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LUDWIK ADAM JUCEWICZ

Queen of the Baltic Sea

TRANSLATION AND INTRODUCTION BY DAVID PREECE

This charming Lithuanian folk tale is a work of fiction published in 1842 by the Polish-Lithuanian writer Ludwik Adam Jucewicz (1813-1846) in his Polish book *Wspomnienia Żmudzi*¹ (Memories of Samogitia). Jucewicz wrote and translated extensively in both languages, notably Polish poetry and ethnographic materials from the North-Western Samogitia region of Lithuania.

The tale is largely perceived as being legendary in origin, though it does not seem to appear in Lithuanian mythology. It is likely literary in origin and a significant early example of mythopoesis or invention of new pagan myths. Although it is based on

the scant contemporary knowledge about Baltic paganism from ancient times, the story is wholly by Jucewicz. Therefore, it can be considered a forerunner of Lord Dunsany's and J. R. R. Tolkien's mythographic subcreations. In fact, its narrative adopts the usual writing form of mythography.

Despite its apparent recent origins, the story soon became widely known. In Poland, Lucjan Siemieński (1809-1877) included it with the similar title "Królowa Bałtyku" (Queen of the Baltic) in his book *Podania i legendy polskie, ruskie i litewskie* (Polish, Russian and Lithuanian Tales and Legends, 1845) without crediting it to Jucewicz. It appears in

¹ Its translation into English below follows its text in this first edition: Ludwik Adam Jucewicz, "Królowa morza Bałtyckiego", *Wspomnienia Żmudzi*, Wilno, T. Glücksberg, 1842, pp. 103-109. We have only kept its first footnote by Jucewicz, since the other ones are related to mere points of language.

Siemieński's volume as if it were a true piece of folk literature from Lithuania. Since then, it has been received as such in Lithuania by further writers and poets in their national language. Among them, Maironis (Jonas Mačiulis, 1862-1932) versified this invented pagan legend in his ballad "Jūratė ir Kastytis" (*Jurate and Kastytis*, 1920), which soon became a classic. This version also helped it to become one of the best-known and beloved Lithuanian legends until today. A monument to the goddess Jūratė stands in the seaside resort of Palanga.

A few other artistic works and representations have added to the tale's popularity, including woodcut illustrations, a ballet and even a rock opera. There is also a seaside resort on the Polish Baltic coast, established in 1928, named Jurata after the legend. However, Jucewicz's creative rule has remained broadly ignored, at least out of Lithuania. The following translation aims to help dispel this unawareness, as well as making more generally known this Lithuanian-Polish contribution to the development of modern high fantasy.

QUEEN OF THE BALTIC SEA

A folk tale

(Dedicated to the memory of Helena of Frejends, Countess von Keyserling).

In the depths of the blue waters of the Baltic, in the old days, when Lithuania and Samogitia meant paganism and bear flags, over the glittering waters there rose the delicious palace of Jurata, queen of the sea. The walls of this palace were of pure white amber, the thresholds of gold, the roof of fish scales, and the windows of first-water diamond. On one occasion, the queen sent out all her pike fish with letters for the finest nymphs of the sea, inviting them to an audience and a ceremony. The appointed day came, and the goddesses arrived: then the queen, surrounded by a courtly retinue, appeared in the hall, welcomed the guests with a courteous bow, and took her seat on her amber throne. And to the assembled she spoke thus: "My dear friends and comrades! As you know very well my father Praamžimas, all-powerful lord of heaven, earth and sea, has entrusted these waters and all their inhabitants to my care and power, and all the inhabitants in them; you yourselves have been witnesses to my gentle and happy reign. Not even the smallest

worm, nor the tiniest fish, has cause to complain or grumble, everyone lives in peace and harmony; no one dares harm the life of another. But then one wicked fisherman, Castitis, from the edge of my domain, where the river Święta pays its tribute to my kingdom; one wicked mortal dared to violate the peace of all, to take my innocent subjects in his nets and condemn them to death, while I, myself, for my own table, dare not catch a single fish; even the flounder, which I like so much, I eat one half at a time, and throw the other back into the sea.¹ Such boldness cannot be left unpunished: here the boats are ready for us, let us sail, companions, to the banks of the Święta, because it is at this time that fishermen tend to cast their nets. With our dances and charms, we will lure him to the cold sea, we will take our revenge, we will strangle him in our embrace, and his beautiful eyes, with which today he enchants the maidens of all Samogitia, I will sprinkle with wet gravel." Thus, she spoke and immediately a hundred amber boats, decorated with pearls, rose up, and to the sound of enchanting songs, with a whole retinue of nymphs the queen sailed off to accomplish her cruel deed.

¹ The people of Lithuania and the Samogitians say that flounders have one eye and the form of half a fish because Queen Jurata, being very fond of them, has bitten off the other half and let them back into the sea

A clear day, the sun shone brightly, the sea was quiet and seemed glazed over as if it were a single vast pane of glass. Its surface was untouched by the slightest breeze, only some boats glided by quickly, leaving behind ripples like wrinkles on the face of a once beautiful woman, on whose face time, the greatest enemy of beauty and charm of gracefulness, had carved its traces. The land is already near, the song of the goddesses' echoes through the coastal woods, and each sound repeated a hundred times thunders ominously: *woe to thee, young fisherman!* And then close to the mouth of the river, the supernatural maidens saw their enemy sitting on the shore and unrolling his nets. The fisherman was young and handsome, with barely a soft moss growing on his delicate cheeks. His brow was arresting, high and fair, his long black hair shaded his face. With peace still in his soul and in his heart, with a song on his lips, dreaming only of a rich catch, he carried out his work. Then he heard some enchanting sounds, lifted his eyes, and made out a hundred shining boats, a hundred maidens of exquisite beauty; and at their head, in her crown with amber sceptre in hand, the queen of the sea. And hark, a pleasant sound rings out... and behold he is already surrounded by gorgeous sea nymphs, who with their songs, their charms, begin to entice him:

*O handsome young fisherman,
Give up your work, come aboard:
With us is everlasting dance, copulation,
Our song will sweeten your cares.
We'll grant thee divine status,
If thou shalt dwell with us:
Among us thou shalt be lord of the sea,
And our lover too thou shalt be.*

The fisherman heard this, looked around in amazement, and could not believe his eyes.

He did not know what to do; at last, taken in by the treacherous temptation, he arose and wanted to throw himself into the arms of the goddesses; when the queen signalled with her sceptre to her companions to remain quiet, then said to the astonished fisherman: "Stop, young man, great is thy crime, worthy of severe punishment; yet I will forgive thee on one condition. Thy youth and thy charms have taken hold of me: if thou dost promise to love me, thou shalt find happiness in my embrace. But if thou disdain the love of Queen Jurata, I will sing you a song, you will come to me, then with one touch of my sceptre you will perish for ever—make your choice!" The young man knelt down, bowed his head, and swore eternal love. "Now you are mine; stay, do not come near us; for one step could lead into the fatal abyss. Each evening, I will come to thee: behold on this hill, which henceforth shall be called by thy name Castitis, I will find thee." With that she raised her sceptre, the oars rustled, and silently the maidens sailed away, without laughing or singing.

A year thus passed, when every evening, the queen of the Baltic sea came to the shore, and on the hill she met her lover; but Perkun, on learning of these secret trysts, was greatly angered that the goddess dared to love a mortal man, and once when the queen returned to her palace, he let down a thunderbolt which split the sea, and shattered the amber palace into pieces. And the fisherman was chained by Praamžimas to a rock at the bottom of the sea, and before him the corpse of his lover, over which he is forced to mourn eternally, and to mourn his misfortune. That is why now, when the wind stirs up the waves, a groan is heard from afar—it is the groan of the poor fisherman; and when the water throws up pieces of amber—these are fragments of the palace of the Queen of the Baltic Sea!