



The Husband Killer

Ancient, pre-Christian Estonian ‘Runo-songs’ (Regilaulud) depict many activities and rituals of rural peoples: work, harvest, love, games, play, cooking, funerals, the natural world. A particularly famous epic Runo-song is *The Song of Meeli*, which forms the basis of *The Husband Killer* (Mehetapja)

The archetype of *Husband Killer* can be found in the poetry and song of Northern Europe. As is the case with all folk-song, the details may change from region to region and over time, but the essential storyline remains the same. In Estonia, the animistic tradition is a central concept to the story. Conversations are possible with seemingly inanimate objects.

A young woman is sent by her family, against her will, to be wed. The ceremony occurs, and during the wedding night she apparently kills her husband. The next morning, she emerges with blood on her hands, and is confronted by the townsfolk. She flees into the forest and begs the natural world for shelter. The rocks, trees and bogs shun her, and eventually she disappears into a small lake. We are not certain if she is dead or has become part of the natural world, or both.

Fables always have a moral, and they are often used to warn the reader of the consequences of bad behavior. So, the story of Meeli can be read as a cautionary tale told to new brides: know your place, and accept the decisions made on your behalf. However, interpreted through a contemporary lens, the fable may be interpreted in the opposite way: Meeli is sold against her will, takes her future into her hands by her violent act, searches for understanding from various witnesses who are unwilling to help her, and finally when she believes that she has found shelter, drowns in the lake.

In certain versions of the fable, there is a clear reason for the murder: the young woman has defended herself against a violent husband, or she is defending the honour of her family. However, in the Estonian Runo-song ‘The Song of Meeli’, the motive for the crime is more vague. So, the moral grounds for her ‘crime’ are left up to us to decide.



The Husband Killer

Music Drama in one act

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Characters

Meeli...	soprano
Jaan...	bass/baritone
Meeli's Mother...	mezzo soprano
Jaan's Father...	bass
Two of Meeli's relatives...	female voices
Pastor...	tenor
Townfolk...	various
The Knife...	female voice
The Well at Kuremäe...	male voice
Tülivere Sacred Oak Tree...	male voice
Jöelähtme Ancient Stone-Cists (ghosts)...	five female voices
Lake Pöhajärve...	female voice

Prologue: A mother had many daughters...

Meeli, Meeli's Mother, two female relatives

Meeli's mother is seated stage right. She begins singing in the manner of a herding call/lullaby, lamenting her soon to be departed daughter, who is leaving to be wed.

Lights come up centre stage: Meeli and two female relatives appear standing. One relative stand on either side of Meeli. The relatives do not move, but gesture toward her and sing about a mother who had too many daughters.

Scene I: The Wedding

Jaan, Meeli, Wedding Guests, Jaan's Father, Pastor

Scene opens with Meeli and Jaan facing squarely facing the audience, Meeli stage centre right, Jaan stage centre left. They are outdoors, in a garden setting. Wedding guests are busy adorning both of them with traditional garments and flowers. During this scene, both Meeli and Jaan's clothes become fantastically rich with flowers of all types. Ritualistic singing and dancing are occurring in small groups, synchronized with the adorning of the bride and bridegroom. This results in a rich layering of part-singing (wedding songs, swing songs, cooking songs, sauna songs)

The pastor and Jaan's father step downstage, the wedding guests step upstage. The pastor delivers a verbal proclamation that Jaan's father agrees to, and Jaan and Meeli are now married, and are each adorned with bridal wreaths of wildflowers. There is dancing, singing and rejoicing amongst the wedding guests. Jaan and Meeli are still entirely fixed in place like statues. Light and music fade, with only spotlights on Jaan and Meeli.

Scene II: The Wedding Night

Jaan, Meeli, The Knife

As the light come up, Meeli and Jaan are in exactly the same position on stage as they were at the end of Scene I, but now each in a small chamber with a door behind them. They each slowly remove their floral adorned wedding garments while simultaneously singing separate songs: Jaan a Harvest Song, and Meeli a song about her home. Once they have disrobed into their sleeping garments, Jaan passes through a door behind him into a bedroom (hidden from the audience, upstage). Meeli does not pass through her door into the bedroom, but just sits quietly. The Knife appears, and The Knife and Meeli sing a tappmiselaul (Murder Ballad). Meeli and The Knife then pass through her door into the (hidden) bedroom.

Scene III: The Next Morning

Meeli, Jaan's Father, Townsfolk

Meeli emerges from the bridal chamber with blood on her hands and garments. She has some bridal flowers still adorning her sleeping garments, and she still wears her bridal wreath of flowers. She is confronted by Jaan's father in an extended duet, and townsfolk begin to gather. Jaan is discovered dead in the bridal chamber. Townsfolk begin to appear and confront Meeli. She runs into Maardu forest (stage left). Jaan's father kneels, distraught. Some of the townsfolk follow Meeli (stage left).

Scene IV: The Well at Kuremäe

Meeli, The Well, Jaan's Father, Townsfolk

Lights come up on The Well at Kuremäe (centre stage), singing a keetmiselaul (cooking song). Meeli arrives at The Well (from stage right), exhausted from running. Her garments are noticeably soiled and

worn from running through the forest. She asks the Well for shelter and comfort. The Well tells Meeli that the townsfolk gather water for cooking, washing and sauna from The Well: they will discover her and blame The Well. She hears the approaching group of townsfolk, and runs further into the forest (offstage, stage left). The townsfolk appear (stage right), run straight past The Well, following Meeli (offstage, stage left).

Scene V: Tülivere Sacred Oak Tree

Meeli, The Tree, Jaan's Father, Townsfolk

Lights come up on The Tülivere sacred oak tree (centre stage), singing a kiikilaul (Swing Song). Meeli runs on stage (stage right), exhausted. There are fewer flower adornments on her clothes, and her robe is more damaged. She asks the tree to hide her inside the trunk. The Tree refuses: the townsfolk have always offered sacrifice to the Tree to ensure a good crop, fertility and health, and the children play on The Tree. The townsfolk will cut it down and use it for firewood if they discover that it has hidden Meeli. She hears the townsfolk approaching and runs further into the forest (offstage, stage left). The townsfolk, now including Jaan's father (but fewer of them in total) run past the tree (from stage right) and continue to chase Meeli (offstage, stage left).

Scene VI: Jöelähtme Ancient Stone-Cists

Meeli, Five Ghosts of Relatives, Jaan's Father, Townsfolk

Lights come up on Meeli as she arrives (stage right) at the ancient Jöelähtme stone-cists graveyard at Muuski. Five large circles of stone are arranged on the stage: ancient graves of ancestors. Everything is quiet. There are very few flower adornments left on Meeli's clothes, and her robe is in tatters. She calls to the graves, asking for the ghosts to bury her in the ground to hide her. As she sings, she digs with her hands to try to make a hiding spot. Five apparitions appear, ghosts of ancestors. The apparitions sing of their own suffering, and how nobody helped them when they were alive. They tell Meeli that she must suffer as well. Meeli leaves (stage left), but not hurriedly. Several townsfolk as well as Jaan's father walk/run on stage (stage right), and are startled by the apparitions. All of the townsfolk turn back (stage right), but Jaan continues after Meeli, cautiously making his way past/through the apparitions (continuing offstage, stage left).

Scene VII: Lake Pöhajärve

Meeli, Meeli's Mother, Jaan's Father

Meeli arrives at Lake Pöhajärve (stage right), entirely exhausted. She is naked, except for her bridal wreath, and covered in earth and leaves. She stops centre downstage and sings to the Lake, asking it to hide her in the waves. The Lake agrees, and slowly Meeli walks into the waves (upstage), taking off her bridal wreath and leaving it behind. She sings to her mother, asking why she hasn't saved her.

Jaan's father arrives (stage right), walking wearily, alternately sobbing and singing. Lights come up stage on Meeli's mother (stage left), on her knees, alternately sobbing and singing. Jaan's father finds Meeli's bridal wreath and throws it into the Lake. He then leaves to go back to the village (stage right). Lights fade, with the exception of a single light on Meeli's mother who continues to sing. Fade out.