

On the Femininity of the Swamp. Reading the Monstrous Garden of Fertility, Fermentation, Decay

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Swamps are often portrayed as desolate and dangerous places: demonic, inaccessible, marshy, boggy terrains. They have been imagined as an orbis exterior, an untamed space symbolically associated with the boundary between the earthly and otherworldly orders, between life and death: in-between places, not quite land and not quite water. In this article, we explore the swamp from a transdisciplinary and more-than-human perspective. Traversing history, literary studies but also biochemistry and all studies of life, our aim is to practice a holistic approach that does justice to the complexity of swamp, and the many processes (like fertility, fermentation, decay) that give form to its being. Our main finding concerns the femininity ascribed to the swamp and to swamp life (its monstrosities) in the various stories being told. All too often these stories turned around ‘the unaccepted’, and showed how society projects its ideas of ‘unacceptedness’ on swamp life, on right and wrong behavior, and of course on how the female was subjected to patriarchy for so long. It is no coincidence that the unaccepted is time again translated and personified into some form of femininity. Why does the marsh garden so often speak through the body of the woman, her fertility, her sexuality, her feared powers? These gardens, swamps and marshes, were always to be found outside of the city, outside of the civilized land. These analyses show us how geometry is deeply political, sexual and in many ways, enacts and reproduces the ethics of patriarchy.

KEYWORDS: wetlands, swamp, terratology, monstrosities, feminism, more-than-human

*“Awake, O north wind, And come, wind of the south;
Make my garden breathe out fragrance, Let its spices be wafted abroad.
May my beloved come into his garden And eat its choice fruits!”*

*“Ἐξεγέρθητι, βορρᾶ, καὶ ἔρχου, νότε, διάπνευσον κηπὸν μου,
καὶ ῥευσάτωσαν ἀρώματά μου· καταβήτω ἀδελφιδὸς μου εἰς κηπὸν
αὐτοῦ καὶ φαγέτω καρπὸν ἀκροδρῶν αὐτοῦ!”*

Song of Songs 4.16

Introduction

Folklore tales often portray the swamp as a desolate and dangerous place, said to be the dwelling place of demonic forces. It is usually depicted as an inaccessible, marshy, boggy area¹. In traditional cultures, the swamp was seen as an *orbis exterior*, an untamed space, and was therefore symbolically associated with the boundary between the earthly and otherworldly orders, between life and death². Swamps are in-between places: not quite land; not quite water. This makes them difficult to define, and they have many names: fen, bog, delta, estuary, lagoon, peatland, marsh, mire, and swamp. There are differences in these lands in terms of their composition, flora/fauna, and water type (freshwater, saltwater, or brackish water). Wetlands generally encompass all of these, and each type contains what we typically associate with that wetland confluence of land and water – mud³.

Mud, by rights, is dirty, stinky, oozy, sticky. In films, like in *The Never-ending Story*, the Swamps of Sadness, consisted of mud that was deadly and dangerous. Characters got sucked into the silt-like mud and died or were tainted by its pungent musk forever. There are no beautiful blossoms associated with muddy swamps. We are scared of being swamped. The unsafe and weird associations that people have with swamps are only fortified by geoarchaeological and micromorphological studies that tell us that swamps can keep bodies and their contents in good condition for more than two thousand years. Take the man from Tollund, for example. His body was found in a wetland and was partially decomposed, but his face, and even the content of his stomach, remained perfectly preserved⁴. It is arranged in an embryonic position and it looks like the man fell peacefully asleep. His facial features, frozen in the 4th century BC, are astonishing not just because of the expression – gentle and calm – but also because of the expressive character. The eyes and mouth look as if the person had closed them a moment ago. The pronounced wrinkles, stubble, and short hair suggest he could have been 30–40 years old.

¹ S. Niebrzegowska, *Bagno*, [in:] SSiSL, t. 1, cz. 2, red. J. Bartmiński, Lublin 1999, p. 427.

² L. Stomma, *Antropologia kultury wsi polskiej XIX wieku oraz wybrane eseje*, Łódź 2002, p. 165.

³ M. Jones, *Bog Witch. A Semi-mystical Immersion into Wild Wetland Habitats: Their Myths, Magic and Meaning*, Ropley 2024, p. 7.

⁴ N.H. Nielsen, P. Henriksen, M. Mortensen, R. Enevold, M. Mortensen, C. Scavenius, J. Enghild, *The last meal of Tollund Man: new analyses of his gut content*, “Antiquity” 2021, 10.15184/aqy.2021.98 (accessed: 25.03.2025).

Can we conclude that there is something very unreal about swamps? It's not just the stories, the myths, and the uncanny discoveries. It is as if the Laws of Nature do not even apply there...

All too often, the finds hidden in the peat seem to suggest a sinking into the bog, a being dragged through the mud, which is undeniably terrifying. The powers of the bog are strong, and it is here that we are confronted with our weaknesses, our unprotected selves, and of course with the countless resonances between the human and the more-than-human elements. Mythological stories showing the relationship between the divine element and the earth also remind us of this. Take the goddess Care, for example. She crossed a river and picked up some mud, using it to fashion a human being. She then asked Jupiter to give the spirit of life to the human being, and Jupiter readily granted this. Finally, Jupiter said, 'Let it be called homo (Latin for human being), since it seems to be made from humus (Latin for earth)'⁵. Is the swamp reminding us of our very essence? Our very own muddiness?

It seems no coincidence that also the founders of Rome have much in common with Velabro, meaning marshy land. The area in Rome near Palatine Hill where the Tiber makes a sharp turn, is called Velabro. It often flooded, creating a swampy marsh. The Velabro is of great importance in the history of Rome: according to ancient legend, it was here that Romulus killed his brother Remus before founding the city, and it was here too that they drifted ashore before being taken and nursed by the she-wolf. In Egyptian mythology, the pieces of the god Osiris are thrown into the swamps of the Delta by the god Seth and are found there by the goddess Isis, who then gives birth to a son, the god Horus, in the swamps. The Slavic goddess Mokosh was also the Mother Moist Earth. There are no narratives about this deity that have survived, but etymological reconstruction shows that Mokosh was the goddess of earth, waters and fertility. She was later reflected in bylinas and zagovory as Mat Zemlya⁶.

This is no coincidence anymore. All these female goddesses, as they gave rise to the Middle of the Earth (the Mediterranean), do so where the water and land meet. They set their beginning in the Black Earth, as the Egyptians referred to it, the fertile earth, the earth from which life would arise. The swamp is unmistakably the face (or interface) of Gaia: it is extremely

⁵ J.N. Shklar, "Subversive Genealogies" 1972, *Daedalus* 101, no. 1, pp. 129–154; M.A. Grant, *The Myths of Hyginus*, Lawrence 1960.

⁶ M. Kropelj, *Supernatural Beings from Slovenian Myth and Folktales*, "Studia mythologica Slavica" 2012, Supplementa, Supplementum 6, Ljubljana: Založba ZRC; A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, Warszawa 2006.

prolific, caring and terrifying. The feminine element is clearly abundant in Mother Moist Earth, and it is clear that the fertility of the land in the wetlands is closely linked to decay.

The marsh garden and the feminine

The swamp is a space somehow ‘enclosed’ by its narratives and mythologies, but also by the biochemicals that mark it, these very particular conditions that make it different. Contrary to the land that surrounds it, the wetland is fertile and fragile, sweet and salty, hostile but also hospitable to so many new and unknown forms of life. The swamp in that sense is an intriguing type of garden. Etymologically, the term ‘garden’ always refers to a type of enclosed space, as with all related terms like yard, -gart (like in Stuttgart) and -grad (Slavic settlements). The swamp or marsh garden is unfortunately often seen as an unwanted enclosed space or a dangerous garden. For despite it being a garden of all of our major sources of energy (peat, coal, oil), and to so many medicines, vegetables, herbs, and other edibles that are now very dear to us (even essential), its reputation as being both dangerous and unexpected, has dominated its identity throughout the world for long. Perhaps the swamp can even be considered our most monstrous garden.

In literature (especially in love poetry) the enclosed, inaccessible garden was often considered a metaphor for purity, innocence, and virginity. In Christian iconography, depictions of Mary in a rose garden are very popular, and the marsh garden is considered its opposite, harboring impure forces and closer to Esmeralda’s body (as Victor Hugo would have it), for which the clergyman Frollo is willing to sin. Of course, things get very symbolic, for example;

Belle, there’s a demon inside her who came from hell
And he turned my eyes from god and oh, I fell
She put this heat inside me I’m ashamed to tell
Without my god inside I’m just a burning shell
The sin of eve she has in her I know so well
For want of her I know I’d give my soul to sell
Belle, this gypsy girl is there a soul beneath her skin
And does she bear the cross of all our human sin
Oh Notre Dame please let me go beyond gods law
Open the door of love inside, Esmeralda⁷.

⁷ *Notre Dame de Paris*, <https://www.allmusicals.com/n/notredamedeparis.htm> (accessed: 25.03.2025).

We cannot understand the swamp and the marsh garden, its role in culture and in our understanding, if we forget this long more-than-human tradition of storytelling (through myth, through magic, through fiction) that turned the marsh into a monstrous garden long ago. The excerpt above, coming from the musical *the Notre Dame of Paris*, it is no coincidence that the swamp is a garden but by all means also female. The swamp is the voiceless gypsy girl, whose darkness and earthliness is immediately connected to sin. In the French version of the musical, Frollo asks that Notre Dame open the door to Esmeralda's garden. (Ô Notre-Dame! / Laisse-moi rien qu'une fois / Pousser la porte du jardin d'Esmeralda).

Obviously, there's a demon hiding in Esmeralda's dark-skinned gypsy body. Mary is associated with brightness and purity in the enclosed rose garden, while the peat garden is unkempt, dark, moisty, and muddy. It is surely not the abode of good beings, nor can anything good happen there.

Female Monsters

While both the rose garden and the marsh garden are female, the difference between them is all too obvious. The marsh, the swamp, is the opposite of the rose garden, and the fact that Esmeralda is not even supposed to speak, reminds us immediately of the Freudian unconscious which was also not able to express itself through language, and which was by all means the seat of dark and evil desires, sexual and aggressive, that were supposed to be controlled by the enlightened and expressive forces of the self (the conscious, or, the ego and superego). In line with this, the monsters that so often seem to inhabit our swamps, are also often seen as feminine. They also have nothing in common with whatever happens in the rose garden. Think of the popular book "Witcher" by Andrzej Sapkowski, and of the computer game based on it, where Kikimore is an insectoid monster species that lives underground and in swamps. Even without considering creatures that are not humanoid, it is possible to perceive a certain quality in swamp dwellers that could be perceived as monstrous. A notable example of this can be found in the opening sentence of Delia Owens's novel *Where the Crawdads Sing*, which offers insight into the nature of the marsh situated near Barkley Cove in North Carolina. In the forest, there's a swamp full of mud where a marsh girl lives. She is an outcast, not accepted by society, and is accused of a crime⁸.

⁸ D. Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, London 2018.

Another example. The book 'Inherited Land' by Maria Turtshchaninoff clearly states that the Nevabacka settlement began with Matts' love affair with a beautiful but dangerous swamp creature.

Matts crossed himself. Clutched the steel in his pocket. The mist closed in, took on form – a soft, curving form. The figure was coming straight for him. It was a woman, with long hair as golden as those little flowers that had just surrendered to his shovel. It cascaded down her back, unbound and tangled. Her arms and legs were long and slender like sedge grass. She smiled at him and her eyes were mossgreen. Though Matts had seen, and had, many beautiful women on his travels, none could compare to her. She said nothing and simply stood before him in all her nakedness and loveliness. Then she laid her hands on his shoulders, and he inhaled her rich, dark scent. She pushed Matts down onto the boggy ground, untied his trousers and straddled him. He had never experienced anything like it, not even with the strumpets of Prague.

Once they had both finished, she disappeared again across the marsh without a word. Matts was spent and weak, and he struggled to trudge back home to the croft. More digging was out of the question⁹.

Do we need to analyze this any further? It is obvious that the women from the swamp embody evil, sexual desire, and aggression. The contrast with the male protagonist (rooted in the civil world) couldn't be bigger.

A final example that not only shows how feminities inhabit the swamps in our stories but also shows how important this transformation is, and how important especially this unforeseen transformation turns out to be. We are referring here to the three witches in *Macbeth* and especially to their cauldron.

Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire burn and caldron bubble.
Fillet of a fenny snake,
In the caldron boil and bake;
Eye of newt and toe of frog,
Wool of bat and tongue of dog,
Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,
Lizard's leg and howlet's wing,
For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble¹⁰.

⁹ M. Turtshchaninoff, *Tangled Roots*, London 2025, p. 239 [online version].

¹⁰ W. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act IV, Scene I [Round about the cauldron go], <https://poets.org/poem/macbeth-act-iv-scene-i-round-about-cauldron-go> (accessed: 23.03.2025).

A cauldron is a perfect receptacle for transformation; it is both a vessel and a vehicle for change – in it, ingredients transmogrify from plain and practical, unprocessed and prosaic to creations with properties beyond those held by any one constituent part alone. Macbeth's three witches cite so many wetland plants and animals in their famous chant. They are inextricably linked. The witches' feats are awe-inspiring, they create broths with unknown properties, and the ingredients they use are terrifying in themselves. They have a secret knowledge that allows them to create a broth that will affect the fate of others. Their influence seems limitless.

Narrating and Situating Swamps

Life in the swamp can certainly be seen as a life surrounded by monstrosities, stories of which have been told over centuries to bind together the swamp and the lives within it. They speak of the swamp and its inhabitants through narratives created by successive generations, showing how the landscape has shaped human life and thought. These stories were of great importance at the time; they were told to sustain life on the swamp. But we cannot just take one example or set up a new terratology (the academic field that once focused on the study of monsters) taking into account *only* the stories. We need to take into account swamp life as a whole, the material and indeed biochemical patterns that are so entangled with what philosophers and academics have to say about the marsh garden. We may not start from the scientific perspective, which can be quite atomist, not equipped, and unwilling to take into account the relational perspective that we so very much appreciate.

We propose to present a teratology that traverses the whole of the ecosystem, with the greatest attention to oddities. Not ending – but instead – beginning with the myths and narratives that traverse the swamps, we aim to set up a transdisciplinary analysis of what swamp life is about.

The swamps are filled with narratives that cover all aspects of life and therefore perfectly perform a teratology that reaches out to the various narratives on swamps that are at work in (post-) Darwinian biologies. This teratology could also offer a home to the affirmative readings of decay and emergence that define the swamp. Especially the old myths and fables, fantasies, legends, and tales, that have been with us for many generations, do not seem to limit their scope to either the human perspective nor to how individual plants, animals, or other identified participants of the ecosystem can be situated in swamp life. Instead, what these histories of storytelling show us, is a rich more-than-human series of meditations that always al-

ready open up to the possible and the impossible, the one and the multiple, the interrupted and the continuous way of reading and opening up to what we refer to as 'swamp life'. Why wouldn't these ancient stories be open to contemporary teratologies, to the most uncommon historical events, and to all the possible relationalities that the swamp can realize?

Swamp life in the Slavic wetlands encompasses various phases and modes of existence, which are often recounted in stories, myths, poetry, and art interested in the phenomenon of marsh life as a whole. Olga Tokarczuk, in her short story "Green Children" from the volume "Bizarre Stories"¹¹, explicitly portrays the territories of Poland and Ukraine as being outside the center of the world, which at that time, in the 17th century, was Paris. The narrator of the story, William Davisson, is an eccentric who goes beyond the center, who travels to Poland, a land of swamps, foreign customs, and violence. He remembers the case of Descartes, who died because of the coldness of the northern land. In Tokarczuk's story, the periphery, the swampy and dangerous environment, is closely linked to Slavic customs and local culture. Davisson, of Scottish origin, serving as King John Casimir's physician and botanist, finds himself in a peripheral, wild land, traveling east to study the phenomenon of *plica polonica*.

The story itself takes place from March to September, and the landscape of the swampy and foggy land changes several times, but the swamp, which is overwhelming at the beginning and dries up in the summer, plays an important role in Tokarczuk's text, teaching us how the swampy and dangerous landscape associated with wildness is linked to peripheral Slavic culture. The fear-inducing world of the wetlands was inhabited by various creatures in the popular consciousness, which made it possible to control a swampy and dangerous environment full of strange phenomena.

In the story by Tokarczuk one day, instead of animals, the servants catch strange children in the forest:

They were two, small and thin, badly dressed, or worse than badly dressed, in a roughly woven cloth, torn and smeared with mud¹².

The children bit and kicked, 'acted like animals', and had green skin. The girl healed the king's toe with her touch. The botanist examined the children, they were even baptized, but unexpectedly the boy died afterwards. That day the marshes around the court rattled with strange sounds, like a funeral orchestra composed of animal voices. The local community wanted to give a Christian burial to the boy, but during the night the boy's body

¹¹ O. Tokarczuk, *Opowiadania bizardne*, Kraków 2019.

¹² *Ibidem*.

disappeared. After some time his sister began to speak, and it turned out that she knew human language. The children were a mystery to the Scottish scientist. His leg refused to heal, so a whisperer was asked for assistance. The woman, from the border between the rational and irrational worlds, told them that in the forest beyond the marshes there was a land where people lived in trees and slept in hollows. On moonlit days, they climb to the tops of the trees and expose their naked bodies to the moon, which turns their skin green. With the energy of light, they don't need to eat much: forest berries, mushrooms and nuts are enough. They don't cultivate the land for food. They work for pleasure and have no rulers. They make decisions together and raise their children together, they spend the winters collectively in a cave, dreaming together, they make friends with the animals who tell them their stories, which makes them even more connected to the natural world. They see themselves as fruit. They say that humans are the fruit that the animals eat. That's why they tie the dead to branches and wait for the forest animals to eat them.

One day, the children and young people of the manor disappeared along with the narrator's servant, Ryczwolski. Eventually, the scholar decided to return to his world – to the center, to try to understand the story that was happening at the periphery of the world. In a way, the story of the green children was explained, but the scholar still did not fully understand it. The mystery of the swampy land remained unsolved but these were female monsters: the green girl and whisperer that tried to show the new world to Davisson.

The figure of the scientist in Tokarczuk's story is also a metaphor for man's discovery of his entanglement with nature, the inseparability of natural and cultural realities, the human and the more-than-human perspective. Davisson is interested in the monstrosity of swamps and finds pleasure in studying and observing this world. He describes the variability of swamp life as a whole, and recognizes its connection to the human world. He begins by observing nature and immediately starts analyzing how the world of people living on the periphery depends on this wetland life. This is also our aim – to look at the monstrosities of the wetlands through narratives that have been created to better understand swamp life.

The Unaccepted

The female monsters discussed are without exception regarded the outcast; figures that are not welcomed by society because they don't fit the patriarchy, the economics of alliance and filiation. Slavic culture teaches

us that areas at the interface between water and land are inhabited by topielica who drag unwary fishermen, anglers and tourists to the bottom. The topielica was described as a demon, the partner of an utopiec, the soul of a young girl who drowned in despair or was drowned. They appeared in the form of young girls with long, light hair. They cried for help or sang, attracting young men who became their victims. Equally beautiful were other swamp-dwelling monsters – morianas – or Pomeranian mermaids. They are born from the souls of maidens who failed to fall in love or died shortly before the wedding. It can happen that a moriana becomes a girl who meets a procession of mermaids at night. She then becomes part of the group and cannot return home. They are also depicted as beautiful naked girls with golden hair and dark eyes. Sometimes they appear in transparent white dresses with garlands on their heads or flowers in their hair. They are usually seen at night¹³.

Reading the local legends, we learn that they are not always a destructive force. The character Wdzydzana from the legend “Prince Sorka’s Daughter”¹⁴, for example, asked a witch to turn her into a moriana because she wanted so much to stay in the land where she grew up. Her father, the prince, suffering from the death of his mother, wanted to return to his homeland because everything around him reminded him of his dead wife. Wdzydzana, on the other hand, was entangled with the land, with the place where she grew up, preferring to turn into a Moriana, forever connected to the water, even though a stolem in love with her, wishing to capture his beloved Moriana, turned the place into a somewhat marshy area with several islands crossing Wdzydzana’s beloved lake.

Prince Sorka’s daughter was not accepted by her father as the future ruler of the watery land, as the prince considered her too weak a woman for the role. She did not leave her land, preferring to give up her life as a human to connect her existence with the world she grew up in and all its inhabitants. She also did not succumb to stolem’s love attacks, and accepted the new face of her land after the monster invasion: the lake branches, islands, and swampy corners of her land did not deter her from staying in this world forever. There she remained connected to the more than human world, outside the human world and social hierarchy, on her own terms. Wdzydzana wanted to remain on her land in harmony with it and its inhabitants.

But water and marsh maidens do not always have this attitude toward the world. Moriana of Water Lily Bay, as a being who does not belong to the

¹³ A. Koprowska-Głowacka, *Panny wodne. O jeziornicach, morianach i wodnicach z Pomorza*, Gdynia 2021.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

earthly order, tempted fishermen with her singing. Her job was to seduce the fishermen while they were fishing, and she considered herself the ruler of the lake. When she met Vyshomir on her way, and he did not yield to her even behaving arrogantly towards her (having previously plugged his ears to avoid being seduced by the beauty of the moriana's voice), the goddess fell in love with him. After listening to the words of the song, the sound of which carried over the lake, moriana, led by her desire, followed Vyshomir to his hut. The fisherman was afraid of the goddess at first, but she promised not to harm Vyshomir or anyone from the human world. The lovers declared their love for each other and remained together until Vyshomir's death. During this time, moriana belonged to the human world, occasionally swimming in the lake at night and spending time in the wetlands. However, the lovers lived in solitude, humans did not trust the goddess. After Vyshomir died and was buried according to the rules of the human world, moriana returned to the wetlands, leaving the human world to live the life of a moriana again, remembering her beloved and the love that changed her heart forever.

Not all water nymphs are bright-eyed beauties who merge their worlds with the human world in various ways, co-creating the land as a whole. The morianas, known since the 18th century as the rusalkas, sometimes have other plans for the men they seduce. They dance in the moonlight, invite a young man to bathe with them, or lure them into the watery depths, with their beautiful voices. Almost no mortal returns alive from an encounter. Rusalkas also sometimes poses riddles and lets those who answer correctly go. Meanwhile, the topielice (also known as Watergirls), demons that inhabit rivers, lakes, ponds, and swamps, are born from the souls of young girls who have drowned or been drowned. Like morianas, they are beautiful girls with pale faces, sparkling eyes, and long, light hair that sometimes turns green. They can be seen naked or wearing white tunics. They often perch in trees above the water, in wetlands. They also lure men with songs or cries for help and carry them off into the depths. Wilys are also born from the souls of carefree girls who haven't had time to enjoy life, and resemble mermaids and topielice, although they sometimes have wings, are excellent archers, and can transform into swans. They live in the water in winter and on the banks in summer. On moonlit summer nights they dance in circles in the meadows. A person approaching such a circle is drawn into it. He usually dies of exhaustion or is tickled to death. Sometimes the violets befriend people and help them, but who betide the one who betrays the demon. They can drive someone mad or kill them, and they can also bring floods or droughts. Sacrifices were offered to them: fruits, vegetables, cakes, ribbons.

The story of Otomin and Odmina, son of the earth and daughter of the water, from the legend "The Infamous Knight and the Moriana Odmina"

teaches us that breaking a promise between lovers leads to tragedy. Otomin was a knight who was given a castle by a lake by the Duke of Gdansk. The knight felt lonely there until he met a golden-haired moriana named Odmina. Every day, the lovers looked forward to the moment when they could meet on the island, in the marshlands, and spend time together. When the prince summoned the knight to Gdansk, Odmina, fearing that he would not be able to bear the separation, gave her beloved a crown of lilies and forbade him to tell anyone about their love. Unfortunately, the knight did not keep his promise. Seduced by the beauty of the Duke's of Gdansk daughter, he uttered the name of moriana. Then the sky was covered with clouds, heavy rain fell and a storm began. Otomin rode as fast as he could to the marshes, to the lake, knelt down and begged Odmina for mercy. But he never saw her again. The legend says that he wandered there for days. Finally, he died on one of his later war expeditions. This story shows us how easy it is to lose the favor of a goddess.

Sometimes goddesses help young people realize their dream of being together. Vita and Sulimir from the legend "Helpful Goddesses of the Crystal Palace" fell in love in the forest, in the wetlands, by the river. Dedicated to living in the rhythm of nature, they longed to live together. However, the lovers' origins proved to be an obstacle. He – the son of a knight and she – the daughter of a miller did not get permission from Sulimir's father to marry. The goddesses tried to persuade the stubborn parents, but their efforts were in vain. Finally, the water maidens invited the lovers to the Crystal Palace and transformed them into water creatures.

However, the whimsical nature of wily is nothing compared to the monstrosity of the boginkas that inhabit swamps, lakes, rivers, forests, and mountains. First of all, they can be seen washing clothes with wooden tadpoles. If a goddess notices a man approaching, she usually kills or kidnaps him, according to folk stories. Young mothers were of particular interest, as goddesses were created from women who died in childbirth, suicides, and infanticides. They were imagined as scarlet women with sagging breasts, large heads, and crooked legs, or as beautiful young girls, usually naked¹⁵, making them similar to rusalkas and morianas. The goddesses' actions were far more destructive, however, as they attacked women after childbirth and exchanged children for them. One legend says that the goddess comes to visit at noon when the mother is carrying food to the field for the elderly members of the household, or at midnight when everyone is asleep. According to another version of this legend, the goddesses appear in pairs, accompanied by a man in a horned hat. They enter the house, where the

¹⁵ K. Moszyński, *Kultura duchowa Słowian*, Kraków 1929–1939.

goddess hits the mother in the face, after which she takes away the healthy (unbaptized) child and leaves the skinny, screaming child¹⁶.

A dropped-off child became a changeling. This was indicated by peculiarities in the child's appearance, such as a large head, bulging eyes, mental issues, and peculiar behavior, such as crying, speech problems, coordination of movements, etc.

The goddesses also kidnapped women to be the mothers of their children¹⁷ and "exchanged" or tormented them, the effects of which we now identify with postpartum depression or the so-called baby blues. Women in this state became unnaturally withdrawn or demanding, annoying those around them. This was explained by the earlier abduction of the young mother by the goddesses to swamps or wet meadows: there the monsters wallowed in the mud, twisted her arms and legs, and beat her back with tadpoles¹⁸.

All of the goddesses mentioned were born from the souls of women whose lives did not end under natural circumstances. Each time it was a life that did not fit into the patriarchal structure. By crossing boundaries, and breaking the rules of the community (even if only by committing suicide, not marrying, or killing a child), these souls condemned themselves to a life on the margins. The swamplands became their home, and they sought to dissolve elements of the world to which they could not fully belong. At the same time, they became part of the land, in which fermentation processes are constantly taking place, striving for its decomposition. The goddesses are beautiful and monstrous at the same time, enjoying and striving for decay. The monsters created by the process of decay, as a result of clinging to the land, became part of the wetlands on a new basis, but by their actions, they are attracted to decay.

Conclusion: We MUST change our lives fundamentally

What is it that we fear so much when it comes to swamps? And why is this fear translated and personified into some form of femininity? The marsh garden speaks through the body of the woman, her fertility, her sexuality, her unknown powers. Of course, these gardens, swamps and marshes, were always to be found outside of the city, outside of the civilized land. Perhaps the fear for it, was nothing but a call for these lands to be cultivated, to be subjected to the laws of those in charge. It is no co-

¹⁶ M. Zieleniewski, *O przesądach lekarskich ludu naszego...*, Kraków 1845, s. 28–30.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ S. Ulanowska, *Wśród ludu krakowskiego*, „Wisła: miesięcznik geograficzno-etnograficzny” 1887, t. 1, s. 71–72.

incidence that our right wing, populist, and fascist leaders, all men, were always the most outspoken in their desires to “drain the swamp!”. This is what patriarchy in the end aims to do. The most prominent example of this is probably Benito Mussolini’s efforts to drain the big swamp to the south of Rome, which had been ‘haunting’ the city for 2000 years. The heart of the Pontinian swamp was turned into the city called Littoria, after *fascio littorio* the bundle wood (to maintain order) from which the term fascism derives. Later the name of the city was changed into Latina, which is still its current name. It is one of the youngest and poorest cities of Italy. Inhabited by refugees and workers in the seasonal industry. Not connected to the train network or the freeway, its continuing decay, can perhaps be regarded an intriguing forerunner of how patriarchy and the humanist urge to organize the world according to his needs, does not in fact constitute the political and ethical “higher ground”. No doubt we live in times in which the ecological crises at least show us that we must change our lives fundamentally, and that questioning these very basic assumptions of our culture, could very well be key to such a change.

We need to keep in mind, however, that we metaphorically drain the swamp *whenever* we want to get rid of something unwanted and remain in the swamp when we do not feel stable in the world. Today, we certainly feel this way more often in the face of a looming environmental crisis, experiencing changing realities and hybridised beings in the age of the rise of artificial intelligence. We, raised by patriarchy, tend to think of bogs as monstrosities, as places on the edge of life and death, a vital and dangerous blend of water and land that often scares us. Why? Any biologist today, however, will agree that marshes, bogs, mangroves, and meadows should be regarded as fragile and creative ecosystems that are the breeding ground of many of the plants, animals and other forms of life, that are of essential importance to us today. Especially in times like ours, we must explore and appreciate these rare and badly known parts of our globe, that we have not yet tamed and subjected to our order. It is time to realize that wetlands, literally and figuratively, are the very places that provide us with the oxygen we need to live.

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