

„ALEXANDRU IOAN CUZA” UNIVERSITY, IAȘI
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**The symbolistics of the path of initiation:
from *quest* to the *fantasy* genre**

- PhD Thesis Summary -

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Anunț

La data de **10 iunie 2021**, ora **11.00**, pe platforma Zoom, domnul Andrei Victor COJOCARU va susține, în ședință publică, teza de doctorat cu titlul „**Simbolistica drumului inițiatic: de la quest la genul fantasy**”, în vederea obținerii titlului științific de doctor în domeniul Filologie.

Linkul ședinței publice este următorul:

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Vă invităm să participați la ședința de susținere a tezei.

Teza poate fi consultată la Biblioteca Facultății de Litere

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Summary

Although we have entitled this study “The symbolistics of the path of initiation: from *quest* to *fantasy* genre”, to understand the true meaning of the symbolism of the initiatic journey, we must take the opposite path: from the “fantasy genre” to the medieval quest – and even arriving at the mythical hero's journey. This is because, ultimately, any journey of initiation represents a return to the origin, to what is able to represent a foundation of the spiritual existence of humanity. Thus, if we are to be honest with ourselves, we will notice that the path of initiation is a progressive reverse to what is essential – a process by which we understand that universal axiom that states that *the end is equal to the beginning plus the experience of the cycle*.

Being one of the fundamental themes of universal literature, the initiatic journey has already been approached from a multitude of perspectives. However, by its dynamic and cumulative nature, authentic knowledge remains permanently open to knowledge. From this perspective, we must admit that we do not yet know what the journey of initiation entails and, consequently, we want to increase our understanding of this issue.

Even if the title of the paper may give the impression of studying a much too broad context, after a closer analysis of the proposed topic and perspective, we find that the object of study is as accurate as possible. One of the premises of the study is that the path

of initiation is, in its symbolic essence, one and the same – regardless of its external forms. But, if that symbolic essence is absent, we are no longer dealing with an authentic initiatic path, but with a kind of "initiatic vagrancy" or with an "anti-initiation" – as can be seen in the case of the (anti)heroes' adventures in pseudo-medieval-inspired fantasy prose.

The fact that the symbolic background of the path of initiation is the same should not surprise us, given that all "local" literatures are more similar to each other than we would have guessed at a first analysis of external cultural forms. Therefore, we can observe that there is an archetypal scheme of the initiatic path that is (re)updated in various forms in all major literary contexts.

Being a theme older than literature itself, its analysis should start from the literatures of the ancient Orient. We will also make a correlation between the ancient adventure novel and the chivalric novel from the Middle Ages. What we want through this approach is to outline an overall perspective on the topic and, at the same time, explain some symbolic moments or characters encountered in the studied paths of initiation. Later, we will point out some peculiarities of the initiatic search in the literature of the Middle East.

Thus, the literary "roots" of the quest will be highlighted, being, at the same time, underlined the influence exerted by mythology on the medieval imaginary, but also the constant tendency of detachment from historical truth in literature – a process that culminates with the birth of fantasy genre.

The medieval symbolism of the quest is studied by reference to texts and authors with a major influence in shaping the medieval imaginary. Considering their influence in the development of the medieval imaginary, special attention is paid to the romances of Chrétien de Troyes and the masterpiece of Dante Alighieri. On this occasion, the influence of alchemy and Kabbalah in the development of the medieval European imaginary of the quest is emphasized.

Later, in the chapter "Symbolism of the initiatic path in Persian poetry of the X-XV centuries" the focus will be on the analysis of the journey/ initiation in Middle Eastern literature – while drawing a parallel with details from chivalric novels analyzed in previous chapters. Thus, according to the general considerations about the development of traditional Persian poetry, some themes and motives of the initiation journey are discussed and the symbolic meanings of some verses belonging to authors such as Omar Khayam, Jalaluddin Rumi or Mahmud Sabestari are analyzed. The theme of love and that of knowledge are presented as essential points of connection between the journey of the wandering dervish and the quest of the wandering knight.

In the next chapter of the thesis ("The Initiatic Path or the Path to Enlightenment") the analysis of oriental literature is continued – but, this time, starting from the events and symbolic details described in Wu Cheng-En's *Journey to the West*.

The third part concludes with the study of certain aspects related to the way in which the European romanticism proposed a new way of understanding the idea of initiatic travel. Romanticism is approached, here, as a point of connection between two types of imaginary (the medieval and the pseudo-medieval) and, at the same time, as the first major reinvention of the medieval imaginary. In addition to discussing two key concepts of romantic literature (namely: "reverie" and "fantasy"), the antagonistic relationship between positive imagination (specific to *reverie*) and negative imagination (specific to *fantasy*) is detailed, in order to understand the specifics of the fantasy literature.

The fourth and final part of the thesis deals with the understanding of the motive of the initiatic path within the fantasy genre – illustrated mainly by two "pseudo-medieval" trilogies (*The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien and *The Broken Empire* by Mark Lawrence). Regarding their study, it had been pointed out, from the introductory part of the thesis, that we had only intended to get to the fantasy genre (in other words, we did not plan a detailed study of the literary context mentioned, simply because it could be the object of study of another doctoral thesis). Therefore, only the highlighting of the relationship between the medieval imaginary of the quest and the pseudo-medieval one is considered – with the mention that, in the strict sense, it is no longer possible to talk about a symbolism of the quest in a framework where the symbols appear mainly as "decorative elements".

Following a comparative analysis of the quest in medieval literature itself and the initiatic path present in fantasy literature, we can see that the theme discussed ends up losing its esoteric essence and can sometimes be replaced by an "literal-allegory" with a pseudo-esoteric appearance. From the perspective of analyzing the symbolic background, it is possible to be wrong to compare the initiatic journey in fantasy literature of pseudo-medieval "inspiration" with the initiatic path we find in chivalric novels from the Middle Ages. The justification would be the following: we cannot speak of a proper symbolism of the path of initiation in a text in which the allegorical meaning itself is eclipsed by a literal narrative.

Studying the symbolism of the initiatic path in the context of universal literature, we do not, of course, claim to be exhaustive – using the phrase "universal literature" to emphasize the comparative and synthetic perspective that is necessary in such an approach. We must not lose sight of the meaning of the first word in the title: we aim to understand a set of relations of interpretations related to a symbol or, as the case may be, to a symbolic motif. It goes without saying that we cannot do this by limiting ourselves only to an isolated context, but by considering an overall perspective. Gradually, we will focus only on the medieval symbolism of the initiatory journey and, in the last part of the study, on its adaptation within the (sub) genre of “epic fantasy” or “high fantasy”.

In addition, it should be noted that the work “The symbolistics of the path of initiation: from *quest* to *fantasy* genre”

starts from a series of presuppositions that we would argue and whose validity would be demonstrated or (re)confirmed. The first assumption is that, in the journey of initiation, the symbolic background is essential, not the external form of the story. Often, if we limit ourselves to a literal analysis of the events described by a particular text, we fail to follow a coherent and constant narrative. This aspect emphasizes that the stages of the journey are intended, rather, for a purely symbolic reception. Beyond the appearance of the outer adventure, the journey of a "wandering" knight can also be an inner journey. From this point of view, the characters, the places and the motives that appear during the quest can be correlated with archetypal elements – which can be found in the depths of the human being.

During the thesis, we will notice that both Indian and Sumerian-Babylonian or Greco-Latin civilization offer suggestive representations of the initiatic journey – all being only external forms that revolve around a common core (imaginary) of all humanity. We recall that the external representations of the hero and his initiatic journey have been adapted to specific socio-cultural contexts. There are, however, clear similarities between medieval knights and ancient heroes. Given that he already has the status of "knight", the central character of the medieval quest is an initiate who has the chance to become, after a long series of trials, an exemplary hero. Like many heroes of ancient literature, the knight is not only a fictional character, but also an anthropomorphic representation of an ideal. In some cases, he is simultaneously both

"person" and "character", his existence being located on the border between legend and history.

Beyond other obvious similarities, the knights in the literature of the Middle Ages differ from the heroes in the literature of Antiquity by a very obvious relationship with elements related to an erotic metaphysics. As we noticed during the analysis of Chrétien de Troyes' novels, this type of idealized character tries to cultivate the virtues of the saint, without giving up his vocation as a warrior or the pleasures of love. Fascinating paradox, the knight is, equally, the servant of God, Ares and Eros.

In the conclusion of this summary it should also be stated that the four essential pillars of the medieval European imaginary of the quest are: ancient mythology, Christianity (especially the mystical one), alchemy and Kabbalah. At the level of the symbolic background of the quest, all these elements intertwine in an indissoluble association. While ancient mythology is a natural source of inspiration for the initiatic journey of the Middle Ages, Christianity was a new cultural form that accepted or censored, developed or reduced, shaped and transmuted the symbolism of initiation. Thus, the initiatic journey from the mythical imaginary is reborn in another form from the "cultural matrix" of the medieval imaginary. The result of this rebirth is the quest itself.