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REPRESENTATION AND SUBVERSION IN *CROATIAN ALEXANDER ROMANCE*

Abstract

Reading the novel *Hrvatska Aleksandrida* (*Croatian Alexander Romance*) as a chivalric narrative structured around a historical figure, this paper aims at reinterpretation of it in the key of popular culture and looks into the politics of the representation of the protagonists-bearers of specific ideological values, acting both affirmatively and subversively within the imposed value system. Beside that, the paper will focus on the novel's strategy of undermining dominant codes, arguing that the chivalric romance provides an ideal frame for the observation of the clash of ideological centers and margins. The codification of the genre increases the transparency of the text, facilitating political readings capable of bringing about the new interpretative potential of the narrative in question. From that theoretical point, the Middle Age chivalric novel *Croatian Alexander Romance* reveals itself as a textual terrain for clashing specific social forces and their mainfestations, stressing the fact that they can be noticed only by using described methodological optics. The dominant chivalrous and Biblical codes represent exactly two dominant social classes (nobels and religious structures) as owners of social power in the historical period in which the text is inscribed. Therefore, this chivalric narrative, at the same time, respects their imperatives, but also offers disparate motives as fantasy, superstition, satire, social critics, individualistic morality and so on. That kind of contradiction inscribed in the (cultural) text himself confirms the very common thesis of cultural studies theorists about culture as a battlefield. On the text level, it is manifested as the series of incompatible motives that a reader could miss out if they read or overview just the surface level of the text. Because, on that level, the text sets an ideological (imposed) 'consensus' which is just specious. They still have its antipode, that they can not completely suppress, and that binary opposition articulates itself in certain segments of the text differently. Its rotations make this text interesting in further readings.

Key words: politics of representation, subversion, culture, society, ideology, conflict, power

1. Introduction

Chivalric romances, tales of great heroes of superior qualities, the embodiment of projected desirable values, is a timeless genre popularity-wise, from its very origins in the twelfth century to the present day. The chivalric romance stood for what blockbusters stand for today, what film industry in general stands for today, a popular and eagerly consumed product for a mass audience, a part of popular culture that proved to be an ideological vehicle for its creators and consumers. The protagonists of chivalric romances seem to meet the expectations imposed on them, as they are the perfect embodiment of the system they stemmed out of and yet, at the same time, they seem to spill out of it, tickling our imagination and making us ponder on the possibility of a revolt, the possibility of a better world. This paper is about looking into this possibility in novel *Hrvatska Aleksandrida* (in the further text, *Croatian Alexander Romance*) (Hercigonja 2017).

Alexander the Great happens to be the ideal knightly material for this type of narrative precisely because of his victories that tend to impress even when narratives stick exclusively to historical sources, which is rarely the case. However, the elements added to the historical sources usually become the containers of the ideological component that is supposed to shed light on the predominant power relations of a certain period. This is precisely where the novel *Croatian Alexander Romance* comes into play. We have decided to reflect on this novel because no one has yet looked into it from this angle and scholars are mostly interested in its narratological and historical analysis. *Croatian Alexander Romance* was rarely interpreted in the light of the period in which it came into being, considering political and social relations, and it is mostly read as a universally known story of the eternal battle of good and evil forces. What seems to be missing from the picture is the parallel between the power structures and subversive elements present in the narrative. This paper is also an attempt to fill this void.[1]

2. Croatian Alexander Romance

The Croatian version of the Alexander romance describes the life of Alexander the Great, son of Philip II of Macedon and Empress Olympia, who became king in 336 BC. Alexander's life was one of the most frequent and most read topics in European literature back then and there are numerous versions of the tale, including the Croatian Alexander romance. The work dates back to the Hellenistic period and was translated to Latin and Oriental languages, but it enjoyed great popularity in the Middle Ages too. It was one of the most popular topics among the South Slavs. Historical sources imply that the story saw its circulation through the Croatian

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1　We deem it important to point out that we use the term novel to denote the narrative text regarded as modern in its time, even in the form of a chivalric romance that usually treated secular themes in Romance languages. Those were its main characteristics, whereas the form or style was not prescribed. Oriented towards secular themes and treated as entertainment, these types of works were usually dynamic accounts, with fantastic adventures and exotic landscapes (Hercigonja i Dürrigl 2017: 8-9). All of this implies that the novel as a form was, in its very beginnings, in direct clash with what was then considered elite culture, as well as with the values the elite culture represented back then.

territory way back in the 14th century. It was a transcription of the Latin version and wealthy inhabitants of Dalmatian cities owned and read novels in Latin and Old French about Tristan and Isolde, Alexander the Great, Brutus, and so on (Hercigonja 2017: 7). All known versions of the work stem from Callisthenes, who accompanied the great ruler on his conquests and wrote about them. First novels inspired by his writings appear immediately after his death.

The account of Alexander's life starts with the tale of a quite unusual conception that adds another mythical layer to its protagonist. In the novel, Alexander's biological parents are Olympia, the wife of Philip II of Macedon, and a runaway Egyptian emperor, astronomer, and magician Nectenab. This rather typical medieval hero is depicted as physically, intellectually, and morally superior. After the death of his legitimate father, king Philip, he inherited the throne and began his eastward expansion, led by the idea of a unified world, being kind and merciful to war prisoners but brutal in combat. Empires fell, one after another, and so did the great cities and great kings, human-like beasts, winged women, and two-headed serpents. Having conquered Rome, he conquered the Mediterranean, Troy, Israel, Egypt, Babylon, and Persia. After Darius was killed and the Persian army defeated, he married Darius's daughter Roxana to further strengthen the unity of the diverse nations his kingdom was composed of. Later on, he set out to India, but, having entered its territory, Alexander's army was already exhausted and so was he. In the end, he was poisoned by a courtier, Roxana committed suicide, and the Empire fell apart.

In terms of genre, these literary works could be defined as blockbusters of their own time (just like the popular film version), designed for a vast audience and mass consumption. This is why they display the characteristics of different genres. *Croatian Alexander Novel* is a historical novel partially rooted in real events, a chronicle of a historical period (and an Empire), a travel book, a memoir, a fantasy novel, and an adventure novel. It was written in a hyperbolic, elevated style characteristic of the medieval prose. Its poetic characteristics could be reduced to two central tendencies: morality (engaged prose) and allegory (the text can also be read as a metaphor or what came to be called the didactic function) (Favišev 1980: 67-96). The poetic characteristics of the work call for a poetic contextualization. Moral lectures and instructive discourse that are, from a critical standpoint, nowadays regarded as shortcomings, represented back then an ideal towards which all art should strive to be called art in the first place.

3. Contextaulization of a prose narrative

Poetic contextualization requires, before we move onto the subversive elements of the works in question, a brief elaboration of the social context, that in which the Croatian Alexander romance came into being and the one in which the film version was produced. Naturally, we will be reflecting on the social events and social climate that managed to find their expression in the works. The period of the rise of the feudal elite coincided with the period of the economic and agricultural boom of the 11th century. Subjects who owned the land gradually gained economic, social, and political power, but the peasants remained in a difficult (marginal) position. The space in which social interaction took place was rather fragmented, even though communication and

the exchange of ideas were well-organized (since the feudal lords were wealthy and mobile, meaning that they could afford to travel and explore, which made them more self-conscious and helped them establish their own value system). However, they did not find the political climate favorable. As the Roman civilization faded and with it the idea of a republic, Germanic peoples imposed the idea of monarchy as an ideal form of social structure. The king was an absolute ruler and was presented as a privileged offspring of noble lineage, but also as the great sage (the wisest among the wise), and as a God's messenger. The latter, naturally, made them reliant on Church authorities in the exercise of power (Duby 2006: 16-23).

In that kind of social climate, Croatian social reality was burdened by other problems too. The Croatian territory was not enslaved by the royal elite only but was claimed by different powers: Hungarian kings pretended to the North; border areas were under the Ottoman Empire and the coastal areas were Venetian. Feudal elites struggled to gain more power and domestic rule (the parliament) to escape the centralization carried out by the kings. The relationship between the feudal lords and the monarchy was prone to changes, it depended on the relationships between monarchies itself, on strategic questions, and personal preferences of individual rulers. Their response to the monarchies also varied, as some showed obedience, others tried to negotiate or even stage rebellions to gain more political power and financial freedom. Social life took place within small urban centers and social classed were impenetrable, firm lines separated lower social classes from the feudal elite and nobility (Raukar 1997: 88-195).

Since the Croatian territory stood at the crossroads of civilizations and empires (Ottoman Empire, Byzantium, Venice) it is not surprising that it acted as a mediator in the dialogue of cultures and literature. The tale of Alexander the Great continued expanding eastward, its versions multiplying on the way. Furthermore, the culture and literature of that period served as a bridge between the ancient foundations of the civilization and the European power centers. The tale of Alexander the Great is an antique tale that has inspired a great deal of Croatian literature, the whole period of classical antiquity was a huge source of motifs and themes, but the story of Alexander the Great is, in this case, told in a Christian code and its main motifs are also Christianized, just like the plot itself (Nekić 2015).

The feudal elite had a dual position. On the one hand, it was superior to peasants, merchants, and the lower class in general, but on the other hand, it was inferior to Church authorities and the monarchy. That meant that the Church and the kings had the power to prescribe forms of conduct and literature. Literary forms were usually simple and constant (which is something novel opposed right from the start), so that readers could focus on the content (moral and religious messages).[2] The high culture had to stick

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2   The influence of the Bible as literary model argued Doležalová in her article (2018: 40-50): "It is also recognized that the Bible inspired and shaped the majority of medieval textual types (…), and it was much used or referred to in other ones (…). The omnipresence of the Bible in medieval written culture is a fact that does not need to be defended of exemplified." The author also explained that the Bible was canonized in long and complex process, but not always as unified text; some parts were more used than others because they were more suitable for presenting to wide audience. That parts formed shorter version of the Bible for folks called the "popular Bible." Wright-Bushman & Zdansky (2014) argue that biblical text were the original context of many narratives that we consider today as secular (they mention English examples of romances, similar to Chretien de Troyes), that share motives and structures of – hagiography.

to those norms if it wanted to be considered high culture and, as such, be promoted by monasteries, with the king's blessing. Furthermore, literary texts were predominantly in Latin, which made them available to a very small number of people (Burke 1991). All kinds of literary production that diverged from the norm, chivalric novels among them, were considered inferior.[3] The chivalric romance was entirely adapted to the culture of the feudal elites: knights, court ideology, ritualized forms of communication between lovers (Badurina 2013: 21). And these elements can be deemed subversive

4. Society – culture – text (ideology)

Agreeing on and acknowledging the relations between society, culture, and text, we open up the new interpretational potential of the work of art itself, regardless of its form. Adopting a certain perspective (that is being offered through the lenses of the sociology of literature and cultural studies), we are being presented with the necessary tools that enable readings in which the clash of different social groups or ideas crystallizes itself. This premise is adopted as a starting point of this paper, raising questions such as: which social groups get represented by a particular genre or narrative, which social groups read that particular genre, and in which way, what kind of value system is incorporated into the work of art in question, what kind of conflict is represented in the text and does it reflect social tensions of a period? Those are some of the questions that we attempt to elaborate on and answer in this paper through *Croatian Alexander Romance*.

To start with, all art is reliant on society and the economy in which it is formed and inserted in. There are many different factors at work when it comes to art in general and most of them are integral parts of the social structure (production, preordering, distribution, consumption). All of these factors bear certain sociological and ideological characteristics, as Howard S. Becker implied in his book entitled *Art Worlds* (Becker 2009).

Although, contemporary theorists in the field of cultural studies have reached an agreement that those structures have their own conventions acting as a kind of communication bridge. Readers are already equipped with a personal set of values that are usually a direct result of a culture inside which the text is being read and they expect the text to conform to those expectations. This rather simple pattern is at work whether we are discussing a medieval romance or a contemporary crime novel. It establishes a correlation between cultural norms and textual patterns (Cawelti 1977: 1-13). Looking back at Becker's statements, structures within a narrative reflect the interests of producers, distributors, and consumers of art capable of finding the gaps within a work that could be filled in with ideological fantasies in a process that redirects the interpretational potential of a work of art.

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3   On the hierarchy of genres and their functiones, see Jaus & Bahti (1979). Every genre, beside its structural norms, had also suitable goals, related to social structures and values defined by centres of power. For example, liturgical drama, religious plays and legends, were used for cultic participation and edification as primary functions (legends could partly fulfill other functions as astonishment and emotion). On the other side, romance and farce were used for entertainment and amusement. Their readers live in social order that is represented in text as symbolical order. To verify it, they have to consume texts that give them insight in symbolical, invisible and spiritual dimension. And those text have better chance to become canonical.

5. Culture – popular culture – cultural studies (methodology)

The novel *Croatian Alexander Romance*, based on the life of a historical figure, is not studied in this paper as a configuration of narrative positions but rather as a battlefield of power structures. According to Terry Eagleton (2002: 28), culture is a stage on which the political conflicts take place. Hence, the methodological approach we have chosen looks into these texts as a reflection of the cultures in which they were formed, a reflection of the battle of power structures, as mentioned earlier in the paper. This is why certain fragments of these works are to be read as bearers of an image of culture and conflicts that take place within a culture, which, in turn, transforms the narrative into a real and proper arena. The battle that takes place inside is, as a matter of fact, a static event frozen in time, an image of a society in motion, which makes it conditional and momentary. This image is frequently idealized, or at least partially idealized, and these properties should also be considered. Culture is, states Eagleton, an aestheticized version of a specific way of life that dwells inside of it, finding its unity within a culture. This makes culture an idealized form, a normative, collective image of society. When it comes to actors involved in the production and distribution of a work of art, culture is the way they perceive their position within the power structure that we refer to as society (Eagleton 2002: 25).

Given the fact that the feudal class managed to find its expression in the medieval chivalric romances, we have decided to look into their perception of power structures in which they lived and their position within those structures, an image that usually crystallizes itself in the narrative. That particular image is the very subject of this paper. This, naturally, entails including the term 'power' in the discussion. Eagleton holds that no political force can survive acting directly through an opposition or violence towards the opposition but only through indirect manipulation of the image of its position, which also implies manipulation of the image of the position of the adversary. And arts and culture have, it comes as no surprise, proven to be the ideal means for this type of manipulation (Eagleton 2002: 64).

This is where we bring into discussion the central notion of cultural studies or its (and ours) methodological approach: the politics of representation. The notion is in direct connection with the production of meaning in a specific context, the generation of meaning within a text, and the formation of text's relation towards the dominant value system (Barker 2008: 7-8). Additionally, introducing the term 'dominant' into the discussion, one is forced to reflect on the binary opposition of low and high culture or the popular and the elite culture, stressing the fact that their constitutive elements, as well as the relationship of the two are socially conditioned. The power structure at work is what classifies a work of art as highbrow or lowbrow (Barker 2008: 47).

Once the broader cultural context is introduced, we are no longer discussing the meaning of a text or the meaning of the elements of a text but the articulation of the text in question. The articulation of a text is, by definition, a momentary and arbitrary closure, and this definition is sufficient in this discussion (Daryl 1996: 112-130). The meaning is generated by conforming or moving away from the hegemonic practices that will always be imposing their version of meaning. However, the

hegemonic center is constantly opposed by its contrary. Therefore, this paper will be moving alongside the axis center-margin. At the very end of the axis, as a direct result of hegemonic practices, the margin is defined as the pure product of discursive practice (Julien Mercer 1996: 450-464). This paper will take a look into the generation of conflict in *Croatian Alexander Romance* in broader social contexts, taking into the consideration the power centers, hegemonic practices at work, as well as the representation of the center and margins.

6. Novel, folk tale and popular culture

Situating the selected text within its cultural habitus, and taking into consideration that it works belong to folk or popular culture, requires specific treatment and determines our methodological approach. Alexander the Great was a historical figure frequently dealt with in historical accounts due to his glorious deeds, but he is not less frequently dealt with in artworks as he turns out to be a suitable figure for the artistic portrayal of a hero endowed with supernatural mental and physical abilities. *Croatian Alexander Romance* is rooted in the ancient source that has stretched for centuries and has found its expression in different European cultures. But how did it end up labeled as popular culture in the first place? What type of high culture does it oppose? What kind of value system classified them as low or popular?

The text considered in this paper exemplify the ongoing battle between Culture and culture, a battle involving everything that a culture represents, regardless of the fact whether it is spelled with a capital or small letter. It is a battle, to paraphrase Eagleton (2002: 57) between culture perceived as etheric, sublime, dead, and culture perceived as mundane, vulgar but also alive and vivid. When it comes to methodology, we should point out that the usage of terms folk culture and popular culture is synonymous in this paper because the difference between the two is not crucial for the central argument of this paper. As Eagleton (2002) and Duda (2002) claimed, the difference is in the context because folklore culture appeared in the pre-industrial era and popular culture in the industrial era. But the mechanism of their activity is similar: it comes down to destabilization of dominant elite culture. However, it would not be right to overlook the heterogeneity of folk culture (in this particular case, the chivalric romance portrays a picture of feudal aristocracy but it was widely read by the lower class too), but, to use Duda's words (Duda 2002: 102-103), even though folk culture meant naval and craft culture, vagabond, and other cultures, they all perform a common mission: undermining the elite culture and the power center.

Folk culture, states Peter Burke (1991: 22), is no less than an opposition to art. And art, in this context, stands for all that is artificial, refined, outside of, and separated from art that is alive.[4] What makes this approach interesting is the simultaneity of subversion and affirmation. In his second study of popular culture and early modern Europe, Burke states that it is precisely the subversive potential of a work of art that makes it widely popular and appealing to the masses, but for the distribution and

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4   We have decided to take the liberty of treating folk culture and popular culture as synonymous, at least when it comes to the interpretation of the selected works, even though in historical terms one is related to the pre-industrial period and the other is usually used in the context of the post-industrial period because both terms denote resistance towards dead or elite culture.

consumption to be allowed by the center, those works have to be affirmative at the same time, which means that they have to walk a narrow line without falling to one side or the other.

7. Chivalric romance: narrative structure and ideological implications

The narrative structure of a chivalric romance contains a young hero, his loneliness and his enthusiasm, the decision he has to make on whether to fight or leave, his journey and further alienation from others, and the process of achievement of his goals that take the form of a new territory or a higher form of consciousness (new knowledge). The narrative structure could be summed up as a) the beginning of a journey (determination, courage, and strong desire), b) being on his own (maturing and learning from his mistakes), c) polarity (accepting both the good and the bad), d) beasts (symbols of mysterious and dark forces that he is about to gain an understanding of, e) a leader (help from above, a voice and a piece of advice), f) descent into the underworld (real or imaginary, learning about the darkness at the edge of life, g) self-knowledge, and h) paradise (the final destination, the metaphor of the greatest good one can achieve) (Sambunjak 2011: 209-227).

The chivalric narrative is, therefore, by default subversive. It stands in direct opposition to what was proclaimed the elite culture in the Middle Ages. At a time, there was an insistence on using Latin as the written language and a tendency to mystify its universality, even though thorough studies have shown significant variations. Latin varied from region to region (Zink 2018: 14-15). The chivalric romance, on the other hand, aimed at entertaining the masses in te vernacular, which positioned the genre as the direct opposite of what was back then considered high culture. The way it was distributed makes this particular genre even more subversive. The Middle Ages featured both oral and written forms. The latter was reserved for content imposed and distributed by the Church, official writings that had to be read in a highly ritualized manner and in public spaces. The oral form dominated the private sphere and was quite the opposite. It predominated when it came to poetry, myths, and legends (Zink 2018: 68). And the chivalric romance encompassed all of the above: it was written in verse, it contained myths (and those were frequently animalistic myths), it resonated with legends and was to be performed orally (at least till the end of the Middle Ages or the apparition of the written versions of orally distributed tales).

In genealogical terms, tracking the origins and the development of the genre in question, we have to revisit the Middle Ages, a period in which chivalric romances started their circulation in oral form, even though written versions appear only in the 13th century. It is an epoch of domination of antiquity that was, throughout the medieval period, considered the pinnacle of human effort. Content inherited from that period, including forms and topics, was considered superior by the cultural elites, it represented the key in the development of culture. That implies that medieval elites insisted on pure antique forms and usage of Latin. The book as an artifact was a tool used in liturgy, it was by no means for the masses. Content and topics that did not meet the antique norms were consequently pushed to the margins and had to be distributed in oral form (Duby 2006: 36-39).

The apparition of oral versions of chivalric romances (a non-standard form in a non-standard language) is accompanied by changes in the social structure. Provincial rulers gained more power, which contributed to the decentralization of the dominant ruling structure with the king at the top, alongside a narrow circle of his subjects in cooperation with the Church leadership. The process intensified from the 11th century onward, and so did the development of chivalric narratives. On the margins, a new class was being formed. Knights were recruited from the ranks of the old nobility, the new wealthy lords, or distinguished warriors. They represented a new social force that stood in-between, not entirely on the margins the way peasants did but they were not the center either, that position was occupied by the king and the Church. Gradually, the class became more and more autonomous, gaining visibility in different spheres of social life. They differed from other classes (they were also equipped with expensive armor, horses, but their knighthood was a matter of family heritage), took part in different rituals, and used different symbols (colors, a coat of arms, etc.). Soon enough, they posed a real danger to the king[5] as they became the new margin, but despite the power they gained they were still culturally inferior, most of them even illiterate and unacquainted with antique knowledge, philosophy, and art (Duby 2006: 60-66). They earned their standing by violent means and the only thing they lacked was a genre that would reflect their value system. It found its expression in medieval chivalric romances, a form that turned out to be quite subversive.

The chivalric romance was, therefore, a reflection of the aspirations of the feudal nobility. It was a synthesis of their moral beliefs, their need for a ritualized form of belonging, idealized view of their own position, a culture of leisure and adventure (Komova 2017: 51-82). Still, even though the form originated, was distributed among, and read mostly by noble ranks, it found its popularity among the lower class who enjoyed fantastic stories and the glamorous world of big ceremonies, battles, and court life (Burke 1991: 129-130). Erich Auerbach (2004: 133) characterizes the epoch as a time when antique forms came to an end and old ideals required new forms of expressions that were soon to replace the old ones. The nobility found its expression in chivalric narratives, as entirely different, but still a rather similar form that glorified the preservation of old values and ideal forms of life quite distant from the real life at a time. The emerging new world was overtly ritualized and stylized and it frequently moved along the limits of kitsch. In direct opposition to Church culture, it became a new, secular counter-culture that was there to stay.

Risden (2016: 19) defines more closely the mechanism of subversion in medieval context: "Medieval narrative subversion tend to focus, not surprisingly, on the instability of human nature and the necessity for vigilance in the face of both physical and spiritual corruption." Subversion, as a concept, implies order. In the case of the medieval period, order is established by representatives of feudalism and (Christian) religion. They establish secular and sacred orders; political and spiritual powers. So Risden (2016: 33) claims that narrative subversion in medieval literature targets both: kingship as political and the Church as spiritual orders. Narratives thematize the

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5   Kings tried to limit their power in every possible way: by banning warfare in certain periods, introducing obligatory rituals performed by priests before battles that were actually a sort of a license to fight, banning them to disturb Church premises, banning arbitrariness and conflicts with brothers in the faith (as something only pagans did), etc. (Duby 2006: 67).

return of an earlier period (before kingship) as an idealized agrarian utopia that can not be established, but its imagining can destabilize the king and political structures. Also, they thematize the Church as a system infected by power and wealth, struggling with corruption; it is therefore described as a labyrinth of privilege.

All that chivalric kitsch (encompassing myths, fairy tales, fantasy, animalistic and mystic tales) functions as a veil that is supposed to mask the antagonisms of the social classes (feudal lords and peasants, feudal lords and the king), suggesting a hermeticism and self-sufficiency of the feudal elite that had no idea about the world beyond its borders (Auerbach 2004: 135-136). The above-mentioned social tendencies led, in the 12th century, to the creation of the first romances of an integral form (that, in a very original manner, contained and made references to the oral tradition, collective memory, and myth) and they slowly took on its political function, too.[6] So, one of the possible political interpretations could be that chivalric romance reflected a nostalgia for feudal customs and rituals that were slowly fading.[7]

8. The novel and subversion

Considering contact points between text and context or the poetics and content of the novel *Croatian Alexander Romance* and its social frame, we encounter the following subversive elements.[8] Those are parts of the text in which a value system (that of the feudal elite) opposes imposed norms:

> *A. The novel is not envisioned as an allegoric journey, as was frequently the case in the Middle Ages. It is instead placed into concrete and well-defined time and space, which narrows down its allegoric potential*

Despite fantasy elements and mythological dimension of Alexander the Great as a narrative figure, we have historical facts about his life and journey, which includes specific a time and space. During every narrative episode, we have a well-defined

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6   British people have inscribed into their narratives a collective image of a new, unique space that was being constituted from a complex, geostrategic position (in cooperation with the Normans and against the political aspirations of the Saxons). By the same token, a new genre was to compete culturally and politically with France, another European superpower that had already distributed its well-known narratives about the legendary Charlemagne (Gajić 2015).

7   The historical relevance we are interested in is the one that manifests itself through the inscription of ideology detected as subversive rather than that based on the accuracy of historical facts. It has often proved pointless to look into those, as exemplified by the story of King Arthur and the Holy Grail. There are no reliable historical sources that could confirm the existence of King Arthur, and doubts on the subject were voiced in the 12th century, as confirmed by the written records of the British entertaining themselves by stories of a fictional king (Zink 2018). King Arthur was likely created through an oral tradition and so was the motif of the Holy Grail, a mystical object that has changed its shape in the oral tradition. Initially, it was a chalice that represented the wealth of the court, then a magic stone in a box, and later on, a vessel with Jesus's blood from the cross (Zink 2018: 91-94). The narrative of the Templars was frequently adapted, as they were the Pope's servants, sometimes even debauched heretics or dark knights in alliance with dark forces (even though there is no historical proof of their alleged heresy) (Frale 2010).

8   Subversive elements can easily be identified by combining the main characteristics of the text and the main poetic elements individuated by Marija Ana Dürrigl in her rich foreword to the novel that is a highly helpful tool for a modern reader (Hercigonja 2017: 33-73).

space, such as Rome and Jerusalem at the beginning of his life (Hercigonja 2017: 81), or the conquest of Atena (Hercigonja 2017: 102), etc.

B. The didactic function of the novel is subordinated to the function of entertainment

Narrative is structured as a series of divided episodes, each one a separate adventure, mostly without the explicit suggestion of any moral values. We have a mixture of legends, fantasy motives (like one about Alexander's origin), exotic elements of Egyptian gods and magicians (Hercigonja 2017: 81-84), and similar elements with no clear function except entertainment. Also, the dynamic of the narrative is adjusted to the reader/listener, providing a awhole scale of emotions and atmospheres in a well-organized disposition (action, emotion, tragedy, horror, introspection, wisdom; etc.).

C. Religious elements are reduced to the bare minimum, giving space to the elements of a fantasy novel

Usually, chivalric romances are situated in the Christian cultural code, trying to include the dominant system of (religious) values. The story about Alexander the Great is an uncommon romance because it has to take into consideration the Greek mythological system, and Egyptian also, if it wants to stay close to the original oral narrative. So, *Croatian Alexander Romance* makes a great effort to subdue itself to Christian cultural code. Despite his Greek and Egyptian origins, Alexander soon starts to act as a representative of the dominant system of values; that means, as an ideal Christian knight, firmly conviced in God's mission and mercy. He starts with mentioning 'our father Adam' and other elements that anticipate his Christian orientation. But, soon after the Jerusalem episode, he feels an afftinity for the Jewish prophet Eremija (Hercigonja 2017: 118-119) and starts to act as believer in God's mission.

But, beside the aforementioned Christian religious element, we have also subversive elements of mythology and fathasy. The narrative starts with the Egyptian episode: the magician Nektenab who helps with the conception of Alexander, by presenting Egyptian gods and magic ritulas (Hercigonja 2017: 81-85). These elements clash with Christian believes. During different narrative episodes which describes Alexander's phases of the taking of empires in the West and East, the text deals with different cultutral systems (Greek, Indian, etc), their mythological creatures, but also living ones (giant peoples with one leg, dragons, monsters, etc). It could be said, that many of the narrative elements narrative elements read as a subversion of the dominant system of believes.

D. The protagonist is initially driven by religious motifs, but he eventually evolves and grows spiritually as he gains more insight; he is not a metaphoric figure nor does he bear a certain idea, he is simply an individual

Alexander starts as God's warrior, a typical figure in chivalric romances, putting his life and reputation in danger to increase the glory of God and king. But, slowly, Alexander transforms into a character that frees himself from that role. Through the rare dialogues and letters that he writes, we see his attempt to understand important questions of the meaning of the life and war, matters of destiniy and the purpose of life (like

in conversation with Evant) (Hercigonja 2017: 151). He will also have visions in his dreams; different night apparations which he will try to unriddle as important messages for him as an individual (Hercigonja 2017: 181). In these situations, he is not a represe0 ntative of any kind of ideas or values, as we expect from the hero of a chivalric romance.

> *E. As the plot slowly progresses, the protagonist is less and less on a quest for paradise as for the common good and is progressively more oriented towards personal gain (wealth and glory)*

To argue this statement, we can look closely to the ending of each episode of conquest. Alexander glorifies his role in war and history, puts his regent in charge and collects money and other material goods for another battle (for example, after the conquest of Egypt) (Hercigonja 2017: 112). Or, in another episode, in chasing the Persian king Darije: first he mentions God's will to kill Darije, but very soon, he eagerly expresses how insulted he is by Darije's acts decades ago (Darije tried to subordinate the Macedonian empire to his power and take the young Alexander into his service) – it turns out that the insult is the main driving force for Alexander's hunting of King Darije (Hercigonja 2017: 130-132).

> *F. Partial misogyny, which is a formative part of the religious code (the Bible as a source of stereotypes, women perceived as sinful), is undermined by heroines endowed with positive characteristics (the brave Talisidra, Kleophila and Rosanda)*

The dominant attitude towards women is explained at the very beginning of the story. The narrator claims, in the Greek and Troya episode, that all problems come from females interfearing in the history process (mentioning the Trojan war and the story about Helena and Paris, as well as the Biblical story about Adam and Eve) (Hercigonja 2017: 112-113). But, popular narratives from the Christian code about women as the source of chaos and evil soon will be undermined. We have Talistrida, The Queen of Amazionian Women, female warriors, who stands in front of Alexander and negotiates (Hercigonja 2017: 164); Kleophila, a queen that Alexander tries to kill, but after certain maneuvers he bows to her wisdom and skills (Hercigonja 2017: 173-175); Rosanda, who gets a very important role in the final narrative episode (the death of Alexander and after) (Hercigonja 2017: 196-202).

We can compare this narrative with those most common to the Middle Ages and notice more subversive potential. Back then, the Church promoted the legends of saints (ascetics who renounced their worldly possessions to be closer to God), tales of good shepherds (idealized figures living in an equally idealized world), and stories about cheerful monks (Burke 1991: 128). The protagonists of chivalric romances are on a quest for knowledge but do not mind getting rich and famous along the way. Besides, the hero himself, his rootedness into a well-determined space and time, is also a subversive element. In the Middle Ages, the centers of power insisted on intact, frozen, and motionless time and space (which explains how a particular social order managed to maintain itself over the centuries without major upheavals). Past, present and future seem to be compressed into a static time that defies change.

Literary space is, subsequently, ethereal, imperceptible, and unimportant because the plot held universal (and not local) truths. The space of the present was perceived as a temporary dwelling on the way to a place where heavenly salvation awaits us all (Galić 2008: 63-74).

The construction of space in the chivalric novel is concretized, but at the same time rather monochromatic, static, and exclusive. Its construction is, without a doubt, subversive towards the royal and Church elite, but it is also self-sufficient when it comes to the depiction of the feudal elite. It is, Auerbach (2004: 138-140) claims, even mildly egoistic and idealizes the feudal elite, glorifying their bravery and spirit and satisfying their need for adventure. Still, the chivalric novel is simultaneously a nostalgic cry for an epoch that is slowly dying due to the development of trade, crafts, and the emergence of a new social class. It is an ode to times (almost) gone that managed to capture the spirit of a feudal 'golden age' of adventure and great quests that cannot be repeated. The Church managed to mitigate some of those elements, but some of them remained, as visible in the novel. The chivalric romance as a genre could be placed somewhere in-between the medieval Christian tradition and animalistic theology (Sambunjak 2011: 209-227). Numerous examples support this thesis: the protagonist is religious to a certain extent, there is a cross on his shield, he respects the Church authorities but also deems himself the son of the gods of other religions (Alexander is fascinated by the way Egyptians worship their rulers, attributing them godlike characteristics), and he encounters and is forced to confront diverse fantastic creatures whose very existence clashes with Christian credos.[9]

What was the Church's reaction to this kind of text? What was its response to a text that apparently contained imposed religious values only to undermine them with the invention of a new hero, the depiction of his drives, his own experience of time and space, his propagation of new (material) values, etc.? It was not easy, but the Church managed to carry out the process of the Christianization of chivalric narratives (there are, after all, numerous contact points such as misogyny, didactic elements, colonialism, and spirituality) (Hercigonja 2017). Still, the process was not so successful, as shown by the records left by priests who were infuriated by the growing popularity of this genre. Chivalric romances remained actual mostly because of their double coding, typical of works of folk culture. They simultaneously conformed to and undermined the dominant ideology, which helped their mass distribution and allowed the genre to be subversive.

Mihail M. Bahtin also writes about this duality of chivalric romances, in relation to their chronotope. The chronotope refers to the space-time organization of the text and connects this structure with structures outside of the text. And that is what makes it suitable for this analysis. The duality of chivalric romance refers to the fragmentation of narrative time and space, which signals the breakdown of a certain

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9   The concrete relation between the story about The Holy Grail and the Church, in the context of sunversion strategies, is described by Risden (2016: 97-103). He considers the story about the Grails as a secular version of the Bible. On the metaphorical level, both are stories about the search for spirituality and redemption; the only difference is that the knights in the story about the Grail look for it in this world. This example is a paradigmatic example of the double play which is characteristic for popular culture. Since the Holy Grail is never found, and therefore redemption is never reached (implying that it is not even possible), the story is not a confirmation of religious order, but its subversion.

epoch. A tightly organized time with a stabile hierarchy is destabilized by unexpected events which leads the narrative line to different directions and separated time-space segments. In those parts, a new fantastic world is opened, with the hyperbolization of time, which means the chronotope absorbs elements of Eastern fairytales (Bahtin 2019: 412-419). Exactly those fantastic and faity-tale elements, which are not part of the biblical opus, can be interpret as the subversion of the culture that the medieval elite sets as high culture.[10]

9. Conclusion

The text *Croatian Alexander Romance*, read with regard to its respective social and political context, turns out to be a subversive work and a critique of the dominant value system and dominant cultural codes. The chivalric narrative is, as we suggested, fertile ground for subversion, deploying the mechanism of a double game, with an apparent affirmation of, and a brave undermining of, the dominant code. As popular culture theoreticians like to affirm, culture is a battlefield (Duda 2002: 24), it was a battlefield in the Middle Ages and continues to be one in the present day, although we tend to think of ourselves as the sole producers of texts capable of a sophisticated subversion. Culture has always been an arena of conflicting interests grouped along the axis of domination and subordination. All it takes is to pay attention to the context to decode the traces of those axes in different layers of the text.

Stuart Hall translates the issue in to of centre and margin as a mechanizm which is inscribed in culture, but also in text. That binary relation is the base of the structure (text or culture), and the tension between its two opposite poles is also constant. Only the criterion of its establishment is change: ethnicity, race, gender, culture, etc. (Julien Mercer 1996: 450-464). We can also see the presence of binary positions and a closer look reveals their instability or their rotations. The methodology of cultural studies requires including the notion of articulation as arbitrary closure, or as a realized current connection between signifier and signified in given conditions (Slack 1996: 112-127). If we focus on the articulation of binary positions in a certain situation, we can conclude that the chivalric romance could be seen as imposing the chivalric code on a biblical platform, and, on the other hand, as its undermining by including non-biblical elements in the narrative (fantasy, corporeality, and so on).

The text could also be defined as the apparent reconciliation of contradictions, as it creates pleasure in the reader but, on the other hand, the pleasure experienced is a direct result of the reader's liberation of fear, contradictions, absurdity, insecurity, and chaos (Cawelti 1997: 15-16). By immersing ourselves into the well-balanced world of a text, we are freed of these emotions, but just as readers. The task of a critic or a scholar is somewhat different, it requires digging deep under the surface and uncovering conflicts and contradictions that a text is trying to suppress. Looking into this popular narrative, into its own context, we have painted a picture of the

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10 Northrop Frye, in his work *Anatomy of Criticism* (1973) shows this disjunction of romace through the terms 'aristocratic' and 'proletarian'. These are two manifestations of romance that undermine each other. Because romance confirms a certain mythical universe by presenting an ideal hero with archetypal conotations, but, at the same time, inscribes itself in a specific time and space, questioning social changes. Describing that what is eternal and what is transient, romance equally gravitates to the status quo and social change.

contradictions inside it, opening, in the process, new interpretative possibilities that have led to new knowledge.

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REPREZENTACIJA I SUBVERZIJA U *HRVATSKOJ ALEKSANDRIDI*

Sažetak

Čitanjem romana *Hrvatska Aleksandrida* kao viteškoga narativa strukturirana oko povijesne figure, ovaj rad usmjeren je na njegovu reinterpretaciju u ključu popularne kulture te politiku reprezentacije nositelja radnje, koji se mogu čitati kao nositelji određenih ideoloških vrijednosti istovremeno djelujući afirmativno i subverzivno prema dominantnome sustavu vrijednosti. Osim toga, rad se usmjerava na taktiku romana koja podriva dominantne kodove postavivši tezu da je upravo viteški roman idealan oblik za proučavanje sukoba između ideološkoga centra i margine. Kodificiranje žanra povećava transparentnost teksta omogućujući uočavanje novih interpretacijskih potencijala analizirana narativa iz perspektive političkoga čitanja. Tako se srednjovjekovni roman *Hrvatska Aleksandrida* otkriva kao tekstualni teren na kojemu se manifestiraju odnosi konkretnih društvenih snaga, vidljivi tek kada primijenimo opisanu metodološku optiku. Dominantni viteški i biblijski kod otisak su upravo viteškoga i crkvenoga društvenog sloja kao nositelja moći povijesnoga razdoblja u koji je upisan tekst. Stoga viteški narativ istovremeno udovoljava njihovim imperativima, ali i nudi disparatne motive poput fantastike, praznovjerja, satire, društvene kritike, individualističkoga morala itd. Takva proturječnost upisana u (kulturni) tekst potvrđuje učestalu tezu teoretičara kulturalnih studija o kulturi kao bojnome polju. Na razini teksta to se manifestira kao niz nepomirljivih motiva koji promiču površnomu čitatelju ako se zaustavi na čitanju ili pregledu površinske razine, na kojoj samo prividno uspostavlja ideološki (nametnuti) konsenzus. On ipak ima svoj antipod, koji ne može sasvim potisnuti i ta se binarna opozicija u pojedinim segmentima artikulira drukčije od predviđenoga, a upravo njezina rotacija čini navedeni tekst zanimljivim za druga (naknadna) čitanja.

Ključne riječi: društvo, ideologija, kultura, moć, politika reprezentacije, subverzija, sukob