

A Database of Romanian Love Charms

Sanda Golopentia (Department of French Studies)
Carole Mah (Scholarly Technology Group)
Elli Mylonas (Scholarly Technology Group)
Brown University
{sanda_golopentia@brown.edu, elli_mylonas}@brown.edu
carole.mah@gmail.com

Abstract

Romanian love charms can be interpreted semiotically by classifying and analyzing symbols and actions into meaningful categories. We have created a database and a website to support ongoing classification of the features of the charms. The metadata that is assigned to the charms is stored in a database, and the charms themselves are lightly encoded in XML.

Keywords: Charms, archive, Romanian, classification

Romanian charms stand out among European charms in their detail and the poetic expressiveness of their language, repaying careful study of their imagery, thematic components and language. Since the 18th c. charms and incantations have been collected and studied in Romania. Starting in the early 20th c., systematic collection by interdisciplinary teams has created rich collections for study, including transcriptions, anthropological information, and even videos of charms being performed.

Medicinal charms, however, have been the major focus of attention; love charms, when studied at all, have been treated as a subset of medicinal charms. The fundamental perspective of this project, proposes that love charms are not just a type of medicinal charm, but actually provide the basic prototype for medicinal charms. In their semiotic sphere, the physical manifestations of illness arise from a fundamental imbalance or error in matters of love or marriage. Correcting the imbalance also heals the illness.

Love charms also present special interest because they provide an understanding of women's lives and belief systems in Romanian culture. They are basically created and transmitted by women. Their language and images the helpers, plants, and other objects they refer to come from the feminine semantic universe.

Charms are recorded as a set of spoken verses, accompanied by a description of the actions that accompany them, both of which contain references to valuable symbolic information. Researchers need to classify symbols and actions into meaningful categories by using the images, symbols, and linguistic tropes in the charms, as well as the formal characteristics of their performance, such as the time when the charm is performed, number of times it is repeated, its stated purpose, and the geographical region it originates from.

This poster describes the planning and implementation of a website that allows the researcher to iteratively refine her classifications, in order to arrive at productive interpretive categories. Although this

is an ongoing project whose main goal is to further research into the semiotics of Romanian love charms, it is also a publication project that is providing a digital corpus for the benefit of other researchers. To that end, charms are entered in Romanian with accompanying historical metadata. English translations will be provided for all the charms, but are being added more slowly. Notes and other commentary are also provided when applicable. The charms can be browsed and searched by visitors to the site.

The website also serves as a laboratory for the researcher to classify the features of the charms. When she enters a new charm, she has a set of fundamental categories such as Magic Acts (Gesture), Magic Acts (Speech), Magic Adversaries, Magic Animals, Magic Auxiliaries, Magic Objects, Magic Plants, Magic Substances, each of which has a set of values to choose from. In addition to selecting a value from a predetermined list, the researcher can also add an unrestricted gloss or refinement in an accompanying field. All this information is stored in a database, so it is possible to then present the researcher with sorted views that allow her to understand her choices and distributions of keyword values. Using these views, she can refine and correct the classifications of individual charms, and she can also refine and adjust the keywords themselves.

Users can also engage with the research agenda by using the classification views as a starting point for browsing the charms. This lets them approach the corpus from the analytical perspective of the researcher, although they cannot, of course, make any changes.

This project is based on well understood technologies and encoding formats. Charm text is encoded in XML, using a targeted DTD, and is stored in a database, along with its metadata. The result of providing good tools for sorting and browsing metadata, however, is a powerful tool for ongoing research, and at the same time, general access to the materials.

References

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