

## ‘WONDROUS DRESSING’ WITH CELESTIAL BODIES IN RUSSIAN CHARMS AND LYRICAL POETRY

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**Abstract:** The motif of dressing with celestial bodies is known in Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian charms. The formula of ‘wondrous dressing’ is found in charms produced to influence the authority and judges as well as in military, pastoral, hunting, wedding charms, etc. The motif includes several main components: they are the wonderful clothing itself (by light, the sun, the moon, stars, dawn, clouds, sky, thunder, and lightning); the likening of a man to the sun and light, and his voice to thunder; the acquisition of wonderful properties (beauty, courage, the ability to cause fear) and even self-deification; a journey to the mythical world (to heaven, the clouds, the Sun, Mount Zion); and manipulation of celestial bodies. The folklore motifs of ‘miraculous dressing’ and ‘miraculous appearance’ were echoed variously in Russian literary works.

**Keywords:** Alexander Blok, Alexander Pushkin, Russian poetry, verbal charms, ‘wondrous dressing’

The motif of dressing with celestial bodies is found in Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian charms produced to influence the chiefs and lawyers as well as in military, pastoral, hunting, wedding charms, etc. The motif includes several main components: they are the wonderful dressing itself, the likening of a man to the sun and light, a journey to the mythical world, and manipulation of celestial bodies. In Russian charms there are descriptions of how a person washes with dew; wipes away the dawn, the sun, light, or the Virgin’s vestment; dresses with celestial bodies or the clouds; is covered with the sky; goes through the sun, the moon, the dawn, and the stars; snatches the clouds; enters the sun or a thundercloud; takes the moon in his hand or puts the sun into his eyes; and leaves the earth for heavenly spheres. At the same time, he becomes a person of giant proportions, so that the celestial bodies appear inside his body. He becomes sun-like or god-like, recalling the righteous sun of Christ and the

formidable Thunderer-Sabaoth. Accordingly, people rejoice in him like at the rising sun or risen Christ. They admire him and lose the gift of speech. In other texts, people become afraid of the thunderous voice and supernatural power of the person who is working the charm.

The motif of wondrous dressing is often combined with the motif of departure in the path. For example, the verbal charm against the sorcerers of the second quarter of the seventeenth century said:

Се яз, раб имрек, стану благословя(сь), пойду перекрестяс(ь), оболочу на себя красное солнце, опояшусь светлой зорей, поттычюс(ь) частыми звездами, возьму в руке млад светел месяц и пойду в чистое поле, и встречу своего аггела хранителя и Пречистую мать Богородицу; и молюс(ь) и плачюс(ь): “Покрой меня кровом своим и крылома своима и огради меня ризою своею от колдуна и от колдуниц(ы), от ведуна и от вещ(ицы), и от всякого злаго человека, и от всякой злой притчи на воды и на земли” (Toporkov 2010: 99, № 18).

Here I am, servant of God [the name of the person], I will get up with a blessing, I will go out with a sign of the cross, *I will put on the bright sun, I will girdle it with the light dawn, I will pin it with many stars, I will take the young light moon in my hand*, and I will go out to the open field, and I will meet my guardian angel and the Most Blessed Mother of God, and pray and weep: “Protect me with thy protection and with thy wings and shield me with thy robe from the wizard and the witch, from the sorcerer and the sorceress, and from any mischievous people, and from any mischief on water and on earth.” (Toporkov 2012a: 47)

Another charm, collected in 1727, describes how the protagonist climbs over the heavens, clutching the clouds and leaning on the young light Moon:

Иду я, раб Божии, на небеса, хватаюся за облака, младым светлым месяцом подпираюся, частым[и] звездами осыпаюся, нетленную ризою покрываюся, каменную стеною заставляюся. (Smilianskaia 2002: 112)

I, the servant of God, *am going to heaven, clutching the clouds, leaning on the young light Moon, dusting with many stars, covering with the imperishable habit, fencing by the stone wall.*

In the charm, originally from Arkhangelsk province, the man embeds the sun into his eyes; thus, it highlights his enormous size. He stands, his head touching the sky:

Земля мать, небо отец, зоря Мария, заря Маремьяния; *красное солнце в очи вставлю, млад светел месяц в тыл положу, частыми звездами подтычуся, ризую Господн[е]ю нетленною покроюся* (Efimenko 1878: 152–153, № 3).

Mother-Earth, Father-Heaven, Maria-the-Dawn, Maremiyaniya-the-Dawn: I will embed the red Sun in my eyes, will put the young light Moon on my neck, will dust myself with many stars, will cover myself with God's imperishable habit.

Of particular interest is the following episode of the power charm:

И я, раб Божий имярек, *воиду в красное солнце, оденусь и оболочусь красным солнцем, поашус утряной зарю и утычусь светлыми звездами. ... Куды я, Божий раб имярек, поиду, где я приду, в ту же възъстошную сторону сходит грозная туча, гром и маланьи и огненное молние, и я, раб Божий имярек, воиду в грозную тучу, покроюся громом, маланьей и огненным молнием. И сколь грозна грозная туча, гром и маланья и огненное молние, стол бы и я, раб Божий имярек, был грозен и страшен, боялис бы и трепетались меня, раба Божия имярек.* (Turilov 2002: 255)

Thus, I, the servant of God, *will enter into the red Sun, will dress in and will cover myself with the red Sun, will gird myself with the morning dawn and will rub myself with the light stars. ...* Everywhere I, the servant of God, go, where I come, the fierce cloud comes to that eastern side, the thunder and lightning and the fire lighting, and *I, the servant of God, enter into the fierce cloud, cover myself with the thunder, lightning and the fire lighting.* And however menacing the cloud is, that is how fierce and fearful will be I, the servant of God, thus, they will tremble and fear me, the servant of God.

In this episode the subject of the charm transforms twice: first, he dresses in dawn, the sun, and stars, afterwards – in thunder and lightning.

In some charms the Moon comes to be in a human body: “Аггел со мною есть, солнце одесную мене, и звезды по главе моей, и луна в теле моем...” (An angel is with me, the Sun is on the right of me, the stars are on my head, and the Moon is inside my body...) (Pigin 2002: 242); “Освечусь я светлым месяцем; осияюсь красным солнышком; препояшусь буйны ветры, отычусь часты звезды. *Солнце деснует, луна в теле ходит; по главе моей звезды ходят*” (I will light myself with the light young Moon; will shine myself with the red Sun; will dress myself with the blustering wind, will dust myself with

many stars. *The Sun is located to the right, the Moon moves into the body; the stars go down my head*) (Kalachov 1854: 53).

In Ukrainian fairy tales, where ‘young princess features’ are described (ATU 850; SUSVK 850), on her body there happen to be the marks of the Sun, the Moon, and stars; for instance: “*під правим плечем дівчини сонце, під лівим – місяць, на чолі – золота зізда, на голові – золоте волосся*” (*under the right arm of the maiden is the sun, under the left one is the moon, on her forehead is a Golden star, on her head is golden hair*) (Berezovsky 1984: 81; Zaikovskie 1999: 111–112).

In Russian fairy tales of ‘miraculous children’ (ATU 707; SUS 707) a young girl promises Ivan the Prince to give birth to “*сынов, что ни ясных соколов: во лбу солнце, а на затылке месяц, по бокам звезды*” (sons, falcons alike: on the forehead – the Sun, and *the young light Moon on the back of the head, the stars at the sides*) (Afanasiev 1985 [1855]: 296, № 283) or “*по колена ноги в золоте, по локти руки в серебре, по косицам часты мелки звездочки*” (knee-deep the legs are in gold, elbow-deep the arms are in silver, *in the braids are many little stars*) (ibid.: 298, № 284).

In the manner of a fairy tale Egoriy the Brave is described in a Russian clerical verse:

По локоть руки в красном золоте,  
По колена ноги в чистом серебре,  
*И во лбу солнце, во тылу месяц,*  
*По косицам звезды переходя.*  
(Selivanov 1991: 117)

Elbow-deep the arms are in red gold,  
knee-deep the legs are in pure silver,  
*and the Sun on the forehead is,*  
*on the back of the head the young light Moon is,*  
*in the braids the stars are moving.*

However, in general the motif of ‘miraculous dressing’ in charms differs significantly from the one used in the description of ‘miraculous children’ in fairy tales. In tales such a description is a third-person narrative, it is static; there are no motifs of ‘dressing’ and the heavenly bodies ‘fencing’; there is no mention of a journey to astral spheres or an increase in size; the main focus is on the Sun, the young Moon and stars, but not dawn and clouds. In charms, however, the ‘miraculous dressing’ description is a first-person narrative, and it is a dynamic rather than static image.

The folklore motifs of ‘miraculous dressing’ and ‘miraculous appearance’ were echoed variously in Russian literary works (Toporkov 2012b: 367–374).

In *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* (Сказка о царе Салтане), written by Alexander Pushkin in 1831, cosmic attributes were given to the foreign young princess:

Вот идет молва правдива:  
За морем царевна есть,  
Что не можно глаз отвести:  
Днем свет божий затмевает,  
Ночью землю освещает,  
*Месяц под косой блестит,*  
*А во лбу звезда горит.*  
(Pushkin 1949: 441)

This report, though, is quite true:  
There's a young princess, they say,  
That she charms all hearts away.  
Brighter than the sun at noon,  
She outshines the midnight moon,  
*In her braids, crescent beams,*  
*On her brow, a bright star gleams.*  
(Pushkin & Zelikoff 1981)

The poet Yakov Polonsky (1819–1898) described the girl princess in the same way:

В дни ребячества я помню  
Чудный отроческий бред:  
Полюбил я царь-девицу,  
Что на свете краше нет.  
  
*На челе сияло солнце,*  
*Месяц прятался в косе,*  
*По косицам рдели звезды, –*  
Бог сиял в её красе...  
(Polonsky 1896: 201)

I remember the days of childhood  
A lovely boyhood delusion:  
I fell in love with the girl princess,  
The most beautiful on Earth.  
  
*The Sun was shining on her face,*  
*The young Moon was hiding in her braid,*  
*Along the braids the stars transmitted, –*  
God shone in her beauty...

In Alexander Blok's (1880–1921) lyrics some feminine characters are labelled with astral folklore attributes, such as:

... Вдруг примчалась на север угрюмый,  
В небывалой предстала красе,  
Назвала себя смертною думой,  
*Солнце, месяц и звезды в косе.*  
(Blok 1997a: 109)

... She appeared in spectacular beauty,  
Suddenly rushing to the gloomy north,  
Named herself the deathly reflection,  
*The Sun, the young Moon and the stars were in her braid.*

И откроет белой рукою  
Потайную дверь предо мною  
Молодая, с золотой косою,  
С ясной, открытой душою.

*Месяц и звезды в косах...*  
“Входи, мой царевич приветный...”  
И бедный дубовый посох  
Заблестит слезой самоцветной...  
(Blok 1997a: 151)

The youth with the golden braid,  
With the pure, open soul  
Opens with her white hand  
The secret door in front of me.

*The young Moon and stars in braids,*  
‘Come, my affable prince...’  
And poor oak crook,  
Glitters with a jewel tear...

Blok was familiar with Russian charms, which became the subject of his article titled “The Poetry of Charms and Spells” (1906). In this article Blok dedicated a special passage to the motif of ‘miraculous dressing’:

Для того чтобы вызвать силу, заставить природу действовать и двигаться, это действие и движение изображают символически. “Встану”, “пойду”, “умоюсь” – так часто начинаются заговоры, и, очевидно, так делалось когда-то; с такими словами заклинатель входит в настроение, вспоминает первоначальную обстановку, при которой соткался

заговор; но, очевидно, ему нет нужды воспроизводить эти действия, довольно простого слова; притом же это слово и не всегда выполнимо: “Оболокусь я оболочком, обычусь частыми звездами”, – говорит заклинатель; и вот он – уже маг, плывущий в облаке, опоясанный Млечным Путем, наводящий чары и насылающий страхи. (Blok 2002: 93)

To summon power, to make nature act and move, this action and movement are made in a symbolic way. “Rising”, “going”, “washing” – it is the common beginning of charms, and, obviously, it has been acted in such a way before; with such words a charmer achieves his mood and recalls the original atmosphere that was present when the charm was created; but, obviously, there is no need to recover those actions, just one word is enough; with that, that word is not always able to become an action: “I will cover myself with the clouds, will rub myself with many stars”, – the charmer says; and so, he is a magician now, floating on a cloud, casting spells and terrifying, the Milky Way around his waist.

It is interesting that at the end of this passage Blok cited his poem “The Night” (1904): “Маг, простерт над миром брений, В млечной ленте – голова” (The magician is flying above the world of dust, In the milky belt his head is) (Blok 1997b: 45).

In some of Blok’s other texts the action of the magician dressing is shown:

И я затянут  
Лентой млечной!  
Тобой обманут,  
О, Вечность!  
(Blok 1997b: 159).

I’m tightened  
By the milky belt,  
I’m fooled  
By you, eternity!

Blok’s lyrical character mentions the Milky Way as her belt:

Я – звезда мечтаний нежных,  
И в венце метелей снежных  
Я плыву, скользю...  
В серебре метелей кроюсь,  
Ты горишь, мой узкий пояс –  
Млечная стезя!  
(Blok 1997b: 176)

I am the star of tender dreams,  
In the crown of snow storms,  
I float, gliding...  
In the silver of blizzards hiding,  
You are burning, my thin belt –  
The Milky Way.

In another verse a magician claims that the belt of a character is the Milky Way, which is meant to be his own:

Серебряный твой узкий пояс –  
Сужденный магу млечный путь.  
(Blok 1997b: 122)

Your silver thin belt –  
The Milky Way promised to the magician.

In the period of symbolism, Russian poets used charms and other folklore types and genres with the intention of finding a new way of poetic self-expression. In particular, in the article “The Poetry of Charms and Spells” Blok writes:

*... заговоры, а с ними вся область народной магии и обрядности, оказались тою рудой, где блещет золото неподдельной поэзии; тем золотом, которое обеспечивает и книжную “бумажную” поэзию – вплоть до наших дней. Вот почему заговоры приобрели психологический, исторический и эстетический интерес и тщательно собираются и исследуются. (Blok 2002: 85)*

... charms, either the whole sphere of folk magic and rituals, happen to be an ore, which contains the glittering gold of a true poetry. It is that gold that nourishes written ‘paper’ poetry, up to today. That’s why charms gained psychological, historical and aesthetic interest and are carefully collected and explored.

The motif of ‘miraculous dressing’ draws Blok’s attention by its mystic content and it is echoed in his poetic works (Evdokimova 2015).

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