

# The Margins *versus* the Centre of the National Literary Canon: The Reception of ‘The Legend of Master Manole’ in Romanian Education<sup>1</sup>

Nacionalinio literatūros kanono paribiai *versus* centras:  
*Legendos apie meistrą Manolę* recepcija Rumunijos švietime

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*Abstract:* The main purpose of the article is to outline a panorama of the reception of ‘The Legend of Master Manole’ in Romanian education, from the beginning of its introduction to the Romanian national literary canon until the post-communist era. The paper explores how the discourse created around this text in the 19th century and perpetuated by interwar critics (e.g. George Călinescu, Mircea Eliade), and the ideology of protochronism during Ceaușescu’s regime, is preserved in

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post-communist textbooks. Although there have been some attempts at the feminist decanonisation of the ballad since 1989, they did not influence the main narrative presented in school manuals. The didactic literature still emphasises the male perspective of Manole, and his sacrifice for the act of creation, ignoring the perspective of Ana, the female character in the ballad, and *her* sacrifice. Starting from the premise that the canon is a certain set of beliefs which can be constantly engaged in polemics that should be continuously shaped and deconstructed, the article also proposes some new literary contexts in which 'The Legend of Master Manole' could appear in school textbooks.

*Keywords:* Romanian literary canon, Romanian didactic literature, 'The Legend of Master Manole', the legend of immured woman, feminist decanonisation.

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*Anotacija:* Pagrindinis straipsnio tikslas – atskleisti „Legendos apie meistrą Manolę“ recepciją Rumunijos švietime nuo kūrinio įtraukimo į šalies literatūros kanoną iki pokomunistinio laikotarpio. Straipsnyje nagrinėjama, kaip XIX a. sukurta ir tarpukario kritikų (pvz., George'o Călinescu, Mircea Eliade'ės) įtvirtinta šio teksto interpretacija, Nicolae'ės Ceaușescu režimo laikais paversta protochronizmo ideologijos įrankiu, pasiekė pokomunistinių laikų mokyklinius vadovėlius. Nors po 1989 metų kūrinį bandyta dekanonizuoti, taikant feministinę prieigą, tai neturėjo įtakos mokykliniuose vadovėliuose dominuojančiai legendos interpretacijai. Mokomojoje medžiagoje vis dar pabrėžiamas Manolės vyriškumas ir pasiaukojimas dėl kūrybos, ignoruojant Anos, moteriškojo legendos personažo, perspektyvą, jos pasiaukojimą. Atsispyrus nuo prielaidos, kad kanonas yra tam tikrų įsitikinimų rinkinys, su kuriuo galima polemizuoti, kurį galima formuoti ir dekonstruoti, straipsnyje siūloma į mokyklinius vadovėlius įtraukti keletą naujų „Legendos apie meistrą Manolę“ literatūrinių interpretacijų.

*Raktažodžiai:* rumunų literatūros kanonas, rumunų mokomoji medžiaga, „Legenda apie meistrą Manolę“, įmūrytos moters legenda, feministinė dekanonizacija.

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## The beginning of the ballad's canonisation process

'The Legend of Master Manole'<sup>2</sup> is considered by canonical literary critics to be

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- 2 This is the story of the construction of a Romanian Orthodox monastery in Curtea de Argeș at the request of the legendary founder of Wallachia, Negru Vodă, the Black Voivode. According to the legend, the work carried out by Manole and the other nine masons during the day was mysteriously destroyed overnight. Manole had a dream in which he was advised that if he really wished to complete the construction, he should wall up within it the first wife or sister who appeared on the horizon the next day bringing food to her husband or brother. The first woman to approach the construction site was Manole's pregnant wife Ana. Manole pleaded with God to prevent her from reaching the construction site, but no obstacle could

one of the fundamental myths of Romanian spirituality and identity. It illustrates the theme of the ‘immured woman’, widely reported throughout the Balkans.<sup>3</sup> It was first published in ballad form by Vasile Alecsandri in 1852, immediately becoming an important part of the Romanian literary and cultural canon. It appears under the title *Negru Vodă și Manole sau Mănăstirea Argeșului (băladă)* (Negru Vodă and Manole or The Argeș Monastery [A Ballad]) in the first anthology of Romanian texts (*Lepturariu rumînesc*, Volume II, 1863) compiled by Aron Pumnul and published in Vienna in the ‘transitional alphabet’ (*alfabet de tranziție*).<sup>4</sup> The Pumnul anthology became the basis for the creation of school curricula and textbooks later used in teaching the Romanian language and literature in the most important Romanian school centres at the turn of the 20th century that laid the foundations for Romanian education, both in the United Principalities of Romania and later in the Kingdom of Romania, as well as in Transylvania, located first within the borders of the Habsburg Empire and then, from 1867 to 1918, of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, before it became part of Greater Romania in 1918.

The purpose of my article is to show that while the placement of a particular text or author in the canon<sup>5</sup> undoubtedly gives it a privileged position in the history of literature, on the other hand, it politicises it, and often makes it become a tool of symbolic violence in the hands of the authorities. This is also the case of ‘The Legend of Master Manole’: its interpretations ‘froze like magma’, focusing

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deter her from her path. Thus Manole walls her in, under the pretence of playing a game. However, this sacrificial act does not constitute the end of the ballad: the denouement focuses on Manole’s existential despair, and, moreover, his death. Following the completion of the temple, the ruler Negru Vodă enquired whether Manole and the other masons could build a more splendid building. When they responded in the affirmative, Negru Vodă became furious and forced them all to the roof, from where there was no escape. In an attempt to reach the ground safely, Manole leapt from the building with wooden wings, in an imitation of the flight of Icarus, but sadly failed. A tiny spring appeared at the very location of his demise.

- 3 For more about the origin and different variants of the topos, see: Dundes 1996.
- 4 This was a series of alphabets comprising a combination of Cyrillic and Latin characters used in Romanian in the 19th century, before switching exclusively to the Latin alphabet.
- 5 By Romanian literary canon, I mean a nation-centered process that started in the 19th century, shaped on the basis of first anthologies of Romanian texts and didactic literature, and finally forged by the interwar literary critics, especially in George Călinescu’s monumental ‘A History of Romanian Literature from its Origins to the Present Day’ (1941), which to this day remains a central point of reference in the teaching of literature, and has perpetuated the hierarchy in school manuals.

on one reading of the text. As it tells the story of the construction of a temple that is important to Romanian history and religious identity, it emphasises the theme of ‘sacrifice in an act of artistic creation’ of the main character, Manole, while marginalising the theme of the victim, the ‘immured woman’, which at first glance seems to be the central subject of the ballad.

The life of the author also intervened in the process of the canonisation and the reception of the text under analysis. Although the legend belongs to folk literature, Alecsandri was the person who made it visible by introducing it into the emerging literary canon, aestheticising and rewriting the original oral folklore version. He is still on the list of leading and must-read authors, and his biography has been used repeatedly for ideological purposes (especially his role during the Spring of Nations in 1848).

Although there have been attempts at the feminist recovery of the ballad, especially after 1989, they have not affected the already well-established school canon, which to this day does not conflict with traditional readings of the text. Therefore, the feminine perspective is excluded from the main narrative about the legend; hence, we can observe here the same mechanisms that usually operate in the process of ‘canonical selection that is always a process of social exclusion, specifically the exclusion of female, black, ethnic, or working-class authors from the literary canon’ (Guillory 1993: 7).

### **The reception of the ballad until 1989: a general overview**

The ballad entered circulation in culture and literature in the 19th century, a time in the history of Romania when the newly established state faced the task of national self-determination and cultural identification. During this time, given the lack of several hundred years of Romanian language literature that could have guaranteed the linguistic and spiritual identity of the emerging nation, an effective recipe to fill this gap in the national literary canon was the aestheticisation and adaptation of oral folklore. The development of Romanian didactic literature of the 19th century and in the interwar period is inextricably linked to the historical and political contexts of the era: religious texts formed the basis for literacy instruction, while the next step was the analysis of literary texts whose content was intended to shape patriotic and moral attitudes

among Romanian schoolchildren. Under these conditions, the ballad about the Monastery of Argeş had to be read from a historical perspective, as proof of the continuity and greatness of the Principality of Wallachia (cf. Adamescu 1899: 91),<sup>6</sup> and from a spiritual and aesthetic perspective, as evidence of the ‘specificity’ and uniqueness of the Romanian spirit, capable of making sacrifices in the name of higher ideals (cf. Dragomirescu 1927: 25).

Therefore, once the text entered the official literary and cultural discourse, it became heavily politicised, and its canonical readings, as preserved by the educational system and culture, emphasised its creative and aesthetic dimensions, following the religious and cosmogonic interpretations of Mircea Eliade in his essays *Comentarii la Legenda Meşterului Manole* (Commentaries on the Legend of Master Manole, 1943)<sup>7</sup> and ‘Master Manole and the Monastery of Argeş’ (1972). According to Eliade’s theory, only a violent death represents a form of creation. Manole thus sacrifices his pregnant wife in the name of the higher ideal of creation, communicating the message that artistic success comes only with great personal sacrifice (Muellner 2018: 247).

From a nationalist-oriented historiographical perspective, George Călinescu, the leading Romanian literary critic, and the author of the Romanian canonical literary studies *Istoria literaturii române dela origini până în prezent* (A History of Romanian Literature from its Origins to the Present Day, 1941) recognises ‘The Legend of Master Manole’ as one of the fundamental myths of ‘Romanian spirituality’. He defines it as follows: ‘our concept of creativity is the fruit of suffering’ (Călinescu 1968: 37), interpreting the ballad as ‘Romania’s constitutive aesthetic myth that emphasised the importance of individual sacrifice in acts of artistic creation’ (Neubauer 2007: 273). Manole’s masculine experience is thus meant to be emblematic of the mentality of the whole nation. Henceforth, and for decades, Călinescu’s classification was to determine how the ballad was conceived, since the entire Romanian communist and early post-communist literary canon was reconstituted based on the hierarchies established in his works of literary historiography. As Eugen Negrici observes, Călinescu is ‘the most

6 In the section ‘Sources’ at the end of the article I only list the sources cited in the article, as the analysis itself covered more than 50 school textbooks and 16 school programmes from the period 1863 to 2017.

7 It is worth mentioning that this interpretation is also ideologically motivated: Eliade wrote 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.

persuasive among all directors of Romanian literature, the one who managed to impose great mythical projections on the reading public' (Negrici 2008: 46–53).

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 legend 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 their 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 the class struggle, responding to the ideological requirements of this particular period.

Such ideologically based uses of folklore were supported by the trend referred to as protochronism, a nationalist-oriented tendency under the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu, which insisted on the supposed pioneering character of Romanian culture and Dacian civilisation. This is why the ballad occupied a particularly special place in school textbooks written after the promulgation of the July Theses in 1971. The central interpretative reference point remained 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 emphasise the uniqueness of the Romanian nation.

What all interpretative approaches have in common is the marginalisation of Ana, the female protagonist in the ballad: her sacrifice is always read in relation to the dilemmas of the male character, and she is inscribed in the context of the moral virtues that the devoted wife should show. Hence, in the case of the Romanian version of the myth, we are dealing with the complete masculinisation of the topos: the walled-up woman suffers, but this is part of the role she must traditionally 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 totally 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.

As archetypal well-established structures are present not only in the fictional world of folk tales, but also in the real world, this power relationship present in the legend under analysis allows me to venture to claim that Ana, being a literary protagonist, can also become a general metaphor for the place of women in Romanian literature; in this traditionally male-dominated universe, women writers were invisible and powerless. The dominant model in Romanian literary circles was one based on a master-disciple relationship: for example, if we consider the communist period, literary legitimacy in the field depended on the so-called ‘literary godfathers’ of young writers. These formed a group of critics who established the literary hierarchy, and were members of the juries that distributed national prizes for literature.<sup>8</sup>

In the literary struggle for power, women have always started from a weaker position, and the literary field perfectly reflects this patriarchal order and subordination to the all-controlling group of literary critics. Hence, the means of legitimisation and consecration remain capitalised by male dominants.

### **The reception of the ballad since 1989**

In the post-1989 period, the male leaders of that generation established the canon at a time when the question of women’s literature was not at all prominent in the debate around the literary canon. During this period, the entire Romanian intellectual world confronted ethical dilemmas, and agreed that literature played a role in the quiet resistance mounted during the Ceaușescu regime. The aesthetic dimension of the work and the greatness of creation were glorified, as presented in the Călinescu model. The literary scene remained a favourable place for the reproduction of the symbolic capital of masculine elites. Furthermore, for the post-communist government, gender equality was not a priority, unless it was related to EU accession (Ana 2018: 155).

However, since then, in the 1990s and 2000s, the ideological and literary landscape has slowly been changing, and literary scholars like Liana Cozea (1994),

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8 The most well-known are: Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu (1921–2000), Nicolae Manolescu (b. 1939), Eugen Simion (1933–2022), Ion Pop (b. 1941), Marian Papahagi (1948–1999), Alexandru Călinescu (b. 1945), Livius Ciocirlie (b. 1935), Mircea Martin (b. 1940) (see more: Răduță 2011).

Elena Zaharia-Filipaş (2004) and Bianca Burţa-Cernat (2011) have made efforts to reinstate literature that had been previously ignored for an extended period of time, helping some of the forgotten Anas to regain their voice and agency. This process of changing the canon is still ongoing, as Daiana Gârdan observes when discussing female authors in Romania: ‘the main labels associated with novels written by women still entertain the cultural cliché of the “soft” feminine voice in opposition to the “hard” genius of the male voice’ (Gârdan 2018: 112).

The early 1990s were also a time of the reinvention and rediscovery of the Romanian feminist movement. Mihaela Miroiu, the leading Romanian feminist, was the first to appreciate and use the subversive potential of the topos of the ‘immured woman’. She argued in her essays that the symbolic structures perpetuated by this myth influenced the formation of the female ideal in Romanian communist and post-communist society, culture and literature (Miroiu 2006 [1998]; 2015; 2018 [1997]; 2020; Miroiu, Popescu 2004). She has repeatedly deconstructed in her texts the ideal of a ‘woman sacrificing herself’ and ‘suppressing her own needs’ for the sake of others, locating its origins, among other things, in the text of the ballad, interpreted for decades by the educational system and culture from a male-centric point of view focused on the dilemmas of the creator (Manole) and his sacrifice for the work being created, while ignoring the perspective of the victim. Consequently, in the erudite analyses of Miroiu, Ana of the legend became a symbol of oppression for all Romanian women, and more broadly for all members of totalitarian societies, who began to equate acts of supererogation with compulsory actions in favour of an oppressive power. Miroiu’s activities, although not directly related to literature, also indirectly influenced changes in the literary canon, and encouraged the tendency to conceptualise, recover and rediscover literature that, for the most part, has been ignored by criticism and by the public. Furthermore, the first feminist organisation in Romania, founded by Miroiu, Laura Grünberg and 19 other members, was called AnA – Societatea de Analize Feministe (The Society of Feminist Analysis), which also represented a direct reference to ‘Ana from the legend’ (Grünberg 2008).

Nevertheless, the new perspective proposed by Miroiu and her colleagues has not influenced the school’s curricula content in any way. Moreover, such an interpretative pattern, which fits within the framework of a patriarchal order that realises fantasies of female submissiveness supporting the development



of the male potential for genius, seems increasingly common in textbooks from the early 21st century. In the early 2000s, interpretations of the ballad seem to encourage finding qualities of an ‘ideal relationship’ on the basis of Ana and Manole’s relationship, while at the same time relying on culturally established models of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’. This situation can be explained by the ‘post-communist *Zeitgeist* [...] [that] (re)created a conservative society, with the reaffirmation of traditional gender roles and anti-feminist attitudes’ (Batori 2019: 171). The primary obstacle to women’s equality in Romania after 1989 is the revival of traditional, rural patriarchal values (Miroiu, Popescu 2004: 297–314).

Thus, Ana is generally portrayed as ‘a being endowed with intelligence, a hardy spirit, and the generosity of a loving woman who does not oppose her husband’s decisions’ (Simion 2001: 81). Her attitude is seen as ‘naïve trust in her husband’s reassuring words during the immurement, convincing her that it was merely an innocent short-lived game’ (Dobra 2004: 97). Although nature had endowed this exceptional woman with wonderful gifts, youth, beauty, a happy relationship and motherhood, this did not stop her from ‘a voluntary act of sacrifice’ (Ibid.: 81). The culmination of this interpretation reproducing uncritically the cultural stereotypes associated with the perception of passive femininity (dutifully associated with youth, physical attractiveness, fulfilment in a relationship with a man, and fertility, all ‘gifts’ offered by a higher power) and active masculinity (despite the interference of a higher power, Manole is intrinsically steerable), appears to be one of the writing assignments for students: ‘A monument more lasting than bronze, an ambivalent story of male genius and female devotion; write an essay on the ideal relationship (Manole-Ana)’ (Ibid.: 82). All analysed textbooks (Iancu 1999; Angelescu 1999; Costache 2006) follow a similar path of interpretation. Besides, the ballad is also used for classes in normative poetics, where it serves as an example of features of the literary genre it represents.

This phenomenon is not an isolated case, but it is part of the general trend in teaching literature in Romania. It has been noted, among others, by the contemporary continuators of Miroiu’s thought, the platform ‘Literatură și feminism’ (Literature and feminism), initiated in 2019 by Mihaela Michailov and Laura Sandu. This is a team consisting of several writers, editors, translators, artists and cultural workers that support literary feminist activism. In 2020 they published a volume of feminist literary analyses intended for high school

graduates, aiming to create an alternative space for reading and understanding canonical Romanian novels:<sup>9</sup>

We figured it out and we discussed the fact that for many years, every Romanian-speaking child who is lucky enough to stay in the education system comes into contact with a kind of very specific way of reading and understanding canonical literature.

The discussion of this topic was an opportunity to share personal memories and experiences: we talked about the museumification of the reception of literature, as we were taught it and as we learned it and internalised it ourselves, to some extent.

We talked about the nationalist filter through which scholarly commentary is passed, the ways in which it contextualises literature, and also about the heavy imprint of literary theory created within a well-ossified, rigid, conservative field. We talked about the effects that awkward reverence can have on the way students relate to authority: male writers are luminaries, celestials, peaks, geniuses ... Male writers and never female writers, because they don't even exist in the compulsory baccalaureate syllabus. But even if there were some female writers, this kind of reporting should be dismantled because it endlessly maintains and reproduces a suspicious hierarchy (like all hierarchies) and a discursive subordination, which our world should no longer have to put up with. On the contrary, our aim should be to develop a critical language that eliminates the tendency to pay homage to power (Sandu 2020: 7–8).

The last proposition fits perfectly into the context of our ballad. The Romanian ethos related to the legend is actually based on the power relationship recalling the sacrifice of servitude: Manole sacrificed to the ruler (he sacrifices himself after the moment of immolation, when Negru Vodă forces the builders to the roof, leaving them to die), while Ana is sacrificed to her husband. Instead of taking a critical approach to this type of hierarchy, contemporary textbooks continue to perpetuate the attitude of submission to an overarching authority. Researchers from 'Literature and feminism' analysed a considerable number of high school textbooks, collections of commentaries and reviews published online, and they were very surprised when they realised 'that the latter were very similar

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9 They proposed a feminist interpretation of *Enigma Otiliei* (The Enigma of Otilia), *Patul lui Procust* (The Bed of Procrustes), *Moromeții* (The Morometes), *Moara cu noroc* (The Lucky Mill), *Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război* (The Last Night of Love, the First Night of War), *Ion*, *Baltagul* (The Hatchet), and *O scrisoare pierdută* (A Lost Letter).

to the ones they had had at school 20 years ago' (Sandu 2020: 8). The authors of the book *Alice în Țara Manualelor* (Alice in the Land of Textbooks) came to very similar conclusions after analysing textbooks for elementary school students: the representation of female and male characters reproduces rigid gender stereotypes, and 'the Land of Textbooks' is strongly rooted in the social realities and cultural imagination ... of the 19th century (Rughiniș, Grünberg, Popescu 2015: 109).

### **The possible non-canonical literary contexts absent from the textbooks**

Although there have been some strong literary voices that have attempted to rehabilitate the female protagonist of the ballad in the field of literature, none of these texts entered the canon, which includes only works of male writers, who adopted mainly Manole's perspective when exploring the myth of the construction sacrifice.<sup>10</sup> The most important here remains Lucian Blaga's drama *Meșterul Manole* (1927), representing the classic reference in literary studies of the legend. Blaga's text is also analysed in school as an example of the reinterpretation by literary fiction (*literatura cultă*) of a folk motif (*literatura populară*). Both works are studied in parallel.

None of the important voices of women who explored Ana's suffering and solitude in their literary work are included in the school curriculum. And the first to explore the feminine potential of the story 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 during which Sylva wrote, because it 'plays with gendered discourse and expectations in a traditionally male-dominated narrative of creation, sacrifice, and ambition' (Muellner 2018: 248).<sup>11</sup> The best-known contemporary poetesses

10 See, for example, dramas by Nicolae Iorga, Octavian Goga, Adrian Maniu and Victor Eftimiu in the interwar period; in communist poetry (e.g. Nicolae Labiș, Marin Sorescu and Nichita Stănescu), novels (e.g., George Călinescu), and theatre (e.g. Horia Lovinescu); and contemporary prose (e.g. Emil Rațiu and Florin Horvath).

11 This drama was written in German, which is an objective justification for its absence from Romanian textbooks.

that have used this motif are Ana Blandiana (*Balada*, 1990), Nina Cassian (*Ca Ana*, 1981), and Ileana Mălăncioiu (*Legendă*, 1982).<sup>12</sup> Significantly, however, their works should not be linked to the feminist turn in Romanian literature (this would not take place until the 1990s), but rather to a certain interpretative shift afforded by the poetic opening of the 1960s, aimed at greater emotionality, acquiescence to writing about difficult experiences, moral dilemmas, suffering (unwelcome during the period of hurrah-optimistic Socialist Realism), and absurd existential choices. In addition, the communist period saw the emergence of more women authors, who naturally chose the figure of Ana to talk about unhappy love or suffering resulting from sacrifice. Therefore, appealing to the well-known symbolism of the myth of ‘sacrifice for creation’ in the Romanian cultural space allowed for the creation of a clear and expressive poetic message. For example, Mălăncioiu’s poem focuses on Ana’s spiritual suffering: using the metaphor of confinement and of ‘boundaries’, the lyrical self describes her unhappy and difficult love, and a degree of incomprehension from the man. However, it is worth adding that the man still remains at the centre of her reflection:

I am inside a wall like Manole’s wife Ana  
 Only that I am not Ana, and the one who walled me in  
 Has never had a dream in his life.

He enclosed me in a wall ready made,  
 In his own defensive wall  
 So that I would be neither inside his boundary  
 Nor outside.

He dreams only now at last  
 And moves to release me from the dry stone,  
 But he no longer knows where he walled me in (Mălăncioiu 2011 [1981]: 54).

The real change in the approach can be observed in the poetic dialogue between Mihaela Moscaliuc and Andrei Codrescu, both of whom are from Romania, live in the United States, and write in English. Codrescu published

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12 All the poems can be found in the anthology *Lacrima Anei* (Ana’s Tear) a local publishing initiative from Curtea de Argeş, which has poems by 113 authors touching on the topic of Ana from the legend. The originator and editor of the volume was Gheorghe Păun.

a poem in 2011 in the *Great River Review*, ‘Master Manole to Ana. A retelling for Mihaela Moscaliuc’, in which Manole, the lyrical subject, despairs over the decision he had to make, but also emphasises its inevitability and the necessity of sacrificing the one he loved most, while realising the moral ambiguity of his act:

I am a mason and a liar and I will always be one  
I am the wall that will not stand unless I build my love within (Codrescu 2011: 33).

On the other hand, he gets tired of the absurdity of the situation, and admits that he cannot explain his behaviour:

Ana immured cries Why?  
Ana immured makes no room for answers I don’t have  
Ana immured I have no answer to your Why (Ibid.).

Moscaliuc responded to Codrescu in 2014 in the pages of *The American Poetry Review* with her poem ‘Ana to Manole. A retelling of a Romanian folk ballad, for Andrei Codrescu, in response to his “Master Manole to Anna”’. The lyrical monologue in Moscaliuc’s work is conducted from Ana’s perspective, revealing the cruelty and absurdity of the procedure of making a betrothal sacrifice and calling by name the experience of female suffering. In the last stanza, which can be interpreted as a mini feminist manifesto, Ana wants to give meaning to her sacrifice, offering herself not to the walls of the Orthodox Church and the permanence of the sacred edifice, but to her excluded, mute sisters, who have been deprived of their right to vote and visibility by the patriarchy:

Take me in, mute sisters, mute sunbright.  
I’ll sweep the closets, break the glass slipper,  
tie our umbilical cords into a magic broom.  
Whisk my blood, swallow me, I am yours (Moscaliuc 2014: 27).

Similar attempts to use the topos of ‘the immured woman’ show that it has a great emancipatory potential to go beyond reading the ballad through the prism of the established, dominant interpretation in Romanian culture oriented

towards the creative dimension of the rite of human sacrifice. This potential is increasingly being used in art and music,<sup>13</sup> but is still absent in education.

## Conclusions

‘The Legend of Master Manole’ is one of the few texts that have been present in the school literary canon from practically the very beginning of the formation of the Romanian national identity until today. Although it is no longer a mandatory position according to current curricula (e.g. *Programe școlare* 2006: 6), teachers still prefer it quite readily, thus remaining a living cultural reference for Romanian society. Having traced its reception, we can observe that its interpretation in didactic literature has been petrified. From the very beginning, exegetes of the ballad imposed two main lines of interpretation: the historical context of the Monastery of Argeș, and the motif of the foundation sacrifice, which is combined with the figure of Master Manole, capable of the greatest sacrifices in the name of an artistic ideal. This example shows us that although there has been talk of a post-canonical reality for many years now (see Damrosch 2006), rigid structures still hold sway over school manuals. Yet, in the current socio-cultural context, the ballad could be an extremely inspiring source text that could take us to the margins of the canon, sparking discussion about the presence of women in Romanian literature, different images of masculinity and femininity, power relationships present at various social levels ... and the canon itself: who creates it, under what circumstances, and for what purpose. This is not an encouragement to overturn the Romanian-centric canon in didactic literature, but an invitation to its constructive re-evaluation, its interpretation with adequate tools, and in terms more in line with the contemporary reality.

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13 See, for example, the play *Meșterul Manole* 2018 (scenario by A. Măjeri, director Andrei Măjeri, National Theatre of Cluj-Napoca), the musical projects of F. Jandarek (2018), *The Legend of the Immured Woman* (Dan Istrate and Jessica Soza), Ana și Rozafa (2022), Union of Interpretative Creation of Musicians from Romania, and the above-mentioned anthology *Lacrima Anei*.

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