Remarks

Pupa's foot warmer is a modern equivalent of Baba Yaga's mortar. This connection becomes even more obvious when the girl Wawa claims Pupa's boot and uses it as a mother's womb in which she falls asleep and dreams her dreams.

Kukla, the vagina dentata, longs for a penis so that she can start up her 'flying machine' and become an independent flier. But in order to come by the requisite part, its owner has to die. Perhaps this is why Kukla's men all die, or are invalids: in other words, Kukla does not need a complete man, she only needs a bit of him - the 'peestle'. A current, a faint and gentle breeze, can be felt enveloping Kukla, who would in ancient times have been the mistress of the four winds.

CANNIBALISM

Baba Yaga is dogged by evil rumours that she 'ate people like chickens'. Her hut or hovel, surrounded by heaps of human bones, plainly signals to the passing traveller that he has stumbled upon a cannibal's lair.

Baba Yaga's cannibalism, from a folkloristic point of view, is linked to a ritual with a frightful name: 'baking the child properly' (perepekanie rebenka). This ritual was performed on children suffering from rickets (the folk name for which, in Russia and Ukraine, was 'dog's old age': sobachya starost').

The actual witchcraft consists of 'burning' the sickness. This ritual was accompanied with chanting a spell: 'Just as we bake the bread, so, dog's old age, you'll bake too!' (Kak bieb pechetija, tak i sobachja starost pekis!) During the ritual, led by the village witch-doctor, they would pretend to push the sick child into the bread oven. In other words, the bread was symbolically identified with the child, and the oven with the mother's womb. Returning the child to the oven, meaning the womb, signified rebirth. The ailing, rickety child was not 'fully baked' in its mother's womb, so it has to be 'baked properly' in the oven. At the same time, the oven symbolises life after death, the provisional descent into it, and provisional death.

In most fairytales, Baba Yaga appears as an old woman living by herself. Sometimes she turns up as a mother with a single daughter, and sometimes as a mother with forty-one daughters. From a psychoanalytic point of view, of course, the most interesting thing is the motif of devouring her own daughter. Baba Yaga (like the Greek Thyestes, who is tricked by his brother Atreus into eating his own sons) gobbles up her own daughter by mistake, or even accidentally kills all her forty-one daughters.²⁰

The South Slavs hold that a witch can only injure her own family and friends. 'We cannot do any harm to those who are hateful to us, but those who are dear to us, or our own kin, they have no escape,' says the Baba in The Mountain Wreath. There is even a South Slavic saying: 'Where else will

²⁰ In Ukraine, for example, a witch-doctor would bring water from three wells early in the morning, mix the dough, bake bread in the oven, take it out and then pretend to push the sick child into the oven instead. Meanwhile the child's mother had to go around the room three times, stopping each time in front of the window to shout: 'Old woman, what are you doing?' The witch-doctor would call back: 'I'm kneading the dough.'

²¹ 'Chuvilhia ran to the hut, ate and drank her fill, then she went outside. She rolled on the ground, and said: 'I'm rolling around because I ate Teryoshka's flesh.' High in an oak tree, Teryoshka shouted down: 'Roll, witch, it is your own daughter's flesh that you ate.' (From Vasilisa the Beautiful)
a witch go but to her own kin?’ In a Serbian folksong, a shepherd describes his dream like this:

Witches devoured me:
my mother plucked out my heart,
while my aunt held a torch to light her work.

The people on some Croatian islands believe that ‘witches like best to pluck out the hearts of their own kin, a bit less to pluck out their friends’ hearts, and if a witch is not satisfied with her husband, she plucks out his heart as soon as she can.’ In Herzegovina and Montenegro, they believe that witches only eat children that are ‘dear and kindred to them, even if they are not their own(!). The common folk suppose that a woman cannot become a witch until she eats her own child. In Konavle, they think a witch ‘has no strength at all until she kills her own child’. And the Montenegrins think that ‘a woman who wants to be a witch must eat up her own child first, only then can she eat other children too.’ (T. R. Đorđević)

Slavs think that what witches like best is drinking the blood of children and others with sweet blood. A witch ‘sups the blood with a little spoon and very soon the child withers and dies’. It is believed that witches sometimes kill older people too: ‘they drink a young boy’s or girl’s heart dry, and whosoever they drink up, is no more: they fade away and die in the flower of their youth.’

Blood is very rarely found on Baba Yaga’s menu. There is a rare motif in a Siberian fairytale, of Baba Yaga drinking blood from the breast of Princess Marfita. The principal hero cuts off Baba Yaga’s head, but the head uses Marfita’s legs to run away.

* * *

It can happen that human fingers are found floating in Baba Yaga’s soup, but her basic diet is ordinary enough. What is not ordinary is Baba Yaga’s phenomenal appetite. 21

The scale of Baba Yaga’s cannibalism is modest by comparison with ordinary witches, or with the Maenads, the Bacchae, who in their trance rend the flesh of living creatures with their bare teeth, and once (according to Euripides) led by Agave, mother of Pentheus, tore Pentheus himself to pieces.

Remarks

Allow me to draw your attention to the camouflaged details in your author’s fiction which could be linked with Baba Yaga. In the first part, the author’s mother barely allows her daughter to have access to her space. The mother identifies herself with her house, or more precisely she is the house, and she experiences her daughter’s presence, like the things that she brings into the house, as a territorial violation. Although it is trivial at first glance, the incident with the little cupboard has a symbolic value: the cupboard becomes acceptable to the mother precisely when it has been painted, when it has undergone this transformation, when it is symbolically ‘chewed up’ and ‘devoured’. Although these relationships are only hinted at, Pupa and Beba have traumatic relations with their own children, something which can easily be explained as symbolic cannibalism. In one place, Beba admits that she is her own son’s ‘killer’.

21 ‘Vasilisa lights the kindling in the skulls along the fence-posts, goes to the stove and takes out the food and sets it before Baba Yaga, and there is enough for ten. She fetches kvass, honey, beer and wine from the cellar. The old woman eats it all up, drinks everything to the last drop, and leaves Vasilisa only a little broth, a breadcrust and a morsel of pork.’ (From Vasilisa the Beautiful)