

A DEGREE OF INTERTEXTUALITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH EMANUELA TIMOTIN

Jonathan Roper

In the third in our series of interviews with charms scholars about their scholarly lives, we present an interview with Emanuela Timotin, the new Chair of the ISFNR Committee on Charms, Charmers and Charming. The interview was conducted remotely in February 2024, then subsequently by email.

When did you first become aware that there was such a genre as verbal charms?

I was a student and it was the first year at the Faculty of Letters at the University of Bucharest. One of the courses in the first semester of the first year was Folklore. At that time (1995), it was considered an important discipline in Romania, meaning that students could study Folklore at the Faculty of Letters as a main discipline for one year. And I did so, two hours each week. And I read various Romanian folkloric texts, and I discovered charms at that time. There was an important tradition of Romanian folklore studies, especially carols and ballads had been studied thoroughly, so I learnt a lot about carols and ballads, and also folktales. But later, when I was about to finish my B.A. years, I realized that most of the professors who studied the history of the Romanian language, also studied charms, because this genre was considered very interesting from a linguistic point of view.

Who were the professors who studied charms?

The professor, who eventually supervised my Ph.D, was Grigore Brâncuș. His professor, Alexandru Rosetti, wrote a short book called *The Language of Romanian Charms* (1975), and another important professor of Romanian language and literature in the first decades of the twentieth century, Ovid Densusianu, also wrote three major studies called *The Language of Charms* (1930–1934). So I came across charms in my study of folklore and of the history of the Romanian language, and these charms, collected by folklorists, which I came to know better and better, they are really beautiful. Some of them are accessible to a wider audience, e.g. the Romanian love charms, thanks to the efforts of Sanda Golopenția, who has translated many of them into English. They are beautiful texts with specific features, and everyone who likes folklore can, I think, enjoy reading them.

So the charm texts you studied in folklore classes were mostly nineteenth and twentieth century texts?

Absolutely. And after I graduated from the University, I had the opportunity to work at the Institute of Linguistics of the Romanian Academy, immediately after graduation. I went to the Department of Philology, and there I discovered Romanian manuscripts with texts written between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries — there are no medieval Romanian texts, so these texts preserved in manuscripts are the oldest texts that have survived to this day. And while I was studying apocryphal texts for my research at the Institute [1], I thought I might look for some charms too. This is how I decided to work on Romanian manuscript charms, and this is how my most important researches on charms appeared. It was a choice that grew out of various moments in my life. I still think it is a wonderful genre, and even today I discover a new charm here and there when I open a new manuscript.

What kind of manuscripts are they — household books, church books?

It depends. If I consider them chronologically, first they were church books, so charms were first written in the margins of church books; later, they were texts intended for use in the church[2]. And after that, in the

eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, they were written in household books or in barbers' books or such like [3].

Surgeon-barbers?

Yes. There is at least one mention of 'surgeon-barbers'.

So you completed your doctorate on charms when? And what was the title of it?

I did a Ph.D in Bucharest, with the title *The Language of Romanian Charms*. It was very much in the line of research previously done by Densusianu and Rosetti [4]. I also did a Ph.D in France, on several Romanian charm-types that appear in manuscripts, because I thought France was a better place to study charms. There I met professors like Claude Lecouteux (Paris IV – Sorbonne) and Philippe Walter (University Stendhal – Grenoble 3), who were involved in the study of charms and of practices of charming. It was a very good place for me [5].

So, you are a 'double doctor'?

Yes, I am a double doctor. I finished my first Ph.D in 2007, and the second in 2009. In those days, people could complete their Ph.Ds over a long periods, not like today.

When did you first hear about the existence of a Committee studying charms?

My professor in Paris sent me a Call for Papers, forwarded to him by Éva Pócs, about the conference held in Pécs in 2007. I sent in an abstract, which was accepted [6]. I was not aware that it was such a large group — I was not even aware that there were so many people who were interested in charm studies. To my great surprise, there were a lot of people there whose research I had already read, so I was very happy when I realized what was going on there.

And then you went to the Athens Congress [2009] and the Moscow Conference [2011] ...

And to the Bucharest conference [2010]!

Indeed! What was the experience of organizing that like?

It was interesting, because I work in the Institute of Linguistics, and of course since charms are considered as a genre of folklore and there are not so many specialists in folklore in the Institute, it was obvious that it had to be organized jointly between my institute and the Institute of Folklore of the Romanian Academy. I was a junior researcher at the time. Fortunately, the former director of my institute, Marius Sala, who was then vice-president of the Romanian Academy, had been a student of Alexandru Rosetti who had written about charms. Mr. Sala had vivid memories of Rosetti's interest in charms and when he heard of my intention to organise an international conference on charms in Bucharest, he became enthusiastic and said to me: 'Go ahead, go to the Institute of Folklore, and talk to the director, Sabina Ispas'. The director of the Institute of Folklore was already a member of the Romanian Academy then. It was a very *vivid* experience. And I think it was a nice conference.

I think so too.

I was very happy that we were able to welcome so many colleagues, and that it had its own specific touch. I think it was very nice all in all and that each place where such conferences have been held, has had its specific touch.

Yes, I remember in Bucharest there were individualised presents for the guest speakers.

Yes, the director of the Institute of Folklore and I really wanted to do this, and we thought about what would be suitable for each participant. It was very nice for us, and we hope for you too.

Would you say that what you do with charms is in the same line as what people like Rosetti did or a departure?

No, it's not at all in the same line, because manuscript charms are not at all the same as charms from oral tradition [7]. Most, though not all, of them are in many respects closer to prayers or to exorcisms and these features are not typically found in charms of oral tradition. There are other, linguistic, features which aroused Rosetti's and Densusianu's interest in charms, and these were definitely not my main concern. [8] So, it's a new corpus of charms, the corpus which I eventually gathered, because it was a hidden corpus when I started my research on charms, and one studied with a different methodology because the texts themselves were different.

But how would you contrast from French and your Romanian Ph.Ds ideologically?

Or would you equate them, perhaps?

First of all, my Romanian Ph.D drew on texts which had not been known to Romanian scholars, and I was not necessarily interested in charm-types. I was interested in the connection of the charms with the Romanian language, because the meanings of the texts themselves are often difficult to grasp. Moreover, some texts have no parallels in the oral tradition, so they are, if I may say, *hapax*. I had to introduce them and to present them properly to a Romanian audience. On the contrary, in my French Ph.D, I was interested in charm-types and in problems of variation in charms. I would say that in my French Ph.D, I dared to raise problems that might have been more difficult to raise in a Romanian Ph.D, because standard Romanian scholarship used to contend that charms do not change — because if they must work, they cannot change. And when you read a manuscript charm-type, you see variation, and I had to enquire whether this variation was meaningful. In my French Ph.D, one of the main goals was to show that this variation was often meaningful, and to try to understand the reasons for this variation, which could be numerous.

It was interesting when you said that the academics thought that the charms do not vary, as this is also the folk account — the people claim that the charms don't vary.

Yes, and this is strange, and it struck me most as a Ph.D student. On the one hand, they say that charms contain many lexical innovations, and on the other hand, they say that charms do not vary. I wondered whether they change or do they stay the same.

So, since you completed your doctorate, you've been working at the Institute. How free are you to undertake charms research there?

Charms have never been a main topic of research at my Institute. Of course, I can always work on charms. I would say that, thanks to my research, charms are an important part of the Romanian literature which is being read today. My colleague at the University of Bucharest who teaches Old Romanian literature has a class dedicated to charms. I think it is a step forward. It is a literary genre that can now be read by students and colleagues working in academia.

How much are your addressees and authorities the folklorists working with charms, like, for instance, Laura Jiga Iliescu?

I have met and spoken with many colleagues who are folklorists. We have all, of course, noticed this barrier between manuscript charms and charms of oral tradition. And we are all trying to learn more and more from each other. I think for each of us, looking at both manuscripts and oral tradition gives us a broader perception. I would say that this manuscript tradition was initially seen as a bit bizarre, because it is so close to prayers and apocryphal narratives [9], but after some time it was gradually accepted.

So, as well as the contrast between those working with oral and those with manuscript sources, there is also, it seems to me, in the fellowship of charms scholars there is quite a big divide between people who work with classical and medieval material and then people who work with folkloric material, which is similar to, but not 100% the same as, the divide you've been mentioning. But as your material isn't classical or medieval, how do you position yourself within this dichotomy?

Many charms I have edited follow a Slavonic and Greek pattern [10]. And it's interesting that the more they follow this pattern, the closer they are to prayers in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Later, if these charm-types survive, this very religious appearance disappears somewhat. In a sense, then, these charms are relics of South-East European *medieval* literature. But what is remarkable is that in many regards something new is emerging. For example, a charm meant to heal the evil eye affecting silkworms appears in the late eighteenth century, because by then there were more and more households were involved in that cottage industry, and silkworms were being bred at home. And if you read about the history of this industry in Romania, there are charms and beliefs about the souls of silkworms [11], etc. So, sometimes these charm-types mirror the changes in Romanian society in terms of social history. Or sometimes they are highly regional; for example, a charm meant to find hidden treasures, used somewhere in Transylvania, contains a significant number of liturgical fragments borrowed from the Catholic liturgy. So, given the richness of the material I studied, I had to put aside the dichotomies mentioned because they were not helpful in my research. In many respects, Romanian manuscript charms are based on medieval south-eastern European literature; at the same time, an important group of texts had very precise references to regional realities.

So, you don't position yourself one side of this apparent divide at all?

No, not at all. I wouldn't have become interested in manuscript charms unless I had known about charms of oral tradition. The connections are obvious, and they have to be seen as a whole tradition. Sometimes it would be a pity not to see Romanian manuscript verbal charms in their relations with other literary genres. It is a degree of intertextuality that shows that these charms were not a marginal literary genre in

the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The people who used them were also aware of other literary genres which were less hidden or less secret than charms were.

So it's part of that web?

Yes.

In the years since completing your doctorates, which articles in charms studies are you most proud of?

It's always the last one! This last article now in print on the role of the Archangel Michael in the Romanian charm tradition — I gave a talk on it in our online seminar series [12] — is a study in which I succeed, I think, in showing how close charms can be to other genres and how the practice of charming can be connected with other practices. It is also an article in which I discuss an icon, whose theme is derived from a narrative that was also used as a charm. This article also gave me the opportunity to show how charms were considered to be effective at the personal level, at the family level, or, at the community level. So, in many ways, this article on the Archangel Michael is my favourite article on charms now.

So that mention of the online seminar series is a good link to asking you about this innovation of online seminars which you in your new role as Chair of the Committee (since our meeting in Riga in 2022) introduced. And I wonder if you could say something about your hopes and fears and vision for the Committee as you lead it?

The Committee has, in my opinion, two very important directions — the annual meetings, which give researchers working on charms the opportunity to meet and talk, and the journal *Incantatio*. Both are important to our scholarly community. It's important to ensure that new persons who join this field want to come to the conferences, want to publish in *Incantatio*, which means a constant effort on the part of the members of the Committee. But I also think that these online seminars (started in October 2022) are a good innovation. It would be good if they continued, although it seems that the interest in them has its ups and downs.

We need more volunteer speakers.

Absolutely. And I further think it would be very good if there were a conference or a series of seminars on charm-types. From my point of view, it would be good to know what is new in charm typology in the years since your book [*English Verbal Charms*, 2005] was published. Can we identify more charm-types? Are they pan-European? Are they south-eastern European or eastern European? How local are they? This conference or seminar series on charm-types would show how research in charm-types has advanced in recent years.

Recently I have also worked on apocryphal and liturgical texts, which were transmitted orally, and I have become more and more interested in the connections between the practice of charming and other practices which involve the oral utterance of apocryphal texts, in verse or prose [13]. So, I favour events with specific themes, and I am very glad that the conference in Helsinki has such a specific theme [namely, Conflicts and Catastrophes]. I feel it would be excellent if we could clarify how research in charm studies has progressed in recent years. We have had this string of conferences and issues of *Incantatio*, etc., let us now assess what they tell us. This might lead to a boost in confidence and in interest.

PUBLICATIONS MENTIONED IN THE INTERVIEW

- [1] Lemnul crucii (*The Tale of the Tree of the Cross*), critical edition, philological and linguistic study, col. “Cele mai vechi cărți populare în literatura română”, 5, Bucharest, Fundația Națională pentru Știință și Artă, 2001, pp. 107–199; Legenda duminicii (*The Letter of Christ Fallen from the Sky*), monographic study, edition and glossary, col. “Cele mai vechi cărți populare în literatura română”, 10, Bucharest: Fundația Națională pentru Știință și Artă – Academia Română, 2005 (2nd revised and augmented edition in 2019).
- [2] ‘Eastern Christian Prayers against Hailstorms: Aquatic Demons and Divine Powers in Canonical and Apocryphal Contexts’. In É. Pócs, A. Zempléni (eds.) *Spirit Possession. European Contributions to Comparative Studies*. New York and Budapest: Central European University Press, 2022, pp. 263–278.
- [3] ‘L’invocation à la lune dans les charmes roumains. Tradition manuscrite et tradition orale’. In A. Branda, I. Cuceu (eds.) *Romania Occidentalis, Romania Orientalis. Festschrift für Ion Taloș*. Cluj: Editura Fundației pentru Studii Europene–Editura Mega, 2010, pp. 651–660.
- [4] Descântececele manuscrise românești (secolele al XVII-lea – al XIX-lea) [*The Romanian Manuscript Charms (17th – 19th centuries)*], critical edition, philological and linguistic study. Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 2010.

- [5] *Paroles protectrices, paroles guérisseuses. La tradition manuscrite des charmes roumains (XVII^e-XIX^e siècle)*. Paris: Presses de l'université Paris-Sorbonne, col. "Tradition et croyances", 2015.
- [6] 'The năjit between Prayers and Charms. A Study on the Romanian Manuscript Tradition'. In J. Kapalo, É. Pócs, W. F. Ryan (eds.) *The Power of Words. Studies on Charms and Charming in Europe*. Budapest: CEU Press, pp. 216–230.
- [7] 'Un aspect méconnu des fées roumaines. Observations sur un texte magique manuscrit'. *Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes*, 45 (2007), pp. 433–443; 'Queen of the Fairies and Biblical Queen. Notes on the Romanian Herodias'. *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica. An International Journal of Ethnography*, 54 (2009) [= É. Pócs (ed.), *Folk Religion and Folk Belief in Central-Eastern Europe*], pp. 363–376.
- [8] 'Despre funcția substantivelor formate prin moțiune în descântecele românești' (*On the Function of the Nouns Formed with Suffixes of Genre in the Romanian Charms*). *Limba română*, 52 (2003), pp. 561–572.
- [9] 'Une version roumaine inconnue de la Lettre du Christ tombée du ciel'. In *Byzance, les Balkans, l'Europe. Études en honneur du Prof. Vasilka Tăpkova-Zaimova* [Studia Balcanica, 25]. Sofia: Institut d'Études Balkaniques, 2006, pp. 549–556; 'Les apocryphes et leurs moyens de légitimation. Le Rêve de la Vierge dans la tradition roumaine', *New Europe College Yearbook*. Bucharest, 2010–2011, pp. 211–253; 'Amulet and Funerary Sermon. A Romanian Manuscript Recension of the Dream of the Virgin'. In C. Bogdan, C.-I. Dima and E. Timotin (eds.) *Représentations de la Vierge Marie entre culte officiel et vénération locale. Textes et images*. Heidelberg: Herlo Verlag, 2022, pp. 249–265.
- [10] 'Les incantations roumaines contre la matrice. Formules répétitives et associations symboliques'. In F. Bayard, A. Guillaume (eds.) *Formes et Difformités médiévales. Mélanges d'histoire, de littérature, de langue et de mythologie médiévales offerts au Professeur Claude Lecouteux*. Forewords by R. Boyer and J. Le Goff. Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2010, pp. 279–285.
- [11] 'Le saint et les vers. Syméon Stylite l'Ancien, protecteur des vers à soie dans la tradition roumaine'. In F. Vigneron, K. Watanabe (eds.) *Voix des mythes, science des civilisations. Hommage à Philippe Walter*. Bern and Berlin: Peter Lang, 2012, pp. 373–382.
- [12] 'Can a Celestial Warrior Become a Healer? The Archangel Michael in the Manuscript and Oral Traditions of Romanian Charms'. In A. Tsakos, M. von der Lippe (eds.) *The Archangel Michael Beyond Orthodoxy. History, Politics and Popular Culture*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024 (in press).
- [13] 'The Lament of Eve, when she was getting out through the gates of Paradise: A Late Romanian Development of The Life of Adam and Eve'. In M. Cioată, A. Miltenova, E. Timotin (eds.) *Biblical Apocrypha in South-Eastern Europe and Related Areas*. Brăila, Istros. col. "Bibliothèque de l'Institut d'Études Sud-Est Européennes", 16, 2021, pp. 47–71; *The Cheirograph of Adam in Armenian and Romanian Traditions. New Texts and Images*. Turnhout: Brepols, col. "Eastern Christian Cultures in Contact", 1, 2023 (with Michael E. Stone).

This work has been supported by the Estonian Research Council (grant project PGR 670).