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The Knight in the Panther's Skin and European Chivalry Romance

The Knight in the Panther's Skin the most significant text of Georgian Literature, written by Shota Rustaveli in the late Middle Ages, belongs to a chivalry romance from the standpoint of genre. Conceptually it represents the worthy reintegration of Medieval Georgian literary processes in European literary traditions. Within the scope of comparative analysis, the Georgian author, in general, reveals various interesting reference to the European authors of chivalry romances (Chrétien de Troyes, Wolfram Von Eschenbach, anonymous author of English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, etc).

The plot of the romance unfolds through an Oriental-type framework adapted to Georgian reality. The opening point of the plot is the Arabian royal court, whose harmony is broken by the appearance and sudden disappearance of a strange knight. Subsequently, the narrative develops against the background of loss-quest-discovery – the basic motif of the medieval chivalrous romance. At the request of his beloved lady, Tinatin, (who is at the same time the Queen of Arabia) Arabian military commander Avtandil sets out in quest of the stranger knight and, after three years of roaming traces his abode in a thick forest, in the cave of giants (devis). He learns from the stranger knight's story that he, commander-in-chief of India, Tariel, had lost his love, had looked for her on sea and land and upon losing all hope of finding her, left the human abode and, desperate and enraged, set up his abode among wild beasts. Avtandil promises him help, and renews a long quest of Tariel's love Nestan-Darejan. As we see, analogously to European chivalrous romances, minor conflicts (the appearance of a strange knight, causing the departure of Avtandil from his love) and major ones (the loss of Nestan-Darejan and Tariel's ranging) are identifiable in KPS; these conflicts are resolved in the finale of the work: following the rescue of Nestan-Darejan from her captivity with the kajis by the knights and their return to Arabia, where Avtandil too marries his love. The plot of the romance returns to its starting-point and the circle is closed.

Even the adapted theme of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* makes it clear that loss/quest/find is the main motive of the work which ends in the formation of a perfect personality of a hero and the victory of good over evil. At the same time, as well-known British scholar Sir Cecil Maurice Bowra (1898-1971) noted back in the 1950s, this text has a lot of characteristics of the medieval French romantic poetry. The scholar proceeds from the following arguments: 1. Dominant role of love; 2. Selfless friendship between two main characters; 3. Accomplishment of almost impossible deeds; 4. Description of battle scenes; 5. Vivid description of especially remote and desert native land pictures of nature; 6. Concept of wealth and noble hospitality. At the same time, Maurice Bowra pays attention to Rustaveli's "originality and independence" which, in his opinion, is revealed in: 1. Interpretation of love in a new way – for Rustaveli love is a "detector of kindness in the human heart and, the establisher of norms of behavior of men and women with various background"; 2. Denial of supernatural and unreal – "from this viewpoint KPS is almost realistic, magic plays no role; 3. Description and artistic images of the characters – "The characters of Rustaveli's personages in spite of their remarkable idiosyncrasy stand closer to men of our imagination". The scholar concludes that "the parallel with French Romance is indeed so close that we might almost conclude that the transition from heroic poetry to romance is a natural change, which comes when feudal society has ceased to believe in its old standards and turns for inspiration to something more courtly and more complicated".

This "change" implies first and foremost the rejection of historicism and its replacement with a

concept of the reflection of artistic reality that implies a narrative that is as far removed from reality as possible and creates "new (ideal) reality". This was a world created according to the new layer – aristocracy – that emerged within the master-and-serf system. The new reality organically combined heroic and romantic ideals. Parallel to changes in the ideological, thematic, artistic, and aesthetic fabric, changes took place also in the structure of romance. The structure was completely new and circular, which implied a coincidence of the original and final points of action (in *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, it is the Kingdom of Arabia and the court of King Arthur in European romances). However, unlike European romances, *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* does not imply collisions between feelings and obligations and enamoured people and fighters. Correspondingly, the conflict is not so deeply interiorised here as in romances. In the meantime, it is this interior conflict that makes the action in a romance "bifurcated" and shapes a two-staged syntagmatic structure, which is overcome in *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* despite the fact that it has two main heroes. The structure of Rustaveli's work is unified and undivided and the rhythm of narration is dynamic and uninterrupted. The descriptive side of battles, tournaments, and voyages is reduced to the minimum, while the informational function of such passages is increased. It is also noteworthy that, like in polyphonic music, various characters and episodes are involved in the narrative. Although the episodes are independent, they are, at the same time, intertwined with each other in order to shape a congruent whole.

The chronotope of romances is also specific. Temporary and spatial dimensions depend on the nature of characters and their lifestyle. Correspondingly, protagonists are placed within the limits of their "own" space, which is at times closed and at times open. As regards their actions, unlike reality, they are determined by the "adventurous time" (Bakhtin). The space of "vagrant" characters (Avtandil, Lancelot) is limited and "bounded" and time is dynamic, as they are guided by clearly defined objectives. On the contrary, the space of static Tariel or Yvain is "unfurled" and the course of time is effectively halted, because after they fly into a rage and "start roaming the wilderness" they lose the sense of life and interest in it. Correspondingly, their existence and actions are not guided by any concrete objective.

Individual details of Rustaveli's concept of love are quite similar to the doctrine of courtly love, which is the foundation of the ethic system of troubadour poetry and romance. This is first and foremost the idea that love is part of the life of a certain class. The love idealised in *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* belongs only to knights and is limited by a clearly formulated code of obligatory features. In addition, love is the destiny of perfect and adorned people. Man's attitude towards woman is based on *service*, which is almost analogous to the principles of vassalage. Like a vassal, an enamoured man must be humble, silent, patient, loyal, and self-sacrificing. Services rendered to the beloved woman are very close to the obligations a vassal assumes to the sovereign. Correspondingly, the beloved woman is not only a mistress of the enamoured man, but also his sovereign and master. Service implies not only having military virtues and obedience to the beloved woman, but also praising and glorifying her poetically. In this process, an enamoured man goes through personal and spiritual catharsis, because praising the woman, everything positive characteristic of a personality comes to the foreground. If the praised woman is benevolent to the man, who praises her, the latter's life becomes a celebration, his heart fills with boundless happiness, and soul is transformed to such an extent that it can even draw close to the ideal. "It is impossible to be a poet and not to love, but it is unimaginable to love in all sincerity without the feeling giving birth to a song of love in your heart" (Cf. Rustaveli: "A poet must not spend his toil in vain, One should seem to him worthy of love, he must be devoted to one, he must employ all his art for her, he must praise her, he must set forth the glory of his beloved, he must wish for nought else, for her alone must his tongue be tuneful" (25)). This opinion formulated in the poetry of early troubadours – a merger of love and poetry, their mutual influence and dependence on each other – became an indispensable principle of society that gave birth to a new model of love and where love acquired a function of ennobling man and giving him aspiration, which is a precondition for the transformation of an enamoured person into a perfect personality.

The similarity of the problems of world view raised in *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* and its artistic, aesthetic, moral, and ethic world to the advanced philosophic and artistic thinking of mediaeval Europe may have two main explanations: First, common religion – Christianity, which definitely

determined the main directions and trends of the development of both Georgian and European cultures. On the other hand, it is the political system – the ideological background that took shape in the feudal world, which proved to be a very rich soil for the new social relations. These relations as well as the moral, ethic, artistic, and aesthetic values characteristic of society of that time were determined in accordance with the interests and demands of the advanced layer – knights.

The social relations in late mediaeval Georgia described in *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* that are called serf-and-master relations are similar to vassalage in mediaeval feudal Europe. According to Rustaveli's romance, the supreme master of the country is the king, who is regarded as equal to God, who all subordinates are obliged to respect, obey, and serve faithfully. The king has numerous serfs or vassals – noble feudal lords, who, for their part, own large estates and numerous serfs. However, unlike vassalage, relations between master and serfs (sovereign and vassals) in *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* are broader than just obligations and represent genuine human love. Such a trend is completely unknown to the mediaeval reality. Its essence is rather similar to the era, where humans are the top value. They are individuals, who can accomplish much more than just honest fulfilment of obligations, which is first and foremost lavishly sharing love given by God to others, be they friends, beloved women, relatives or master.

The era that became part of history under the name of Renaissance started in Europe almost two centuries after Rustaveli's romance was written, but its theoretical prerequisites were due to the processes that started in the highly-developed Christian world and unfolded essentially in the same manner both in Georgia and Europe. This was introducing reason and intellect in the sphere of religion, viewing the surrounding reality from the angle of human logic, and aspiring for renewal, which ultimately led man to the discovery of the "new world". The philosophy of the author of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* is a result of the Georgian philosophic and theological thinking in the classical period. Correspondingly, it is based on all the sources used by progressive intellectual forces of the late Middle Ages in Europe – Christian literature (the Bible and spiritual literature), classical Greek philosophy (both Plato and Aristotle), and Areopagite Neo-Platonism). Correspondingly, philosophic problems raised by Rustaveli are linked to the late Middle Ages and his approach to the resolution of these problems raises him to the thinking of the renaissance era (Khintibidze).

The ideal of renaissance that, as said above, started to take shape in the late Middle Ages was manifested first and foremost in Rustaveli's manner of describing his characters, which implied adopting a new vision of man, going deep into his inner world, and aspiring to cognise it (all this will be called "discovering man" in the Renaissance era).

It is natural that the human ideal described in the work written on the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries is the ideal of a knight. Correspondingly, the most essential element of the personal perfection of a personality is moral perfection. The sense of dignity that is most important among knightly virtues (it was regarded as the main social virtue in feudal society) was absorbed by the ideal characters of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* first and foremost due to their social standing. They are of aristocratic origin and enjoy privileged positions in society (Avtandil is an army commander and son of a commander-in-chief, and Tariel is the prince of the seventh Kingdom of India and the admiral of the country), which makes the characters socially responsible. The responsibility is manifested in their ethic perfection and uncompromising morality, which first and foremost implies that they should realise their human obligations, treat friends with love and serve them selflessly, and be just. It is these moral qualities that make ideal characters of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* different from minor characters.

The sense of dignity, courage, fearlessness, helping people in trouble, and charity were also part of standards of morality and ethics of the knightly culture in Western Europe. These were linked to other knightly virtues: Refraining from killing a defeated enemy, refusal to become involved in an uneven battle, and so forth. However, unlike the European knightly ethics, the demonstration of moral principles (and, correspondingly, behaviour) was not at all ritualised and was due to characters' sincere emotions. This is probably the most striking example of the reception of mediaeval problems by Rustaveli: Relations between male characters that should be determined by the code of knightly virtues given the canons of the genre are determined by human love based on mutual liking. Correspondingly, the major factors that

facilitate friendly relations between the characters of the poem are aesthetic (admiration for each other's handsomeness) and emotional (a knight's love of his friend is as strong and sincere as his love of his beloved woman), which is characteristic of the Renaissance ethic and aesthetic.

In addition to the obligations according to the knightly code, the *moqmes* in *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* (the word *moqme* means *knight*) are linked to each other due to selfless love and the feeling is so strong that it is even equal to their love of the beloved women. However, this behaviour of the knights has a concrete philosophic and theological basis – the Christian ethic and classical Greek philosophy. The substantiation is also philosophic: Man's morality is derived from his intellectual potential. Wisdom that rules out any depravity motivates man to be moral. Correspondingly, the behaviour and morality substantiated in such a manner is characteristic of only the chosen, who are obliged to observe them. The most serious obstacle a person can encounter in meeting his obligations is fear, which is a base feeling albeit quite natural for a human being. *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* says that fear is useless, an assumption that has a philosophic substantiation: Fate directs man's future with its inevitable will and a mortal can never escape death that makes equal knights and elderly people and weak and courageous people. Therefore, man should overcome fear and follow his chosen path as "Better glorious death than shameful life!" (781).

Rustaveli's characters, who have all features necessary for an ideal man (faultless beauty, generosity, modesty, military virtues, and so forth), of which wisdom and intellect are of major importance, do all they can to help their friends in trouble, eradicate injustice, cognise "hidden secrets", and achieve their top ideal – love – in this world, which is ultimately equal to the victory of good over evil. It is noteworthy that unlike characters in European romances, magic forces do not help Rustaveli's heroes in achieving their goals (in general, the role of magic and fantastic elements is reduced to a minimum in *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*). Rustaveli's world is objective rather than fantastic. It is lacking in one element which permeates nearly all chivalry romances – the supernatural. Even Kadjis are portrayed as a "fleshly men like us". Their name is called Kadjis because they are men "skilled in sorcery". Characters of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* achieve their goals relying on their own mental and physical potential and untameable aspiration towards victory. All this is motivated by love and guided by faith in God and fate. This vision of human potential goes beyond the mediaeval method for resolving this problem and rises to the level of Renaissance thinking.

The Renaissance vision of man's inner world by Rustaveli becomes most obvious in his description of love. The *Prologue* and theme of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* make it clear that the concept of love shaped by Rustaveli is specific and, at the same time, completely new, not known by Georgian writers, who preceded him. Individual details of this concept of love obviously bear the influence of Oriental culture on the one hand, on the other hand, they are nourished by motives of European courtly love. However, conventional motives typical for both concepts can be seen in Rustaveli's work as ready-made formulas represented with a different interpretation.

The love described in *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* is a natural human feeling. It is a gift bestowed by God and it can even cross the boundary between life and death. Correspondingly, torments of love and the joy it brings are tightly intertwined and are not described separately. The emphasis is laid here not on the strength of torments and death, but on overcoming the painful emotions and on the ability to cope with them, overcome problems, transform them into joy, and make life victorious. This variety of love that Rustaveli describes as "brute ravings" "imitates" heavenly love through inspiration and the sincerity and elevated nature of feelings. Correspondingly, it is described by means of the categories of divine love. This confirms again that all kinds of love in *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, be it of a beloved woman, friend, or master, are a variety of divine love.

According to Rustaveli, poetry (*shairoba*) is also "divine", because it descends as inspiration "from heaven". Correspondingly, a poem is "good" if it combines eloquence and poetic art with the Creator's emotional and intellectual principles. God as a co-author also participates in writing a poem. It is such poetry that can have a strong emotional impact on readers. Together with the aesthetic function, genuine poetry also has a cognitive function. It is "divinely intelligible to the godlike" and "very wholesome to theme that hearken" (19). Therefore, like everything God has laid hands on, this genial text is not doomed

to oblivion or to be influenced by literary tastes or trends of various eras. Genuine poetry is marked with immortality. It does not obey time and is part of eternity.