

## Book Review

### ***The Power of Words: Studies on Charms and Charming in Europe***

**Edited by James Kapaló, Éva Pócs, and William Ryan.**

**Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2013. 325 pages. IS BN: 978-615-5225-10-9 (hard cover).**

Traditional verbal charms are magic words: Speaking them causes changes in the physical world, and a person who knows these words can wield their power. The genre encompasses a variety of Lithuanian terms (burtažodžiai, maldelės, užkalbėjimai, etc.), and more broadly, it may also include curses (keiksmi); but Lithuanians often called them simply *žodžiai* (words). Although a few Lithuanian verbal charms were first published in 1846, systematic research did not begin until 1929, when a professor of Finnish folklore, Viljo Johannes Mansikka, published the results of his fieldwork in Lithuania. Mansikka's main interest was folk medicine (charms to stop headache, rheumatism, etc.), but Lithuanian folklorists soon discovered many additional charming topics, including, for example, prayers to the spirits of the moon (Mėnulis), hearth (Gabija), and earth (Žemyna), or words to freeze a thief. The first relatively complete overviews of the genre were published in the United States by folklorist Jonas Balys, beginning in 1951 with *Lithuanian Incantations and Charms*. Monumental steps forward were recently made by Daiva Vaitkevičienė, who published a CD-ROM of archival materials, *Lietuvių užkalbėjimų šaltiniai* (2005), and the 919-page bilingual Lithuanian-English collection, *Lietuvių užkalbėjimai: gydymo formulės / Lithuanian Verbal Healing Charms* (2008). A vast collection of Lithuanian charms and their many variants is now available to the next generation of researchers worldwide. The book reviewed here offers inspiration for new directions in analysis.

International comparative research on charms and charming traditions flourished in the first half of the twentieth century, but waned after World War II. The enterprise was revived in the twenty-first century by British scholar Jonathan Roper, who organized international conferences and edited two volumes to document the current state of the field: *Charms and Charming in Europe* (2004) and *Charms, Charmers, and Charming: International Research on Verbal Magic* (2009).

The third book in this series is *The Power of Words: Studies on Charms and Charming in Europe*, presenting chapters by thirteen scholars from ten countries (Finland, France, Hungary, Lithuania, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the USA). A variety of research approaches and arguments is divided into three thematic parts: Part I, "Genre, Classification, Terminology," revisits the history of charm studies in Norway, Gaelic-speaking lands, and Hungary, and surveys reference tools and concepts for international comparative research. Part II, "Historical and Comparative Studies," attempts to identify origins: Three scholars find the roots of folk charms in medieval Church writings, while a fourth—Daiva Vaitkevičienė (mentioned above)—offers examples of structurally and thematically similar Latvian, Lithuanian, Belarusian, and Russian charms to argue they are survivals of an ancient, common Balto-Slavic culture.

Folklorists who focus on texts alone often distinguish charms (words that aim to change the physical world) from prayers (words asking a supernatural being to change the physical world), and they most certainly classify healing charms separately from harmful curses. But this book's Part III, "Content and Function of Charms," blurs such seemingly clear boundaries. Analysis is guided by the words and beliefs of the folk who practice charming. Structural and thematic categories of charm versus prayer may not be foremost in a charmer's mind. Charms related to childbirth in Finland and Karelia, for example, often mention the Virgin Mary without addressing her directly, and traditional Orthodox prayers beseech Mary for help in childbirth. Is there a difference? People speak them for the same reason: helping a mother in labor. Part III thus expands attention from "lore," the texts of charms that we find in archives and manuscripts, to "folk," the living people who used these charms in their everyday life.

Much remains to be studied and discovered. How, for example, do charmers believe? A classic study by Finnish folklorist Juha Pentikäinen, *Oral Repertoire and World View* (1987), analyzed 1,592 items of folklore collected from one person, Marina Takalo, among them fifty incantations and many memorates about persons who wielded magic power. Takalo's worldview and beliefs were a complex combination of Orthodox religion and pre-Christian traditions. She definitely believed that charms work. But although she did distinguish between charms and prayers, her most fundamental beliefs were not in the power of words spoken by humans, but rather, in Fate, as ordained by the Christian God. What did Lithuanian folk charmers believe? Apparently, some belief in the magic power of words continued in the late-twentieth-century Lithuanian-American community, because, in 1951, Jonas Balys found it necessary to introduce his book of charms with this warning: "Attention, reader! The material published in this book is presented primarily for the purpose of scholarly folklore studies.

Nowadays these things are not appropriate for practical life. Prayers should be learned from prayer books; and sick people should consult a doctor...”

**Guntis Šmidchens**