

Oponentský posudek na bakalářskou práci Lucie Stehnové „The Portrayal of Heroines in Jane Austen’s Novels“

The unifying force of all Austen’s novels is the heroine. Jane Austen firmly belongs in a didactic literary tradition, as her heroines either function as exemplars of moral perfection (here definitely building on the model of *Clarissa*, a predecessor of Austen also in capturing domestic life) or they are made perfect after a reform in their judgement. It is in this second character type (the mistaken heroine who reforms) that Austen is following (and also critically reacting to) a tradition long established in the eighteenth century (Mary Davys, Charlotte Lennox, Eliza Haywood, Fanny Burney etc., an almost exclusively female tradition). Both the exemplary and the fallible heroine become the locus of attention for Lucie Stehnová in her BA thesis. Led by the insights of Marilyn Butler and her division of heroines, she proceeds to explain away through attention to the plot and the actions of the respective heroines, the error they are guilty of, how they realize their mistakes and how they reform, or, alternately, what makes them figures of exemplary moral values to be emulated.

The premise on which the thesis is founded is definitely proved, the aims are clearly achieved. The main problem may, however, lie in the relatively limited aims of the thesis. If involved with “the portrayal of heroines” why focus merely on probing how they fit two typological categories? For a proper character analysis it may not be sufficient to take into account what the heroines do but also how they do it. I mean, how the author narrates the heroine’s actions, including also the multi-layered irony in authorial comment. Or, how is change in judgement actually performed?

If we take, for example, the case of *Pride and Prejudice*: How has Elizabeth’s reform actually been described in the narrative? Jane Austen is always interested in what is passing in her heroine’s mind, but it is symptomatic how she presents her thought processes in the crucial scenes. E.g. during Wickham’s conversation with Elizabeth on the topic of his acquaintance with Darcy, Austen’s investigation is limited to a few references to Elizabeth being in thought or reflecting. Whenever Elizabeth is said to be thinking, the thoughts themselves do not appear but the rash speeches that result from them do. Elizabeth is said to be in deep thought, but what the narrative conveys is her lack of true reflection. What I want to stress here is that I agree with Lucie Stehnová that it is indeed lack of rational judgement and thinking, but what I miss in her analysis is how she has actually arrived at such a conclusion, and how Austen enables us to draw such a conclusion. Later, when Elizabeth receives Darcy’s letter, her behaviour is very different. This time her thoughts lead her to fresh attention to the evidence. As quoting relevant passages would show, from now on Elizabeth reflects more often, and we really are more often inside her mind as it goes through its task of reassessment. From then on also, she reflects on her father’s behaviour, her family etc. Elizabeth moves, to a degree, from witty speech to serious thought (of course, without losing her playfulness, her major attraction for Darcy and for the reader). Inspiring comments were made by Butler concerning the role of dialogue in the first and second volumes of *Northanger Abbey*. Therefore, it is a pity the thesis was influenced only by Butler’s typology but not her method of analysis. Consequently, the thesis mostly reads like a critical retelling, a summarizing of events. And also, related the comment above, I miss a greater degree of critical reflection of Lucie Stehnová’s sources. How has the author of the thesis critically reflected Butler’s division? What are Butler’s grounds of argument? Has she added anything? Can she see any problems in this division? Can she think of some alternatives? I hope my following comments and questions may shed light on the dangers and limitations of one categorization only.

Further issues:

1. *Sense and Sensibility* indeed prove a rather peculiar case. Marianne fits and does not fit the fallible heroine category. Indeed, Marianne's reform is of a different kind. So far, I agree. But why is that the case? Should we not take into account, e.g. this heroine's different position in her novel? It may easily be argued that *Sense and Sensibility* has two heroines, and I am surprised by the omission of Elinor Dashwood from any discussion (she gets only a brief mention and definitely deserves more, either as exemplary heroine or as a counterpart influencing Marianne).

2. Also, the novel represents two principles. Marianne's mistakes are a comment on a whole philosophy of life (sense versus sensibility). In what way is Marianne a representation (type) of the concept associated with her in the title and her "reform" an overt criticism of its dangers?

3. *Mansfield Park*, though ostensibly having no heroine in need of reform, is also a comment on the literary tradition of the fallible and reformed heroine (and in fact, all the mentors – Darcy, Knightley and Tilney – present different twists on the archetype). In fact, it is here that the convention is given a thorough dissection. The relationship between hero and heroine begins in the tradition of mentor and pupil. Edmund Bertram begins to take the part traditionally played by lover mentor from other novels (he recommends book, encourages taste, corrects her judgement). Austen's irony is directed against this mentor who so little understands the value of the mind he has helped to form that he falls for its opposite in Mary Crawford. With amusement we see the tables turned on the mentor. Edmund now needs Fanny's advice (about the play) and with a fine irony Austen makes him both recognize the fact and refuse to follow it to its logical conclusion. Austen, however, does not simply reverse the usual tradition, substituting the female lover for the male. In *MP* she attacks the whole idea of either good man or good woman reforming the opposite sex through love and guidance. Edmund's attempt to reform Mary provides plenty of evidence against the practice. He sees her faults but spends his time making excuses for them. Instead of influencing he deceives himself. Fanny does better (not because she makes a better mentor, but because she refuses to be one: Edmunds says: "Your judgement is my rule of right", but she refuses this role: "Oh no! - Do not say so. We have all a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person could be". Part of the function of this exemplary heroine is actually to refuse to be an example. The lesson that she teaches Edmund is a similar one to the lesson taken by Elizabeth etc. Not example, but conscience, inner moral life can only reform. (This is why self-awareness and rational judgement are important.) This is why the categorization into two distinct types (although it is admitted they are difficult to distinguished but this problem is never tackled) of heroine and consequently of type of novel can be oversimplifying and blind the foreclose possibilities of analysis.

3. All Austen's heroines are in some way deliberate revisions. Jane Austen disdained the heroine of romance: "Pictures of perfection as you know make me sick and wicked", she wrote once to her niece. Her exemplary heroines then may not be just boringly perfect, but they are also always part of some ironic twist. Indeed, the chapter on exemplary heroines is "patched on" as a kind of afterthought, not quite dealt with adequately. (And as I have tried to show, "exemplary" heroines may not unrelated to narratives of the other type.)

4. In Catherine Morland, I think, we get a case of not only reading reality as if it were a Gothic romance, but also - that she must understand that reality can be bad too. It is not a case of two mistakes, but both (wrongly evaluating the Thorpes and her suspecting General Tilney) are actually resulting from the same error. Moreover, as events show she was not so far out as might at first appear. It turns out she is not wrong in suspecting that the General is no good. He is an evil man. Although Marilyn Butler may argue that an act of rudeness is not an act of villainy, he is arrogant, snobbish, even his children are afraid of him. And even contemporary readers found his ungentlemanly behaviour incredible.

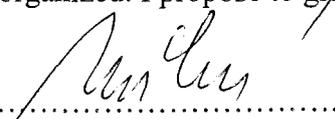
5. More importantly, in Catherine, Austen is ironically playing with the whole concept of heroine. The book is a comment on novel-writing, not only novel-reading. *NA* is full of literary allusions, not only to the Gothic, but the novel of sentiment and the overtly moral narrative. Satire on the clichés of the novel is also in her mocking preoccupation with the way she tells her story. *NA*, including its heroine, is a literary satire, but its events and passions are not exaggerated but scrupulously contrasted with literary example and expectation. A double awareness is created in the novel, of the novel she is writing and the one she is not writing. Playful or ironic, the authorial comments are almost always part of the comparison of real and conventional heroines. Therefore, I must again, feel sorry that none of this has found its way into the thesis.

6. Since the title of the thesis indeed is “the portrayal of heroines”, what could have been also taken into account as part of the process of characterization, is the role of other characters, i.e. not only lovers, but parents, siblings, the domestic setting (as relevant to respective texts). So, for example, except for *Emma*, all Austen’s novels are about girls who are in some sense homeless and in the end find homes. (And interesting exceptions give subtle resonance here, e.g. Anne Elliot by marrying a sailor actually remains unsettled, permanently sentenced to insecurity and waiting.) Whatever the type, fallible or exemplary, the heroine’s story is thus about defining and being defined by space (as again Richardson’s novels so forcefully made clear), about finding a space of one’s own. Austen’s novels are not simply about marriage because that was a social necessity but as the narratives make clear attaining the external correlative (husband, social position, house) makes inner potential the heroine real and possible for the heroine (for example, the merging of *Hartfield* and *Donwell* as the joining of emotion and effective action could possibly be read in this way, or the acquisition of Pemberley as a harmoniously and effectively organized estate, or Mansfield Park parsonage as the true spirit etc.). Family ties are important and so are relationships with other characters, e.g. importantly sisters in the make-up of the heroines, or the doubling contrasted heroine in *Sense and Sensibility*, or Emma’s alternative Jane Fairfax (exemplary heroine to her fallible one??). Twinning the love story has a structural resonance but is also important in the portrayal of heroines, may be part of her process of maturation - it mocks the idealization of singularity in the romance (e.g. even second attachments are possible, learns Marianne, both the heroes have loved other women before) And like Elinor and Marianne, Jane and Catherine define themselves by studying each other, comparing and contrasting. Conversation sharpens characters, by sharpening the awareness, of both.

To conclude, the process of the heroine’s reform is not only the revelation of one’s errors but also shame, social humiliation and embarrassment, awareness of the inappropriateness of one’s conduct. “Humbly submitting to objective reality” also literally means, cease to be a heroine. Wedding bells end the literary life of the heroine, exemplary or fallible.

Lucie Stehnová has written a thesis that has proved to be highly inspirational, even if rather by its omissions than arguments presented. Despite all my critical comment above, I do recommend it for defence as a thesis fulfilling all the requirements for academic work on the BA level and displaying a good standard of erudition. It is well written with some minor errors in language (especially articles), logically structured and organized. I propose to grade this thesis as very good (**velmi dobře**).

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