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ACADEMIA ROMÂNĂ



Laura-Eveline BĂDESCU

Mentalități,
retorică și imaginar
în secolul
al XVIII-lea românesc
cărțile de blestem



Editura Muzeului Național al Literaturii Române



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ADDENDA

Conclusions

The analysis of the *curse books* issued in the 18th century was sparked by the necessity to describe the evolution of these documents and the role they played in our cultural history. Doubtless these documents ought to be considered in the terms of a civilization of Orthodoxy. The distinctive traits of this civilization, established by Academician Răzvan Theodorescu (*Ce poate fi astăzi, „Civilizația ortodoxiei“?* [=What Can 'The Civilization of Orthodoxy' be Today?], in *Picătura de istorie* [=A Drop of History], Bucharest, Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 2002, p. 267-272) are easily identifiable in the corpus of data we have presented so far, since they attest not solely the indigenization of the Christian truth or the ecumenical tradition, but also the complex links between the church and the lay world.

The statute that these documents acquired in the *middle century* as a juridical act of evidence that proved decisive in the practice of the ruling Divan was correlated with the genetic context of their functionality.

In this respect, we considered the political, administrative, social and ecclesiastical components that supported and promoted the issuing, application, validity and the prestige of these documents.

The description of the political space, more often than not during the Phanariot rule, was achieved by resorting to the most reputable sources of studies of history, but also to various texts and documents that were quite widespread at the time. This approach outlined the image of the Romanian Principalities from the perspective of the major upsetting political changes, the toughening of fiscal habits and disrespect for legislation which at that particular time was overwhelmed by the variety and high number of felonies. All these were considered in a relationship of causality with the

social aspect, which was also profoundly influenced by terrible natural catastrophes.

The description of the 18th-century cultural space, considered itself as part of the genetic context was accomplished from the perspective of an author-centered perspective. The reason behind this approach was the fact that the literature of princes and scholars may offer the genuine instruments needed to make up an ordered social guide of rules and hierarchies, ceremonial and manner of life, customs and innovations. This was done in order to affirm an idiosyncratically-outlined political imagery. As a matter of fact, the idiosyncrasy appeared as a natural reaction within the era procuring motivations that changed into the major themes of Middle-Century literature. Bearing a direct relationship to it, but passing on to diachronic evolution, the polymorphism of this literature was effected on the edifice of myth, oblivion, collective memory filtered by individual memory. More often than not the humanism of this literature was brought to the fore, with an insistence on the recognition of civilizing models, of belonging to unity or to territorial permanence, etc. In fact, the sentiment of belonging (either national, dynastic, social, etc.) together with the sentiment of otherness can be found as a paradigmatic axis in works that are representative for this literature.

We have not neglected the profile of the reader during the era either, which was defined by considering the studies made on the basis of the lists of pre-numbered readers, namely the people who by acquiring beforehand a certain number of copies supported the printing of the book. In this respect, we notice the preeminence of the number of pre-numbered readers who were part of the ecclesiastical environment, a fact which is relevant for the share of people who could read and write had at the time.

By forcing to a certain extent the comparative paradigm, we have opposed to the literature of the princes a literature of anonyms made up mainly of books whose popularity quickly propelled them among the favored readings of people in the middle century. The high number of manuscripts and printed copies of these volumes are a direct testimony to the physiognomy of the reader of the time, who was especially and generally interested in reading for leisure, and particularly oracular books and books of divination.

For the Romanian moment of the 18th century, the two major directions of literature are subordinated to the powerful contrasts between poverty and opulence, between obscurantism and intellectual brilliance.

With this in view, the first chapter motivated, by means of giving a detailed presentation of the genetic context of the political, social and cultural environment that facilitated the institutionalization of curse books.

The process of institutionalization implies the correlation with another level, the level of the generic context, responsible for the immutability of the normative that determined the appearance and evolution of the formulas of imprecation. Starting with this chapter, in order to avoid confusions of a terminological type, we have adopted the term 'malediction,' no longer using the term 'curse' for the official productions which were in fact based on an act of linguistic magic whose intentionality was firmly established, namely that of protection.

The bibliography we accessed allowed us to state that malediction enjoyed an official status even before the Common Era, during the Mesopotamian civilizations. The study of inscriptions proved that they often played the role of protecting a property and of enforcing its boundaries for future generations. The presence of the formulas of malediction in some contracts of selling lands in later periods (between the 8th and 7th centuries before the Common Era) certifies their use in an institutional environment. As the theme of these maledictions was not at all different from the theme of Christian maledictions – including the punishments invoking afflictions such as leprosy and its plaguing wounds, etc. – prestigious researchers signaled that these were taken as such in sacred books.

Comparative studies in literature have highlighted the positioning of curses in the Old Testament along a descending line of the Mesopotamian inheritance. The proposed typologies have demonstrated that the variety of the Old Testament formulas does not constitute an impediment for correlating them with the pre-Christian traditions which were undeniably their source. Common topoi, such as leaving the body unburied, the futility of fundamental actions, the destructive epidemics, etc. affirm an undeniable self-standing corpus from which the bishop's curse took the formulas that established it.

This second chapter randomly mentions (the term *randomly* signifies that subsequent archeological proofs may contradict this date) that the first attestation of what was later to become the foundation of the bishop's curse dates from the year of 363 Common Era, namely less than half a century since anathematization had become a practice recognized by the Church during the first ecumenical council at Nicaea (325 Common Era).

The variety of the formulas of imprecation used in the European Middle Age or in early Romanian history illustrates their distinct evolution: only those that spring from a cultivated descending line have been presented, that is, the curses meant to protect books.

The fact that the malediction had an official status during the European Middle Age (see the Benedictine maledictions) constitutes a major argument for the conservation of a pattern of thinking that determined the same forms of manifestations, expression and pressure linked by a relationship of an instrumental type with the juridical-administrative system in the Orthodox space.

The *generic context* is emphasized especially in the subchapters 2.2. *Official Malediction* and 2.3., *Malediction in the Romanian Juridical System*, in which references made to the normative corpus point not only to a larger framework of Christianity, but also to the national Christian framework with a Byzantine-rite Orthodox extension. The illustrations with fragments from the documents of times gone by serve as a proof of the unity of writing and conceptualization of the formulas that constituted the bishop's curse in its most diverse uses.

Placing the malediction between the common law and the popular sanction facilitates the understanding of the process through which malediction took roots under the umbrella of coercive prestige and of sanction seen as a prerogative of politics and an attribute of perennial values.

This process is doubled by another one, which has legislative power and canonic cover, a process that had begun early in the Romanian countries through the codes of law of Matei Basarab and Vasile Lupu, had continued under the Greek influence and was accomplished through the indigenous legislative initiatives of the 18th century and the beginning of 19th century.

The two fundamental operations that facilitated the institutionalization of the curse books and in fact led to establishing the bishop's curse as a distinct species are highlighted by illustrating the relationship existing between the ecclesiastical courts and the princely courts of law. The administration of evidence and the competing force of the book of enforcement compared to the curse book reflect the diachronic route towards the disappearance of an instrument of ecclesiastical administrative practice.

The *functional context* was described by appealing to the corpus of texts used – namely the curse books kept in the stock of the National Archives in Bucharest, like those from volumes of edited documents. The delimitation bishop's malediction *versus* curse was given in terms that were as precise as possible, which took into account the authority of the issuer, the type of document, its finality, etc. Bearing in mind that this delimitation did not operate on the level receiver/beneficiary of malediction/curse we showed what the principal antidote for untying the curse knot was: prayer. We have tried to illustrate the various types of these prayers by transcribing certain novel fragments kept in the stock of Romanian manuscripts from the Library of the Romanian Academy.

The functional context was emphasized through the correlation with the presence of the bishop's curse in distinct categories of documents issued by the ecclesiastical authorities. They are listed here in reverse order of the frequency of their issuing and their relevance to the present analysis: *Specialized leaves, Book of enforcement, Curse book*.

We have given special attention to *curse books* due to their representativeness and the impact they had on the Romanian juridical-administrative system, but also on the mindset of the individual in the middle century. The ceremonial of issuing these documents was an institutionalized, even monitored ceremonial, and implied distinct stages (the soliciting, the choosing of witnesses and the issuing of the act, its transmission, its application, the testimony).

We have presented each level through the correlation with the aforesaid documents, paying special attention to the relationship that existed between the common law and the written law. Thus, for example,

the assimilation of certain practices of the common law in the *application of the disposition of the act* (as it is known, if the aim of the curse book was to establish the boundaries of a property (estate, vineyard, pond, forest, etc.) the ceremonial was a complex one, presenting substantial differences from one case to the other (as it necessitated reformulation or a string of further information: it varies depending on what, from what to what?): one walked to the boundary with a lump of earth in his lap or with bits of earth/a curse book on one's head, with this latter habit continuing the habit of putting a *furrow on one's head*) reflects the mixture of influences and accounts for the prestige of the written document.

The matter of the curse books that circulated in the Principalities was regarded as separate from the matter that constituted the homonymous documents circulating in Transylvania. The relative confusion between the two regions was also caused by the inconsistent notation of the document titles in their very summaries both in the Principalities and beyond the mountains. Thus, within the *notification* or even the *exposition* where it was found, we have identified three terms: *curse book/book of anathematization* or, very rarely, *book of enforcement* (see the stock of the National Archives). However, it should be pointed out that these are fundamentally different from one another. Thus, the documents recorded in Transylvania did not have any juridical value, and their finality was vindictive: to sanction the person who did evil. As the malediction was the principal motive behind the circulation of these documents, and not learning the truth in certain litigations, we have named the acts that belong to this category as *books of malediction* in order to distinguish them from curse books. Another difference between the two types of documents specified here is based on the value of the imprecation, which appears as an exercising act, not a factitive act that categorically suppresses the relationship between the *one who curses* (receiver) and the one who was called upon to cast a curse (issuer). The action may be received as a punitive magical act during which by means of the ecclesiastical authority in order to fulfill the negative wish the support of the deity is called upon. The recording in these documents of a non-marked beneficiary (Mr. *This* or Mr. *That*) and of certain structures that bring to mind popular magic beliefs can be considered as elements that indicate both the circulation and adaptation of these texts to the spiritual

necessities of the individual in the middle century, as well as an attitude of shirking from the authority of the high ecclesia. As a matter of fact, these documents are a testimony of the degradation of the institution represented by the curse book and of its assimilation to a form of popular justice.

In order to maintain the existence of a typical formula for the bishop's curse we have resorted to the main methods of investigating the documenting materials, considering as essential the *criterion of circulation* and the *criterion of the diplomatic formula*.

To achieve a distinct corpus of curse books that was not subjected to any editorial constraints, we have studied the stock of documents extant in the National Archives in Bucharest. After analyzing the 39 volumes that comprise acts and documents issued in Wallachia and inventoried in the ecclesiastical stock of the Metropolitan Church, of the Argeş, Buzău and Râmnic bishoprics, as well as that found in numerous monastic settlements, secluded convents, churches, monasteries, etc. there resulted a number of 391 curse books. On the basis of these documents, we were able to state clearly that some states of facts were recorded erroneously in previous studies. Arranged temporally on the duration of four centuries, we notice that the involvement of Greek patriarchs in the issuing of curse books is representative only during the 17th century, a period when the Romanian juridical system was constituted, which is quite a relevant aspect. The diminishing of the number of curse books issued by the high Greek authority over the next centuries can be explained, in our opinion, by the fact that the Phanariot political class already had enough authority and power to coordinate actions in the interest of the Greek Church. Another conclusion that resulted from studying the corpus of documents indicates the fact that among the issuers of the curse books there was not a single priest, as they were essentially issued by the bishop or metropolitan bishop.

It is not known exactly when the curse books stopped being functional. What we know for certain is that they continued to circulate, as is shown by the two Romanian manuscripts kept in the Library of the Romanian Academy: *Mss rom 3989 – Condică cuprinzând hotărârile Mitropoliei Țării Românești de a elibera cărți de blestem în diferite pricini, în special în cele privitoare la proprietăți și încălcări de moși, pentru anii 1847-1850*

[=Romanian Manuscript 3989 – Code of laws comprising the decisions of the Metropolitan Church in Wallachia to issue curse books in various litigations, especially those concerning properties and trespassing of estates, for the years 1847-1850] and *Mss rom 3990 – Condiță cuprinzând hotărârile Mitropoliei Țării Românești de a elibera cărți de blestem în diverse pricini, în special în cele privitoare la libertăți și încălcări de moșii* (1859-1862) [=Romanian Manuscript 3990 – Code of laws comprising the decisions of the Metropolitan Church in Wallachia to issue curse books in various litigations, especially those concerning liberties and trespassing of estates (1859-1862)] respectively. The total number of curse books (458) recorded in the two codes of laws in an interval of only 15 years is overwhelming if we compare it to the total corpus number of these documents kept in archives or introduced as integral parts in volumes of documents. The fact that during the 19th century curse books still had a juridical status was correlated not only with the assimilation of this practice in the civil codes of laws, which were the only codes recognized and accepted to be used as such, but also due to the subordination of the Romanian society to certain common law patterns.

The diplomatic formulas of curse books, a level that by definition belongs to the generic context, respects the norm of official acts issued by the ecclesiastical offices, with a few exceptions motivated by their specific contents. Our analysis investigated mainly the *sanction* both in the different types of documents that circulated in Romania and in the curse books. We have emphasized the common aspects, noting that in our diplomacy the *sanction* prevalently had a spiritual nature, which probably contributed to its standardization.

In terms of curse books, we studied the corpus of documents and this enabled us to state that the formula of the bishop's curse inserted as *sanction* is generally articulated on the sequence of the punishments that gather specialized topoi and is identified by the structure: 'may some of those be *damned, accursed, anathematized* by Our Lord Jesus Chr[i]st and the 318 H[o]ly Fathers from the Council [of] Nicaea. Likewise, by our Patriarchate. May the stones and the iron melt away and let their bodies stay forever black, forever tied to the curse, may they share the fate of the accursed Judas and the anathematized Aries'.

This sequence is joined, in a manner that lacks any substantial significance for the virtual balance of the formula, by another sequence, that of the blessing, whose construction is curt, without any topoi circumscribed to the rewarding of the righteous. Most often, the sequence of blessing appears in the form: 'if you speak in honesty, may you be forgiven and blessed.'

In order to see whether the formula of sanction appearing in curse books specialized as a bishop's curse exhibits a didactical line of the *ars epistolaria*-type of treatises and whether it was felt as a trope, we studied a few of the volumes that circulated in the Middle Age in Europe and in Romania. Thus, after investigating Johannes Mabillon's *De Re Diplomatica*, we notice that in the Western diplomacy the imprecation did not specialize depending on the issuer or on the finality of the act and did not contribute to a firm delimitation of the sacred space from the secular space.

Since this kind of treatises is missing in the Romanian space, we have consulted the first treatises of Romanian rhetoric that were used at the pulpit or at teachers' desks and gave theoretical support to the imprecation. We note that it was not illustrated by phrases that belong to the bishop's curse, even if the references made to it through the *illustrious example* from the Bible were eloquent (see the *Rhetoric* edited by Molnar or the one edited by Archimandrite Dionisie). This fact confirms the major difference that operated at the time, since if the bishop's curse does not illustrate the category of *imprecation* this indicates, on the one hand, that the imprecation had a well-determined finality at the time, and on the other, that its impact was strong enough for it to be used with aims other than canonic.

These conclusions show that the imprecation inserted in the curse books is specialized and typologically supports the bishop's curse. This fact can only be explained by the connection with the canonical normative, but also by the collective mindset. In order to support this initial inference, we correlated it with the larger Orthodox space, noting the identity of the canonic codes in use, as well as the identity of the *sanction* subdivision of the diplomatic formula in use.

At the same time, the survival of the formula must be explained by a collective mentality in which the word of the church preacher was holy,

despite the numerous drawbacks it might have caused. We illustrate this in Chapter III by mentioning the Huși Chronicle, where the 'prophet's curse' is fulfilled and serves as an example for the contemporary reader.

The last chapter, written to suggest an *imaginary realm of damnation* reiterates the consistency with which the painters of yore imagined histories on the basis of the written word. The predominant topoi of curse books are presented here and they emphasize a compositional unit that can best be explained by the correlation with the Erminias and/or with leisure reading (predominantly the cycle of going to hell and so on).

The present study attests the vertical circulation of the bishop's malediction. Its conservation in a range of formulas issued by the highest among the representatives of the Orthodox ecclesia makes it exert authority and prestige in all social environments. It became legitimate by appealing to norms accepted until our country reached the threshold of modernity at all the levels of Romanian society. The immutability and the specialization of the structure, which are features that may be inferred not solely from the specific documents we have presented, but also from the treatises of epistolography or rhetoric, respectively from cultured or folklore productions, indicate a lengthy process in which the social factor irrupts onto the level of cultural existence on the basis of certain explanatory judgments of a religious nature that in some environments acquire a certain inclination towards the nature of magic. The official and the popular religion thus recognize the *utility* of the instrument they employ, but nevertheless do so with distinct finalities. The presence of the bishop's malediction in the curse books and in the books of maledictions respectively indicates not only the different manner of receiving the malediction, but also interpretative paradigms required by distinct social needs in the Principalities and in Transylvania.

[1] NOTES

Răzvan Theodorescu, *Ce poate fi astăzi, „Civilizația ortodoxiei“* [=What Can 'The Civilization of Orthodoxy' be Today?], in *Picătura de istorie* [=A Drop of History], Bucharest, Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 2002, p. 267-272

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