

English 1102 Artifact 3 Script

Swan Maidens



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Narrator: Welcome back to another episode of *Your Favorite Cryptozoologist*. Today, I have a very special episode about swan maidens. Over the past decade, I have had the pleasure of meeting several of these extraordinary women, two of whom have agreed to join us today.

Narrator: For those unfamiliar, the typical swan maiden tale follows a shapeshifting female, often part bird, who comes down to earth to bathe. She takes off her bird cloak and, in doing so, transforms into a woman. However, a man lurking nearby steals her cloak, preventing her escape and forcing her to marry him. Often, the swan maidens are not just any supernatural creature, but are goddesses. I'd like to welcome our first guest onto the show, Urvashi. Urvashi, it is such an honor having you on the show. I know you are the first to hold the title of "swan maiden" and from my understanding, you're also Hindu goddess of sorts?

Urvashi: [laughs] Yes, well I'm more of a celestial nymph. As for being a "maiden", I wasn't a maiden at the time of my story, but I think there are definitely a lot of parallels. I left my husband after he broke a promise. After many years of searching, he found me in the form of a swan. I still refused to go back with him. He then gained a higher position where I could no longer reject him. I believe Karnick and Desai recorded this in their book, *The Vikramorvastyam of Kalidasa*, around page 27. But anyway, I am eternally forced to be his wife.

Narrator: I am so sorry. I really appreciate you sharing your experience.

Narrator: Now it's time for our next guest, Aine, a goddess of Irish origin. I first heard about Aine from David Fitzgerald's *Popular Tales of Ireland* around page 186 and knew I had to reach out to her. Welcome, Aine!

Aine: Hello everyone!

Narrator: Aine, I was hoping you could share a bit of your story with us.

Aine: Yes, so in classic swan maiden fashion, I often take the form of a swan and have a cloak that allows me to transform. One day, I was bathing when the Earl of Desmond seized my cloak and forced himself on me. Thankfully, because I am a goddess I did not have to marry him like another maiden might have. However, even that could not save me from rape.

Narrator: I am sorry you had to endure that and I am really grateful to you for sharing your story with us.

Narrator: Now there is one more person I wanted to talk about. He is the former husband of an Irish Selkie, a seal shapeshifter species whose lives often follow a very similar pattern to swan maidens. Her tale also differs from the typical swan maiden by marrying voluntarily. However, since she is supernatural and he is not, she had to leave him, causing him immense grief. Unfortunately, he could not be here tonight, but, if you have time, take a look at this [clip](#) linked in the transcript from his movie directed by Tomm Moore called *Song of the Sea*. While the movie is centered around his children, the husband is so depressed after his wife's disappearance that he is unable to care for his children and has to send them to his mother's house.

Narrator: Now, let's talk a bit more about what it means to be a swan maiden. Aine, I believe you have the most typical swan maiden experience of anyone here. There is one very stereotypical part that Fitzgerald describes on page 187 as "she told the Earl that he never could hâve had his will with her had he not seized her cloak". Did you say that?

Aine: I did. He trapped me and, as someone with birdlike tendencies, being trapped is worse than death. I would never willingly go with him.

Narrator: Exactly, there's a reason humans use birds as symbols of freedom. And, by stealing your ability to be a bird, he stole your freedom. Serinity Young put it on page 73 of *Women Who Fly*, when birds are on land, "their mobility is limited and they are vulnerable - a feature that easily fed into tales about captured swan maidens". It is against the very nature of swan maidens to be trapped on land in these "marriages". And not only is your bird side afraid of entrapment, but your human side as well. Your situation made me think of a quote I read on page 195 of Yi-Fu Tuan's *Landscapes of Fear* where he said, "The fear was of an undifferentiated rottenness both physical and moral. It was felt that the violence and degradation of the prisons and asylums generated a poisonous air that could be smelled hundreds of yards away". Humans have also developed a fear of imprisonment.

Aine: That makes sense.

Narrator: The pain of this entrapment is felt not only by swan maidens but also the men that they are bound to. A common end to the swan maiden tale is the disappearance of the maiden. The men either become severely depressed (like in *Song of the Sea*) or, as described by Barbara Fass Leavy on page 56 of *In Search of the Swan Maiden*, the “abandoned man will usually perceive himself as his wife’s victim rather than a contributor to her unhappiness”. The men in most swan maiden tales do not care about their wives’ feelings (he forced her to marry him after all), he only thinks of himself when she leaves. Despite being the one sexually assaulted and abused, the swan maiden is blamed, fueling negative female stereotypes. Someone who knows quite a bit about this is Urvashi.

Urvashi: Yes, I am not proud of it, but when I rejected my husband, I said to him, “[Husband], do not die; do not vanish; do not let the vicious wolves eat you. There are no friendships with women; they have the hearts of jackals”(Karnick, 27).

Narrator: Why did you say that?

Urvashi: I was telling him what he wanted to hear. He was hurt that I left and did not respect my decision. Part of me still loved him, I think. Instead of him only blaming me, I wanted to shift the blame to all women instead. I regret it now. Although, I was surprised by how easily he accepted my excuse.

Narrator: Scapegoating larger groups, particularly women, is very common throughout history. It is often why women have so many negative stereotypes. It reminds me of this one book I read called, *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 14: Folklife* by William R. Ferris. There is a section on womanless weddings. In the south, people would stage plays featuring weddings that reversed typical gender stereotypes. During these plays, the “woman” character is often vilified and “is older, ugly, stupid, and desperate to marry, often because she is pregnant or has already had a child”(Ferris, 381). The bride actor is also much larger than the groom, further reinforcing stereotypes (Ferris, 380). Even what are supposed to be fun events reinforce negative stereotypes about women.

Narrator: In conclusion, as Vladimir Propp put on page 38 of *Theory and History of Folklore*, “Independently of the intentions of its creators and performers, folklore reflects real life. The forms and content of this reflection differ according to the period and the genre. They are subject to the poetics of folklore”(Propp, 38). Swan maiden tales are no different. They are symbols for rape. Particularly, rape of women that results in marriage to said rapist. This horror has been prevalent throughout history. Even today, it is institutionalized in some countries. Sara Tor outlines this issue in her opinion piece, “Opinion: Turkey’s ‘Marry Your Rapist’ Law Has Taken Women’s Rights Right Back to the 1950s” on a country (Turkey) where the law states that punishment for rape can be avoided if the perpetrator marries their victim. The article calls out Turkey for their lack of progress in women’s rights, especially when compared to other, more conservative countries (Tor, 1). Additionally, Tor emphasizes the president’s reasoning for the

bill: to encourage population growth (Tor, 1). No matter what reasoning a community uses to justify it, the misogynistic marry-your-rapist social trend has negatively impacted the lives of millions of women. Even those that don't experience it directly are affected because it reinforces negative stereotypes about women, encouraging misogyny. Like A. T. Hatto says in "The Swan Maiden a Folk-Tale of North Eurasian Origin?", "So [many swan maiden tales] tell the woman's side of the story - whether sympathetically from within or scathingly from without (at the expense of the 'foreign woman') - that one suspects its first tellers may have been women" (Hatto, 333). In other words, swan maiden tales spread as a cry for help from women experiencing rape and forced marriage and as a way to combat the negativity towards the real women experiencing this all-too-common scenario.

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“Image of a scared young woman holding a swan skin cloak wrapped in chains”, *Adobe Firefly*, Adobe, 22 Sep. 2023, <https://firefly.adobe.com/generate/images>.