

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.

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