The Washerwomen of the Night: 
Women's Revenge in Breton Folklore

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Fanta Lezoualc'h of Saint Trémour worked by the day in surrounding farms. She could only get her own work done at night. One night, she said, "It's Saturday and tomorrow is Sunday. I must wash the shirts of my husband and children. They'll have time to dry since it is nice tonight, and we'll be ready by high mass."

It was a clear, moonlit night. Fanta took her packet of linens and went to the riverbank. There, she soaped, rinsed, and beat her laundry. The sounds echoed far and wide. She was so busy and so hard at work that she did not hear another woman arrive. The newcomer was a skinny woman, slender like a doe, who carried a huge bundle of laundry on her head.

"Fanta Lezoualc'h," the woman said, "you have the whole day for yourself. You shouldn't take my place at night."

Fanta, who thought herself alone, was startled and did not answer at first. Finally, she said, "I did not mean to take the place of another. I'll get out of your way if you like."

"No," said the woman, "I'm only teasing you. I don't mean any harm. Quite the contrary. To prove it, I'll help you if you like."

Fanta, reassured, replied, "By my faith, I can't refuse help. But I don't want to abuse your generosity since I see your bundle is far larger than my own."

"Oh, me? I'm in no hurry." She dropped her bundle and

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the two women worked together.

"You have a hard life, don't you, Fanta?" asked the woman.

"You could say that. Right now, especially. From the Angelus to sundown, I've been out in the fields. It will be like that the rest of August. It's almost 10 p.m. and I still haven't eaten."

"Oh, Fanta," said the stranger, "go home and eat in peace. By the time you're done with the third mouthful, I'll have delivered your laundry perfectly bleached."

"You truly are a good soul," said Fanta. She ran straight home.

As she entered her house, her husband remarked, "Already? You must have worked very quickly."

"Yes," Fanta said, and she told him the whole story. Her husband listened, stretched out on his bed, smoking his pipe. He became worried.

"Oh no!" exclaimed Fanta's husband when she had finished. "That's whom you are calling a good friend? God preserve you. Did you think about who she was?"

"I was afraid at first but was quickly reassured."

"You unfortunate woman. You accepted help from a Maouès-noz!"

Fanta cried out: "I had no idea. What do I do? She's coming to deliver my laundry!"

"Finish your supper," responded her husband, "then arrange all your utensils on the hearth. Take special care to hang the tripod from its hook. Then, sweep the house so it looks nice and clean and then lean the broom in the corner upside down. Wash your feet, toss the water on the doorstep and go to bed. Then, be ready."

Fanta hastened to obey. She followed every point of his instructions. Then, she got into bed without even undressing. Just at that moment, the washerwoman of the night knocked
on the door.

"Fanta Lezoualc'h! Open up! It's me. I'm delivering your laundry."

Fanta and her husband remained still in the bed.

A second, then a third time, the woman demanded that they open the door. Silence filled the house. Then, they heard a great wind, the anger of the Maouès-noz.

"Since a Christian used me, tripod," said a furious voice, "come let me in."

"I can't," said the tripod, "I'm hanging from my hook!"

"Let me in, broom."

"I can't. I'm upside-down!"

"Then you, foot water."

"Alas, look at me. I'm scattered on the doorstep."

The fierce wind gradually subsided and Fanta Lezoualc'h heard the voice grumble: "That piece of work. She must have found someone smarter than herself to teach her this lesson."

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This is just one version of a Breton legend known as the washerwomen of the night (lavandières de la nuit). It comes from Plougastel-Daoulas, near Brest in the department of Finistère, and it was recorded in 1890. There are several variations on the washerwomen of the night from across Brittany, and most tales are not nearly as elaborate as this one. However, all are based on these central figures, the ghostly women who spend eternity doing their laundry and terrorizing unfortunate souls in the middle of the night.

This legend, like all legends, has an ageless quality and it is tempting to project it backwards into the mists of time. I want to be cautious, however. My own specialty is women's

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1 Anatole Le Braz, La Légende de la mort chez les Bretons Armoricans (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1902), 259-63.
work in the eighteenth century, and the notion of the laundrywomen of the night speaks to me in a way that goes well beyond the charms of "old-timey" ghost stories. Yet I know that the tales were recorded in the nineteenth century and were often recorded by educated outsiders with an academic interest in folklore. Most of the tales are identified as "quite old" or "traditional" and may very well date to the eighteenth century or earlier. We simply have no way of knowing when or where the tales originated.²

It is clear that the legend holds great meaning for Bretons in particular, even today. A Google search for the term will lead you to numerous sites on Breton culture and heritage. Yan' Dargent painted the massive painting "Lavandières de la nuit" in 1861 and it hangs in the Musée des beaux arts in Quimper. More up-to-date versions of the image are prevalent in comics and storybooks. Just last year, a paperback thriller based on the legend by Stéphanie Bayle was published; the plot revolves around a young woman finding out that her grandmother's stories "were not just stories."³ While there may be modern and historical versions of the laundrywomen outside of Brittany, Bretons claim the legend as their own.

Who are the washerwomen of the night? Some of the ghosts are merely harbingers of death, who appear and announce that they are preparing the shroud of someone who will soon be dead. Another sort of ghostly laundress is the innocent soul who suffers because she has been neglected by

her descendents. These women are busy washing their own shrouds because their families did not have the decency to bury them properly. Their appearance serves to shame their guilty families. However, shame might be preferable to other possible punishments.

In another elaborate version of the tale, a party-animal by the name of Wilhelm Postik spent All Souls' Day drinking in the company of "sailors without religion and women without honor." Wilhelm should have been mourning, praying for the souls of his dearly departed, and laying flowers at their graves. As he made his way home after midnight, he passed by the wash-trough and saw women working at their laundry. They asked him to help wring out the heavy, sodden sheets they were washing and he happily obliged. He even tried flirting with the pale women. Unfortunately, as soon as he took hold of the wet sheets, the women started twisting and his hands became caught in the sheets. The women kept twisting, and suddenly he recognized the ghosts of his recently departed wife and his long-dead sisters, aunts, and mother. It was too late to beg forgiveness. They told him he’d had the chance to get them out of purgatory by following the customs of All Souls' Day, but he was too selfish. They kept twisting until his arms were crushed, then they dragged and held his tangled body under the water.

In most versions the washerwomen are not innocent, however. They are themselves sinners who are damned for eternity to haunt waterways and washhouses. Their sins cover a broad range and vary by locality. The most pitiful and harmless laundrywomen are those who did their washing on the Sabbath; their punishment is to keep washing for eternity. They pay little heed to the living, sometimes merely saying, "Go about your business. I'm doing as I was commanded to

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According to storytellers in Basse Bretagne, they are women who committed the sin of stinginess. They skimped on soap or treated clothing roughly when it belonged to a poor person, thus damaging the goods of someone who had little to spare. In central or eastern Brittany, the washerwomen are said to be the tortured souls of women who murdered their own children. These are the most horrifying and the most dangerous of the ghosts; they cannot be saved and they aim to kill any unfortunate being who dares to approach them.

Like all scary ghosts, the washerwomen are generally not very picky about their victims. They will kill anyone. However, a knowledgeable Christian should be able to avoid their grasp. One might make them disappear simply by keeping cool and making the sign of the cross. Anyone carrying a newborn child who has not yet been baptized is probably safe because even the damned are loath to keep young innocents from their salvation. In addition to these spiritual safeguards, there is much practical advice. One should never offer or accept help. If one does agree to help wring out the wet laundry, one should be careful to "stay on the same side of the sheets as the laundrywoman." Though I am not sure how this could be accomplished, it is supposed to make it impossible for the women to catch their victims' hands and kill them.

Of course, the best advice for the wary is to stay home and not wander the streets at "un-Godly" hours. Most of the people who encounter the laundrywomen of the night are out too late or are themselves up to no good. In these cases, the laundrywomen might deliver a scare but pose no real danger. In Brenilis, also in Finistère, a woman named Jeannic in the 1880s reported that she had gone after sundown on Saturday to do some last minute washing. She was frightened by the sudden appearance of a giant, skinny, and pale woman with
fangs dripping with blood. Terrified, Jeannic ran home but was not pursued. As she was assured later, the laundrywomen of the night have no power over mothers with young children.\textsuperscript{5}

The overall lessons offered by the washerwomen are pretty clear. One avoids becoming their victim in the same way one avoids joining their ranks. One must honor God, respect the Sabbath, be kind to the poor, be dutiful to one’s family and ancestors, have kids, keep a clean house, and be home at a reasonable hour. Of course, one must also refuse to help when asked, but we cannot expect perfect consistency from the evil damned. These values represent reasonable expectations in the kind of close-knit and God-fearing communities found throughout Brittany in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At the same time, they point to the real difficulties of women's lives in that same era. As Fanta Lezoualc'h's ghostly companion asked her, "You have a hard life, don't you?"

Life was hard in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For all but the elite, the workday started at sunrise and ended long after sundown. Few were entirely self-sufficient; like Fanta, they worked for others all day long and had only the night and the Sabbath to work for themselves. This was as true in rural villages, where peasants did their own laundry or worked in teams, as it was in the big towns and cities where professional laundresses worked for pay. No matter how tired a woman might be, however, she had to be ever vigilant in order to resist temptation. When Fanta's laundrywoman asks if she has a hard life, it is an expression of sympathy and at the same time it opens the door to mortal danger. The laundrywoman uses Fanta's exhaustion to trick her. The ghostly washerwoman serves as a warning to young women:

\textsuperscript{5} Paul-Yves Sébillot, \textit{Le Folklore de la Bretagne} (Paris: Payot, 1950), 46.
you will be exhausted but do not break social norms, do not work on the Sabbath, and do not go out alone at night!

Hard work is just the beginning. In truly desperate times, when no amount of work would put food on the table, parents might consider abandonment of their children. An illegitimate pregnancy brought great risk to both mother and child. Faced with outcast status in her community, a lone woman might be tempted to kill or abandon a child. Even authorities recognized that risk, judging from the declaration of pregnancy (déclarations de grossesse), which had been collected from unmarried pregnant women since the early eighteenth century. These declarations were recorded in an effort to prevent abandonment or infanticide of unwanted babies and to identify both parents in order to secure financial support. But death was a constant companion to all in the lean years, and even loving mothers worried about providing for and bringing up their children. For these women, the laundresses represented two things: the terrors of damnation brought to life as well as the comforting notion that they were protected from supernatural harm as long as they were good mothers.

For all working-class women in Brittany, then, the washerwomen were both a warning and a lament. Women could identify with the sadness of the condemned souls even as they determined never to fall into the same traps. But one may still ask, why laundrywomen as opposed to some other kind of ghostly apparition? Why not a spinner, a milkmaid, or a crêpe-maker? Since the lessons for women seem to concern the risks and hardships of everyday life, why is the laundry so central?

I believe the ghosts are laundrywomen because the location of their haunts is of such central importance to both womanly virtue and to a kind of misogynist fear. Whether it was at a fountain, riverbank, or washhouse, the laundry was
one of the few places at which respectable women could gather without question. Thus, it became the locus of common women's social lives. At the same time, the laundry became infused with the suspicion and disapproval with which some men viewed any gathering of women. The laundry is simultaneously the center of women's social lives and of women's suspected anti-social behavior. It is no surprise, then, that in folklore the site becomes the place where a woman is both judged and punished.

In the countryside, riverbanks and simple washhouses were where women gathered. A solitary woman might do an occasional pile of shirts, but she washed her real laundry only two or three times a year and always in the company of others. Most detailed descriptions date from the early twentieth century. Pierre-Jakez Hélia offers one such description in *The Horse of Pride*, his childhood memoir of growing up in a Breton village just after the First World War. There were three stages to laundry, significantly called Purgatory, when the laundry was soaked, Hell, when the laundry was beaten and rinsed, and Heaven, when the laundry was laid out on the sunny fields to dry. It was such a grueling process that women helped each other on big laundry days knowing that they would receive the same help when their turn arrived.

Hélia describes the variety of ways in which the laundry was central to women's lives. It was a place where all women showed up eventually and where women kept tabs on one another. His own mother went into labor while at the washhouse and quickly went home. In spite of her childbirth, she would not rest until someone fetched her unfinished

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laundry lest others think she was a bad housekeeper.7 In a much more serious example, Hélias notes that when the hard life drove peasants to the desperate act of suicide, men tended to hang themselves in a solitary barn or workshop while women drowned themselves at the well or wash trough.8 The laundry was a place where judgments were made.

In the cities, most women did their laundry at a fountain or at a washhouse built specifically for that purpose. Many washhouses date back to the seventeenth century, when the appearance of a clean, white shirt first became de rigueur. Others were designed in the nineteenth century as public works aimed at raising the hygiene standards of the poor. The design and structure remained fairly constant throughout that span of time, however, and in all cases the washhouse was a feminine space.9

Thus, the laundry was also central to men's perceptions of women's lives. Hélias writes that the women held their "county council" at the laundry, helping each other decide when a child needed a spanking or a husband was not pulling his weight. "Never would a man dare to show his face there for fear of hearing some home truths about himself."10 That is a twentieth-century remark. A Breton saying recorded in the eighteenth century, however, reveals a similar attitude: "One goes to the tavern for news and the laundry for gossip."11 Where women gather, they will talk. And, since gossip is both frivolous and dangerous, there is fear of women who talk. Some men in authority feared the talk of

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7 Ibid., 32.
8 Ibid., 18.
10 Hélias, 166-67.
laundresses so much, so the theory goes, that they attached the washhouse to the town hall in order to keep an eye on women there.12

Women might complain about their families or seek advice when in the company of other women at the laundry. That is why some men saw laundry-talk as dangerous to their authority over their wives and daughters. Similarly, women at the laundry shared secrets, willingly or not, since they were quite literally airing "dirty laundry" in front of one another. Thus, women at the laundry might gain an intimate knowledge of others in the community. This may be one reason why laundresses were constantly undermined by stereotypes that portrayed them as whores and witches. However, the washerwomen's harsh reputation may have been deserved. Naturally, urban laundresses were generally not well off, and they were said to be fairly rough characters. Some may very well have supplemented their incomes through prostitution. Others earned the attention of the police in the eighteenth century by brawling or hurling insults at strangers who entered their turf. One legend from Vigneux claims that the reason there is a headless statue of Saint Martin at the washhouse is because the language used by laundresses there was so crude his head simply flew off one day.13

Laundresses in reality, as in the legend, were both the judges and the judged. The laundry was where women sympathized and commiserated as well as where they vented and schemed. It was where they proved their worth or committed their sins. Thus, storytellers and their listeners might see the washerwoman of the night as a useful and universal representation of all women: tragic and vulnerable,  

12 Roddier, 25.  
proud and dangerous, and eternally doing the laundry. It is tempting, then, to see the legend as the empowering revenge fantasy of the most downtrodden and vulnerable members of society; the laundresses seek an unholy satisfaction in randomly lashing out at whoever is unlucky enough to wander into their reach. But most women do not give up, break the rules, or kill their children. And so the tale is also an affirmation of the values of those hardworking and pious Breton women of old. If the young Bretons of today continue to embrace the tale, and the laundrywomen remain immortal in spite of the advent of the washing machine, then perhaps the ghostly ladies of the night can finally get some rest.