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REVISION OF THE *LEGEND* *OF MASTER MANOLE* IN ROMANIAN FEMINIST DISCOURSE AFTER 1989¹

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the ideological shift after 1989 that determined the nature of the debates over the role of Ana, the female character of the *Legend of Master Manole*, and her sacrifice. Until 1989, her perspective was widely ignored because the canonical interpretation of the ballad emphasized the male perspective of Manole and his sacrifice for the act of creation. After 1989, the feminist discourse argued that the symbolic structures perpetuated by this myth were reinforced in Romania by the communist regime. The main aim of the article is thus to present how the newly formed feminist critique employed one of the canonical Romanian texts to show the functioning of the model of a self-sacrificing woman in the social imaginary.

KEYWORDS: Master Manole, sacrifice, the legend of immured woman, Romanian feminist discourse, Romanian women's imagery

THE PLACE OF THE *LEGEND*² *OF MASTER MANOLE* IN ROMANIAN CULTURAL AND LITERARY DISCOURSE

The wandering topos of the immured woman, recalling the archaic practice of human sacrifice, is known throughout the world, and is widely reported in Europe, especially throughout the Balkans.³ In the Romanian area, the legend of Master Manole passed from folklore to literature thanks to the work of Vasile Alecsandri, who published the initially

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² In my paper, I will use the terms *legend*, *ballad* and *myth* interchangeably. A *legend* indicates the semi-historical dimension of the text, which gives an account of the creation of a real historical object, a *ballad* refers to the literary form in which the folktale appeared in the Romanian literary canon, and a *myth* refers to the classification established by G. Călinescu (national myth) and M. Eliade (cosmogonic myth).

³ To read more about the origin and different variants of the topos, see: Dundes 1996.

oral text in ballad form in 1852 in the volume *Collected and Edited Ballads* under the title *The Argeș Monastery*.⁴ As a product of romantic literature, this text has permanently entered the Romanian literary and cultural canon, has become a part of the school curriculum and an inspiration for numerous literary, theatrical and musical works. Its canonical readings, as preserved by the educational system and culture, emphasized its 'creative' and aesthetic dimensions, following the religious and cosmogonic interpretations of Mircea Eliade, from his essays *Commentaries on the Legend of Master Manole* (1943) and *Master Manole and the Monastery of Arges* (1955) and the nationalist-oriented perspective of George Călinescu from his *History of Romanian Literature from its origins to the present* (1941).

According to Eliade's theory, only a violent death represents a form of creation.⁵ Manole thus sacrifices his pregnant wife in the name of the higher idea of creation, communicating the message that artistic success comes only with great personal sacrifice (Muellner 2018: 247). Călinescu recognizes the legend as one of the fundamental myths of "Romanian spirituality". He defines it as follows: "our concept of creativity is the fruit of suffering" (Călinescu 2001: 42), interpreting the ballad as "Romania's constitutive aesthetic myth that emphasized the importance of individual sacrifice in acts of artistic creation" (Neubauer 2007: 273). Manole's masculine experience is therefore meant to be emblematic of the mentality of a whole nation. Henceforth, and for decades, Călinescu's classification and Eliade's cosmogonic exegesis were to determine the direction of research reflection about the ballad.

However, there are some post-1945 literary essays that try to find some new symbolic meanings of the legend. Some of them will explore the motif of the ideal of creative work, considering architecture „the human expression enchanted in stone" (e.g. Botta 1968), others will offer an ideological interpretation in the optimist context of the "new, great man" (e.g. Ciompec, 1979). Quite an original point of view is proposed by Horia Bădescu, who discusses in a comprehensive essay *Master Manole or the Immanence of the Tragic* (1986) the G. Dem. Teodorescu's variant of the ballad incorporating it into the framework of Greek tragedy.

In the communist period, which "reinforced the privileged position that folk poetry assumed in the 19th century and continued to regard folk poetry as a foundation of all literature" (Neubauer 2007: 284), this ballad served as an illustration of the Romanian creative genius, who is capable of sacrifice in the name of building a new reality. Thus, for example, the 1953 school curriculum (Programa 1953: 86–87) draws attention to the historical context of the legend, the creative power of the Romanian people, their industriousness and willingness to make sacrifices in the name of workers' duty. Manole is opposed to the figure of the ruler Negru Vodă, who arouses the hatred of the people. The ballad is thus embedded in the notion of class struggle, responding to the ideological requirements of this particular period.

Afterwards, such ideologically grounded uses of folklore were supported by the trend referred to as *protochronism*, a nationalist-oriented tendency during the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu, which insisted upon the supposed pioneering character of the Romanian culture.

⁴ To read the resume of the ballad, see i.a.: Andreescu 2013: 107.

⁵ This interpretation is also ideologically motivated; Eliade writes the first version of his text in 1943, under the great influence of Nae Ionescu's mystical nationalism and the activity of the Iron Guard.

This is why the ballad occupied a special place particularly in school textbooks written after the promulgation of the July Theses in 1971. The central interpretative reference point remained there the classification of national myths by Călinescu and the idea of Manole's "sacrifice for creation" [jertfa pentru creație] (Programele 1977: 14, 38), which was meant to emphasize the uniqueness of the Romanian nation.

At the same time, there is a significant number of researchers that continue the ethnographic and anthropological research on the ballad's variants, their contextualization in the Balkans, the geography of motifs, possible sources of texts and their evolution.⁶

What all interpretive approaches have in common is the marginalization of the female protagonist Ana (Caplea in the Teodorescu variant) - her sacrifice is always read in relation to the dilemmas of the male character and she is inserted into the context of the moral virtues that the devoted wife must prove.

Hence, in the case of the Romanian variant of the myth, we are dealing with a complete masculinization of the topos: the walled-up woman suffers, but this is part of the role she traditionally must fulfil; she has no choice but to submit to her fate (which, moreover, since it appeared to Manole in a dream, is thereby determined by *force majeure*). The central axis of the text is completely constituted by Manole's series of dilemmas, and it is *his* dedication that becomes the basis for any interpretation that highlights the creative dimension of human sacrifice. Therefore, it is not the perspective of the "victim" that is accentuated here, but of the one who sacrifices the victim. Moreover, the Romanian reception of the ballad is dominated by the monastery/the construction itself, whose symbolic significance as an Orthodox temple, a royal necropolis and an important place in the history of Wallachia have always played a significant role in the interpretation of the legend.

However, in the field of literature, there have been attempts to rehabilitate the female protagonist. Some important women's voices explored Ana's suffering and solitude, often universalizing her fate. The first one was Carmen Sylva (the penname of Queen Elisabeth of Romania): her play *Meister Manole* (1892), relating the myth of the walled-up wife, can be read, as convincingly presented by Beth Ann Muellner, as a metaphor for real women's lives and their socio-political position in the period Sylva wrote because it "plays with gendered discourse and expectations in a traditionally male-dominated narrative of creation, sacrifice, and ambition" (Muellner 2018: 248). The best-known contemporary poetesses that have used this motif are Ana Blandiana (*Balada*, 1990), Nina Cassian (*Ca Ana*, 1981) and Ileana Mălăncioiu (*Legendă*, 1982). Unfortunately, none of these texts entered the canon, and the latter includes only the works of male writers, who adopted mostly Manole's perspective when exploring the myth of the construction sacrifice.⁷

Stemming from the view that literature is not only an individual act, but also a social phenomenon which can influence the collective mind, the dominant male interpretation of the myth reveals, as I argue following the studies of Mihaela Miroiu,⁸

⁶ The research on topos was done mainly by men, both in terms of folklore, and literary and cultural studies. See studies elaborated by: L. Șăineanu, N. Iorga, G. Tocilescu, D. Caracostea, P. Caraman, I. Talos, Gh. Vrabie, O. Papadima.

⁷ The most important remaining L. Blaga's drama *Meșterul Manole* (1927), representing the classic reference in literary studies about the legend.

⁸ To read analyses using a feminist approach in connection with other Balkan versions of the ballad, see i.a.: Mandel 1996 [1983], Aleksić 2013.

the position of the female ideal within the Romanian imaginary, “seen as subordinate to an all-controlling Other, as well as to the patriarchal order” (Andreescu 2013: 105). This myth perpetuated the ideal of a self-sacrificing woman since it was a part of the literary education of all generations of Romanian children during Gheorghiu-Dej’s and Ceaușescu’s regime,⁹ and of the new school curriculum in democratic Romania. For decades, this ‘ideal’ was further ingrained in the minds of the nation due to the fact that the canonical interpretation of the legend focused on the perspective of Manole and *his* sacrifice for the act of creation.

THE IDEOLOGICAL SHIFT AFTER 1989 AND THE APPEARANCE OF DEBATES OVER THE ROLE OF ANA – THE FEMALE PROTAGONIST OF THE LEGEND

It was only after 1989 that Romanian feminist discourse, which had to be reinvented and rediscovered after communism,¹⁰ argued that the symbolic structures perpetuated by this myth had influenced the formation of the female ideal in Romanian communist and post-communist society, culture and literature; hence, it was proposed that the canonical interpretations should be revised in an effort to change the position of women within the patriarchal system.

A pioneer of gender studies in Romanian academia, Mihaela Miroiu, whose studies are the main point of reference in my article, paved the way for feminism in this South-Eastern European country. Immediately after 1989, Miroiu and her colleagues embarked upon the same work that female feminist scholars in the UK and the US had long been involved in since the mid-1960s, thus making up for the gaps in the development of various feminist currents and literary criticism in communist Romania. However, it is important to mention that the tradition of Romanian feminism dates back to the turn of the 20th century, and in the interwar period the feminist movement became a substantive part of Romanian civil society, thanks to some strong female voices, like, *inter alia*, Alexandra Cantacuzino, Alice Voinescu, Elena Gr. Romniceanu, Elena Meissner or Calypso Botez (cf. Mihăilescu 2006). The activists of the 1990s could therefore refer to their predecessors, whose emancipation activity was interrupted by the apparent „emancipation” under the communist regime.

Although Romanian literature offers many examples of important women’s characters that could serve to describe the psychological constructions of femininity and patriarchal patterns dominant in literature considered canonical, Miroiu chooses Ana from the *Legend of Master Manole* for her analysis by making her the symbolic figure not only of feminine oppression, but also of the general condition of the population in a totalitarian system.

⁹ Actually, the ballad in Alecsandri’s variant appeared already in 1863 in Aron Pumnul’s *Lepturariu rumînesc*, the first important anthology of Romanian texts used also for educational purposes and it was analyzed in some manuals also in the interwar period.

¹⁰ In the 1990s, we are dealing in Romania with a lack of feminism as ideology and politics as a result of being closed-off from these ideas during communism (cf. Miroiu, Popescu 2004: 297–314).

Such a strategy fits in with Miroiu's project developed in her early essays from the 1990s, where she so frequently reiterates the close link between woman's position in the Balkan patriarchal society and any individual subjected to oppressive mechanisms of authoritarian regimes, that it becomes an essential element in her argument.

In the first years of establishing feminist postulates, with full cognizance of the politicization of this topos, Miroiu skillfully used the cultural and ideological dimensions of the myth of the immured woman, which served to raise Romanians' awareness of the concept of gender equality, the emancipation of Romanian women, and their role and place in society. By referring to the well-known, recognizable and legible figure of Ana, who represents an essential part of the national cultural heritage, she analyzed the position of the female ideal that was internalized by Romanian society, very often unconsciously. According to the researcher, this idea of sacrifice for the sake of creation is responsible for the historical invisibility of women; the master who sacrificed himself for the work gains immortality in common consciousness, while the woman who sacrificed her life for the creator remains anonymous (Miroiu 2020: 212–213). Furthermore, Ana's entrapment constitutes an apposite reference point for Miroiu to draw attention to the gendered and political meanings of space (private-public; marriage as an enclosed space; Ana's body seen as the body of the nation).

This folktale-based metaphor became so powerful in creating a new language to discuss the marginalization of women that it was the basis of the title of an entire anthology, edited by Tanya Renne and first published in 1997, *Ana's Land: Sisterhood in Eastern Europe*. This book offers us insight into women's experiences and perspectives in a region that is undergoing dramatic social and political change after the fall of the communist regime. Miroiu hypothesizes that this self-sacrificing attitude of a woman from a folk legend was reinforced in Romania by the communist regime:

Romanian literature and history focus on the standard myth of the self-sacrificing woman. The development of this myth has been facilitated, in large part, by the survival micropolitics practiced by most women in eastern Europe, a form of behavior they have developed in response to the chronic scarcity of resources that characterizes their condition (Miroiu, Popescu 2004: 300–301).

The Romanian scholar calls communism 'a state patriarchy', which imposed on women a double working day without ever contesting their traditional role within the family, and represented not their interests, but the interests of the party as they connected to women's lives (Miroiu 2015: 89). Moreover, it succeeded in instilling negative "feminine" features in people: obedience, fear, and a lack of assertiveness and autonomy (Miroiu, Popescu 2004: 306).

Ana's Land author is the first researcher to introduce into the discourse about the balad the category of *supererogation*, which allows her for an in-depth consideration of the nature of Ana's self-sacrifice. The simplest definition of the act of supererogation can be summarized as follows: "to do for others more than your duty requires" (Miroiu 2020: 213), an immanent feature of this act being therefore freedom of choice. Miroiu discusses it in reference to classical feminist texts on the ethical basis of supererogatory actions, conceived as self-sacrifice for the good of others that is not strictly required (Straumanis

1984), and broaches the conception of freedom essential for the liberation of women (Gould 1984). Following Gould's thought, Miroiu observes that women internalize supererogatory actions as duties as a result of their being traditionally educated for self-sacrifice and self-denial, and thus their identity is rendered functional in this manner – by typically being presented as “X's wife” or “Y's mother” (Miroiu 2020: 214). Similarly, the folkloric Ana also lost her agency, her name often being used in Romanian collective representations in a possessive form, in the popular formula “Manole's Ana” [Ana lui Manole].

Miroiu argues here, in particular, with Eliade's canonical interpretation of the ballad, accusing him of “ideological blindness”. He claims that “in the Romanian ballad the woman accepts her ritual immolation with resignation and even serenity” (Eliade 1996: 80), which can be understood as an act of voluntary self-sacrifice and contributes to the representations of Ana as a devoted, ready-to-sacrifice wife, thus creating a (harmful) cultural role model of femininity. But, as Miroiu admits, Ana's sacrifice was involuntary and non-conscious, she has not been treated as an autonomous agent, so it cannot be interpreted as self-sacrifice, the supreme act of supererogation. In this case, the distinction between a socially imposed duty and supererogation collapses. Bringing Manole the victuals, no matter the obstacles, Ana behaved as her duties required of her – the sacrificial process in which she was, fully aware, involved, was that of serving Manole, and that sacrifice ended once she found herself in the wall. The act of immurement was a crime masquerading as a game¹¹ – Ana was sacrificed, it was not her free choice, she could not refrain from performing it.

Manole represents an example of truthfulness towards Negru Vodă and his fellow builders, and towards an idea of an architectural masterpiece, but this sincerity is not maintained or applied when it comes to Ana (Miroiu 2020: 217). Despite the fact that he commits the crime against his will, he chooses to sacrifice his wife because he recognizes that the durability of the monastery and obedience to the ruler are more important. However, after the immolation moment, using his overarching power, Negru Vodă leaves all the builders to die in order to make sure that a better creation will never be possible – thus, at the end of the ballad, Manole sacrifices himself and dies. Hence, Miroiu changes the interpretation vector and shows, that the Romanian ethos related to the legend may refer also to this sacrifice of servitude – Manole sacrificed to the ruler, Ana sacrificed to her husband. The biggest difference here is the distribution of power - in this hierarchy, the only powerless protagonist is Ana. Manole, although he has to obey his king, compared to Ana is a free man who consciously sacrifices what is dear to him.

Therefore, the canonical Eliadian interpretation does not make salient the fundamental relation present in the legend – the power relationship. Only in Miroiu's approach does Ana become a symbol of all powerless people who are subject to the dominance of those who could be represented by Manole and Negru Vodă. She sees here a parallel to totalitarian societies, where supererogatory actions became regarded as duties. In such societies, powerless people face the need to sacrifice themselves for those more powerful. Like Ana, they are walled in for the sake of a goal or glory that is not their own (Miroiu 2018: 138), they obey the rules established by the one with more power. The citizenry were

¹¹ In the story, Manole deceived Ana during the immurement, convincing her that it was merely an innocent short-lived game.

turned into Anas through the experience of being inculcated with the view of supererogation as self-sacrifice and duty, and through the ordeal of their self-creation in the walls of monuments built for the glory of a totalitarian megalomaniac regime.

THE CONSTITUTION OF ANA NGO

Finally, Ana has regained her voice not only due to the new interpretation of the myth, but also as a result of “an institutional consecration”. The first feminist organization in Romania, founded by Miroiu, Laura Grünberg, and 19 other members, was called AnA – Societatea de Analize Feministe [The Society of Feminist Analysis]. Its name comes from *analyze*, from the dichotomy *A-non-A*, and from ‘Ana from the legend’. This society set out the intention to create a bridge between academic and activist feminism in Romania. It has also organized short-term courses in gender studies, as well as established a documentation center with feminist literature, in order to synchronize intellectually with feminist thought from Western Europe and the US. Additionally, one of its objectives was to re-evaluate the feminist perspectives of Romanian myths and legends. In one of the first issues of the “Analyze Magazine” [Journal of Gender and Feminist Studies], founded in 1998, Miroiu admits that Ana remains the most popular and viable cultural model – she was sacrificed for the one who chose to sacrifice himself for the ‘great creation’ (Miroiu 2006: 99). In this text, which bears the hallmarks of a manifesto, the author exposes the ideological dimension of the myth of female self-sacrifice that has been internalized by society, and announces upcoming changes:

[Contemporary Anas -OB-N] no longer want to go inside the walls. They recognize the difference between playing and building. They do not even wait for Manole, to tempt him with female cunning and immure him in their place. What they do is to invite him to plan their future together and to join them in a refusal to give in to any temptation of submission and domination (Miroiu 2006: 100).

In addition, Grünberg wrote a book *biONGrafie Ana – istoria trăită a unui ONG de femei* [biONGraphy AnA – the lived history of a women’s NGO] which she dedicated to all the Anas [*Anelor*], and where she presents, in a very informal way, the difficult story of the institutionalization and professionalization of the feminist movement in post-communist Romania.¹² The members of the AnA society call themselves ‘Anas’ and claim that Romanian space is “dominated by Manole’s clones and their Anas who sacrifice themselves” (Grünberg 2008: 36). This power relationship, detected in the legend, illustrates then all areas of socio-political and cultural life in Romania.

¹² To read more about women NGOs collaborating with governmental gender equality bodies, see: Ana: 2018.

CONCLUSIONS

Today, the symbolic potential of the legend is perhaps not as significant as it once was; a good many other canonical texts are being revised and read from a feminine perspective,¹³ and the ballad is no longer a compulsory part of the school curriculum. However, it can still represent a lively and current theme in contemporary Romanian culture – and, remarkably, the visibility of Ana’s role has increased, an outcome which can be considered a positive consequence of Miroiu’s educational campaign and successful ‘demasculation’ of the topos.¹⁴ Miroiu achieved a very important goal on the brink of the Romanian transition: in endeavoring to introduce the feminist perspective to Romanian post-communist discourse, she initiated the review of a well-known myth rooted in social consciousness, thus instigating the deconstruction of a dominant model of ‘the self-sacrificing woman’, related to the stereotypically tragic component of the ideal of a woman. By showing that the ballad portrays a feminine ideal that women in Romania are encouraged to embody, she revealed the deepest structures of the social imaginary, helping us, *ipso facto*, to name them, understand them, and finally – transcend them.

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¹³ What Miroiu started in the 1990s continues to this day; an example of this is the platform *Literatură și feminism* [Literature and feminism], initiated in 2019 by Mihaela Michailov and Laura Sandu, a team consisting of several writers, editors, translators, artists and cultural workers that support literary feminist activism. They characterize their feminism as intersectional, queer, decolonial, antiracist, and anticapitalistic, and they promote publishing initiatives that implement these postulates. In 2020, they published a volume of feminist literary analyzes intended for high school graduates, aiming to create an alternative space for reading and understanding canonical Romanian novels (<https://literurasifeminism.wordpress.com/>). See also: Rughiniș, Grünberg, Popescu 2015.

¹⁴ See e.g.. Mihaela Moscaliuc’s poem “Ana to Manole” (*The American Poetry Review* 2014: 43(2), 26–27); Spectacle *Meșterul Manole* 2018, scenario and dir. A. Măjeri, The National Theatre of Cluj-Napoca; Musical projects: F. Jandarek, 2018, *The Legend of the Immured Woman* (feat. D. Istrate & J. Soza); the anthology “Lacrima Anei” [Ana’s Tear] – a local publishing initiative from Curtea de Argeș, which contains poems by 113 authors touching on the topic of Ana from the legend (Păun 2019); *Ana și Rozafa*, 2022, Union of Interpretive Creation of Musicians from Romania.

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