

‘KPS?’:

In the final analysis, what is this ‘Knight in the Panther’s Skin’?¹

It is more than two centuries since ‘The Knight in the Panther’s Skin’ appeared in the field of vision of intellectuals interested in the Middle Ages, [first] in Europe and [later] worldwide. It very soon earned the particular status of a chivalric romance, which underlined Georgia’s assignment to the medieval literary [and, correspondingly, cultural] mainstream of the time², although it still remains a strange, dual phenomenon: 1. For non-Georgian-speaking readers it represents, it is true, a piece of the global medieval context, but it is still a local, chivalric romance of importance only to Georgia, whose geographic and historic position is located somewhere between the *Shahnameh* and the *Song of Roland*. (2) For Georgians, despite medieval, colonial, postcolonial, modernist, postmodernist and post-postmodernist literature, ‘The Knight in the Panther’s Skin’ still remains a basic text whose intertextual annotation, allusion, deconstruction and reconstruction are ongoing³. In the modern world it is hard to find such a situation where the backbone of active literature still is a text written nine centuries earlier.

We cannot cite ignorance and provincialism of Georgian writers as the reason for this Georgian perception: on the contrary, it can be said that the more knowledgeable a Georgian writer is of the techniques and processes of modern literature, the more he will turn to ‘The Knight in the Panther’s Skin’ as a fount of creativity. Besides this, Georgian researchers into ‘The Knight in the Panther’s Skin’ from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day find very fertile ground for the discovery of traces of various theories or philosophical and theological doctrines. Provincialism is not justified here: a part of these researchers is (and was) well acquainted with modern thought and its expression⁴.

If we take it that Georgian perception is not provincial and perceives the text adequately, then if we turn the question round and look at the reason of formation of a shared interpretation of the text of ‘KPS’ among European researchers – looking at the first (nineteenth-/twentieth-century) foreign researchers and translators of ‘The Knight in the Panther’s Skin’ with a reading knowledge of Georgian – we see a strange fact: not a single one of them was an expert on medieval literature or even on medieval culture in general. Here is a list of them:

- Marie Brosset (1802-80): journalist, man of letters;
- Arthur Leist (1852-1927): journalist and translator;

¹ A periphrasis of the title of one of Umberto Eco’s essays in which, while talking of the Western literary canon, he asks: ‘Who is this Rustaveli?’. Umberto Eco, ‘Rustaveli, chi era costui?’. *L’Espresso* (Rome), <http://espresso.repubblica.it/dettaglio/rustaveli-chi-era-costui/2139101>.

² Историческое изображение Грузии в политическом, церковном и учебном ее состоянии, СПб., 1802; M. Brosset, *Recherches sur la poésie géorgienne*, *Nouveau Journal Asiatique*, V, 1833; Н. Мара, Вступительные и заключительные строфы Витязя в барсовой коже Шоты из Рустава. Грузинский текст, русский перевод и пояснения с этюдом „Культ женщины и рыцарство в поэме“, ТР, XII, Санкт-Петербург, 1910. Chota Rustaveli, *L’homme à la peau de léopard*. Texte français de M. Georges Gvazava et de M-me Anie Marcel-Paon, Paris, 1938; *La pelle di Leopardo di Schotha Rustaveli*, Milano, 1945; Schota Rustaveli, *Der Recke im Tigerfell*, *Altgeorgisches Poem*, Deutsche Nachdichtung von Hugo Huppert, Berlin, 1955, 1970; see also ‘Rustaveli in World Literature’, Tbilisi, 1986.

³ See Aka Morchiladze, ‘The Book’, Tbilisi, 2003; Paata Shamugia, ‘Anti-Panther’s Skin’, Tbilisi, 2007; interview with Robert Sturua, *24 Hours* (Tbilisi), 15 February, 2003.

⁴ Viktor Nozadze, ‘The Theology of the Knight in the Panther’s Skin’, Paris, 1962; Vladimer Norakidze, ‘The Idea of Humanity in the Knight in the Panther’s Skin’, Tbilisi, 1966; Zviad Gamsakhurdia, ‘The Imageography of “The Knight in the Panther’s Skin”’, Tbilisi, 1991. Zurab Kiknadze, ‘The Two Kingdoms’, Tbilisi, 2013.

- Niko Marr (1864-1934): linguist;
- Vikár Béla (1859-1945): linguist, ethnographer;
- Nikolay Zabolotsky (1903-58): poet, translator;
- Hugo Huppert (1902-82): poet, translator;
- Marjory Wardrop (1869-1909): translator.

Most of these were outstanding for their good knowledge of Georgian and also for the fact that they were not experts in medieval culture. Consequently, their conceptions of medieval literature would not have overstepped, in general, the boundaries of knowledge of a well-educated graduate in the humanities. It is not surprising that no one compared 'The Knight in the Panther's Skin' and medieval Persian/Indian/European epics with one another⁵.

It is to be noted that in this respect neither were the Georgian researchers on 'The Knight in the Panther's Skin' in the Soviet period outstanding. Korneli Kekelidze, the founder of the canon of literature research in Georgia, in his 'History of Georgian Literature' devotes several pages to 'The Knight in the Panther's Skin'⁶, although he has not made a single comparison with any medieval national texts. It is possible that this used to happen due to Soviet censorship: in the first decades of the Soviet Union and later, the machinery of repression could severely punish anyone drawing any parallels, even historical, with the bourgeois world.

We obtain an interesting picture if we compare 'The Knight in the Panther's Skin' with other written epic poems from about the seventh century (the time of the creation of the Celtic epic poem *Táin Bó Cúailnge*) to the sixteenth century (the time Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* was written).

It is possible for us to identify four significant features that set the 'Knight in the Panther's Skin' apart from the chivalric romances of this period.

1. The absence of miracles

'The Knight in the Panther's Skin' is an oddly secular epic: it is very realistic. It is more like a chronicle than a chivalric romance. However, the form, the way of expression and the characters are knightly/fabulous: foreign countries, foreign kings, and foreign regions. However, despite this form, it has not a single magical object, potion, action, or magician. Every phenomenon described in words as a miracle is later described as the result of skilled craftsmanship; and every object referred to as magical from the outset is later specified as a piece of craftwork. For example, when mentioning evil demons, a rapid deconstruction occurs: the author says that the evil demons are simply learned and skilled humans. Such a chivalric romance is unknown to the Middle Ages: a mythological environment precedes even historical epics; frequently, historical works/epics are not free of miracles and magic.

Against the background of all this, 'KPS' must have been a wholly outstanding text against the background of medieval narrative culture and, probably, must have had a similar influence on the reader as did Harry Potter, only in reverse: if Rowling showed everyone that added fantasy gives our everyday world amazing results, the author of 'KPS' showed everyone that a life removed from everyday miracles is just as interesting and that everyone can become a participant in the stories described in its narratives⁷.

⁵ An exception is Viktor Nozadze's published manuscript, where he compares medieval knightly and epic poems and 'KPS' themes with one another. See <http://www.nplg.gov.ge/gsd/cgi-bin/library.exe?e=d-01000-00---off-0period--00-1--0-10-0--0---0prompt-10--4-----0-01--11-en-50--20-help--00-3-1-00-0-0-11-1-0utfZz-8-10&a=d&cl=CL4.2&d=HASH0122cedaacefe520de36a3d8.7.3>.

⁶ Korneli Kekelidze, 'A History of Georgian Literature', Vol. 2, Tbilisi, 1958, pp. 149-160.

⁷ However, it should be noted that, if Rowling continued an existing [fantasy] tradition and made it universally accepted/shared, the project of the author of 'KPS' so far looks unprecedented. 'KPS' itself appears to us to be the creator of a tradition.

2. The absence of clergy

Even such a character as might vaguely remind the reader of a clergyman does not exist in 'The Knight in the Panther's Skin'; there is only one place where 'mullahs' are mentioned (stanza 351), and this is in a secular context with an appropriate sarcastic commentary. What is more, there is nothing else, not even a single 'wise old man' that might remind us, however slightly, of a clergyman.

It is entirely possible that it was for this reason that 'The Knight in the Panther's Skin' was an object of pursuit over the centuries on the part of the Church and, perhaps, this also explains its huge popularity throughout Georgia. It is possible from this viewpoint that 'KPS' is a reflection of a secular political movement unknown to us, one that tells that there may exist an environment devoid of clergy in which man, like Avtandil, one of main protagonists, addresses God directly. From this viewpoint, 'KPS' is a manifesto of secularism.

3. Every narrative or fable existing in the medieval world (and not only then) has been described and is part of a basic fable; consequently, 'The Knight in the Panther's Skin' is not about relations between characters, but about relations between stories and themes.

It is possible to single out four mutually intersecting themes:

(a) A central European story [the Western chivalric romance]: A knight departs on a quest at the command of his mistress. He is to win the hand of his mistress on completion of the quest: Avtandil's story;

(b) A Persian story [similar to the *Shahnameh*]: The hero, the true heir to the throne, is banished from his own country as a result of intrigues. They take his mistress from him and hide her in a distant castle: Tariel's story;

(c) A [frivolous] southern European story: While travelling, the hero finds himself in a merchants' town, where he becomes involved in an amorous relationship with the wife of the governor, which will help him realize his own purposes: Avtandil's and Patman's story;

(d) An Indian story [Rama and Hanuman]: While travelling, the heroes meet a warrior whom they help and who later helps them in achieving their aim: Pridon's story.

4. Every symbol, image and opposition employed by medieval intellectuals is used.

For example, there is constant confrontation between two cities (countries): India/Arabia, India/Khataeti, Arabia/Mulghazanzari, India/Kajeti.

One chapter is to be noted where in a monologue by the hero (Avtandil) every heavenly body, the esoteric and mystic symbols of the time, is mentioned.

The final part of the epic is particularly noteworthy, where all resistance has been overcome and harmony has been established. Here, the religious narrative of the Christian heaven and its symbols are used.

I think that after listing these four features it will be clear why 'KPS' has attracted Georgian readers and writers up to the present. These four features distinguish the text not only within medieval literature, they still leave it as modern literature:

(1) An adventure romance without magic or spells;

(2) A secular world in principle, direct contact between man and God without mediators of any kind;

(3) A collection of narratives from various parts (of countries and of literature), at the point of intersection of which a fable is created;

(4) Using the symbols and images of as many and as varied confessions and doctrines as possible, which facilitates all kinds of interpretations and, in the end we can understand this as irony directed at the reader, at the text, and at itself.

And finally, a question naturally arises: If it's all like this and on the surface, then why isn't it obvious to Georgian and foreign researchers?

The answer, I think, is also on the surface: 'The Knight in the Panther's Skin' has never found itself in the field of vision of serious researchers into world medieval literature. And, as far as educated non-specialists are concerned, for the modern reader, knights, hunting, infatuation, love, battles on horseback or at sea are so much associated with romance and fairy tales that 'KPS' has been abandoned to its fate: let it be perceived as an ordinary fabulous chivalric romance.