

Witchcraft and Manipulation in a Romanian Chronicle Dating from the Beginning of the XVIII Century

Doina Ruști

Media University, Bucharest

In the Anonimul Brâncovenesc (The Brâncovenesc Anonymus), a Romanian chronicle, there is a happening, mentioned within another chronicle too, which narrates the killing of some nuns accused of witchcraft (1714). The story sets more reception levels, determined by the spectacular evolution of the message from emission to final reception. The writing points out the way these transformations occur. They are being placed in the labile area of Derrida's "more than present". Due to emotional and historical pressure the primary acceptance of the story comes across different areas of the public opinion and has to face the consequences of these meetings.*

A case of collective suggestion which occurred on a global emotional and unhappy background, is being narrated in a medieval chronicle. The happening dates back to the death of the Romanian prince, Constantin Brâncoveanu (1654-1714). This ruler was decapitated together with his sons, following the decision taken by the Ottomans. The chronicles state that the people repented his death and considered it unjust. Brâncoveanu's place as a ruler was taken by Ștefan Cantacuzino. People in Bucharest had already had an inkling about Ștefan's interference in Brâncoveanu's death, especially due to his father's contacts. On Saint Mary's Day (the 15th of August), it was known that Brâncoveanu's execution was taking place in Istanbul when people in Wallachia witnessed a miracle. Păuna, the new ruler's wife was hit by the Divine punishment while entering the church. The chronicler tells that the woman looked as if being possessed by Evil (devilish). Probably she had a hysteria crisis or had been given drugs as, the chronicler says *everybody around her felt frightened* and the illness continued for a few days. As there had already been a suspicion that Ștefan Cantacuzino could be blamed for Brâncoveanu's death, the scene in the church was enough to persuade everyone in believing that Păuna's diabolizing was the clear sign of Ștefan's sin. It is a very high probability that things would have worsen if Cantacuzino hadn't immediately found a way of redirecting the suggestion that had set in. He said that an unfaithful witch-nun, called Olimbiada was to be blamed for his wife's crisis. Consequently, the nun was locked in a cell and the door was built in. Only a little window was left opened, so that the nun could receive water and bread. More than that, to amplify the act of sorcery, a few other nuns at Olimbiada's orders were hanged.

It is interesting that the *diabolizing scene* happens in the church, on a rejoicing day, in front of many people. It is for this reason that, as in some other similar cases, the suggestion of the extraordinary happening grows deeper. The World was already prepared for this and was just waiting for a Divine sign. In cases of general discontent, it is a known fact that the crowd can be easily manipulated, and the main principle is not to contradict an already angry group. And that is the path followed by Cantacuzino, he does not deny what is obvious: it's

* Anonimul Brâncovenesc, în *Cronicari munteni*, București: Editura Fundației Naționale pentru Știință și Artă&Univers Enciclopedic, 2004, 746.