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SANDA GOLOPENȚIA

# Desire Machines

A Romanian  
Love Charms Database

*Spandugino*

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**I**

**THE ROMANIAN LOVE  
CHARMS DATABASE**

## Overview

The Romanian Love Charms Database (RLCD) is (a) a small database; (b) focused on a severely restricted domain of folk magic; (c) initially meant as a publishing tool; and (d) currently developed for its potential to enhance research on live (non-autonomous) texts—that is, texts that maintain a direct connection with the biography of their users. It is small inasmuch as, even if it were to incorporate later on—as I hope it will<sup>1</sup>—love charms from a number of other cultures, the relevant inventory for each culture would hardly go beyond a few hundred items. It is a focused database, since, even if it will contain many types of documents other than love charms, the latter will have a clearly different and auxiliary status with respect to the former (which represent the core of the RLCD). The Romanian Love Charms Database instrumented the preparation of the camera-ready copy of the present volume, by making it possible to control an unusually intricate (and—what is more important—bilingual) corpus for editing and typesetting purposes. It is a database meant for research, inasmuch as, by simply subjecting several hundred love charm items to rigorously homogeneous formal treatment, it renders visible unexpected structural relationships that

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<sup>1</sup>When incorporating love charms from other cultures, the name of the database will change to *Love Charms Database*.

have not been studied before in anthropology, folklore, or cultural semiotics, but are worth exploring for both theoretical and methodological reasons.

The developer of the database is Sanda Golopenția (Professor of French Studies at Brown University—currently, Professor Emerita at the same university). Dr. Allen Renear, Director of the Brown University Scholarly Technology Group, is the database consultant for the project. Each of the charms was translated by a team including Sanda Golopenția (for Romanian) and consisting of Will Robins, Dr. Catherine Sama (with a Ph.D. from Brown University in Italian Literature), and Laura D'Angelo (for American English). Dr. Peg Hausman (with a Ph.D. from Brown University in Comparative Literature), Robert Austerlitz (Professor of Linguistics at Columbia University), Marguerite Dorian (freelance writer and translator), Blossom Kirschenbaum (Academic Research Assistant at the Comparative Literature Department, Brown University, and freelance translator), James Augerot (Professor of Linguistics and Romanian at the University of Washington), and Charles Carlton (Professor of Romance Linguistics and Romanian Language at the University of Rochester) acted as translation consultants; their helpful comments are gratefully acknowledged here<sup>2</sup>.

While basically consisting of love charms already published in Romania, the database and the present volume also include a number of ten love charms which were never published before. This is the case of charm scenarios 28, 30, and 41 (collected by Ștefania Cristescu in Runcu, Gorj county, Romania, during the months of June and July in 1930); of charm scenarios 29, 34, 35, 36, 55, and 109 (also collected by Ștefania Cristescu in Șanț, Bistrița Năsăud county, Romania, during the summer of 1935), as well as the charm scenario

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<sup>2</sup>The order of listing reflects the depth of the involvement with the project.

111 (collected by myself in the village of Breb, Maramureş county, Romania, during the month of July, 1976).

Both in the database and in the volume, I reproduced the collectors' or main editors' (phonetic or standard) transcripts of the texts.

## What Are Love Charms?

Love charms are marginalized forms of psychological energizing and healing, which can still be encountered locally in rural Europe. To the postmodern Western intellectual, whose insight is not blurred by exclusive cultural taxonomies, they might appear to be the recessive counterpart of currently dominant psychotherapeutic practices.

Like psychotherapy, love charming is performed in private sessions; by a legitimate specialist (or by oneself in simpler cases); on behalf—often times—of a (psychologically) victimized client; by means of general healing fiction (offered in response to specific complaints and meant to enhance the client's sense of self-understanding, self-esteem, and power) and characteristic gestural scenarios; and in accordance with a specific dogmatism (or theory).

In contradistinction to psychotherapy, the charm specialist is characteristically female; the healing fiction is characteristically versified—to allow easy and exhaustive memorization—and accompanied by ritualized gestures that act as metaphors of or models for the type of change aimed at in the charm; there are no postural scenarios (with the patient lying on a sofa, for example) meant to stress the temporary domination of the “expert” over the client or any otherwise asymmetrical relationship between them; the dogmas on which charm-saying

is based and which appear in myths, legends or tales are centered upon “cosmically relevant marriage” rather than “normal sexuality” or “normal adult behavior.” Thus, in the archaic strata of “love theory” subtending Romanian love charms, it is postulated<sup>3</sup> that:

1. for every human being there are three and only three marriage partners who had been planned in the grand order of things (“fated” by the Fates during the third night following her/his birth; “written” for her or him in “the Book of Life;” “willed” by God, etc.);
2. it is everyone’s responsibility to make sure—by means of rigorously enacted ritual practices during the year (with strong moments at Christmas, on St. Basil’s Day, at Easter, on St. John’s Day, on Sundays, etc.) combined with circumstantial magic help—that one marries the “right” spouse;
3. if, due to precipitation or existential blindness, all of one’s marriage partners were attracted toward other spouses, one has to “extract” one of them from her/his “misguided” marriage rather than “erroneously” marry in turn. Accordingly, one will therefore perform for oneself or have performed on one’s behalf, in more difficult cases, charms for *knowing* (“seeing,” dreaming of) the fated partner; charms for *unbinding* or *turning* the fated partner who is inadvertently joined with a “wrong” spouse (in reaction to which, *counter-charms* defending the client’s marriage—which, one claims,

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<sup>3</sup> When speaking of the “love theory” subtending Romanian love charms, I continue and expand a train of thought initiated by Malinowski (1978). The “postulates” I am proposing here are my way of condensing and synthesizing a number of popular beliefs that the interested reader can find in Marian (1886), Gorovei (1931), Muşlea and Bârlea (1970), and Fochi (1976), among many others.

is the correct one—from such magic pressure evolved in time); and charms for *marrying* one's fatewoman or fateman.

For outsiders, the performance of a charm is not always easily accessible in terms of watching or recording. As in the case of medical or religious treatment<sup>4</sup> in modern societies, the individual beneficiary's<sup>5</sup> privacy tends to be protected by keeping the charm (magic) session relatively closed to the public. The positive or negative value that a given community attaches to charm-performing is also important. Charm-performances will more easily be open to the public when charming is highly rated among the activities or professions that are currently practiced by the members of the community. If charms come to be rated lower by simply becoming outdated or they are perceived as inefficient (naive, superfluous, ridiculous, etc.) or, even worse, if they are outlawed (both have happened, at different moments, in Western Europe), then charm-performances will naturally tend to become invisible.

Because of the difficulties involved in observing charm-performances, current research on the subject<sup>6</sup> rarely deals with actual magic sessions involving the charm-performer and her client. It concentrates instead on what I propose to call *charm scenarios*, that is, on

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<sup>4</sup> Confession to a priest, for example.

<sup>5</sup> One might prefer to speak about clients rather than beneficiaries in this context since both the physicians (or charm-sayers) and their clients are beneficiaries, the first in an economic or social sense (by receiving a payment or by increasing their prestige), the second in a medical or magical sense (by getting the help they need).

<sup>6</sup> This refers not only to research on Romanian love charms but also and more generally to research on magic practices conducted in other cultures and/or countries. One (partial) exception is represented by Favret-Saada and Contreras (1981), where the anthropologist's participation in and involvement with magic sessions as such reached what we may call a rarely attained climax.

the instructions transmitted at the researcher's request by informants who are usually active charm-performers and they are acknowledged as such within their communities. Ideally, a charm scenario combines mentioning of formulas with descriptions of, comments on, or advice concerning the physical actions and the rules that govern the efficient mixture of magic words with magic gestures. Its clarity and completeness depend on the intrinsic complexity of the practice, the expressive abilities of the informant, the degree of empathy and intensity brought into the interview discussion by the field researcher, and the dialogical agreement between the informant and the researcher.

Even when collected by professional anthropologists, folklorists, or sociologists—which did not happen before the end of the nineteenth century—charm scenarios are still characteristically vague and sketchy.<sup>7</sup> A first reason for this aspect lies in the unusual, highly artificial character of the field encounter between researchers and informants. Tired or simply bored by the numerous obligatory repetitions of the charm scenarios and by the questions of the researcher, informants often (a) omit parts of the formulas that, they think, can be easily recuperated by an insider and do not matter anyhow to a “nonprofessional” outsider; (b) give telegraphic indications concerning the nonverbal procedures which, to them, appear to be the easy component of the scenarios and, moreover, are hinted at in the text of the formulas; (c) mention the formulas and gestures without specifying the exact point in the verbal partition where a certain gesture is to be accomplished or, if we look at it from the other end, the point

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<sup>7</sup> This applies to collections as different as those of Birlea (1924), Candrea (1944), Cristescu (1984), Gorovei (1931), Ionașcu and Mândreanu (1897), Ionescu and Daniil (1907), Lupașcu (1890), Marian (1886, 1893), Niculiță-Voronca (1903), Pop (1976), Șerb (1967), Teodorescu (1885), Tocilescu (1900), and Vasiliu (1934) or, in other cultural spaces, Malinowski (1978) and Favret-Saada (1977).

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**LOVE CHARM  
SCENARIOS**

## For Beauty and Love

## 1

*[Tot în Banat este datina ca, în ziua de Bobotează, mama care voiește ca feciorul său, dar mai ales fiica sa, când vor ieși în lume, să fie bine văzuți, să fie iubiți și căutați de toată lumea, cu un cuvânt să fie tuturor dragi – luând unsoare, se duce și o pune sub piva (treasc) ce va pocni prima dată la începerea slujbei mari (leturghie), zicând:]*

Cum se vestește  
cum răsună și pocnește  
astă pivă  
așa să fie cutare vestită  
să se pocnească-n lume  
despre dânsa  
în toate casele  
la toate mesele  
prin oboare

*[In Banat there is the custom, on Epiphany, that the mother who wants for her son—or even more, her daughter—to be looked at, loved, and sought after by all (or to put it simply, for them to be dear to everybody) takes grease and puts it under the felting machine that will be the first to clatter at the beginning of High Mass. While doing this she says:]*

As this felting machine  
makes itself heard  
clanging and clattering  
so let N be famous  
let the clatter of her go  
throughout the world  
in all houses  
at all tables  
through cattle markets

prin ogoare  
pe la joc  
peste apă  
peste foc  
peste țări  
și peste mări.

through fields  
at the dancing-place  
across water  
across fire  
across countries  
and across seas.

*[După ce piva a pocnit, se ia unsoarea și se păstrează până la Paști. Pe seara de Paști, legându-se în cârpsoră, se leagă sub aripa cocoșului din curte și se zice:]*

*[After the felting machine has clattered, one takes the grease and keeps it till Easter. On Holy Saturday, in the evening, one puts it in a small piece of cloth, which is tied under the wing of the rooster in the yard, while saying:]*

Cum cocoșul din aripi o pălăpăi  
lumii Paștele-o vesti  
din somn toți s-or pomeni  
la biseric-or veni  
și cu toți s-or veseli  
așa să fie cutare vestită  
de toată lumea iubită.

As the rooster will flap its wings  
to proclaim Easter to the world  
and all will awaken from sleep  
will come to the church  
and rejoice  
so let N be known  
let her be loved by the whole world.

*[Dimineața, luându-se de sub aripa cocoșului, se pune la brâu și, mergând, ocolește (încunjură) biserica la Înviere.*

*[The next morning, one takes it from under the rooster's wing, puts it at one's waist, and circles the church (as is usually done, SG) at (the) Easter (service celebration).<sup>1</sup>*

*Această unsoare apoi se păstrează în casă peste întreg anul, ungându-se cel ce voiește a fi iubit*

*This grease it then kept at home for that whole year; those who want to be loved and looked at when going*

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<sup>1</sup> Rom. *Înviere* means "Resurrection" and is a common designation for "Easter."

*și văzut când merge la joc ori locuri  
publice din ea pe sprâncene, pe  
dosul mâinilor și, dacă tocmai fata  
a pus pe cineva ochiul, de se poate  
respectivului să-i ungă din această  
unsoare o haină care nu se spală.]*

*to dance or to public places spread it  
on their eyebrows and on the back of  
their hands; if a young woman has  
picked someone out, she tries to  
spread the grease on a piece of his  
clothing that is not often washed.]*

Marian (1898), p. 187. See also Iana (1889) and Iana (1891). Place: Banat. Date: shortly before 1891. Designation: -. Translated by S.G. and C.S.