

## THE SYMBOLIC IMAGINARY OF ROMANIAN CHARMS\*

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**Abstract:** The way in which the disenchantments were perceived in the old times communities, presents numerous particularities that we shall try to detail further on, following, on one side, the signs, the symptomatology, its description, and on the other side, the structure of the disenchantment, the way it is stylistically constructed, its typology: of cure, of household's protection etc.

The content of disenchantment has certain particularities, including its atypical structure, doesn't include rhymed lyrics, the formulations have their own logical meaning and, sometimes, it is significant the way in which it is spoken – whispered, as a repertoire or jerkily.

The reasons for the evil eye can be diverse and they talk about the way in which certain qualities or attributions are perceived, the disenchantment describing sometimes a genuine ceremonial, meant to reestablish the initial order. The content of the disenchantment refers to certain additional elements, certain plants with prophylactic valences, to specific attitudes.

The particularities of these protective practices include either some references to the prophylactic, apothropaic elements – of keeping away the evil, of protection (not to catch it): garlic, basil or different practices meant to remove the evil eye. The typology of the disenchantment takes into consideration their destination, being either a remedy, either protection for the households.

These former practices lead to a wide range of gestures orientated towards prophylaxis and remedies, an ensemble of attitudes that draw the attention of the researchers through the richness of their symbolism.

**Keywords:** Evil eye, symbolic gestuality, customs, symbolic practices, Romanian charms.

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Romanian charms represent a segment of Romanian folklore that has activated numerous studies, collections, specialized works, polemics, debates, etc. Simion Florea Marian promoted *Popular Romanian Charms, collected by...*, book published at Tipografia lui R. Eckhardt in Cernăuți, Suceava, 1886, XXII+352 p. Another well-known folklorist passionate about studying magic among Romanians, especially enchantments, is Gheoghe Pavelescu, in his works: “Magic among Romanians. Studies and research on magic, charms and mana”, Minerva Publishing House, Bucharest, 1998, 330 p. and “Research on magic among Romanians from the Apuseni Mountains”, published by the Social Research Institute of Romania, in Bucharest, in 1945, 204 p. Another important work regarding the study of Romanian charms is the one written by Simion Florea Marian, “Romanian folk charms. Spells, charms and dissolutions”, Coresi Publishing House, Bucharest, 1996, 242 p.

The historiography of Romanian charms also records the following works: I. Aurel Candrea, “Comparative Romanian medical folklore. Overview Magical medicine”, published by Polirom Publishing House, Iasi, 1999, 489 p. and Vasile Pistolea, “The Vision of Human Destiny in The Myth of the Fates and Other Divinatory Beliefs”, Dalami Publishing House, Caransebeș, 2015, 198 p. Another important book in the historiography of Romanian enchantments is Lazăr Șăineanu, “Telele sau Zânele rele. Folkloric studies”, Mythos Collection, Saeculum I.O. Publishing House, Bucharest, 2012, 528 p.

The presence of fantastic beings in enchantments is also attested in the collection of enchantments made by Radu Răutu, “Anthology of Romanian folk enchantments”, Grai și Suflet Publishing House. National Culture, Bucharest, 1998, 270 p.

We find landmarks in terms of fantastic representations in Romanian popular charms in volume III of “Folk materials”, too – written by Grigore Tocilescu, Minerva Publishing House, Bucharest, 1981, 527 p.

The enchantment is a reaction to remove the negative. Simion Florea Marian believes that enchantment has its origin in primitive culture and especially in its manifestations, which are related to magical thinking. He also defined “enchantment” as “the totality of words spoken by the sorcerer or charmer who performs the cure, spell or charm, from which he expects a previously determined result”<sup>1</sup>.

Both in poetry and in the practice of enchantment, factors that speak of ancient magical beliefs prevail, of man’s attempts to subdue the forces of nature through the power of words and gestures, with the help of elements whose real effect was discovered through a long practice. Later, “superstitious beliefs in spirits and saints, derived from Christian mythology, were superimposed over this primary layer”<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Florea Marian Simion, *Vrăji, farmece și desfaceri*, in „Analele Academiei Române”, Bucharest, 1896, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Simion Florea Marian *apud* Artur Gorovei, *Descântecel românilor. Studiu de Folclor*, Regia M.O. Imprimeria națională, Bucharest, 1931, p. 85.

The appearance of enchantment was favored and conditioned by two mythical elements: dualism – the belief in a genius of evil and a genius of good (in Christianity, the devil-God opposition) – and the belief in the magical power of the word. To these is added a factor related to the practice of officiating the rite: the existence of the professional, the shaman, the sorcerer.

The practice of enchantment is determined by individual situations. Its function is to eliminate the unpredictable and restore life to its natural course. Mihai Pop and Pavel Ruxăndoiu draw attention to the fact that it takes place “usually before dawn or in the evening, after sunset, on certain days of the week”<sup>3</sup>. They never enchant on Sunday, because the cure comes from God or the Mother of God. “Sunday being a day of rest, it is not permitted to call to their help”<sup>4</sup>.

To enchant you need several objects. Some of them are plants: plum and willow leaves, garlic, hazel wood, pepper, basil, thyme, etc. These were selected according to their healing qualities, known and verified by the people, following millennial practices.

Other elements are objects invested with magical value: knives, brooms, spindles, scissors, sieves, hoes, etc. or substances such as: salt, still water, coal, charcoal, dough, honey, wax etc.<sup>5</sup>. The charm is passed from one generation to another, in closed circles through initiation. The magical efficiency is conditioned by the radical character of the formula, which often leads to the use of linguistic expressions that do not exist in the current language, “an astonishing wealth of verbal invention; surprising image associations; discharges of effects of great intensity, both in the sense of the frequency of diminutives towards the patient, and in the sense of invective, alternating with flattery, or of entreaty, alternating with cursing”<sup>6</sup>. As a poetic structure, the enchantment goes beyond the simple framework of the incantation poem, approaching the wish poem. The closing formulas often have similarities with carols.

The way in which the charm was perceived in the ancient communities presents many particularities that we will try to detail, following on the one hand the signs, symptoms, its description, on the other hand the structure of the charm, how it is stylistically constructed, its typology: to cure, to protect the household, etc.

The text of the charm contains certain peculiarities, including its structure is atypical, it does not contain rhyming lines, the wording has its own logic, and sometimes the way it is said is also significant – whispered, repetitive, jerky.

The particularities of protective practices refer to certain prophylactic elements, certain sayings *so as not to get caught*. What is important is how the

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> Artur Gorovei, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

<sup>5</sup> Mihai Pop, Pavel Ruxăndoiu, *Folclor literar românesc*, Bucharest, Didactic and Pedagogical Publishing, 1976, p. 220.

<sup>6</sup> Ovidiu Papadima, *Poezia riturilor de însănătoșire (Descântecul)*, in „Literatura populară românească”, Bucharest, E.P.L., 1968, pp. 362–363.

spell is constructed stylistically: who says it, how the evil eye is described, its signs. The reasons for the evil eye can be varied and speak of the way in which certain qualities or attributes are perceived, the enchantment sometimes describing a real ceremonial meant to restore the original order.

The evil eye is in a direct connection with what is related to sight, to see, it is actually about the intensity of seeing and the way in which that fact is perceived, about the way in which the gaze is oriented by the feeling. To see and hide from sight, here is a prophylactic valence of concealment – from here derives a series of gestures aimed at preventing the evil eye: wrapping children in red cloth, protecting them from people who can curse, putting a red string on the hands of infants, to carry garlic or various objects with a symbolic, sacred charge. There are many “eyed” characters in folklore, which speak to how the help they can provide is understood. They allow an expansion of perceptions, so we can mention characters such as Ochilă, Pasări-Lăți-Lungilă and other helpers like them.

The eyes, respectively sight, are also closely related to jealousy, envy. The role of the spell is to identify what caused the imbalance and to fix it in a way designed to provide safety, for example: “It’s done with two, I undo with three, it’s done with three I undo with four, it’s done with four, I open with five etc.”. Here is an example of how the charm is made.

There are therefore several types of charms, the ones that can be considered requests: “Good morning dew!/ - We thank you/ Proud beauty/ I have come to worship / and to pray that you wash me... Make me clean/ Of all the hates/ and deeds”<sup>7</sup>, others can be formulated in a more direct manner, addressing the eye, as an indication: “Run evil eye from between the eyes / That the wind from my mouth reaches you”<sup>8</sup>. The reasons for the evil eye can be varied and speak of the way in which certain qualities or attributes are perceived, the enchantment sometimes describing a real ceremonial meant to restore the original order.

The content of the charm also refers to certain helpful elements, certain plants with prophylactic valences, to certain attitudes, it indicates certain bodily areas on which it must show its effectiveness: “Run evil eye from between the eyes/ Flee evil eye/ That the wind reaches you from my mouth/ Flee evil eye/ That maddened wind reaches you/ Flee evil eye from the front of the cheek/ From the crook of the nose/ From the throat/ From the brains of the head/ From the spleen, from the heart/ And to go out and go/ Because I enchanted you in my mouth/ I took you with my hand/ and I threw you into the wind/ to remain (Maria) clean...”. The structure of the enchantment refers to who enchants, whom, when it enchants, meeting thus several types of enchantments, constructed either as a request, as an

<sup>7</sup> Florea Marian Simion, *Descânțele populare române*, Bucharest, Coresi Publishing, 1996, p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> Gh. F. Ciușanu, *Superstițiile poporului român în asemănare cu ale altor popoare vechi și noi*, Colecție Mythos, Bucharest, Saeculum I.O. Publishing, 2001, p. 251.

indication, or as a direct or indirect command<sup>9</sup> (for example: spell of evil thoughts: “Flee accursed thoughts, / And impure thoughts/ go into the wilderness/ through mountains, through distant valleys.../ Disperse yourselves in the winds/ In seas and other depths/ (...) Get out you bad thoughts / Run away / Come in you good thoughts”. The ways in which the charms are built are varied, whether through comparison, enumeration, gradation or dialogue, storytelling<sup>10</sup>.

Overcoming the impasse is foreshadowed by magic, sometimes invoking certain entities, deities St. Mary, God, the Saints of the week – St. Friday... (“Ladies/ Empresses/ worthy/ and hardworking/ strong / and saints” or “You old ladies/young ladies/you empresses//you priestesses”), or help is requested from elements that appear symbolically invested with healing power – “Jordan stream”, “unshaken dew” etc. Sometimes ignoring the disease causes it to get upset that no attention is being paid to it and leave.

The particularities of the protective practices include either certain references to prophylactic, apotropaic elements – to keep evil away, to protect (not to be caught): garlic, basil or various practices aimed at warding off the evil eye. The typology of charms takes into account their destination, being either a cure or to protect households.

The charm is never addressed to the beneficiary, but to the force acting in his favor, or to the evil force. Among the positive forces, the Virgin Mary occupies an important place in our enchantments. In the classification made by Artur Gorovei, we find enchantments with the formulas: “The Mother of God sends the patient to the enchantress”, “The Mother of God heals”, “Walking on the path, on the path, he meets the healer, whom the Mother of God sends to cure the disease”, or “The sick man walks on the road and laments, the Mother of God heals him”. It is present regardless of the type of enchantment. In an enchantment, we learn: “...I will pray to the Mother of God/ I will rid him of charms/ of throws, / of dice, / Nicholas to remain clean...”<sup>11</sup> In the framework of an “unfolding enchantment”, the Virgin dialogues with the one who invokes her: “Oh, merciful Mother, / Be merciful to me too. / The Mother of God answered: /-Shut up, but don’t whine anymore/ Because of all the fact, / I will untie you”<sup>12</sup>. Sometimes the Mother of God is the only one who can banish the pain, because she knows them all: “No one has seen it / no one has heard it, / without the Mother of God”<sup>13</sup>.

In the context of an „evil eye” enchantment, The Mother of God can be a model of beauty and cleanliness: “Run, eyes over your head/ to whose door you drove,/ Ruxandra pure, enlightened, / like The Mother of God from heaven left

<sup>9</sup> Artur Gorovei, *Descânțele românilor*, 1931, p. 87.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> Artur Gorovei, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 287.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 297.

her”<sup>14</sup>. The same thing happens in a “quinsy” charm: “you shook it, / you broke the beads/ you swept them with the broom,/ you cleaned them from Ruxandra,/ you left it like the lap of the Mother of God/ clean and enlightened”<sup>15</sup>. Mary can be a giver of diseases, but at the same time also a healer, when she remembers his cure (cutare): “If only the knife,/ the spike and the dagger/ from The Mother of God,/ The Mother of God should remember/ of his cure (cutare)/ and to bring it to him”<sup>16</sup>.

In some charms, the Mother of God heals only by commanding the sick person to get up or heals by casting a spell herself. Her magical object is the cross: “She met Saint Mary on the way and struck her with the golden cross on her forehead”<sup>17</sup>. In order to heal, the Mother of God also runs to the help of other divinities. Send Saint Sunday to bring the cure or call Saint George to whip and banish the disease. Saint John also comes to the aid of the Virgin. The Mother of God can show the patient the cure with which he can be cured: Saint Mary came and said to them: “don’t cry... but go home quickly, cut the hairs from your head, dip them in oil and the longing will drown and pass”<sup>18</sup>.

She can also reverse the disease, which is heading towards the patient: “The Mother of God said: run away from Nicholas”<sup>19</sup> or she can turn away healers (Saint Paul and Saint Peter), sending them to the sick man<sup>20</sup>. She can send the sick to the enchantress: “Go to the old lady and enchant yourself”<sup>21</sup>. Other times, the holidays related to Mary are invoked, as part of a “jaundice” charm: “Holy Mary, / Holy Mary, / Holy day today, / may the jaundice / and all the pain, / from the brains of the head, / from the front of the face/ go away”<sup>22</sup>. The Virgin Mary can also appear in the final formulas: “like silver from the lap of the Mother of God left”, “like blown gold, / as given by the Mother of God” or: “the charm from me, the cure from God and the Mother of God”<sup>23</sup>.

Other fantastic beings are *Ielele*, *Dânsele*, with a bivalent nature, sometimes evil, sometimes benevolent, as is also conveyed by the names they bear: the Beautiful, the Masters, the Merciful, the Powerful, the Saints etc.<sup>24</sup>. Many charms record this bivalent nature of the Saints, they also do harm to man, but they are also Merciful, Saints and have the cure for the recovery of the sick, which they must remember: “You, great water,/ Great lady/ How you are a proud cleaner/ May you

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 298.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 329.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 185.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 187.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 188.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 324.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 194.

<sup>24</sup> Lazăr Șăineanu, *Ielele sau Zânele rele. Studii folclorice*, Colecția Mythos, Bucharest, Saeculum I.O. Publishing, 2012, p. 67.

also be purifying./ To cleanse Gheorghe of sickness/ From the Holy things./ If it is from the Holy things,/ Let them remember,/ May the cure be brought to him./ If it is from God,/ May God remember,/ May Gheorghe's cure be brought to him/ If it is a meeting from the heights/ From the winds,/ From meetings,/ Let it come out of his body Gheorghe". Recipe: "To drink water from the place where two springs meet and bathe with that water on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday", collected from Ilinca Baranga, from Peșteana de Sus, Gorj county, neither the year nor the date of birth of the informant is specified<sup>25</sup>.

Another "Saint's charm" thus describes the situation of the one who is charmed:

"– Good day, great brandy,/ Great lord/ George left/ On the great field/ Towards the rising sun/ He met the Saints on the way./ In arms took him,/ He threw him over the cart,/ They drank his blood./ George was crying and wailing/ The Mother of God from heaven heard him/ She was going down on the silver stairs/ And she asked George/ - What are you crying , what are you doing, George?/ Go to the charmer/ Let her make you some water/ *Nastrapa* water/ With a stalk of basil/ Let her wash you all over/ - Saints,/ Good ones,/ Come as smooth as water / Good as bread/ Sweet as honey/ And soft as silk/ And give George the cure"<sup>26</sup>.

Other fantastic characters encountered in enchantments are "Rusaliile", "Joimărițele", "Șoimanele", "strigoiu cu strigoaica", "moroii cu moroaica", "Muma-Pădurii" etc. They all talk about an archaic mental horizon, about symbolic representations of some affections, about cures coming from fabulous beings, being completed by a particular gesture. The discussion about fantastic representations in spells remains open due to the richness of folkloric expressions, the beauty of combining archaic or imagined words.

The manifestation of the disease always has a symbolic component that comes either from the origin of the disease – a demon or a supernatural being (Ielele, Samca, Muma-Pădurii, Zburătorul, etc.); from God, if you violated any prohibition, worked on a holiday, on a saint's day, etc. or non-compliance with hygiene rules handed down from one generation to another.

It is difficult for the villager of old times to understand how a disease works: "It is known that primitive man does not even know the normal function of the organs in his body. That is why he cannot realize that diseases come from the disturbance of normal physiological functions in the body. How can he explain why this man, who left home in good health, is found writhing a little later, on the road, foaming at the mouth and in a state of unconsciousness? How can he explain the mystery of the man who today is in a good mood and tomorrow, for no apparent reason, is shaken by the cold, his teeth are chattering, while his whole body is bathed in nausea? A man is clear-minded today, a man like all men, and

<sup>25</sup> Grigore Tocilescu, *Materialuri folcloristice*, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing, 1981, p. 203.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 204.

tomorrow his mind darkens, he speaks like a fool or is seized by a wild rage. (...) primitive man (...) came to the conviction that the disease is caused by *someone*<sup>27</sup>. Here is a fragment of an enchantment, where that someone is the Windy, the Beautiful – mythological beings: “Gheorghe started/ From the house,/ From the table,/ On the way,/ Fat and handsome,/ Cheerful./ But when he was / In the middle of the road,/ The Windy met him/ And with the Beautiful./ Slammed him from the front,/ He made him thick black,/ He covered him with dung,/ He put the cataract in his eyes,/ He left him without sight”<sup>28</sup>.

The cry of the one who suffers is heard only by the Mother of God, who will also bring him healing through the three sisters of the Sun: “Gheorghe began to lament/ And to speak/ With a loud voice up to the sky,/ With tears down to earth,/ No one saw him,/ No one heard him,/ Only the Mother of God/ From the gate of heaven./ Only she saw him, Only she heard him/ And called him by name/ And thus he asked him:/ - Gheorghe, why are you crying,/ What are you lamenting,/ What are you talking about...”. The Mother of God is told about what has happened, and she answers him: “- Shut up, Gheorghe, stop crying/ With tears of blood!/ Don’t cry,/ Don’t be silent,/ Because I will heal you!/ The Mother of God/ From the gate of heaven/ A golden ladder freed her,/ She descended,/ She came out before Gheorghe,/ He took him by the right hand ,/ He poured it from the sun/ And started it, and left it/ On the way of Adam,/ At the Well of Jordan,/ And three sisters of the Sun swept it,/ With three brooms,/ With three rakes,/ With three sleeves of white silk”. The three sisters of the Sun were going to clean the Well of God, but the Mother of God tells them that it is “clean,/ It is illuminated/ As if it was given by God./ Yes, you go/ And you go/ To clean the whites/ And the mists/ From Gheorghe’s eyes,/ Clean the white whiteness,/ The black whiteness,/ The red whiteness,/ The whiteness of 99 kinds./ The whiteness of 99 faces./ Look for it in the tongs of the head,/ In front of the cheek,/ In the eyelashes of the eyes,/ Around the eyes,/ In the lights of the eyes”. The disease “with 99 faces” is described here and the symbolic image of the body of the bewitched, from the pincers of the head, i.e. “the part of the head where the parietal or lateral bones join the forehead bone”<sup>29</sup>, from the face, from the cheek, from the eyelashes... The disease is banished “With rakes you rake it,/ With scissors you shear it,/ With brooms you sweep it,/ With nails you pinch it,/ You drive it away from my eyes, / With your sleeves you wipe it,/ You put it in my lap,/ You take it to the field with the washermen,/ Like the washermen in a hurry/ They tear it to pieces./ Over the farm’s fence, let the oxen with their horns take it. / The horned oxen would take her/ And they would take her to the sea./ There to perish,/ There to rest”. And the

<sup>27</sup> I.A. Candrea, *Folclorul medical român comparat. Privire generală. Medicină magică*, Iași, Polirom Publishing, 1999, p. 131.

<sup>28</sup> Florea Marian Simion, *Descânțețe populare române. Vrăji, farmece și desfaceri*, Bucharest, Coresi Publishing, 1996, p. 102.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 105.



bewitched man “to remain clean,/ Clean and enlightened,/ As the filtered silver,/ Like the sun in the sky,/ Forever and ever, amen!”.

This anticipation of the healthy man, we always meet in enchantments, as he was created by God “To remain pure,/ Illuminated,/ As it is left by God/ And baptized by the pope (...)/ From me the enchantment,/ The gift from God!”<sup>30</sup>. The return to the original state of health is a near-perfect image of the enchanted, as an effect of the ritual performed by the enchantress, although the actual healing is expected from God.

The symbolic imaginary of the body, as it appears in enchantments, depends on the description of the disease, on the origin of the disease, on how the disease appears symbolically represented. A lot of symbols appear woven here, “the symbol as a sign that refers to an unspeakable and invisible signified, thereby being obliged to concretely embody the adequacy that escapes it, and this through the game of mythical, ritual, iconographic redundancies, which inexhaustibly corrects and completes the inadequacy”<sup>31</sup>. This definition of the symbol helps us better understand how the symbolic imagination works. Thus, “unable to figure the infigurable transcendence, the symbolic image is the transfiguration of a concrete representation by a forever abstract meaning. The symbol is therefore a representation that makes a secret meaning appear, it is the epiphany of a mystery”<sup>32</sup>.

In a charm collected by S. Fl. Marian, at the origin of the disease is an “unclean spirit, a hideous spirit”, it is believed that the one who is enchanted has stepped on some “throws”, some charms made by a witch or some enemy. In fact, some clothes are enchanted with which the enchanted can be dressed, more precisely a shirt. All his gestures are symbolic: he threatens the evil spirit to leave, otherwise he will cut it with an ax or stab it with a knife, tools he has nearby, even a plow iron, a pitchfork “Come out evil spirit,/ Skinned spirit,/ Because if you don’t come out/ I will destroy you./ I will cut you with an ax,/ I will stab you with a knife”<sup>33</sup>.

Healing means cleansing the whole body, from head to toe, the charmer mentions every part of the body: “Throws/ Screams/ And stabs,/ Arrows/ And evils,/ Pains/ And sorrows (...)/ Come forth / To perish:/ From the head/ From the under the head,/ From the hair/ From under the hair,/ From the brains/ From under the brains/ From the ears/ From under the ears,/ From the eyes/ From under the eyes,/ From the hearing of the ears,/ From the sight of the eyes,/ From the nose/ From above the nose,/ From the mouth/ From under the mouth,/ From the teeth/ From above the teeth (...)/ From the ribs/ From above the ribs,/ From back/ From

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 112.

<sup>31</sup> Gilbert Durand, *Aventurile imaginii. Imaginația simbolică. Imaginarul*, Bucharest, Nemira Publishing, 1999, p. 22.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18.

<sup>33</sup> Florea Marian Simion, *op. cit.*, pp. 109–112.

above the back (...) / As far as he has them. / From the front of the cheek (...) / From the crown of the head / To the soles of the feet”<sup>34</sup>.

These images of the human body affected by disease easily describe how people once perceived the human body and its functioning. The vertical orientation of the human body is observed, as is the charmer’s healing of it.

These ancient practices refer to a horizon of gesture oriented towards prevention and remediation, a set of attitudes that remain in the attention of researchers due to the richness of its symbolism.

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 109–110.