

Posudek na bakalářskou práci Elišky Horákové “The Influence of Polite Manners on Communication in and Structure of Jane Austen’s Novels”

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Jane Austen’s novels have received major critical attention in the recent decades, and even in the Czech academic environment there has been possibly a surplus of theses devoted to her texts. Nevertheless, this thesis manages to come up with a valuable and original approach to the novels in question. A particular combination of structural analysis based on dramatic conflict mixed with a historicist approach to social conventions of “politeness” can only be intriguing. At the same time, it presents numerous obstacles. As testified to already from the title page of the BA dissertation: The extension of “polite manners” into “společenské konvence” (i.e. social conventions) in the translation of the title on the front page is rather startling. What considerations forced such a choice?

I must admit a certain prejudice overcame me when I realized that Jane Austen was going to be analysed in terms of tables and a “Dramatica” structure that was gleaned from the internet. Nevertheless, Eliška Horáková’s approach and careful handling of the acquired concepts show the caution with which she applied them to her texts, letting the novels speak for themselves before imposing any pattern on them. The thesis tackles well the difficulty of combining an essentially timeless formalist approach with historicism and its social constructions of polite behaviour, conventions and the constructions of gender propriety. The most enjoyable sections are indeed those that are related to detailed analyses of dialogues between Elizabeth and Wickham, Harriet and Emma, etc.

Despite this enthusiasm, I have a few reservations and comments:

The thirds section is supposed to explore the underlying themes exposed by the Dramatica theory - where is the theme of old and new money (as presented on page 14)?

It may be rather startling that the word irony does not appear in the thesis. The text discloses no awareness of the fact that focusing on dialogue (as a ritualized form of communication) rather than narrative voice may limit interpretation of “manners”. Narrative voice also packs every sentence with competing meanings and implications. Not only dialogue, but also the narrator conveys characters’ feelings, although, it may be argued, texts are dominated by what characters think to themselves and how they reason their decisions.

Jane Austen’s novels all consist of a series of social events: visits, dinners, walks, balls etc. Ritual and indeed convention does create the central events of the plot. Plots provide social gatherings when the behaviour of each character can be observed and interpreted: moreover, there follows a discussion of the social event between two or more people, which enables different interpretations to be expressed. Thus, the “truth” about a character is constantly speculated about, analysed by others and we are encouraged to sift all these.

The use of Dramatica theory seems useful but Eliška concentrates only on character. Structure, nevertheless, can be conceived of more broadly. Structure actually usually means the arrangement and interrelation of all the elements in a book. It would be useful to come to terms with the fundamentals of the Dramatica theory. What does structure mean for this theory? What is the meaning of situation in relation to social event, what is activity in relation to behaviour, politeness and convention?

This is a thesis that is inspiring, full of exciting and insightful interpretations, although sometimes in need of a more critical and nuanced approach to its fundamental starting points. Written in nearly flawless idiomatic English, well-structured and reasonably argued, the BA dissertation meets all the requirements and, therefore, I recommend it for defence with the preliminary mark of excellent to very good (**v ý b o r n ě a ž v e l m i d o b ř e**).

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