PRACTICAL TEXTS IN DIFFICULT SITUATIONS: BULGARIAN MEDIEVAL CHARMS AS APOCRYPHA AND FACHLITERATUR

Svetlana Tsonkova

The objects of this article are medieval Bulgarian charms, written in Old Church Slavonic language and preserved in manuscripts. The article is focused on two issues. Firstly, it deals with the charms as specialized texts, as a specific kind of *Fachliteratur*, with important practical function in coping daily life challenges and problems. The main purpose of these charms was to meet and solve the crucial quotidian issues, like health problems, provision of good luck and protection against evil forces. Secondly, the article refers to the position of the charms among the canonical Orthodox Christian texts. This position is examined in the context of practicality and of the historical changes in the society. This is also a question of the relations between the content of the charms and the content of the other texts from the same manuscript. In this respect the medieval Bulgarian charms are an interesting phenomenon, as they intermingle among canonical Orthodox Christian books, as service books and books of needs.

Key words: apocrypha, apotropaic magic, daily life, medieval Bulgarian charms, medieval *Fachliteratur*, oral and written transmission of charms, practical magic

1. INTRODUCTION

The apocrypha are one of the most important phenomena of the Middle Ages. They provide a different perspective and a valuable insight to the mentality of the period. The Late Medieval Bulgarian apocrypha are not an exception. According to the prominent Bulgarian scholar Donka Petkanova, they give a picture of "an extraordinary world, where extraordinary events take place with the participation of extraordinary characters" (Динеков 1985: 86). On the other hand, the content of the apocrypha in many respects refer to ordinary down-toearth quotidian human issues. The Late Medieval Bulgarian charms represent an excellent example in this respect too. In the present paper, these charms are examined in terms of their relation with other texts and of their position in the manuscripts. I shall focus on two issues. Firstly, my paper deals with the charms as specialized texts. Secondly, I shall refer to the position of the charms among the canonical Orthodox Christian texts. I am especially interested in the relations between the content of the charms and the content of the other texts from the same manuscript. This is related with the question of the charms. This is also a question of historical context and practicality.

2. THE SOURCE MATERIAL

The source materials for this article are group of Late Medieval Bulgarian charms written in Old Church Slavonic language. These are short texts, quite many in number,¹ with a rather heterogeneous content and form. They have extra-liturgical purpose and usually refer to a specific ritual and use of magical objects. The charms are preserved in manuscripts, dated between fourteenth and seventeenth century. The majority of these manuscripts are Orthodox Christian religious books: priest's service books (*cлyжeбнuqu*) and books of occasional prayers (*mpe6huqu*). The charms however can be also often found in miscellanies (*cборнuqu*) and healing books (*лековници*).

Concerning the terminology, some scholars call these texts *apocryphal* prayers or false prayers (Петканова 1999: 40; Алмазов 1901: 221–340; Яцимирский 1913: 1–102, 16–126), while other researchers propose a differentiation between canonical prayer, quasi-canonical prayer, apocryphal prayer, charm with functions of a prayer and magical charm.² In my opinion, two issues must be kept in mind here. Firstly, there is no distinction between the texts in the manuscripts themselves. Usually the charms are preserved between other, completely canonical texts, without any notes or comments concerning the canonical or non-canonical character of the charms. Therefore, the later artificial division and classification of the texts is a rather problematic issue.

Secondly, finding a clear and non misleading Bulgarian and English terminology for designating the medieval Bulgarian charms is very much needed. These texts belong to a mixed genre. They have very specific features in terms of their intermediate position between religious prayer and magical charm, between sacred and prohibited, between popular religion and literature. The term "apocryphal" (as used in both Bulgarian and English) is rather problematic when applied to charms. On the other hand, the terms "prayer" and "prayertype" can be used within certain limits and accompanied with additional definitions, like for example "non-canonical" and "amuletic".

Therefore, the discussion on the terminology of these texts is definitely a rather urgent scholarly task in general. As much as it requires an extensive detailed research and thus belongs to the future, it is out of the scope of this paper. These texts belong to the category of charms, as it was convincingly established by Ferdinand Ohrt (Ohrt 1936: 49–58). Therefore, I will further in the paper use the term "charm" together with the more general "text".³

The origin of the charms is quite ancient and difficult to identify. According to the Bulgarian scholar Maria Schnitter, they are the product of a combination of folkloric magical texts and Christian texts (Шнитер 2001: 49). Thus, their development followed a long ancient tradition with deep roots in the pagan magical practices. On the other side, scholars like Donka Petkanova emphasize Byzantine influences (Петканова 1999: 40)⁴. According to them the Bulgarian magical texts, discussed here, have very close parallels in Byzantine non canonical prayers of the same content and function (Maguire 1995: 1–8 and 155–178). Other scholars suggest the South Slavic texts evolved as the result of complex influence of numerous Classical Greek and Roman, Byzantine, Jewish and Islamic elements (Ryan 1999: 9–30)⁵.

3. MAGICAL AND PRACTICAL IN THE NETWORK OF *FACHLITERATUR*

In terms of content, the Late Medieval Bulgarian charms are focused exclusively on practical matters of daily life, namely health, provision of good luck and protection against evil powers. These texts belong to a clearly-defined branch of verbal magic, namely the practical, positive and apotropaic one. Additionally, this is an area dominated by powerful supernatural benevolent or malevolent agents and their activities. These superior powers, however, are closely connected to the ordinary quotidian human experience. They influence heavily the daily life. Saints, demons, angels, perpetrator of illnesses, etc, cause and solve quotidian problems. It is a quotidian event to interact with these powers, to communicate with or against them. This continuous communication process involves texts, but also ordinary daily live objects or purposely created amulets.

In terms of interrelation and interaction, the practical aspect of magic provides a special example. It is a complex network, where the communication with the supernatural and the solution of daily life issues are interwoven. It is a multisided phenomenon, a full-blown action, with one important characteristic: the magical aspect of the texts is in fact a rather practical aspect. These two aspects are neither separated, nor opposed to each other. On the contrary, they work together and they are depending on each other. Within the frame of this complex quotidian magical network, verbal charms, daily life objects and magical amulets function together as tools in the magical practice. They are all part of the daily life experience.

The Bulgarian charms are texts and as such they belong to a specific branch of literature. Along with the magical content, the charms provide important concrete instructions and directions. Thus they give practical guidance how to cope with supernatural interference and impact on human daily life. Therefore these texts can be included among the specialized "technical" literature. But how they stand among this specialized literature? First of all, it is needed to present the main features of this literature. I designate it with the German term *Fachliteratur*, as it is well-defined, understandable and widely accepted.⁶

The *Fachliteratur* is a non-fiction literature, which records, preserves and transmits information about experience of various kinds. More precisely, it presents specialized knowledge in different categories of science, arts, crafts and other activities (Haage & Wegner 2007: passim). Basically, the *Fachliteratur* contains and transmits theoretical and practical know-how (usually essential one) in a certain field. It provides the guidance needed for successful completion of an activity: it gives theoretical knowledge; it provides instructions, directions, advices and tips; it shares practical experience, skills and knacks; it also gives reference information and data. Handbooks, manuals, guides, "how-to-do-it" books, instruction books, specialized reference books – they all belong to the *Fachliteratur*. Providing a well-balanced combination between theory and practice, the *Fachliteratur* is a focal point of synthesized practical knowledge and experience.

The medieval *Fachliteratur* covers numerous fields: the *Septem Artes Liberales*, various crafts, human and veterinarian medicine, hunting and fishing, agriculture, fighting, cooking, medicine preparation, alcohol making, cheating, etc. (Haage & Wegner 2007: 14–20). The texts, dedicated to *Artes Magicae*, belong to the category of *Fachliteratur* too. Here we can list books about conjuration of demons, various kinds of divination and prognostication, necromancy, astrology, preparation of amulets and talismans, etc. (Haage & Wegner 2007: 266–82).

As we move further on towards the category of verbal magic, we can see that charms can be regarded as *Fachliteratur* too.⁷ These texts provide information and instructions for coping with supernatural powers and their impact on human life. The content is dealing with the Other World, and its impact and relations with the human world. At the same time, the final aim of the charms is related to that of a manual, a guide or a handbook. Verbal magic has its place in the *Fachliteratur*, as it provides the guidance needed for successful competition of a practice, namely of the interaction with the supernatural.

Can the Bulgarian charms and prayers be regarded as specialists' texts? Can the manuscripts containing these texts be regarded as specialists' books? In my opinion, the term *Fachliteratur* is applicable towards the Bulgarian source material. The reasons for this are the following.

Firstly, because of the character of the manuscripts, containing the texts. As it was shown above, Bulgarian medieval charms can be found in different books: Orthodox prayer and service books, miscellanies, healing books (Петканова 1999: 40). Despite the differences, all these volumes have one thing in common: they belong to specialized "technical" literature. The healing books (*лековници*) present the clearest example for *Fachliteratur*. They give specialized knowledge about human and animal health, provide recipes and advices, and give information on the curative qualities of different plants and substances. Further on, the priest's service books (*служебници*) and books of occasional prayers (*mpeбници*) are another example. They belong to the liturgical books of the Orthodox Church. At the same time, their purpose is very practical too: to be handbooks for the priests and to guide them in their liturgical activities. And finally, the miscellanies (*сборници*) with their mixed and varied content offer pieces of different information, including charms.

Secondly, because of the purpose of the charms themselves. As it was mentioned before, these texts are powerful magical tools in the interaction with the supernatural. The verbal magic presented in the Bulgarian Late Medieval material is aimed at helping, curing, protecting and preventing. Therefore, the examined charms are also powerful technical instruments in the coping with the Outer World and its negative influence. This is even more visible, if we look at the well defined circle of daily-life issues, which dominates the content of the charms. The health-related issues hold the top position among the topics, being the main theme of the charms. Health of humans and animals is probably the most important aspect of human life. Its protection and improvement is among the most crucial needs. Therefore, a number of texts is dealing with health protection and recovering.

The health issue is closely related with the broader topic of protection against malevolent supernatural powers. This group of charms includes the protection against personified illnesses and perpetrators of illnesses, but also against forces of nature, elemental powers, demons and the Devil himself. And finally, we encounter charms dedicated to the provision of good luck during journeys or at the court of law. The grouping of the charms according to their functions is a result of scholarly examination of the material. The purpose of this systematization is to outline the roles, fulfilled by the charms and to present the patterns in the charms' content. There is, however, an important fact to be remembered: the medieval Bulgarian charms are scattered in many manuscripts. Therefore, the categorization of the largest possible number of the charms and the full examination of their functions requires a long detailed research. The following four examples are only a sample of medieval Bulgarian manuscripts, containing charms.

Example I

The first one is the fourteenth century *Zaikovski Trebnik* No 960 (Book of Occasional Prayer) *from Mount Athos*, written in Bulgarian redaction of Old Church Slavonic language.⁸ The book is kept in the National Library "St. Cyril and Method" in Sofia and contains the following parts: excerpts of liturgical texts; canonical prayers, which are to be read at different occasions: baptism, marriage, confession, vigil; charms for protection of the wine, for blessing of the animal to be butchered, the salt, the flour, the food vessels, the vine grapes, the newly build house, for protection against rabid dog or wolf, and for curing constipation.

Example II

The second example is the fifteenth-sixteenth century *Sbornik* No 308 (Miscellany) written in Serbian redaction of Old Church Slavonic language.⁹ The book is kept in the National Library "St. Cyril and Method" in Sofia and contains the following parts: list of orthographic rules, excerpts of liturgical texts, two recipes for blue and for black ink, excerpt of biblical text about king Solomon, excerpt of the life of St. George, excerpt of the life of St. Alexis, six canonical prayers for a new-born child, one canonical prayer for purifying a food vessel, texts of monastic oaths, prognostication text on the basis of the body trembling, prognostication text on the basis of the new moon, prognostication text on the basis of the Christmas day, two prognostication texts on the basis of the thunder, prognostication text on the basis of the day in which a person got ill, a line of letters to be written on bread and then eaten, five charms: for good luck in fishing and when meeting with superiors, for stanching blood, against harmful rain, against the illness-demon.

Example III

The third example is the seventeenth century *Sbornik* No 273 (Miscellany), written in Serbian redaction of Old Church Slavonic language.¹⁰ The book is kept in the National Library "St. Cyril and Method" in Sofia and contains the following parts: a praise of the Holy Cross; a list of seventy-two names of God, protecting the person who wears them against every evil; list of seventy-two names of the Mother of God; a list of the names of the archangels; a list of the names of John the Baptist; a list of the names of the apostles; a list of the names of the holy martyrs; the first chapters of the Four Gospels; thirty-nine charms: against unclean evil powers, against witches, whirlwind and storm in the day and in the night, against the devil, against evil people, against evil arrows flying in the day and in the night, against thunder, against pain, against the illness-demon, against plague, against vampires, against wolf attacks on the domestic animals, against bandits, against parasites in the grain and the fruits, for protection of the vineyard, the fields and the barns, for a good luck in traveling, at war and at the court of law, for a good luck during a meeting with the king and the boyars; and finally, the twelve seals of King Solomon helping in battle, in the court of law, in traveling, in trade, and protecting against magic, witches, arrows, sword, wind, storm, illness of the head, evil meeting, vampires and female hatred.

Example IV

The fourth example is *Trebnik* (book of occasional prayers) No 622, a seventeenth-century manuscript kept in the National Library "St. Cyril and Method" in Sofia.¹¹ The manuscript is in fact a miscellany, containing various texts in a Serbian redaction of Old Church Slavonic language. These texts are: the Akathist hymn dedicated to the Mother of God; fifty-three prayers which are to be read or pronounced at various occasions: celebration of church feasts, birth giving, baptism, marriage, confession, harvest, for curing different illnesses, when building and blessing a new house, when making a new well, for purifying food vessels, for protection against different illnesses, twelve charms for protection against *nezhit* (a supernatural perpetrator of illness), charms for protection against the Devil; charms for exorcising the Devil; blessings for good health; commemorative lists of people.

4. CANONICAL AND APOCRYPHAL IN THE NETWORK OF PRACTICAL MAGIC

As it can be seen in the examples, the Bulgarian Late Medieval charms are preserved between other texts (usually prayers or liturgical texts), which are completely canonical. Further more, there are no notes or comments concerning the canonical or non-canonical character of the charms or the prayers. Especially in the case of the miscellanies, we encounter a varied mixture of texts, corresponding to the requirements the Church and texts, deviating significantly from the norms established by the church authorities.

All these texts, however, work together in the network of practical magic. The canonical and non-canonical are connected in a constant interaction. The final aim of this interaction is to cope successfully with urgent daily life problems. Most probably, the charms stand together with canonical texts exactly because of this functional relation. They both operate in the same sphere of apotropaic positive magic. Their proven efficacy is of primary importance. Being helpful in difficult situations: that is the most valuable characteristic of both charms and prayers. This is also probably the reason to be preserved together in manuscripts.

At the same time, the charms are tools in the field of practical activity. They guide and instruct towards the successful interaction with the supernatural agents. Thus, the charms are not only magical texts, but also representatives of specialized literature. Further on, not only the separate texts, but the manuscripts themselves appear as practical instruments: a mixture between apocryphal and canonical, pieces of *Fachliteratur* inseparably connected with daily life and its constant challenges.

In terms of further research: currently I work on the historical contextualization of the manuscripts containing charms. Created during and after the Ottoman invasion on the Balkans (a period of weakening and destruction of Bulgarian Orthodox Church authorities), these books reflect both the lack of normative religious sanctions and the attempts of the local Christian priests to cope with the daily life needs and problems of their congregation.

It is important also to take into consideration the fact that almost all of the miscellanies are created and copied in monastic environment. Did the members of the clergy recognize the canonical of non-canonical character of the texts? And if so, why did they copy a text despite its non-canonical status? Did they deliberately write down and preserve unofficial and apocryphal texts, only because of their efficiency in daily life practice? What is the broader historical and cultural context of the religious books, containing both canonical and non-

canonical texts? Previous Bulgarian scholarship touches some aspects of this problem, but still many more questions are to be answered.

Another necessary direction for future research is to examine the Late Medieval Bulgarian charms in comparison with later Bulgarian folklore material. Such an interdisciplinary research will provide us with a much broader picture in terms of daily life usage, practicality and effectiveness. It will probably also give answers of questions concerning the interaction between oral and written. If we regard "magic as a crossroads, as a crossing-point" (Graf 1997: 1–19 and Kieckhefer 2000: 1–3 and 44–45) between different cultures, but also a complex network of different relationships, interactions, conflicts and forms of perception and transmission of motives and patterns within a certain society in a certain period, it is important to examine and understand how the Bulgarian source material relates to the same (or similar) sources from other Slavic territories as well as to sources from wider geographical and cultural contexts (Kieckhefer 2000: 2).

NOTES

- ¹ Up to my knowledge, there is no calculation of the exact number of the South Slavic *apocryphal prayers*. For example, Мария Шнитер [Maria Schnitter] in her book *Молитва* и магия [Prayer and Magic] analyses twenty five of these texts. Probably, the South Slavic texts altogether are several hundreds. (Шнитер 2001: passim)
- ² (Шнитер 2001: 50–59). The book is an examination of a series of apocryphal prayers, including ones against *nezhit*, in terms of philological and stylistic peculiarities of the texts. The author also deals with the ways of transmission and with the reasons for the survival of non-canonical texts.
- ³ For a detailed discussion on the terminological issues and also on the problem of including or excluding texts in the category of "prohibited" during the Bulgarian Middle Ages: (Шнитер 2001: 50–69)
- ⁴ In the article on apocryphal prayers the author also further bibliographic references.
- ⁵ The focus of the author is mainly on Russian texts, but he also discusses questions concerning Slavic tradition in general.
- ⁶ Up to this moment the term *Fachliteratur* has never been used in connection with the Bulgarian sources. This term, however, accurately describes the nature of the Bulgarian charms.
- ⁷ For example, the Merseburg charms are among the first texts in every research book on practical magic, but at the same time they are the first ones listed in scholarly pieces on *Fachliteratur* (Haage & Wegner 2007: 295–7)
- ⁸ The manuscript is described in (Ционев 1923: 114–115).

- ⁹ The manuscript is described in (Цонев 1910: 252–254)
- ¹⁰ The manuscript is described in (Цонев 1910: 174–175)
- ¹¹ The manuscript is described in (Цонев 1923: 133–134)

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the first issue of Incantatio. This peer-reviewed journal is the natural outcome of the recent upsurge in charms studies, as illustrated, for example, by the activities of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research's Committee on Charms, Charmers, and Charming (http://www.isfnr.org). It is intended that Incantatio will be a lively forum for charms studies from a wide variety of traditions and scholarly approaches rather in the manner that Proverbium fulfills this role in paremological studies. Some of the range we hope to cover will be indicated by the contents of this our first issue, where we have articles on both medieval and (near-)contemporary charms, both European and North American material, and both close readings and theoretical interventions. Alongside such articles, we intend to published reports of conferences (or conference sessions) and reviews of books which touch on charms, charmers and charming.

The general editor of Incantatio is Mare Kõiva (mare@folklore.ee), who is also editor of the Electronic Journal of Folklore (http://www.folklore.ee/folklore). In addition, each issue will have a guest editor. For this first issue this role is being played by Jonathan Roper. We look forward to informative and productive developments in charms studies appearing the pages of Incantatio.

Mare Kõiva and Jonathan Roper