



FACULTY OF ARTS Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Barbora Stará

“Silence into Language and Action”: Political Poetry of Audre Lorde

BA Thesis

Opponent’s Report

Framed with a brief introduction and a conclusion, in three chapters the thesis focuses on selected works of Audre Lorde. These include her essays “Poetry is Not a Luxury” and “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” as well as the poems “Power,” “A Litany for Survival” and “Afterimages.” Barbora Stará analyzes these works with the intention to highlight Lorde’s insistence on the political power of poetry and the transformative power of language. Specifically, Stará argues, Lorde utilized her writing in the intersectional struggle against racism, sexism and homophobia.

The chapter “Contexts” starts by introducing Lorde’s work in the context of the 1960s social activism. Subsequently it moves to a discussion of “political poetry.” The chapter is well researched and clearly argued. In her concluding remarks concerning “political poetry,” Stará argues that “[p]olitical poetry is then a type of poetry in which the poet conveys through the poem his [sic] feelings, thoughts, or views on an event or his [sic] experience that has a higher social significance” (10). This raises many questions, such as, what is not “political poetry” and why? What difference does it make if a poem is called “political” (or “unpolitical”)? And, respecting the definitional framework established by the thesis, can all the poems that Lorde wrote be classified as “political”?

The third chapter, “Audre Lorde’s Essays and the Power of Poetry,” reviews key ideas from Lorde’s aforementioned two essays but the weight of the thesis lies in the fourth chapter, “Audre Lorde’s Poems: The Analysis.” Here the three selected poems are analyzed. The close-reading of “A Litany for Survival,” “Afterimages” and “Power” is informed, eloquent, perceptive and sensitive to the issues the poems raise.

Besides the above questions concerning “political poetry,” the defense could elaborate on two issues. First, there is the question of the difference between poetry and rhetoric. The thesis presents contradictory views. The second chapter argues that “[s]ocial justice and human rights movements are often accompanied by powerful rhetoric” (5) as they aim to persuade but that speeches such as those of Martin Luther King or Malcolm X are marked by poetic qualities as well - just as Lorde’s poetry. “Lorde,” it is claimed, “uses poetry as a way of communication, of *persuasion*, to incite her readers to action in a manner similar to movement leaders and political figures” (5, original emphasis). While at this point, the thesis appears to state that rhetoric and poetry may coexist, when this question is discussed again in the fourth chapter, the two appear irreconcilably different. Following Lorde’s well-known lines from the poem “Power,” Stará proposes that Lorde regards rhetoric as vacuous, unlike poetry, which in her view is



FACULTY OF ARTS Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

crafted from deep within oneself and is the transformation of ideas and emotion into a message or testimony which can further make an impression on the reader. Contrarily, rhetoric can be viewed as a reverse process in which a rhetorical piece/speech is put together to convince others, thus lacking the necessary appeal from intimate experiences and emotions. Therefore, poetry is desirable because the poet speaks from their conviction. (33)

However, did not Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, who are mentioned as authors of powerful speeches, speak from their conviction? Or were their speeches not rhetoric because of their poetic qualities? How, then, is the difference between poetry and rhetoric understood, in the thesis and by Lorde?

The second set of questions concerns Lorde's intersectional approach. The thesis rightly underscores the problems of racism, sexism and homophobia; however, in what essays and poems did Lorde express concern with other forms of oppression, such as towards people with disabilities? Did she address the problem of class?

On the whole, the thesis is accurately presented and carefully edited. I recommend it for defense and propose a preliminary grade of 1.

Prague, 19th January 2023
Pavla Veselá, PhD