

Jesús Suárez López, *Fórmulas mágicas de la tradición oral asturiana. Invocaciones, ensalmos, conjuros*, Gobierno del Principado de Asturias, Ediciones Trea, 2016, 701 p.

We are dealing here with a remarkable book, which will undoubtedly mark the future researches on the history of the verbal magical formulae and on the practices of charming. It focuses on the magical formulae which have been used in the province of Asturias up to nowadays, and presents an impressive inventory of 600 texts. An important part of this corpus had been published in scattered books and journals since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The book also includes an important amount of 343 recently collected, unedited formulae: Jesús Suárez López has been collecting them since 1990, and his most recent field work which gave him the opportunity to collect magical formulae took place in 2014 (see p. 36, 170, 227, etc.). Xosé Antón Fernández Ambás and Ramsés Ilesies occasionally collaborated to this impressive work, and their contribution consists of magical formulae they collected after 2013, which are published here for the first time (p. 36).

The book has an important comparative dimension in so far as the Asturias texts are constantly compared to other similar texts, in Spanish and in other European language, which are used mainly in Spain, but also in other regions of Europe or in South America. The diachronic dimension of the analysis is also significant, and the author often brings into discussion ancient formulae (mainly Latin), medieval or 16<sup>th</sup> century texts in order to establish the tradition of the Asturias texts.

The book is divided into three parts: a short methodological introduction (p. 15-63), the anthology of texts (p. 63-670), and the bibliography (p. 671-695).

In the *Introduction*, the magical formulae are defined in opposition to other oral formulae in respect to three criteria: the performer's attitude, the attitude of the Church toward their use and their transmission. According to Jesús Suárez López, the magical formula, the performer of which aims to control and manipulate the nature, is opposed to the prayer (*oración*) and the supplication (*plegaria*), the performer of which shows an attitude of submission and reverence in agreement with the religious feeling. Moreover, prayers and supplications can be known by the whole community, their use for granting a certain grace or favour is accepted and even encouraged by the Church, while the verbal formula with a magical character is prohibited by the church, is usually secret and is transmitted from generation to generation, in the strictest familiar intimacy (p. 20).

The author establishes three main categories of magical formulae: invocations (*invocaciones*), conjurations (*conjuros*) and charms (*ensalmos*).

The invocations are defined as usually short requests, most of which are addressed to celestial bodies.

The conjurations are described as verbal formulae directed to a demonical or mythical character, a meteorological phenomenon, a harmful animal or a maleficent agent in order to counteract its negative influence or destructive power (p. 21); they are considered to be more complex than the invocations, they are imperative, and are usually accompanied by ritual acts charged with a basic symbolism (p. 22).

The verbal formulae oriented to a divine figure, a saint or a holy figure, in order to acquire the recovery of an illness or of a pain through supernatural meanings are labelled as charms (*ensalmos*). They have a curative function, their performance also includes the use of natural elements (of animal, mineral, or vegetal), and they must be performed repeatedly for a specific number of (consecutive) days. In opposition with the invocations and the conjurations, they have a more complex structure both in respect to verbal formulae and the execution of the ritual. Hence their typology is more varied, according to the variety of diseases meant to be healed (p. 22-23). Although the author organises the charms according to their function, in the *Introduction* he also lists eight categories of charms, established according with the typology of the verbal formulation and the *modus operandi* of the healing ritual: narrative charms (*ensalmos narrativos* or *historiolae*), imperative charms (*ensalmos imperativos*), supplicatory charms (*ensalmos rogativos*), sympathetic charms (*ensalmos simpateticos*), analogic charms (*ensalmos analogicos*), transfer charms (*ensalmos transferenciales*), enumerative charms (*ensalmos enumerativos*), figurative charms (*ensalmos figurativos*) (p. 24-28).

In the final part of the *Introduction*, the author focuses on the charmers, whose ages can vary from 12 (see p. 135: an invocation to a flute) to 94 (see p. 160: an invocation to find a lost needle), and on their narratives about the circumstances in which they learnt the magical formulae, about their functions and the decline of their use (p. 44-61).

The anthology of texts is the largest part of the book (p. 63-670). Each text is accompanied by information about the informant (name, age, origin), about the year it was collected and its editor(s), if any. Each group of texts with the same thematic is complemented by information about their function, the ritual context of their use, their geographic distribution, the earliest testimonies; the analysis also offers an important bibliography about other similar texts attested in other European regions.

The texts are organised according to the three categories delimited in the *Introduction*. Their variety is impressive, and the author's numerous comments help the reader to understand them, to perceive their originality, their inner

poetry and to connect them to other European charms. Many times however, a reader less experienced in reading this dialectal variety of Spanish might feel overwhelmed by the frequent alliterations and by the vocabulary of the texts, which either has regional features or displays a range array of new lexical creations.

Most of the invocations are organised in respect with the addressee. There are numerous invocations to stars (the sun, the (new) moon, the shooting star), but also to various animals (snails, ladybird, cricket, toad, turkey, hen, cuckoo, eagle, vulture, porcupine). Extremely interesting are the invocations addressed to musical instruments, such as the rustic flutes; in this case, the formulae are meant to ease the cut of the brunches of which these instruments are made, and to make the instruments sound good (p. 129-140).

Other formulae are used while seeding the hemp, or in order to find a lost needle or other small objects, to dry a wet sheet of paper. According to the author, most of this sub-category of texts are nowadays mere songs, but their comparison with similar ancient and modern texts proves their magical origin and function (p. 21).

Several texts similar to nursery rhymes are also considered to have a magical character and are included in the category of invocations. They are meant to attract swarms of bees, to induce refractory cows to give their milk, to make butter (p. 169-184).

The conjurations form a rich category (p. 185-368). They are meteorological (against tempest, lightning, heavy rain, fog, for wolfs not to attack the cattle, against whirlwinds which are considered to be malefic), or are meant to protect against harmful animals (rodents, vermin, serpents, weasels, wolves) and mythological beings (the spirits which produce nightmares, the devilish assaults). The formulae against evil eye have an important place in the Asturias tradition (p. 348-368).

The most important category of magical formulae have a curative function. Many of these charms (*ensalmos*) (p. 369-670) refer to children's illnesses (aphthae, pinworms, hernia, children's muteness), to skin diseases (e.g. erysipelas, herpes zoster, ulcers, chilblains, burns), to eye illnesses (macula, sty), dislocations, fistulae, mastitis, haemorrhage, toothache, etc. An important part of them is supposed to heal cattle illnesses (p. 611-670).

The Asturias rich tradition of verbal magical formulae, in particular, and the Spanish tradition of verbal magical formulae, in general, mostly ignored before, are brought to light by this impressive book. Jesús Suárez López's efforts to gather a vast number of variable texts, his interest in the relation of the Asturias tradition with other (Spanish) traditions make this volume a

significant contribution for the study of charms, for the history of religion and, last but not least, of the Romance languages.

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