External Examiner's Report on the Dissertation of Vidya Kesavan
"Nuclear Shakespeare: Apocalypse and Annihilation in *King Lear* and *Hamlet*"
Erasmus Mundus Joint Doctorate TEEME
Charles University and University of Kent

I. Brief summary of the dissertation

Starting from the hypothesis that studying literature can "shed light on our predicament in the nuclear age" (p. 1), this dissertation shows how Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *King Lear* and their adaptations are meaningful in our nuclear age and how they speak to our present situation and its apocalyptic potential. The dissertation relates early modern apocalypticism to contemporary discourses of annihilation. Its theoretical and methodological basis is Jacques Derrida's "nuclear criticism," proposed in his 1984 essay "No Apocalypse, Not Now," in which "he emphasises the link between literature and nuclear annihilation" (p. 3). The thesis considers annihilation broadly, including the threat of climate change (p. 5). As announced in the introduction, this thesis is "a work in literary theory and criticism' (p. 6).

II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation

This is a very good dissertation. It is very clear and well written, very interesting, very well documented. Its structure and argument are convincing and stimulating. It shows the author's high and mature level of thought. It definitely meets all the requirements of a PhD thesis, both in form and content.

III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects

1. Structure of the argument

The dissertation is clearly and convincingly structured and the argument is mastered throughout the thesis. The introductions and conclusions to each chapter are very useful and help the reader follow the argument.

The first three chapters are mainly theoretical and strive to define and connect annihilation, apocalypse, and representation. They stimulatingly raise theoretical, methodological and ethical issues about the role of literature in "an age of annihilation" (p. 7). These chapters combine a study of early modern concepts and an analysis of present-day theoretical tools. They are based on extensive readings that are used to develop the author's specific argument. This theoretical step allows the author to have a strong context on which to base the study of Shakespeare's plays and their productions in the second part of the thesis. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on *King Lear* while chapters 6 and 7 explore *Hamlet*. The argument is nuanced and balanced and the perspectives that are adopted are rich and intelligently formulated.

All this makes it a very stimulating thesis in literature that helps the reader to deeply reflect upon the part the humanities may play in our world.

The general introduction and conclusion are very clear and useful.

2. Formal aspects of the dissertation

The form of the thesis is very neat, coherent and it meets all the requirements of scientific referencing. The author is coherent in the use of abbreviations and syntax of bibliographical references. The footnotes are formatted correctly. The language of the dissertation is grammatically correct and, except for a few exceptions that do not deserve to be mentioned

in this report, it is free of linguistic infelicities. It is visually well-presented, and graphically well-formatted. All this makes it an instructive and pleasurable reading.

3. Use of sources and/or material

The author works very transparently with secondary sources that are all relevant to the topic. There is a great variety of sources that show that the readings have been extensive and that the author masters them and manages to use them without tumbling into any jargon. There is a nice balance between primary and secondary sources, which allows the author to tackle complex issues, such as the notion of "radical evil" (p. 14), the "unthinkable" (p. 15), the "inadequacy of language" (p. 17), or the complex articulation of the real and the fictional in matters of nuclear threat (p. 17), millenarianism and Millennialism (chap. 2), among others. Adorno, Arendt, Derrida, Auerbach, Benjamin, Debord or Baudrillard, all these authors (and the list is not limited to these names) are difficult to read and the author shows that she is at ease with the theoretical tools that they offer.

The tools and concepts that are explored in the first part of the thesis are intelligently used in the second part to illuminate the corpus of Shakespearean plays and films. Such formulations as "*King Lear* is an endless question with no answers" (p. 137) are illuminating and the studies of Godard's film of *King Lear*, of Mallarmé's interpretation of *Hamlet* or the connection with *Ulysses* are particularly welcome and stimulating. The titles and subtitles in each chapter are cleverly chosen and to the point.

4. Personal contribution to the subject

The thesis constitutes an original contribution to the field by refreshing Derrida's "nuclear criticism" and using it to enlighten Shakespeare's plays and the filmic productions of *King Lear* and *Hamlet*. The thesis intelligently articulates corpuses that are not often studied together. Thus, the author employs her primary and secondary sources to propose an original, organically formulated contribution to the field of Shakespeare studies. She definitely manages to show "the importance of the connections between the late modern discourses of annihilation, early modern apocalypticism, and certain paradoxes of representation" (p. 217), the thesis giving a lot of food for thought. This work surely "energises the field of Shakespeare studies" (p. 221).

IV. Questions for the author

The questions that follow aim at giving matters of discussion during the viva and they may be food for the future work of the researcher, or not.

1. In the introduction (p. 5), the author mentions "presentism". I wonder whether the issues at stake with presentism and its theoretical basis should not be more extensively introduced and explored in the introduction.

2. While the structure of the thesis is on the whole convincing, I wonder why chapters 4 and 5 are in this order and not the reverse and I would be interested if the author could explain this choice.

3. When in Chapter 1 the author explores the unspeakable, I wonder whether it would not be interesting to introduce trauma studies in the argument. Wouldn't that be relevant to prolong the work done in this thesis? The thesis mentions Michael Rothberg's *Traumatic Realism* (2000) but it seems to me that there might be more to say and that integrating trauma studies into the argument might have been fruitful. Is that a field of research that the author has contemplated or could contemplate studying?

4. The studies of the filmic versions of the plays as all responding "to the threat of nuclear annihilation" (p. 99) are interesting. However, I think the thesis would gain in having a more substantial bibliography on the screen versions of *King Lear* and *Hamlet*. A lot has been written on *King Lear* and on *Hamlet* on screen and I encourage the author to explore these studies a little more extensively. I recommend José Ramon Diaz's film-bibliographies such as that on *King Lear*: https://www.cambridge.org/files/5515/6086/0358/Shakespeare_on_screen_King_Lear_extended_bibliography_Diaz.pdf.

It would also be very interesting to include screen captures from the studied versions. In that field of research, a selected picture is often more telling and efficient than the description of a sequence.

5. About Miriam Jakobson's work on "cipher" (p. 140), I suggest the Prologue to *Henry V* could be profitably mentioned as it relates nothing and representation.

V. Conclusion

The work submitted absolutely meets the standards customarily required of a doctoral dissertation. That is why I recommend the dissertation for a public viva and have no hesitation whatsoever to recommend the submitted dissertation with the tentative grade of pass.

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