

## Opponent's Review

### Kateřina Bonnerová, "The Irish Peasant Novels of Emily Lawless: *Hurrish. A Study & Grania. The Story of an Island*"

Kateřina Bonnerová chose to discuss in her thesis the work of the neglected Anglo-Irish author, the Honourable Emily Lawless (1845-1913). Lawless was a fairly popular novelist in her lifetime – particularly in England – but was forgotten very shortly after her death; her work has received a degree of critical attention only since the 1980s (preceded by an unpublished PhD dissertation written in the early 1970s). This makes the candidate's choice of topic quite unusual in the context of an M.A., and certainly laudable. At the same time, it automatically makes for quite a challenging task.

The candidate has dedicated the opening sections of her dissertation to a bio-bibliographical survey, while also providing plot summaries of the two novels she selected for discussion; this decision is clearly justified by the nature of the topic and material. Bonnerová also provides an outline of the cultural and political context of Lawless's work, outlining the situation of the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the various attitudes of Ascendancy members towards Irish nationalism and the strife for Home Rule, and describing the influence of Ernest Renan's and Matthew Arnold's concepts of the "Celt" on the contemporaneous writing about Ireland. Her account is clear, and generally sufficient for the purpose of the dissertation, although particularly the section which concerns the Literary Revival includes several simplifications and inaccuracies (e.g. on p. 19, the candidate makes an equation between the West of Ireland and "islands;" on p. 18, Yeats and Synge are described as "attempting to reject their Englishness" – it would have taken the most militant of nationalists to apply the term "English" to these authors, which, however, is not to say that their credentials as "Irish" would not have appeared dubious to nationalist radicals of course.)

The main strength of Bonnerová's dissertation lies in her detailed comparative analysis of the novels *Hurrish* and *Grania*. The candidate focuses in turn on the characters of the novels, the depiction of landscape, and the theme of love. What is of particular value is the meticulous manner in which individual characters are juxtaposed with Matthew Arnold's construction of the "Celt" and found to be essentially based on Arnold's notion. Quite in tune with this is the candidate's discussion of the role of "Celtic" landscape in the novels. All in all, the reading of the texts under discussion is quite informative, well-structured and generally plausible in its argument.

Bonnerová concludes by stating that Lawless has created in her novels a vivid picture of the Irish peasantry. Lawless's account of rural Ireland is seen to qualify/reject the image of the

idealised Irish peasant created by the Literary Revival (it would have been perhaps more accurate to speak about ‘forming a counterpart,’ or ‘balancing up,’ as this particular idealisation was being developed more or less simultaneously with Lawless’s work), and is seen as more “realistic.” It is the latter observation that is rather worrisome, while it also appears to contradict the preceding analysis in which the candidate successfully captures both the influence of Celticism and the staunch (anti-Home Rule) politics behind Lawless’s representations. It may also well have been that Lawless “attempt[ed] to convey the present conditions [of rural Ireland] in a fair way” (p.53) – although how is one ever to establish that with certainty – but “fair” very much from her own perspective. An area to explore in connection with this issue would have been the tradition of the “stage Irishman,” or literary caricatures of the Irish generally. Should substantiation be needed for this remark, one need only to look at the character types in *Hurrish*. Not only do they speak a brogue you could cut with the proverbial knife: the central character’s membership of the “stage Irish” class is announced already in his name (a corruption of “Horatius”), while the type of a loquacious, essentially loyal and good-natured servant, though at times impulsive and violent, has numerous parallels in earlier English drama and fiction. Other stock characters in the novel include the fierce Fenian of a mother called Bridget, a violent brute of a drunken neighbour, Hurrish’s angelic niece who is being corrupted by her surroundings and ends up in a convent, and finally the gifted young man of the nationalist persuasion, Maurice, whose emancipatory claims for Ireland are demolished by Lawless as she shows him to be driven by rage, cowardly, and murderous. In this context, it is hard to think of how the term “realistic” could be justified; one is rather reminded of a particular brand of (English, Irish) melodrama.

Despite the above, Kateřina Bonnerová presents a useful interpretation of Lawless’s writing, while the fact that she chose to reclaim a neglected author in her dissertation is in itself valuable. I have no further questions to ask at the defence, excepting perhaps a minor one: has the candidate come in her research across any suggestions as to why Lawless apparently turned in her later career to writing about Ireland chiefly in a romanticised way?

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade it as “very good.”

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