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discipline: literary studies

Summary of the doctoral dissertation entitled "Post-figurations of the medieval knight motif in contemporary German and Polish literature, based on cases studies of selected novels", written under the supervision of dr hab. Paul Martin Langner, prof. UKEN

The aim of this research was to determine the function of the knight motif in selected recent German and Polish historical and fantasy novels. The heroes of these novels are post-figurations of knights drawn from the medieval era. By means of post-figuration, the authors of these novels have modified the traditional, classical image of the knight, imbuing it with character traits or endowing it with attributes that contrast with culturally ingrained images.

The theoretical section of the dissertation presents an outline of two literary genres: the historical novel and fantasy literature, and places them within the framework of popular literature. In addition, due to the presence of certain medieval themes and elements in the works of fiction in question, the concept of medievalism is also addressed. The next section focuses on the chivalric ethos, examining the origins of the knight, as well as the rituals, character traits, norms and values, ethics of combat, physical attributes, duties and attributes (horse, sword, castle) associated with the knightly caste.

The knightly figures that appear in these Polish and German novels were analysed from the perspective of reception aesthetics, i.e. from the viewpoint of the reader, looking at how the reception of these works was greatly determined by the reader's horizon of expectations. Four literary knights are discussed and analysed in the dissertation. Firstly, the post-figuration of each of these warriors was assessed, taking into account those elements associated with the general concept of the knight as well as those factors modified by the authors of the said novels. The analysis was organized according to the various aspects of the chivalric ethos described in the theoretical part of the dissertation. Then, using various concepts drawn from cultural studies as a guide, the study analysed both the characters and the cultural and social contexts into which they are embedded in the novels.

The results of these investigations confirmed the changing role of the knightly motif in contemporary literature when compared with the patriotic and ideological functions it served in older works. In addition to providing a form of entertainment, the modern knightly figure also provides a source of cultural identification for readers. The characters in the German and Polish novels studied in this dissertation demonstrate how in many ways modern literature has discarded traditional representations of the knight – as a strong man in armour, on horseback, a defender of the faith, of women, of the oppressed. The authors analysed in this study draw heavily on genre characteristics, offering contrasts, highlighting differences and unexpected constellations and providing new platforms for interpreting their works. Contemporary issues and questions are presented against a medieval backdrop – the knights depicted in these novels provide a prism through which readers can observe shifting gender roles, legitimized violence, or are invited to embark on a journey in search of ancient values, virtues, and ideals of masculinity.