

CHARMS AGAINST WORMS IN WOUNDS: THE TEXT AND THE RITUAL

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The article traces the origin of the Eastern and Western Slavic spells against worms in wounds as a result of intersection of the believes, folk motives, magical acts, and the dialectal words.

Keywords: spells, Slavs, folklore, ritual, diseases of livestock, dialectal speech

In the magical folklore of the Eastern and Western Slavs, as well as of the Germanic tribes, short verbal charms are known that are said over a wound that has gone septic and in which fly larvae, or even worms, are to be found. Most often such charms are cast over farm animals (horses, cows, sheep, pigs), but sometimes, though less frequently over people.

There are several types of charms against worms in wounds in Slavic folklore. In some of them, the worms are invited to a wedding in the hope that they will leave the body of a sick animal; another type of charm implements the countdown model (usually from 9 to 0), which symbolizes decrease/reduction and, in the end, reduces the disease to zero; the third type of charms is based on the motif of taking the worms out of the body of the sick animal in a subsequent manner, starting from its head and finishing with its paws or tail. The main narrative types of charms against worms have recently been reviewed by Tatiana Volodina on the basis of the materials related to Eastern and Western Slavic and Germanic charms (Volodina 2012). She has managed to find a connection between Slavic and Germanic texts and to follow their dynamics in time and space.

In addition to these narrative types, the Eastern and Western Slavs know a further group of charms against worms in wounds. These charms are accompanied by a small ritual. Essentially, a person (a healer) finds a certain plant, bends its top to the ground, and utters a brief charm. By addressing the plant, the person who says the charm is asking it to remove the worms from the wounds by promising to release the plant if it helps, and if it does not, by threatening to keep it forced down against the ground. This ritual has not been properly researched yet, although in the literature concerning Slavic ethnobotany it is referred to repeatedly (see: Zelenin 1937: 605; Kolosova 2009: 245–246).

The ritual and short charms that accompany it have been recorded since the 18th century until recently. There are also reports of them having been known to the Czechs, Moravians, Poles, Lithuanians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Russians. The following are available at our disposal:

- 8 Eastern Czech and Moravian charms;
- 8 Polish charms from the territory of Poland and at least 1 from Lithuania;
- between 6 and 10 Lithuanian charms: D. Vaitkevičienė cites at least 6 texts that help get rid of worms and several similar charms which people used to say to protect themselves against other diseases (Vaitkevičienė 2008, Nr. 28–41); M. V. Zavjalova simply mentions that more than 10 texts addressing a thistle against worms were recorded in Lithuania (Zavjalova 2006: 227);
- 6 Ukrainian charms;
- 4 Belorussian charms (one more is known that was published in *Dobrovol'skii* 1, p. 211, nr. 2, but it cannot be regarded as authentic);
- 20 Russian charms from the territories of Povolzh'ye (Volga Region), Central and Southern Russia.

And the last thing to mention is the geography of the ritual. This ritual is actively represented in Moravia, but it seems that it does not exist in Slovakia; it is widely represented in Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine (mainly in the west and south-west), but is little known in Belarus; in the extensive territory of the European part of Russia this ritual is spread all across the area, except for the Russian North. Such uneven distribution of the charm ritual we are interested in among the Slavs is most likely indicative of the fact that its origins should probably be sought for outside of the Slavic tradition. In any case, two circumstances should be taken into account: firstly, the fact that in the Germanic tradition, as we have already mentioned, several other types of charms against worms are known, and secondly, rituals of bending a thistle down to the ground, similar to the Slavic ones, were recorded in Eastern Prussia in particular, in the area of the intersection of the Germanic, Slavic, and Baltic populations (see: Mannhardt, Heuschkel 1904/1: 15 and remark 2).

The oldest of the charms we know so far that is related to this ritual dates back to 1700 and was found in a Czech book on herbal medicine. In this charm someone calling himself 'Jan' requested that a thistle release someone called Dorota from worms:

Ve iménu Boha Odce, Boha Syna, Boha Ducha Svatého. Já Jan shejbám tě, zakrývám tě, mořím tě, bodláče, dokud' nedobydeš Dorotě červa z její hlavy, z jejího těla, z jejího ze všeho oudu. Toho mi dopomáhej Bůh + Odtec, Bůh + Syn, Bůh + Duch Svatý, všejeden Hospodin, jeden Bůh od věků na věky. Amen.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I, Jan, am going to hit you, to torment you, the thistle, until you release Dorota from the worm and take it out of her head, her body, and all of her limbs. Please help me, Father, Son, the Holy Spirit, the One and Only God since the beginning of time and for good. (Směs 1912: 206)

And even though this charm directly refers to a human, in the Slavic sources of later periods this ritual as well as the charm formulae included in it, were more typically used in relation to sick animals, such as horses, although sometimes they were indeed said over a human (who had worms or larvae in his or her wound or teeth); on rare occasions such charms were said over garden and field crops (cereals, cabbage, etc.) that had been struck by caterpillars and other insect pests. Let us have a closer look at the ritual and the texts that accompany it.

TIME, PLACE, AND CIRCUMSTANCES THAT ACCOMPANY THE RITUAL

Just like any other magical practice, the expulsion of worms from wounds is ritualized in its particulars. This ritual is usually carried out at dawn before the sun rises, but sometimes also at sunset; occasionally the ritual is done repeatedly morning and evening over three days; if the cattle is black, then the plant is bent westwards, and in other cases – eastwards; the plant is forced against the ground with a special, usually flat, rock obtained from underneath a drain-pipe, etc., and after the plant is loosened, the stone is placed back in its original location; while practicing the ritual, sometimes the animal is taken closer to the plant, although most often this is not the case; in the charms that are said over the animal, the colour of the animal must be described as well as other distinguishing features, and the spot on the body where the suppurated wound is found is pointed at, like, for example, in the following Belarusian charm:

Dziwanna... kab ty... karowie burej z rany u pachwinie wyhnała czerwi
So that you, Dziwanna, ... would expel the worms from the belly of the brown cow. (Wereńko 1896: 226, Vitebsk Governorate)

An analogue of this was also found in Russian:

Репейник, репейник, выведи червей из правой ноги у коровы шерстью черной, а рога калачом.
Burdock, burdock, take the worms out of the right leg of the cow with black hair and rounded horns. (Borisovskij 1870: 20, Nizhny Novgorod Governorate)

However, the most curious thing is that many descriptions mentioned that a blooming plant must be used for the ritual (Talko-Hryncewicz 1893: 284; Koro­vashko 1997, No 61, and others). This means that here we are dealing with the seasonal association of a remedial ritual, i.e. it can only be done in summer time, in the short period when certain plants are in bloom. It is no coincidence that this magical procedure was called *Лечить барана летом от червей* ‘to deworm a sheep in summer’ (Serebrennikov 1918: 24, Perm Krai). A calendric determination for remedial rituals is quite unusual and is definitely worth notice. Furthermore, it makes us think about such a phenomenon as the annual calendar of the healing and veterinary practice, which is similar to seasonal calendars of household and field activities.

SELECTING THE PLANT AND ITS PERSONIFICATION

Thorny weeds are often used as a magic tool in rituals; see such phytonyms as: Czech *bodlak*, Pol. *oset*, Russian *мордвин*, *татарин*, *пеней*, *чертополох* and others. These phytonyms are not the name of separate types, but, as a rule, are common terms for thorny weeds that belong to different genera (on this phenomenon, see: Kolosova 2009: 234). Occasionally the nettle, which is a stinging plant that can also be used as an apotropaion, just as thorny weeds can, is also addressed in charms. This is mainly true of the Ukrainian and Belarusian traditions, and sometimes also of Poland. Charms addressed such a plant as *коровяк* (Lat. *Verbascum*): Pol. *dziwanna*, Bel. dial. *дзіванна*, *дзівонна* (Sloŭnik belaruskich gavorak 1980, 2: 50), Ukr. dial. *дивина* (SUM 2: 270), which is regarded as a medical plant, but which is neither thorny nor stinging. Also, in one Belarusian charm *бульняк* (*bulnyak*) (Bel. *быльнік*) is mentioned, while one of the Russian charms mentions *чернобыл* (*chernobyl*) – both dialectal words meaning ‘wormwood’ (Lat. *Artemisia*), a plant which has a strong smell and is also used in magic apotropaically. Finally, the Russian charms refer to the plant they are address merely as *grass*.

The selection of the plant is not only determined by its botanical genus. If the charm deals with a thistle, the plant with a large head or with an odd number of heads is selected, the sex of the animal is focussed on: male parents are healed by the male form of mullein, while female parents are healed by the female form (Rokossowska 1900: 461, Volhynian Governorate).

Charms display a tendency towards “forming” the personal characteristics of a plant (to which the charm is addressed) – mainly by means of various supplementary terms (e.g. personal names, kinship terms, titles and other signs of social status, etc.), which specify the object of personification. At the same time, this trend manifests itself in different traditions in various ways.

As it appears from the charms, the Russians attribute high social status to the plant (thistle, mullein), hence the address, such as

Ты царь трава Чертополог; Царь татарин! Царь мордвинник! Ты трава царица; Князь татарин, стоишь ты на князьями выше всех и над царями выше всех; Татарник, татарник, боярин!

You are the Grass Tsar – the Thistle; Tatarin Tsar! The Mordvinnik Tsar! You are the Grass Tsarina; Tatarin Prince, you stand above all of the princes and above all of the tsars; Tatarnik, tatarnik, the boyar!

Sometimes kinships terms are used in the address to the plant: *Матушка крапивушка, святое дерево!* *Матушка трын-трава* 'Mother nettle, the holy tree! Mother *tryn-trava*' The Polish and the Ukrainian traditions use propitiatory and respectful forms when addressing the plants, such as *Prześliczna panno, piękna dziewanno* 'Beautiful pani, beautiful mullein', *Mój panie oście* 'my thistle pan', *Dzivanje, moj dobry Panie* 'Mullein, my dear pan', *Дыванна-панна*, etc. We have not found similar addresses in the charms of the Czechs and the Moravians.

ACTIONS WITH THE PLANTS, THEIR SYMBOLISM, TYPOLOGICAL PARALLELS

As we have already mentioned, the plant that the charm addresses is often threatened, and the threat is expressed both verbally (in the charm) and in the form of actions: the plant is bent down to the ground, and its head is pressed against the ground in one way or another – it might be tied down by the stem, pressed against the ground with a stone, or pinned into the ground with a stick.

The charm usually contains a mere threat:

Dzivanje, moj dobry panie, wypędz z kapusty robaki. Kiedy wypędzisz odpuszczu, a nie wypędzisz, nie odpuszczu.

Mullein, my dear pan, expel the worms from the cabbage. When you do so, I will release you, and if you do not, I will not. (Vaitkevičienė 2008, No. 1613, a Polish charm recorded in Lithuania)

Tatarin, tatarin, if you expel the worms, I will let you go, and if you do not, I will break you! (Pjatnickij 1873: 226, Tula Governorate).

But sometimes the actions performed on the plant may have a symbolic meaning. In this case, forcing the top of the plant against the ground has various possible designations:

– “to break/cut off/rip the head off the plant”: as in the western Czech charm

Bodláčku, ja tobě tvou hlavu zlomím, pod kámen ti ji vložím, nepustím tebe, až mně nevyženeš z mého hovada červy z jeho místa.

Thistle, I will break your head and put it under the stone, not release you until you expel the worms from my animal and the place where it lives. (Adámek 1900: 236)

the Belarusian charm

Чуешь, крапиво: се не выпадут робаки из червонного вола, я тоби голову здоймаю.

Can you hear me, nettle: if the worms do not fall out of the red bull, I will rip your head off. (Zelenin 1914: 440)

– “to lock the plant in jail”: as in the Moravian charm

Pcháčo, bodláčo... Tebe já zavírám do žaláňa a spíš ti nepropustím, dokad' tech červů z ráne nevyženeš.

Thorn, thistle... I'm locking you in jail, and I will not release you until you expel the worms from the wound. (Bartoš 1892: 272)

– “to foredoom the plant to torture”: as in the Polish charm

Dotąd cię będę męczył oście – dopokąd nie wyjdą z mojej krowy goście.

I am going to torture you until the unwanted guests leave my cow. (Siarkowski 1879: 57)

– “to eradicate the root and the genus of the plant”, i.e. to eliminate the plant and all of its future “offspring”: the Russian charm

Burdock, burdock... unless you expel the worms, I will eradicate you and all of your subgenera. (Borisovskij 1870: 20)

The ritual can involve reverse actions, too, if the plant does what is requested and expels the worms. It is believed that when the worms disappear, and the wound is clean, then the plant has to be untied, and the stone removed, so that it can straighten up again, which is said in the Russian charm:

Матушка крапивушка, святое деревцо! Есть у меня р.Б. и.р., есть у него в зубах черви и ты оных выведи; ежели не выведешь, то я тебя высушу; а ежели выведешь, то я тебя в третий день отпущу.

Mother nettle, the holy tree! I have the r.B. i.r., and it has worms in its teeth, and you should expel them; if you do not, I will dry you up; if you do, I will release you on the third day. (Afanas'ev 1872: 77)

With this, the plant is not only “released“ from confinement but is also thanked for help:

Bodláčko, já tebe propóščím z tvýho vězení a děkuju ti za to zpomožení.
Thistle, I am releasing you from your confinement, and I am thanking you for your help. (Bartoš 1892: 272)

People used to believe that if you did not release the plant, the cattle would suffer, get sick, or die.

In the Moravian, Polish, Ukrainian, and Belarusian charms, no imperative is used when addressing the plant with a request to expel the worms: the charms simply say that the healer will not release the plant until the worms leave the wound (*leave, fly out, spill out*):

– the Moravian charm

Kopřivo, já tě zlámo hlavičko, aby vepadale naši bily svince červi z vocaso.
Nettle, I will break your head if the worms do not fall out from underneath the tail of our white piggy. (Bartoš 1892: 272, translation: Velmezova 2004, No. 297)

– the Polish charm

Oście, oście, dotąd cię nie puszczę, póki z tego zwierzęcia nie wylecą goście.
Thistle, thistle, I will not release you until the unwanted guests fly out of this animal. (Biegeleisen 1929: 468)

– the Ukrainian charm

Поти тебе так буду держати, поки у Н... не випаднуть черві.
I will hold you like this until the worms fall out of N. (Talko-Hryniewicz 1893: 284)

– the Belarusian charm

Oto ja ciebie zginam dziewanno na zachód słońca, i póty cię nie puszczę, aż nim u (тут указать вид животного и масть) nie wypadna robaki.
I am bending you, mullein, westwards, and I will not let you go until the worms fall out of the (colour) animal. (Szukiewicz 1910: 123)

There is a completely different situation in the Russian tradition, where the plant is addressed in imperative mood, ordering it to expel the worms from the wound. To express this order, three verbs are used in Russian charms: *to lead out, to expel* and *to bend down / turn down*. And while the verbs *to lead out* and *to expel* are quite clear in the context of the charm and express the idea of the forced expulsion of the worms from the wound (*to lead the worms out, to expel*

the worms), the verbs *to bend down / break off* are not that clear in expressing this idea. Some uncertainty of its meaning is mainly related to the fact that in charms, this verb can have two objects – a plant and the worms.

In a number of examples, *to bend down* refers to the name of the action done by the person who is doing the ritual: the person approaches the plant and bends it to the ground but does not break it (i.e. *bends it down*). Focusing on this meaning (“to bend down the plant without breaking it”), the ritual has been named “bending down the plant”, for example, *bending down the grass* (Dal’ 1845: 40).

In other cases, the verb “to bend down” means the action a thorny plant is supposed “to do” in relation to the worms in the wound, and the object of this action is not the plant, but the worms: *Матушка трънь-трава, заломи червей у такой-то коровы* ‘Mother *tryn-trava*, break the worms off the cow’ (Gusev 1893: 323). This meaning is also expressed in ritual terminology, and, in the result, the ritual gets the name of, for example, *breaking the worms off the mordvinnik*, where *the mordvinnik* is one of the names of the thistle (Sadovnikova 1874, No. 40, Simbirsk Governorate). We would like to draw attention to the fact that in the Russian dialects, the structures of the preposition *na* ‘on’ with a noun in the accusative case (a noun that is having something done to it) corresponds to the structure in the instrumental case without a preposition in the literary language (i.e. the instrument by or with which the subject achieves or accomplishes the action); so, here the noun in the accusative case performs the function of the action instrument (SRNG 1983, 19: 97). Thus the name of the ritual of *breaking the worms off the mordvinnik* means to expel or to eradicate the worms with the help of the *mordvinnik*.

It is not without reason that we have had trouble trying to define the exact meaning of the verbs *to bend down / break off* in the charms we have considered above. On the one hand, as we have already said, in the Russian charms, *to bend down / break off* alternates with the verbs *to expel* and *to eradicate*, which is why this verb can have a meaning similar to eradication or expulsion of something or someone. As a rare parallel to the usage of the verbs *to bend down / break off* with the meaning of *to expel* or *to remove* we would like to cite the Belarusian expression *заламіць русалку асінаю* ‘to break off a mermaid with an aspen’, which means “to expel a mermaid with an aspen” (the aspen was regarded as a strong apotropaion). This is how the seasonal demon “*the mermaid*” was referred to in Belarus when it was expelled so that it would not break spikes in the field nor ruin the harvest. In particular, this dialectal expression appears in the Belarusian song sung on Trinity Sunday:

Правяду русалку, правяду,
Да й асінкаю заламлю,
Каб тая русалка не хадзіла,
Майго жыта не ламіла
(Vesnavuja pesni 1979, No. 284, Gomel Region).

On the other hand, in some Russian dialects, the verbs *to bend down / break off* have such meanings as “to break, to ruin the integrity; to destruct, to make useless, to spoil; to eradicate, to destroy; to kill, to tear to pieces, to cripple” (Pskovskoj oblastnoi slovar’ 1995, Vol. 11: 308), i.e. gravitating towards the idea of destruction and annihilation. To that end, the expression “*to break the worms off the mordvinnik*” could be interpreted as “to eradicate the worms with the help of a thistle”.

In addition to changing the object of the action (*to bend down / break off the worms*), in the texts of the Russian charms the verbs *to bend down / break off* involve other words that contain the same root in the lexical and notional game. In the result, in one single charm one can come across such pairs as *заломить* and *сломасть*, *заломить* and *отломить* (all of these words have the same root and mean *to bend down / break off*):

На море, на океане, на острове Буяне растёт Мордвин трава. Мордвин трава, заломи червей. Если не заломишь, то я тебе голову сломаю.
Mordvin grass grows in the sea, in the ocean, on the Buyan island. Mordvin grass, break off the worms. (Bulusheva 1994: 64, Saratov Governorate)

Бульняк-бульнячына, белая на табе цвяціна, загну тябе, заломлю тябе, покуля у моёй скотины, чорной шарстины, черви повывыспаюцца, а тогда разогну тябе, отломлю тябе.
Wormwood, you are white, I will be bending you down, I will be breaking you off until the worms fall out of my cattle, which is black in colour, and then I will release you. (Romanov: 135, No. 56, Mogilev Governorate)

Such building up of verbs united by the meaning of destruction and eradication (*to break* means “to destroy, to tear apart”) intensifies the cumulative magical effect of charms and the ritual on the whole.

In a wider typological sense, the ritual of “breaking off” the worms can be regarded as an individual case of using the threatening strategy in relation to plants, which fits into a wider context of magical rituals. The plant is addressed with a threat, and relevant actions are done in order to “make” this plant release a human or an animal from a disease or some other evil. For example, in Montenegro, during an attack of fever, the tops of blackberry branches were forced against the ground, with the charmer saying: *kad mene pušte groznice*,

tad ću ja vas pustiti ‘when the fever releases me, I will release you’ (Usačeva 1988: 91). In Belarus (Vitebsk Governorate), when something was stolen, the owner tied up and forced a handful of grass to the ground, and then pressed it down with a stone, hoping that it would help him to get back what had been stolen (Nikiforovskij 1897: 85).

In addition to individual cases, many examples of using the threatening strategy in relation to plants were recorded in the Eastern Slavic tradition. In particular, we are dealing with the charms that are said when someone suffers from throat diseases (mainly with flu), many of which are called *глот*, *глотанец*, *дубоглод(т)*, etc. (‘throat disease’; all of these words have the same root as the word *горло* meaning ‘throat’ in Russian (SRNG 1970, 6: 201–202; 1972, 8: 238–239, Mid. Rus. *глотать*, *глотка* ‘throat’). As a rule, these charms address an oak, which is requested to “take away” a throat disease, by threatening that otherwise harm will be done to the tree. Here is a typical charm of such kind:

Дуб, дубанец, добрый молодец, возьми с имярека глотанец! А не возьмешь, проглочу с ветками и с кореньями.

Oak, the good lad, release this Jane / John Doe from throat disease. If you do not, I will swallow you, your branches and your roots. (Gorbunov 1894: 3, Orenburg Governorate)

The Eastern and Western Slavic charms against worms in wounds considered above are peculiar in methodological respect, since they show that the symbolism of charms, their motives and language are formed at the intersection of ritual, folklore imagery, and dialect speech.

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