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TWO PARALLEL FIELDS: AN INTERVIEW WITH DAIVA VAITKEVIČIENĖ

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In the fourth of our series of interviews with charms scholars about their scholarly lives, we present an interview with Daiva Vaitkevičienė, a long-standing member of the ISFNR Committee on Charms, Charmers and Charming. The interview was conducted by email in the autumn of 2025.

How would you describe your formation as a scholar?

The inclusion of verbal charms in my research was a matter of chance. Since graduating from Vilnius University, my passion had been mythology. However, when I started working at the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore in 1991 (at that time, it was still combined with the Institute of the Lithuanian Language), I was tasked with working on folklore. I was involved in preparing a typological publication of Lithuanian folk songs, and in 1999, together with another young colleague, I published one of the volumes of this multi-volume work [1]. During this time, I learnt how to classify folklore genres and assign songs to genres, types and sub-types.

After defending my dissertation, 'Manifestations of fire in Lithuanian and Latvian Mythology', in 1999, I moved to the Department of Folk Narrative, as fairy tales, legends, and folk beliefs were more in line with my research. It was then that Kazys Grigas, a renowned Lithuanian paremiologist who had developed a classification system for proverbs, suggested submitting a research project based on the verbal charms published in the Finnish folklorist V. J. Mansikka's *Litauische Zaubersprüche* in 1929 [2]. This took place in 1999–2000, by which time digitisation opportunities had already emerged in Lithuania. Thanks to Grigas' efforts, the Institute had already begun creating a database of proverbs. So it should come as no surprise that I shifted my project from Mansikka to creating a database of verbal charms that was made available as a digital publication [3]. That is how I became involved in the field of charms. Since the Institute was focused on typological research, this later led to a typological publication of Lithuanian verbal

healing charms. Since then, I have been working in two parallel fields – verbal charms and mythology research.

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

I had been familiar with verbal charms since my student days, when I took part in folklore collection expeditions. During fieldwork people would tell me how charms had helped when somebody had been bitten by a snake or affected by the evil eye. I had the opportunity to record several charms at that time.

The genre of verbal charms was popularised in Lithuania in 1968 with the publication of the fifth volume of the collection *Lietuvių tautosak*a ('Lithuanian Folklore'), which covers the small genres of folklore [4]. Around 200 verbal charms and archaic prayers were published in this collection. As many Lithuanian verbal charms do not contain Christian themes, it was acceptable to publish them during the Soviet era as an example of folk imagination. Charms were regarded not as a practice, but rather as folklore texts that had already become extinct.

Were people you spoke to in the field hesitant about telling you their charms? Did some fear they might lose their powers?

Not all charms are considered secret by charmers. They usually don't hesitate to share charms for warts, heartburn or *grižas* (swollen joints). Sometimes people don't even consider these words to be charms, nor themselves to be charmers. However, the more dangerous or difficult the disease, the stronger the charm needed, and the more hidden it will be. Charms for serious conditions, such as erysipelas, fright or snakebite, can usually only be transmitted or disclosed only once the charmer has stopped using them.

Personally, I am reluctant to ask charmers to reveal their verbal charms, as this could endanger this fragile and disappearing tradition. I once witnessed the negative impact that researchers could have on charmers. I conducted field research among the Lithuanian diaspora in Gervėčiai, Belarus, for several summers between 2010 and 2012 (the research was published as a separate article [5]). A doctoral student of mine was very keen to record some verbal charms from a charmer, and

he did so. The following summer, when I visited the same practitioner, I heard that she had lost her patients. She said that this had occurred after she had passed on her charms to a stranger the previous year.

I believe that during field research today, it is much more important to document the context than the charms themselves: the details of the charm ritual, the circumstances of the treatment, and how charms are transmitted. Such data is still lacking because, for many years, folklorists only recorded texts, leaving such ethnographic details almost unknown.

However, there is one small region in Lithuania where verbal charms can be disclosed without fear of the charmer losing them. This region is the small parish of Dieveniškės in south-eastern Lithuania, bordering Belarus. The Lithuanian-speaking community here is surrounded on all sides by Belarusian-speaking people. I suggest that the charmers living here can be influenced by the open tradition that prevails in neighbouring Belarus. I have recorded a number of charms here.

How much does your mythology research interact with your charms research? Or are they two largely separate fields?

These are distinct yet interconnected fields of research. After the publication of my book *Metaphors of Fire* [6], which focused on images of fire in Baltic mythology, I started to research charms. In the beginning, the two fields of research were like two worlds apart with no bridge between them. I focused mainly on the structure and typology of verbal charms, and my research was more philological in nature [7 and 8]. This led to the typological system of Lithuanian verbal charms and the 2008 academic publication *Lithuanian Verbal Healing Charms* [9], which covered the entire corpus of healing charms.

From then on, I shifted my focus to looking at the emic perspective in charms research – folk terminology, practice of charms, including prayers, rituals and the ethnomedical context, as well as the role of charmers in society [10, 11, 12, 13]. This is closely related to the fields of mythology and religion, as practitioners of verbal charms perceive illnesses as entities. Their identification and treatment is based not only on the power of the charms or charmers themselves, but also on knowledge of mythical cosmology. For instance, erysipelas, known in Lithuanian as *rožė* ('rose'), is a fiery disease that can be caused by cold water. In the healing practice, we can see the charmer's effort to find a

balance between the two cosmological elements, fire and water [14]. Or in the case of snake-bite, the charmer addresses the king of snakes or even the Earth goddess, as snake venom is associated with the power of the Earth. Here, the Earth appears not only as a cosmological element, but also as a deity. It is referred to as 'the Sacred Earth' or 'Mother Earth'. Some Lithuanian verbal charms are, in fact, pre-Christian prayers addressed to the Sun, the New Moon, the Earth, and the Wind, which were regarded as deities in Lithuanian mythology. I believe that charms and charming are a living thread that connects charming practice to the pre-Christian Lithuanian religion. Therefore, researching them contributes to the study of Baltic religion.

Your Lithuanian Verbal Healing Charms opened up the Lithuanian corpus for many domestic and foreign researchers. What were your models and goals for this publication?

When preparing this publication, my aim was to reveal the scope of the corpus of Lithuanian verbal healing charms. Until then, it had been unclear which of the published charms were original and which had been published previously. My first task, therefore, was to identify the primary sources. Some charm texts had been published two or three times, or even more often. For example, the collection of charms made by Mansikka was published repeatedly on many occasions. In 1931, the Lithuanian zoologist and folklore collector Jurgis Elisonas republished Mansikka's charms against snakes [15]. In 1940, Pranė Stukėnaitė- Decikienė, a Lithuanian ethnologist, published a substantial compilation of charms that had been collected by Mansikka in eastern Lithuania [16]. These charms were not taken from Mansikka's published work, but from his manuscripts held in the Lithuanian Folklore Archives. Finally, in 1968, dozens of Mansikka's charms were published for a fourth time. This was when folklorist Kazys Grigas selected the most poetic ones and included them in the fifth volume of a representative collection of Lithuanian folklore [17]. When I started working with charms, I began by building a database to identify repeated variants.

My next goal was to develop a typological system of Lithuanian healing verbal charms. This should not be a surprise, as studies of Lithuanian folklore are still very much focused on typologies. This extends beyond narratives to proverbs, riddles and even folk songs. For example, the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, where

I work, is well known for having created an extensive typological card catalogue of folk songs, as well for publishing 26 typological volumes of *Lietuvių liaudies dainynas* ['The Book of Folk Songs'] [18]. This work is still ongoing. Therefore, building a typological system of verbal charms seemed to me like a modest ambition compared to the typology of folk songs containing hundreds of thousands texts. However, my publication of charms differs from *Lietuvių liaudies dainynas* and other typological publications in that it contains all the Lithuanian charm texts I was able to compile at the time, rather than simply representative examples.

My third goal was to make the Lithuanian charm corpus accessible for comprehensive research in Lithuania and abroad. International conferences organised by the ISFNR Committee on Charms, Charmers and Charming have contributed significantly to my understanding of the need for international academic representation of all types of Lithuanian verbal charms. However, in Lithuania, research into Lithuanian charms is progressing slowly, with few people showing an interest in the subject. Paradoxically, though, *Lithuanian Verbal Healing Charms* has attracted considerable interest from the public. Even though it has long been out of print, I still receive letters from people who want to have this book. I guess some of them are trying out verbal charms, either for their own well-being or to help others.

The 2005 compendium on cd-rom is now hard to access because of its now-old format, whereas the 2008 book, while it may be out of print, can still be read anyone found finds it in a library. I wonder what your reflections about the accessibility of the charm-texts you have painstakingly curated might be, and about the question of digitisation more broadly?

Indeed, technology changes fast and gets outdated fast, while books last. I once thought about moving the database of Lithuanian charms to an online platform, but for various reasons this idea was postponed. Over time, my understanding of what such a database should be like also changed. This is also connected with the digitisation of the Lithuanian Folklore Archives, which hold many manuscripts of verbal charms, most of which have not yet been digitised. Still, I am sure that this material will be available online sooner or later. It could eventually become an international project: Aigars Lielbārdis, who works with Latvian verbal

charms, intends to bring together material from across the Baltic region into a joint database. But this is something for the future.

Do you feel that the Lithuanian healing charms have much in common with other corpora (I am thinking here of a comparison with the Latvian corpus, but also the Polish and Belarusian, or also more broadly the German-language and Russian-language corpora)?

One might expect Lithuanian verbal charms to be most similar to the Latvian ones, since our languages belong to the same Baltic language branch, and we are, moreover, neighbours. However, when it comes to folklore, things are more complicated. While we share similar folk narratives, proverbs, and riddles with Latvians, our folk traditions diverge significantly in the domain of folk songs. Latvian songs tend to have mythological plots, whereas Lithuanian songs are mostly lyrical. Verbal charms also differ significantly: Latvians have many types of narrative charms, whereas in Lithuania, there are few. I have identified around only 30 common charm types in Lithuania and Latvia, most of which are short formulas, counting-down charms, or dialogical charms. However, it is worth noting that, like the Eastern Slavs, the Latvians have a large collection of mythological narratives within their corpus of charms. Narratives like these are very rare in Lithuania. They may have existed centuries ago, but over time they disappeared, largely due to the Catholic Church's efforts to combat pagan practices. The same probably happened to Lithuanian mythological songs.

In turn, the corpus of Lithuanian charms shares similarities with those of the Eastern Slavs, particularly the Belarusians. We can find several dozen parallels with Belarusian charms, perhaps even more than with Latvian ones. However, there are also almost no narrative parallels. Here, I am not referring to migratory Christian charm-types such as **Three Roses** or **Flum Jordan**, which are widespread throughout Europe and were most likely disseminated to Lithuania from Poland.

What aspects of charms research are you particularly looking forward to in the future?

Currently, I am primarily interested in the ritual of charming and its various components, including the actions performed by charmers during healing practices and the tools they employ (e.g. water, bread, flour, and salt). Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that such tools are used not only for practical reasons (e.g. rye flour reduces pain and fever in cases of erysipelas), but also for their symbolic properties. To illustrate, water, being a fluid substance, is emblematic of the act of purifying a person or animal of ailments from within, or of submerging illness in the depths of the waters. Another significant property of water is transparency, which is associated with light and purity. It is no coincidence that springs, especially those flowing east, are considered sacred and associated with healing powers in Lithuania. Another illustration of the symbolic significance of tools for practitioners of charms is black rye bread, which was often used to treat snakebites. In Lithuania, rye bread was considered sacred because of the leaven, which was an expression of the household deities. If the bread rose well, it meant that the home was safe and happy; if the leaven was bad, it was a sign of misfortune. In my book *The Blossoming Cup: The Beverages and Rituals of the Balts* [19], I wrote extensively about the importance of leaven and fermented beverages in Lithuanian rituals. In Lithuanian mythology, the fermentation process is also associated with Perkūnas, the god of thunder. According to folk beliefs, a fire caused by lightning could only be extinguished using fermented milk or another fermented substance. I would like to emphasise that in Baltic, Germanic and Slavic mythology, the god of thunder is the enemy of snakes. This is why folk beliefs recommend taking a piece of bread into the forest to prevent snakebites and why charmers would say charms over bread to be given to a person or animal that has been bitten by a snake.

Another area of research that I find very intriguing is the power, role and status of charmers within the community. My project involves comparing twenty-first-century field research material with historical narratives and folklore, particularly folk stories about charmers and wizards. My research will also focus on unravelling the intricate connections between charmers and priests of the ancient Lithuanian religion, a subject documented in historical sources from the 16th to the 18th centuries. I am also intrigued by the various specific roles of healers and diviners, which were meticulously detailed by the Prussian

historian Matthias Praetorius in the early 18th century. He provided detailed descriptions of their customs, which included fortune-telling using birds, water, fire, smoke, and many other techniques. Some of the described diviners acted like charmers — they knew how to change the direction of the wind, charm fire, or summon 'kaukučiai' (mythical creatures that multiply goods) to people's homes. I would like to take a closer look at how the status and functions of charmers, diviners and wizards evolved.

I am fascinated by the fact that much of the research into Lithuanian verbal charms is intwined with Baltic mythology and religion. Many years ago, the Lithuanian mythologist Norbertas Vėlius suggested that studying verbal charms and ethnomedicine could offer a fresh perspective on the study of Baltic mythology. The more I think about it, the more I agree with him.

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