

Anna Krýsová, “Historical Romance” or a “Tale of Virtue and Pity”?: *Thaddeus of Warsaw* as a “New Species of Writing”

MA thesis

Opponent's report

The submitted MA thesis is unique in its dealing with a single, less known early nineteenth-century novel *Thaddeus of Warsaw* (1803) by the Scottish writer Jane Porter, who claimed it to be the first historical novel before the genre was popularized by Sir Walter Scott. There can be no doubt that the author of the thesis contributes in her way to our better understanding of the period's literary scene, most notably by her attempt to read the novel in the context of contemporaneous conventions of writing; at the same time, her approach raises questions which it will be the principal concern of this report to point at.

The basic idea of the thesis is that it seems very difficult to define *Thaddeus* in terms of traditional genres as the character of this rather incongruent composition addresses several issues pertaining to different generic forms: the conservative “anti-jacobin” novel, the national tale, the historical novel or the sentimental novel. This disquieting equivocality is already suggested by two authorial prefaces, written quite wide apart in time and stating different intentions. The analytical part of the thesis begins with the presentation of these two “paratexts” (the account of the “new preface” precedes that of the “old”, curiously enough; anyway, I would designate them rather as the “early preface” and the “later one”). This is then followed by a detailed discussion of the conservative (i.e. anti-jacobin) aspects of the novel (Ch. 2), the role of history (Ch. 3) and the sentimental legacy (Ch. 4). Each chapter also contains a comparison of *Thaddeus* with another, thematically or methodologically related, novel of the period. This conception is justified as the three discussed areas seem to be the essential constituent parts of the aesthetic plan of the novel.

The presentation is, however, not free of limitations. The tendency of the second chapter reflects its title: “The conservative principles and their illustration”, and indeed it provides, most of all, ample illustrations of M. Butler's definition of the conservatism of this kind of writing, as the student understands it. Nevertheless, even if this part could have been briefer, it importantly accentuates the fact that the primary focus of the novel is, in Krýsová's reading, on virtue and the hero's integrity towards this central term. In this light, it does not seem fully appropriate to characterize Mary Brunton's novel *Self-Control*, the one compared with *Thaddeus* in this part, as “more realistic” (due to the author's “representation of the passionate and sexually motivated love”), since the two novels clearly set themselves different goals. Also the fourth chapter discusses the legacy of the sentimental novel as a presentation of various elements and their manifestation in the major characters, not relating them to any other function than the distinction between those who possess genuine feelings and those who merely feign them (this formal division then prevails even more in the presentation of *The Wild Irish Girl*). Does this distinction operate on more than one plane?

However, I see the most serious problems in the chapter dealing with Porter's conception of history. The student rejects to read the novel as a comment on the actual political situation in England of the early nineteenth century and instead proposes to take the use of history in a parabolic mode (which should be specified in more concrete terms, I'm afraid). This means that she avoids reading Poland as e.g. the author's native Scotland or in the context of the spreading revolutionary ideas. Granted; but there was a much more pressing political issue in this period – the growing danger of the invasion of Britain by the Napoleonic armies.

Couldn't this menace have inspired the (pseudo)historical account of Poland invaded by Russia and the loss of Polish political liberties and in this way provide an interpretive analogy? My second reservation concerns the attempted confrontation of *Thaddeus* with the historical novels of Walter Scott. The account of difference in conception seems based, apart from secondary sources, on the student's knowledge of a single novel, *Waverley*, and its programmatic preface. But in his later novels, Scott's conception varies and the distinction is not that clear-cut – thus *The Heart of Midlothian* discusses the continuity of the Presbyterian creed from the times of the National Covenant as a matter of Scottish national identity, *A Legend of Montrose*, though grounded in the idea of disruption, also raises the question of transition of values in modern times, etc. Simply, Scott's conception of history is more complex than the thesis suggests. Moreover, inclusion of some subchapters in this part seems debatable: e.g. the one on the juxtaposition of the domestic and the military sounds rather pointless and the relevance of the meaning of the word "patriot" is also not convincingly explained. I also have doubts concerning the viability of confronting a historical novel with a Gothic fantasia; these two genres can't be easily viewed as compatible.

My last comment concerns language and formal properties of the thesis: more than occasionally uncorrected errors remain in the text (missing commas and articles, "than" instead of "then" /several times/, clumsy or confusing phrases such as "She formed a member of this little bevy" or "Leerssen ... makes a sort of tour de force through the European history of the term", etc.). The two prefaces are attached as an appendix, but this is not indicated in the Table of Contents. Sometimes even contradictions occur in the text, most obviously in the Conclusion: "we may call *Thaddeus* [not put in italics] an anti-jacobin novel, a national tale and a historical novel, but not a novel of sensibility. Porter merely uses the techniques and conventions of the genre to portray the emotional life of her characters; however, she does it for her conservative purposes – to record the human conscious mind in the process of decision-making. Because this is an ideal, abstract goal, she does not attempt the realistic, psychological sketch of characters in historical circumstances" – how can it then be called a historical novel and not a novel of sensibility?

Conclusion: I **recommend** the thesis of Anna Krýsová for defence with the preliminary mark of **velmi dobře** (very good).

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