

REVIEW OF THE LANGUAGE OF MAGIC, EDITED BY ELEONORA CIANCI AND NICHOLAS WOLF.

E. Cianci – N. Wolf (cur.), *The Language of Magic* – Milano, LED, 2022

ISBN 978-88-7916-996-7 – <https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/996-language-of-magic.html>

Il segno e le lettere
Collana del Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature e Culture Moderne
dell'Università degli Studi 'G. d'Annunzio'
Segno - 28

The Language of Magic

edited by Eleonora Cianci and Nicholas Wolf



LED Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto

The essays in this thought-provoking collection arise from the proceedings of the Conference on The Language of Magic, held in in Pescara, Italy, in May 2019, organized by the Charms, Charmers, Charming Committee of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research.

While the book's chapters have been arranged in alphabetical order by author, in this review, I have grouped essays according to common themes and approaches to the broad topic of the "language of magic."

The special register of "the language of magic" can be analyzed from the perspective of "ordinary language." That is, charms and rituals occur within the circumstances of people's lives lived within particular time-periods. Social status, gender, and performance practices of specific eras shape the rituals. Both the customary attitudes and beliefs of those involved in these performances, as well as very specific occasions of sickness or misfortune drawn from daily life are open to exploration by charms scholars.

For example, Ilona Tuomi's study of two early medieval Irish charms for urinary disease focuses on the manuscript contexts of the charms, seeking contemporary understandings of causality and responses to the medical condition through the words of the charms. Similarly, Nicholas Wolf's study of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Irish charms aims at capturing the attitudes toward maladies and verbal cures by close readings of the vocabulary of the texts. It illustrates vernacular

attitudes toward medical crises and foregrounds the ‘action words’, the words conveying illocutionary force, that charmers relied on to combat such evils as farcy, bleeding, and the dangers of childbirth.

Three essays by Giancristofaro, Golubeva and Kupriyanova, and Koiva, respectively, draw attention to the confluences of the ordinary language of daily life and the language of magic and magic rituals. Lia Giancristofaro describes local, vernacular performances of magic to dispel the evil eye, collected in the Abruzzo region of Italy during two periods, 1965–1970 and 2008–2020. From these domestic rituals of women at the kitchen table, she draws out the social and gender issues embedded in the practice and transmission of the rite, as well as the local triggers, such as financial loss, an accident, a quarrel, a break-up, or a failed exam. Lubov’ Golubeva and Sofia Kupriyanova study the vernacular negotiations and secret language around childbirth under the care of the mother-in-law, mid-wives, and elderly women, contrasted to the professional practices and language of doctors. Also focusing on ordinary language, Mare Koiva illustrates how verbal substitutions, mainly complimentary euphemisms and insulting dysphemisms populate Estonian incantations aimed at the control of cockroaches, grasshoppers, ladybugs and bees, on the one hand, and ravens and wolves, on the other.

Turning from the language of the lived world to the poetic, two essays by Veselova and Lombardi argue that oral traditional poetry, such as the *bylina* epics and the Old Norse poetic sagas, contain magic rituals and language similar to that of vernacular charmers. Inna Veselova’s essay shows women’s magic as a means of empowerment within the male dominant society of the *bylina* texts, that is, oral traditional epics, which were still being performed and last recorded in the 1980s. Veselova isolates the magical practices of women within these traditional poems and finds parallels with strategic use of magic by village women, practices identified in fieldwork in Northern Russia. Maria Cristina Lombardi’s essay teases out the links between the magical language in the Old Norse poetic sagas and two medieval runic objects, the Bergen stick charm to name a thief and a copper amulet to ward off an evil spirit in order to heal a fever caused by a wound.

Four essays by Iliomäki, Fadeyeva, Cianci, and Harlan-Haughey analyse the ritual performances of magical language in specific cultural circumstances. Henni Iliomäki introduces the *tietäjä*, a ‘knower’, a seer within Finnish-Karelian society. The authority and power of the performer acquires potency by construction of ‘a ritual ego’ that comes

between the common world and the other world. This is accomplished by association with metaphorical powers of birds of prey, otherworldly arrows and armour. Once empowered by metaphorical language giving access to the otherworld, the charmer is able to subjugate its harmful agents. In her essay, Liudmiller Fadeyeva identifies motifs in East-Slavic charms that allude to Christian icons. For example, the Virgin spinning threads on the icon of the annunciation, symbolically making a body, is translated in charms to the red threads identified with strings of blood and therefore function to staunch bleeding. Or the icon of the beheading of St. John the Baptist gives rise to charms that evoke the image of the head on a platter in charms against pain and blood from a wound.

Eleonora Cianci examines the manuscripts containing Old High German charms through the lens of monastic liturgical practices and manuscript making. Specifically, she argues on the evidence of neums written over the words of three charms in two twelfth-century manuscripts that the charms were sung in the manner of liturgical chant. As far as I know, no one has claimed to find musical notation for charms before; such an observation and interpretation is a significant contribution to debates about early performance of charms within monastic, liturgical contexts. Sarah Harlan-Haughey's essay reveals a continuum of language—from peasant charming and blaspheming to liturgical song—within the medieval *Second Shepherd's play*. In fact, it connects the liturgical world of a play performed within a church environment with the low business of sheep-stealing, in which charms and curses function on a continuum with angelic liturgical songs of praise of the newborn Christ. She demonstrates the medieval playwright's integration of peasant charming into the comprehensive Latin liturgical celebration of the Incarnation.

Two papers in this collection raise fundamental questions regarding the traditional genres. First, Andrei Toporkov's contribution asks us to think about what constitutes a legitimate oral tradition. By showing how historical publications have sometimes falsified folklore traditions, he demonstrates the importance of relying on accurate accounts and primary sources on which to build constructs of traditional folklore. It prompts us to take seriously the implications of supposed -emic descriptions and the -etic perspectives in which data is brought back to life by and for scholars. Tuomi, whose essay on early Irish charms I have already mentioned, is highly sensitive to the presentation of her texts in publications by other scholars and explains the implications

of errors in printed editions. As Toporkov argues, the cultural picture changes when we systematically question our sources, identify falsified or false records and note their proliferation, however unwittingly that might have happened.

Another fundamental question is raised both in Laura Iliescu's essay and in Barbara Hiller's contributions. How do we best explain oral and written charms within the same tradition? Iliescu offers a nuanced consideration of the traditional performance and transmission of the *Dream of the Mother God*, a written prayer-text, a vision, that takes the form of an encounter charm. Performances are grounded in writing, reading or reciting the narrative by memory. She illustrates how the act of writing, and the talismanic power of the written or even printed text, circulated in the manner of an oral tradition; and how traces of orality are detectable within the examples of the written text, despite the fact that it did not circulate in a purely oral form. This is an important point.

Part of the creativity of living oral traditions is the osmotic absorption of new ideas and technologies. Writing is one of those technologies that becomes part of the genre of charms very early; it appears on ancient amulets. Iliescu's account of the transmission of the *Dream* text illustrates the ebb and flow of written and oral (reading out loud) performances. We see the varied life and post-modern afterlife of this one text. From these studies we understand that written texts may belong to and follow the same patterns of transmission as oral texts. It is probably time for the apparent opposition of written vs. oral to be rethought and reframed.

Lea T. Olsan

Cambridge, England

A DEEP INSIGHT INTO LATVIAN CHARMS

A review of **Aigars Lielbārdis** *Latviešu buramvārdi. Teksti, tradīcijas, konteksti* [**Latvian charms. Texts, traditions, contexts**]. Rīga: LU Literatūras, folkloras un mākslas institūts, 2024. 264 pages



Aigars Lielbārdis' most recent book provides a deep insight into Latvian charming tradition from three simultaneous points of view: texts and magical images of charms, persons of charmers, and the performance of charms. A well-thought-out combination of methods and theories has helped to reveal the values and different contexts of the tradition, maintaining both the continuity of the research and offering a new discourse for future analysis of the topic. Lielbārdis employs a classical approach, drawing primarily on the contextual methodology and performance theory from American folklorist Richard

Bauman, alongside the intertextual framework, replete with its complex lexicon, from French narratologist Gérard Genette. These approaches are adeptly applied: intertextual analysis enriches the understanding of charm texts; the contextual method elucidates the social environment and practitioners of the tradition; and performance theory is crucial for documenting and interpreting contemporary charm use. As concludes the author himself:

This study provides conceptual answers in defining the genre of Latvian charms, explains and confirms the rootedness of the charm tradition in the cultural and linguistic environment, and links the text to its users in contemporary society, with particular emphasis on the role and influence of the charmer in the functioning of the charm genre. (p. 259)

Well, but what a reader not familiar with the Latvian language and not feeling adventurous with the latest machine-translation tools would

gain from this volume? The short answer: quite a lot. First, there is a 27-page long English summary that presents the contents of the book and provides insight into the subject matter. Second, a comprehensive list of sources and literature covers almost everything that has been published on Latvian charms since 1873. Last but not least, the book includes thirteen illustrations ranging from a manuscript page of an Early Modern protocol of witch trials to contemporary data visualizations of charm distribution.

Moreover, all of the above is provided by the world-leading expert of Latvian charms. The research behind this volume has been presented in local and international academic forums and also partially published in peer-reviewed research journals. A significant part of this work consists of Liebārdis' unpublished doctoral thesis *The Tradition of Latvian Charms*, defended at the University of Latvia in 2012. As a lead researcher at the Archives of Latvian Folklore, the author has not only direct access to 56,000 Latvian charm text variations stored there but also the knowledge that has allowed him to develop a cutting-edge digital catalogue of the same texts. He has been present and presenting at most of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR) committee of Charms, Charmers and Charming meetings, organizing one in Riga in 2022 too. Besides multiple stand-alone articles (including in *Incantatio*) and book chapters on the subject matter, this is his sixth book.

Overall, the book consists of three parts. The first part provides a historical overview of the study of the charm tradition in Latvian folkloristics, an analysis of the cultural and historical context and conditions shaping the charm tradition, and also the theoretical and methodological background of the research. Historical overview allows a glance into Latvian charm studies across distinct historical periods such as Tsarist Russia (1869–1917), the interwar period, the time of Soviet occupation, and from 1991 to the present day. The most important works and authors are discussed in detail. For the cultural context, the author has chosen to characterize three facets: meaning, institutions, and commutative systems. In other words, these are the historical, economic, religious, and other conditions that determined the development of the Latvian tradition of charms and their geographical distribution as well as their content and form. In addition, the main charming situations are listed, and the author provides an overview of public knowledge and beliefs concerning the activities of charmers, healers, and sorcerers. Folklore collecting “campaigns” and their influence on the corpus of Latvian charms are also assessed.

The second part examines the corpus of Latvian charms, which historically have been formed by two traditions – written and oral. This division is based on the different origins, variations, and dissemination of the charms as well as the content and form of the texts. The geographical distribution of Latvian charm texts generally falls within the area of present-day Latvia. One of the basic criteria, along with the physical area of the tradition, is the use of text in Latvian, although the texts do include formulas in German and Latin, such as combinations of letters and palindromes. Lielbārdis adeptly traces the influence of pan-European and Slavic charm types on the Latvian corpus, pinpointing the Jesuit Order’s role in their integration. Special attention is given to the *Debesu grāmatas* (Books of Heaven or Heavenly Letters), primarily written charms influenced by the mid-18th-century activities of the Herrnhut brethren in northern Latvia.

Lielbārdis establishes a clear formal distinction between Latvian charms and other folklore genres, based on textual structure and formal characteristics, categorizing charms into three groups: poetry, prose, and graphic representations. This leads to a nuanced cross-genre analysis where charms’ plots and personae are compared with those in folksongs, tales, and legends—an ambitious scholarly endeavour, as previous studies typically categorized Latvian charms by function rather than narrative content.

The third part is dedicated to contemporary charming practices. Based on the author’s field research data since 2005, it focuses on charmers as a social group. Lielbārdis here shares his witnessing of contemporary charming by three female practitioners. Two situations of performance are related to healing, two to harming, and, three documented several times over a longer period – related to a calendar custom (so-called “tying up the hawk” to protect household birds from the predator) that takes place before dawn on a Good Friday. The latter is represented also in Lielbārdis ethnographic documentary, released in 2010. The part contains not only a description of the charmers’ performances but also a detailed description and analysis of the charmers’ interpretations of their actions. In the characterization of each informant and her activities, attention is focused on her personality, the acquisition of the knowledge required for charming and influences on this knowledge, self-positioning or self-identification, and the relationships of the specific performance to the tradition.

In conclusion, Lielbārdis new book provides an excellent overview of both the corpus of Latvian charms and research of those charms,

in addition to testifying to the living practice of the tradition. Most importantly, it anchors the charm genre and its national variations in a broader milieu of vernacular culture which is represented both by traditions and by varied other folklore genres like Latvian folksongs, beliefs, folktales and legends. Historically, the volume bridges previous, written textual research with present-day fieldwork and new methods of digital humanities the author is helping to develop in research of magic and charms. If this has caught your interest you may also like to check out Lielbārdis previous book on the most important historical Latvian charm corpora – *Collection 150 Charms*. This title is fully bilingual, Latvian and English, published by LU LFMI in 2020.

Toms Kēncis

University of Latvia