

German Tale of Chivalry: “The Knights of the Lion” by Ch. H. Spiess

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Abstract: The article discusses the novel of Christian Heinrich Spiess “The Knights of the Lion” (Die Loewenritter), which left a noticeable mark in the 19th-century German literature. The works of this type occupied a significant place in the cultural life of Germany. In this context one should note knightly dramas. One of the most famous writing was Goethe's drama “Goetz von Berlichingen”, which influenced the further development of the works of this genre. The German tale of chivalry “The Knights of the Lion”, created at the end of the 18th century, was essentially one of the few works of literature of the time in which one can observe the changes in the essence of attention to historical processes. It's true that there is no historicism in the modern sense in such works. It is important to note that by this time there occurs a rethinking of the meaning of the novel genre for literature, as well as the fact that the theorists of aesthetics and literature are beginning to see in it an independent literary phenomenon, which reflects the world around a person, that is, an early understanding of the novel as a certain fairy tale (fiction) gives way to an understanding of the novel as a reflection of reality. Thus the aim of the paper is to investigate the sources and peculiarities of German tale of chivalry of the second part of the 18th century and analyse Spiess's novel “The Knights of the Lion” as a typical novel of such kind in German literature.

1. Introduction

A tale of chivalry was a widespread genre in German literature of the second part of the 18th century. Its roots go back far in the past, to the Middle Ages with their chivalric novels. At the same time, at the end of the 18th century the German novel of this genre variety stood much closer to modern problems than it might seem. Writers no longer sent their knights to make feats for a beautiful lady or exclusively for the exaltation of their own honor, but forced them to perform heroic deeds for justice and the salvation of the honor of offended people. Knights oppose cruelty and deception, villains and abuse. It's true that the authors of tales of chivalry using medieval attributes reproduced no less conditional world than the authors of medieval chivalry works. The fabulousness of the tale of chivalry bore the imprint of the Age of Enlightenment. The aspirations for accuracy and historical authenticity that readers demanded and that they were used to in the 18th century were merged together, with the undoubted fabulousness of the plot and the deeds of the heroes of such works. The purpose of our research is to study the novel by Christian Heinrich Spiess “The Knights of the Lion”. The objectives of the paper are to characterize the origin of the German chivalric novel and to analyse the specific features of the

German tale of chivalry of the second part of the 18th century by the example of the novel “The Knights of the Lion” by Ch.H. Spiess.

2. Methods

When studying the Spiess novel “The Knights of the Lion” [1], we used various methods of scientific analysis, which are largely accepted in modern Russian and foreign literary criticism. Among them are such methods as comparative-historical, historical-theoretical, historical-functional, typological, system-structural, thesaurus. While studying the novel, the attention is drawn to the peculiarities of this kind of literature that allow them to function in a society, the concreteness and certainty of genre forms in a particular era of the development of the society (in this case, the Enlightenment), their reception in a historically changing environment, the mobility of genre boundaries, the susceptibility of the novel at a certain time, the relationship of various novel genres with each other, and also their place in the artistic culture of the epoch a part of which they were. The work uses complementing each other elements of these approaches, that allows to make the most complete analysis of literary and cultural material.

3. Results

Many years after the approval of the novel in the system of literary genres writers start to distinguish not only between the types of novels in line with the traditional interest in highly artistic literature, but also come to understanding the fact of the presence of various groups and types in literature. It can be said that in the first third and in the middle of the 19th century, the largest literary figures (e.g., Goethe [2]) already saw this difference and considered it necessary to know the trivial variety of literature, believing that the literary process is an inextricable unity of different but closely connected parts.

The establishment of "trivial" literature, to be more exact, the trivialization of literature, the allocation of its trivial wing is associated with the development of broad initial literacy, a sharp increase in the volume of printed materials, that is, with a process that is usually called the democratization of literature and expansion of its readership. In addition, there was a dictate of a certain pattern of action in the literary production of this type, which gave a reader an opportunity to predict the development of the plot and tune himself to the events that could or should have happened in the novel. These features were also strengthened in the literature after publishing “The Castle of Otranto” (1764) by Horace Walpole (1717-1797) [3] and “Vathek” (1786) by W. Th. Backford (1760-1844) [4], which took place in the distant Middle Ages.

In the last third of the 18th century, in the trivial (later the works of this kind began to be called “mass”) German literature there were the authors who created famous dramas (J.M. Babo. Otto von Wittelsbach, 1782 [5]; J.A. Graf von Toerring. Kaspar der Thorringer [6]) and novels (for example “Rinaldo Rinaldini” by Ch.A.Vulpius [7]). One of these writers was Christian Heinrich Spiess (1755-1799), and his novel “The Old Man Everywhere and Nowhere. The Ghost Story” (Der Alte Ueberall und Nirgends, 1792) belongs to a trivial classic. Spiess made his debut in literature in 1785 with “The Biographies of Suicides” (Biographien der Selbtsmoerder) and in 1788 he first appeared as a writer of plays. Until 1802, 15 dramatic works were published under his name - knightly dramas, tragedies, and comedies. They were so popular at the time that they were held out in the repertoire of many German theaters until the 20th century. The researcher Wolfgang Promies, in his afterword to Spiess' “The Biographies of Crazy People” (Biographien der Wahnsinnigen), noted that his “Klara von Hoheneichen” was performed in almost all the German theaters (for example, 10 times in 1805 in the Weimar Goethe Theater). In 1811, J. Koerner (1786-1862), a German poet and physician, saw it in Vienna; in 1824 it was staged in Hamburg, and for a long time the knight Adelungen was generally considered a model of the hero-knight [8].

Spiess saw and felt that readers are especially interested in such stories - events that had a real basis. A story as a narrative about people's life and the countries they live in acquired a new meaning and content in the 18th century. It's worth recalling, in this regard, the historical works of Defoe and Voltaire or major political events of that time (the war of the North American states for independence against England, the French Revolution of 1789-1794). It should be remembered about the heightened sensitivity of trivial writers in relation to the trends in literature, tastes and interests of the reading public. On the other hand, despite the outstanding achievements of German writers in the novel genre, camouflage of fiction under historical reality testified that readers still perceive the novel as a fairy tale or something unreal, fictitious, created in the traditions of previous eras.

Finally, with his work Spiess confirmed the fact of strengthening historical consciousness in the last third of the 18th century, the foundations of which were laid by Herder (1744-1803). Composing novels on historical subjects was dictated by various reasons. The audience was waiting for something new, preferably from the national past, since in the second half of the 18th century French influence already provoked irritation and rejection, or at best doubts about the necessity of imitating exactly the French models. It was manifested not only in the aesthetic systems and works of prominent German thinkers (G.E. Lessing), but also in the writings and expectations of writers of the trivial wing of literature (Spiess, Gemmingen, K. Lessing, etc.). Spiess's greatest novel "The Knights of the Lion" (1794-1795, 4 parts) could be called a historical work. While reading the novel, the reader perceives the historical background, which was in many cases ennobled. It should be noted that many characters and realities are taken, as stated, from history.

The first part of the work opens with a brief reminder of the situation of Germany during the time of Henry the Strict, who fought against the Pope of Rome Innocent, who, according to the writer, inspired the civil war in the country, when any person (this refers to a feudal lord) sought to preserve his rights and no one felt protected by the law. Innocent III (1198-1216) chronologically is more suitable for the action of the novel. It is not very clear, who Spiess had in mind by the name of Henry the Strict, because in German history Ludwig IV the Bavarian (1282-1347) is better known under the nickname "Strict", and perhaps it is the son of Frederick Barbarossa, Henry VI von Hohenschaufen (1165-1197, the king of Germany since 1169, the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire since 1191).

In the center of the narrative is the history of the Knight's Order of Leo, its battles and the final collapse. It is difficult to say whether Spiess understood the interest of the church in organizing crusades, but, nevertheless, he noted in his novel the strivings of the church to seize the lands of the knights who had gone to Palestine to save the tomb of the Lord. For this purpose, the monks organized the persecution of the knight of Neuburg's wife and destroyed his entire family. They were assisted by mysterious criminal knights, who captured the members of the Union of Leo. Spiess describes the wanderings of heroes with their wives and beloved in the lands of Sultan Korradin, who by his moral qualities was immeasurably higher than many Christian knights who wished to be saved due to the betrayal of their comrades-in-arms or the sale of daughters. The novel ends with the death of most of the Leo's knights and the dissolution of the surviving members of the order.

It should be noted that the writers of the "pre-romantic" or "trivial" trend of literature constantly resorted to pointing to existing realities. In the case of Spiess or, Vulpius, these are historical figures who took part in various real events of the past, and quite reliable geographical and historical realities, taken in a certain historical context. The question here is that the task the writers faced was not so much to reflect historical events and accurate geographical data (accuracy, by the way, can be traced simply by using a geographical map), but rather in an effort to show the unusualness and unpredictability of human life. Of course, searches for historically reliable, characteristic of the Enlightenment and even earlier centuries, separate works in which one can already find the forerunners of the historical approach (for example, in Shakespeare's Works) [9] and the features of such a display of the past, in which the reader got a complete picture of what in fact, could have happened in the distant and not very distant past, how people, living in

those times, acted, what encouraged them to do this or that act - all this will be perceived as integral attributes of historicism, so far only declared, but actually unfulfilled.

The heroes of the writers of this type eventually repent of their crimes, but this is done not so much by direct (state, legal, that is, profane) punishment, but by their conscious acceptance of the atonement. Even negative characters with a set of the vilest negative traits have enough moral strength to overcome their shortcomings and crimes, thereby becoming much more complex characters than their later followers in films and writings of mass writers of the twentieth century (e.g. Barbara Cartland's novels).

Spiess showed many elements that influence the fate of a person, and they are complex, unpredictable, not subjected to reason. The differences between the representations of writers from different countries can be, however, attributed to temporary and national differences. By showing the reader the inexplicability of the life events of his characters and putting them into a fantastic sphere, Spiess thus gives his contemporary the opportunity to imagine real life as something quite tolerable and safe. The writer emphasizes that heroic valor and everyday helplessness, in general, do not exclude each other. Thus, he demonstrates that powerlessness is not an obstacle to realize personal goals and achieve happiness. A man must endure and suffer, and only in this case he can win. Putting his characters in such a situation, Spiess unequivocally rejected the legacy of the Enlightenment, which in principle emphasized the need for vital activity, thanks to which a person is able to build his own destiny. At the same time, the novelist proclaims a rather progressive idea that the person's dignity depends not on his origin, but on his personal qualities and abilities.

Spiess created the works that showed that weakness, passivity, patience can become advantages and preconditions of success. Such traits of a human character substantially prevailed in the inhabitants of Germany at the end of the 18th century. A rationally acting person fell into difficult, life-threatening situations. The mind could not cope with the understanding and explanation of the world. Salvation eventually came from divine or otherworldly powers, and not from rationally understood possibilities of existence. Spiess was well aware of the logical inconsistencies in his novels, therefore, worrying about how the reader would perceive them, he repeatedly introduced into the text of his novels instructions that were intended to influence the public in the direction that the author needed - identifying the reader with his characters. Such a technique provided the novel with a favorable reception of the reading public: the reader could merge with the character, penetrate into his inner world, understand the reasons that made him perform certain actions, sympathize with him in deadly situations and enjoy his insight, subtlety, intelligence and ... his own safety.

Structurally, the novel "The Knights of the Lion" is an exception among Spiess's novels, since it is not only the most voluminous, but, in fact, the replacement of one central character by another takes place in it - along with the knight Friedrich von Froburg, the head of the Order of the Knights of Leo, to be more precise, in parallel with him, King Frederick appears (an image created according to the type of historical Frederick II). Accordingly, a change in the goals of their activities has to happen - to some extent, from purely knightly, combat tasks of achieving justice, they transfer to state tasks, the tasks of winning the throne, but they fulfill it from the perspective of the moral component of their actions.

The action of the novel takes place about 1300. It was the time after the king's death when, according to the author, anarchy was starting in the country. It was also supported by the Pope Innocent, who wanted to strengthen his secular power. In this controversial situation, the forces were found that sought to curb dangerous trends in the country and restore the order to protect the weak. This force was the Order of the Lion, and Spiess tells about their actions in detail.

The difference in the ways of solving the problem will also lead to various options for the development of the action of the novel, which will be first associated primarily with the image of Friedrich Froburg. Spiess built the plot quite diligently and logically. Receiving a letter that may raise doubts about the honesty of Klara or Tierstein does not directly lead to distrust of them. To clarify the situation, Froburg the elder sets off at night to see what will actually happen. In the course of the action,

the reader does not receive the slightest additional information that the characters of the novel would not know about, that is, the characters and the readers are in this case in the same position.

The dynamics of the plot leads the reader to the idea of the impossibility to understand the true reasons of events taking place in the world, since Frederick is disappointed with the course of time while doing what he thinks is good. Communication of Tierstein and Clara, the secret dungeons of the castle of the Order of Leo, lead him to incorrect conclusions. His mind makes false conclusions from seemingly inferential and hypothetical logic. Frederick set an example and believed that people's judgment was limited.

Thus, and here the character cannot understand the true background of the event. The hero manages to save himself, trusting only the highest authority - God. It is true, that the problem of divine providence is not the most significant for Spiess. In fact, God does not directly influence the events of the novel (compare, for example, with the events of Spiess's novel "The Twelve Sleeping Maidens" – "Die zwölf schlafenden Jungfrauen", 1795) [10]. This is one of the possible options for the development of the action, however, of such a development, when the character can feel protected from the outside world. Exactly here lies the explanation of the fact that the unreasonable actions of the main character ultimately turn out to be the most necessary, useful and only possible.

If we compare the other novels of Spiess with the novel about the knights of Leo, then we can state an important difference between them, concerning, first of all, the problem of overcoming difficulties by the heroes of these works. In some writings, the solution of the problems of the main characters depended to a large extent on themselves. Incorrect actions led to incorrect results, but the fact that the decisions turned out to be erroneous was revealed only later. The heroes could not adequately control their actions. In the end, it was supposed to achieve individual happiness. Although Spiess is talking about the distant past, his departure from a historically reliable depiction of antiquity can only indicate a certain "historical mood". The establishment of historicism encompassed, as it's known, quite a long period of time and ended in the era of romanticism. At the same time, even in the works of the romantics themselves, it is not always possible to confirm with certainty the authors' historical thinking. At least, a huge number of romantic works successfully got along without understanding historical processes.

4. Conclusion

When creating their works Spiess and his contemporaries (as in the framework of pre-romanticism, and in the last third of the 18th century as a whole) successfully used a stock of themes and plots from the historical past. They explained what was happening quite close to how professional historians could have done it, although the content of novels and plays on a historical theme did not reflect the habits, customs, manners, and everyday life of people of the past in their complexity and versatility yet.

The content of the trivial novel on a historical theme corresponded to the usual features of all the literature of the Enlightenment, but the writers did not know how to recreate history, while the general understanding and general perception of the past did not separate it from the present. Moreover, the audience read just such works with great enthusiasm. They were not particularly interested in how accurately the writers reproduced the world of bygone eras. A theoretical understanding of historical events took place throughout the eighteenth century. Trivial writers did not stand aside from this process. They did not fall out of the general picture of contemporary literature, as they were its typical representatives. Thanks to the writers of this type, broad segments of the German population could read national works in which problems of the past of their own country arose in a very distant approximation. Therefore, the analysis of the "high" and "low" literature reveals their affinity, because they, in fact, act as two sides of the same problem.

In the Enlightenment, the attitude to the novel in Germany was ambiguous. On the one hand, the novel begins to be conceptually comprehended by the most famous authors. On the other hand, the novel is also perceived as something of little use, distracting people from the urgent issues of everyday life. The

“trivial” novel just got into this direction. It was perceived as the heir of those works that led a person into the world of fiction, giving people the opportunity at least for a while to escape from the complexity and hostility of life or to find such a way out of a hopeless situation, as in Goethe’s “Werther”, a way that was also rejected by most theorists, not excluding G.E. Lessing, the largest German thinker of the 18th century.

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