamentations by means of which the Irish Banshee foretells death may also find few parallels in the multiple testimonies about the strange, usually loud sounds produced by characters similar to Rusalkas. First, we should recall their famous laughter; Rusalkas are, however, also famous for their poignant sounds, e.g. the Siberian Rusalka would "groan and moan sorrowfully and plaintively" (Zyelyenin 1995: 191, *cf.* also the "song" of Lorelai). Interestingly enough, Rusalkas, Mavkas, Leshachikhi etc. may also foretell (or bring?) death with a typical moan or "howl", although in Slavonic tradition this motif is not

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⁵ K. Briggs provides Banshee with another index – F.254.1 – "Fairies have physical disability" (Briggs 1976: 16).

⁶ As well as the motif F.233.5 – "Fairies have golden hair" (in Arthurian tradition, see Cross 1969: 245).

quite widespread. For example, let us recall the testimony of a story from the collection of traditional lore collected in the Perm region:

A man called Pantelej was in the army. One late night a Rusalka came to his house where his wife was. She began to cry and to lament and stopped only in the morning. And a month later Panteleikha (his wife) received a letter that her husband was killed during the manoeuvres (In Russian, "муж ейный на манервах жизни решился", Tihov 1993: 106).

One can compare the anonymous testimony from the popular beliefs of the Khakasy: "*Sug Eezi*-Woman, her hair long and fair. People see her combing it. If you hear her crying near the river, someone will die shortly" (Khakasy n.d.).

If we turn our discussion to the field of syntax, we could compare the first function of the folklore character (its motif) with the predicate and its secondary function (its attribute) – to the attribute. One can say (Example 1):

Example 1:

A beautiful girl studies French.

OR

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A girl who studies French is beautiful.

Or, to avoid the false identification:

Example 1a:

This girl studies French **and** she is beautiful. OR

This girl is beautiful and she studies French.

In the first sentence to study French is a predicate and to be beautiful is an attribute. On the contrary, in the second one to be beautiful is a predicate and to study French is an attribute. In common speech and in common life, of course, it does not signify that all beautiful girls study French and all persons who study French are beautiful. But in the binary mentality of folklore the first function of the personage (the predicate) is always connected to its attribute. That is, if in Irish tradition being a messenger of death represents a predicate and having long hair is an attribute, in Slavonic tradition (in which the characteristic of having long hair is a predicate) we must expect a specific attribute (Example 2):

Example 2:

Irish tradition *The female spirit foretells death and she is combing her hair. vs.* Slavonic tradition *The female spirit is combing her hair and she foretells death.*

Foretelling death can be a predicate and combing one's hair is an attribute in case of Banshee; on the contrary, combing one's hair is a predicate and foretelling death is an attribute in case of Rusalka.

5. Conclusion

But let us return to the Banshee's comb. The study by P. Lysaght contains some important data concerning the geographic distribution of the motif in Ireland. The motif of combing one's hair is absent in the southwest and the northwest of Ireland. This is explained by a simple reason: the motif of combing long hair in these areas was attached to another prominent supernatural figure – to the mermaid (Lysaght 1996: 159).

This is a very significant observation: it demonstrates a specific feature of folkloric mentality: to be systematic, formulaic and to contain its special syntax. That is, a character that embodies a predicate requires an attribute. The predicate of Banshee is to be a death messenger; the predicate of the mermaid is to have a fish tail:

Example 3:

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The east of Ireland: *The female spirit foretells death and she is combing her hair.* The west of Ireland: *The female spirit has a fish tail and she is combing her hair.*

It is almost certain that the Mermaid, an erotic figure connected with water, has more rights to obtain such characteristic as "combing her hair" as an attribute, and, according to our schema above, *it is not* in the west of Ireland that Banshee is deprived of her attribute, but rather in the east that this attribute becomes unrestricted. And, following Patricia Lysaght, we could enquire: what was the reason that Banshee was generally seen with a comb, if she did not require it at all? We suggest that she acquired it by mistake, in accordance with a specific systematic logic of the folkloric mentality: a constant attribute must find its actual possessor.

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Irska *banshee* i ruska *rusalka*: motiv češlja – njegovo značenje i postanak

Sažetak

Prva je i najvažnija funkcija lika koji se u irskom folkloru naziva Banshee da bude predznakom i glasnikom smrti. Kad se čuje plač ovog ženskog duha, predstoji smrt člana irske obitelji. Predaja o banshee svojstvena je gaelskom svijetu (Irska i Škotska). Sekundarne funkcije ovog lika bliske su ženskim likovima iz drugih narodnih predaja. Pod tim funkcijama podrazumijevamo motiv češljanja duge kose posebnim češljem, rasprostranjen u istočnim i središnjim područjima Irske. U sjevernim i zapadnim područjima ovaj se motiv veže uz drugi lik, uz sirenu. U slavenskim zemljama isti motiv češlja povezan je s folklornim likovima poznatima pod nazivom vila u Srbiji, mavka u Ukrajini, leshachikha, rusalka u Rusiji. Ova ženska stvorenja obično se opisuju kako češljaju svoju dugu kosu. Slavenska narodna predaja naglašava da je opasno podići češalj koji ona ispusti, slično kao i s irskom *banshee. Rusalka* će pronaći lopova i osvetit će se, kako već vila smrti običava. Pokušat ćemo pronaći tragove ovog univerzalnog motiva u različitim europskim narodnim vjerovanjima i objasniti njihovo podrijetlo.

Ključne riječi: Irska Banshee, ruska Rusalka, ženski duhovi u folkloru, motiv duge kose, legenda o češlju, glasnici smrti, sirene, sintaksa tradicionalnih bajki

Key words: Irish Banshee, Russian Rusalka, female spirits of folklore, long hair motif, comb legend, death messengers, Mermaids, the syntax of traditional fabulates

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