Erasmus Mundus Joint Doctorate – TEEME (Text and Event in Early Modern Culture)

Minutes of the Viva

Date of the viva: 23 September 2021, 15:10–17:05
Location: Charles University (online meeting on MSTeams)

Candidate: Vidya Kesavan
Dissertation title: Nuclear Shakespeare: Apocalypse and Annihilation in *King Lear* and *Hamlet*

Chair of the committee: prof. Ondřej Pilný, PhD. (Charles University)

Supervisor I: prof. Martin Procházka, CSc. (Charles University)
Supervisor II: Rory Loughnane, PhD. (University of Kent)

External examiner: prof. Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin (Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3)
Internal examiner: PhDr. Soňa Nováková, CSc. (Charles University)

Additional TEEME staff member: Emily Guerry, PhD. (University of Kent)

15:10 Prof. Ondřej Pilný, as the chair of the committee, welcomed everyone present and summarised the proceedings.

15:11 The first supervisor, prof. Martin Procházka, introduced the candidate and summarised his report, mentioning especially:

- the daring and original choice of topic
- the candidate's successes, for instance her influential presentation at one of the TEEME conferences
- the deft negotiation between historicism and presentism and the interdisciplinarity of the thesis, which uses a number of recent and contemporary theoretical approaches
- the productive employment of the results of close-reading and the use of Shakespeare in the works of modernism, for instance in the works of Joyce and Godard's film adaptation of *King Lear*
- his only reservation, i.e. the fact that the candidate did not sufficiently address her own situation in postcolonial India and the role of Shakespeare in the colonial education system

He proposed a pass with distinction, given the originality of the argument, and expressed his conviction the thesis is likely to become one of the major reference points in the field of nuclear Shakespeare.

15:18 The second supervisor, Dr Rory Loughnane, summarised his report, mentioning especially:

- the highly original and timely contributions to knowledge the thesis makes
- the wide-ranging scope of the study and the breadth of the candidate's learning
- the applicability of the focus on annihilation and apocalypse to other authors and plays of the period
- his only reservation, i.e. the fact that more historical grounding in the Jacobean period would have been useful (for instance a discussion of the Gunpowder Plot and the related issues of annihilation and revelation)

He proposed a pass with distinction.

15:25 The candidate, Vidya Kesavan, presented her thesis, mentioning especially:

- the supervision process and the influence of the individual supervisors on the resulting work
- the main concerns of the thesis, including the relationship between early modern apocalypticism and late modern discourses of annihilation and the question of truth and meaning in representation
- the main theoretical frameworks: an updated form of Derrida's nuclear criticism combined with feminist materialist critique

She summarised the major concerns of the individual chapters of the thesis, including:

- the ethical problem of representing annihilation, representation and responsibility, with references to Adorno and Steiner
- the silencing of genocide victims and subaltern groups, for instance through destruction of historical documents, with references to Lyotard and Spivak
- representing annihilation in the works of Kafka, Beckett, and Weiss
- the shift in temporal consciousness in the early modern period, with references to Anderson and Auerbach
- medieval and early modern readings of the Bible, especially of the Revelation, and debates about millennialism
- debates about representation from the antiquity to the modern day
- the exploration of four nuclear adaptations of *King Lear* (Kozintsev, Brook, Kurosawa, Godard), and the appropriability of *King Lear*
- the analysis of the two text versions of *King Lear* in relation to the Apocalypse, using Derrida's concepts
- the analysis of *Hamlet* as a nuclear text, the references to *Hamlet* in the works of Joyce, the issues of apocalyptic justice, warfare and weaponry, and the last judgement in the play

15:44 The external examiner, prof. Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, summarised her report, and mentioned especially:

- the impressive scope and level of the dissertation
- the convincing argument and the maturity of thought

- the clarity and the quality of the writing and the candidate's gift for pregnant formulations
- the neatness and coherence of the form
- the meticulous referencing
- the energising potential of the thesis in the field of Shakespeare studies

She proposed a pass with distinction.

15:50 The internal examiner, Dr Soňa Nováková, summarised her report, and mentioned especially:

- the clear structure and symmetrical organisation of the dissertation
- the nuanced methodology, the comparative dimension, and the insightful close reading of the primary texts

She raised several topics for discussion, including:

- the recent shift of the nuclear debate in relation to ecological activism
- the representation of the unspeakable as a vital issue in feminist, postcolonial, and trauma studies
- the time when the meaning of "apocalypse" actually shifted

She proposed a pass with distinction.

15:59 The candidate answered the questions from the reports.

<u>Questions posed by prof. Vienne-Guerrin</u>

- the introduction of presentism in the thesis: the topic was expanded on during the lecture; in the thesis, she tried to maintain a balanced attitude to the different approaches
- the sequence of Chapter 4 and Chapter 5: the ordering is fully intentional and reflects the process in which the idea of the thesis emerged. The Fukushima disaster influenced the proposal of the dissertation, as it made the candidate to start looking into the contemporary relevance in *King Lear* in relation to nuclear issues.
- trauma studies and their possible integration: the candidate actually applied for a post-doc position related to trauma studies some years ago and maintains a serious interest in the field
- other film adaptations: in one of her essays, the candidate also compared Olivier's and Branagh's adaptation of *Henry V*, focusing on their attitude to war and their different agendas

<u>Questions posed by Dr Nováková</u>

- the dismissal of nuclear threat as outdated after the Cold War: in the thesis itself, the candidate makes an argument for the relevance of the focus: it has mutated, but remains absolutely relevant

- the shift in the meaning of the term "apocalypse" (from redemption and revelation to destruction): according to the OED, the meaning, "a cataclysmic event", is modern (not included in the second edition of the OED)
- the role of postcolonial readings and the perspective of third-world women: this particular nuclear reading reflects the candidate's perspectives, although she is a third-world woman herself; in a way, it may also be a means of avoiding the postcolonial perspective, given her own subjective standpoint; the term third-world provides a productive alternative to capitalism and authoritarian communism, focusing on solidarity and links between oppressed people anywhere

Comment made by Prof. Procházka

- the burden of colonial education and Shakespeare as the major tool of colonial hegemony and oppression: the candidate acknowledged that she should make her own position and perspective much clearer

16:24 Prof. Pilný opened the general discussion.

Dr Nováková mentioned the debate around memorials (for instance the Berlin memorial of the Holocaust and the game element involved in it) and asked about the candidate's attitude to this kind of fictionalisation of suffering.

The candidate referred to the reasons listed in the introduction: why she chose to deal with fictional representations. She mentioned Finkelstein and the commodification of Jewish suffering and the Holocaust industry, and the fact that the dangers are forgotten and not memorialised.

Prof. Procházka mentioned the aesthetic ideology in the German tradition, starting with Schiller, which makes the play or the game the model of the future state without significant repression. It also became the basis of Marxist ideology and the world revolution. He mentioned the ideology of emancipation, establishment of meaningful communication, and seeing fiction as interface. He corrected the candidate's response about the time when apocalypse started to be used in the changed meaning, highlighting the fact that the notion of apocalypse was already very powerful during Romanticism, for instance in the works of Lord Byron, and recommended Jacques Khalip's *Last Things* for a nuanced discussion of the eschatological aspects of Romanticism.

The candidate expressed her gratefulness for all the recommendations and ideas. She mentioned Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* and Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and their critique of utopia in the Euclidian, European, and masculinist sense, and stressed the value of the concept for liberation and emancipation.

Vidya Kesavan expressed her gratefulness to all the supervisors.

Prof. Vienne-Guerrin asked the candidate about her future career plans.

The candidate mentioned her interest in finding an academic job, the complicated situation in India, the importance of staying in the country and responding to the political climate, and also the desire to focus on her own creative work.

Prof. Pilný recommended the candidate to incorporate the comments and suggestions from the session and to get the dissertation published.

16:49 The candidate and the guests were asked to leave the session temporarily, to allow for a reserved voting session of the committee.

16:50 Reserved session of the committee (prof. Pilný, prof. Procházka, Dr Loughnane, prof. Vienne-Guerrin, Dr Nováková, Dr Guerry)

Prof. Pilný introduced the two possibilities of voting about the result of the viva: by open ballot (simple acclamation), or by secret ballot.

Prof. Pilný proposed to vote by open ballot. The suggestion was approved unanimously.

Prof. Pilný suggested the result of the viva should be a pass. The suggestion was approved unanimously (6 votes in favour, 0 against).

Prof. Pilný suggests to vote by open ballot about awarding a distinction. The suggestion was approved unanimously.

Prof. Pilný suggested that a distinction should be awarded. The suggestion was approved unanimously (6 votes in favour, 0 against).

The candidate and the guests re-joined the meeting.

17:00 The result of the viva – pass with a distinction, both unanimously agreed upon by the committee – was announced.

Minutes: Petra Johana Poncarová, PhD.

24.9.21

27.9.21