

Opponent's review

Courtship and marriage is a very prominent issue of the 18th and 19th centuries both in terms of societal values and their literary representation. The two concepts appear frequently as a theme in the novels of the period, especially those written by women. This fact more than justifies the topic L. Vomáčková decided to examine in her thesis, in which she tends to combine sociological and literary aspects. The number of secondary sources she uses, both of the period and recent, proves that the significance of this issue has not diminished.

It is apparent at first sight that the thesis is very neatly structured, discussing economic and social conditions of marriageable women in English society first and then attempting to assess the way these conditions are reflected in four novels covering the period of eighty years. Here comes the first problem, nevertheless: it is obvious that the first two novels represent a social and cultural context (the late 18th century – *Pride and Prejudice*, though published in 1813, was conceived and written in its first version in the mid-1790s) considerably remote from the mid-Victorian period of the other two novels. Is not this gap too wide?

Another, more specific, problem can be tracked down in the way the student allows herself to work within the delineated fields of study. What I mean is the fact that the clear definition of the three perspectives with which she suggests to deal with the topic of courtship, well-chosen as they seem to be, eventually results in methodological rigidity. This is most obvious in the student's treatment of "courtship as knowledge", where she sticks to the figure of mentor-lover whether it is relevant for the topic or not. In Austen's novels, this figure is much more important in *Emma* or *Northanger Abbey* while in *Pride and Prejudice* courtship as knowledge, i.e. as a process of recognition of the real state of things, is represented by other means, in particular by Eliza's interpretations of different forms of communication (verbal – Darcy's letter; non-verbal – Darcy's portrait; etc.). The role of Mr. Collins as mentor is much more that of means of satirical disparagement of formal demands on courtship, as Eliza's teasing of Darcy (quoted on p. 43) is. This is also why "courtship as convention" should be given more attention.

There are indeed other problematic points in L. Vomáčková's reading of the text, of partial character more or less. The comment with which she concludes the *Jane Eyre* part on p. 27 is one of them. Here she states: "[Moore House] is the place where Jane can nourish both her spirit and her body. Her relatives, Diana and Mary, are the companions she always wished for, and in their company, she undergoes the lesson of self-awareness and gains more confidence eventually accepting her duality." But this phase is not the climax of the novel, it is not the phase of Jane's completion – this comes later with her return to Rochester. This means that Jane longs to nourish more than spirit and body. What is it? (I don't think the concluding lines on p. 56 provide an adequate answer either even though they seem to contradict the position held on p. 27.)

Concerning *The Mill on the Floss* and its representation of the two concepts, I doubt this is a good choice of text – Eliot's *Middlemarch* would provide a better opportunity to discuss the topic. It is clear that *The Mill* signals a departure from the courtship-marriage romance model, but in a more intellectually demanding way than e.g. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (of the previous titles) or Meredith's *Diana of the Crossway* and Thomas Hardy's novels (of the following

production). E.g. Maggie and Tom's death in the river can indeed be read symbolically as a form of marriage of two souls which could do so only when liberated from concrete conditions of social as well as biological existence (Darwinism is one of the theories that are clearly reflected in the novel). Which of course bears upon a more general question: to what extent can the theme of courtship and marriage be read as symbolical representation of more general and perhaps profound issues (especially in later novels) and what are the limits of realism in perusing this theme? I ask this question because the tendency to reproduce rather than "read" the texts sometimes occurs with somewhat disquieting intensity.

My last objection, though a minor one, concerns language. Errors are not frequent and they are not grave but they do occur. Especially the awkward-sounding phrase "similarly to", persistently and frequently used in the text, should, in my opinion, be replaced by "like", and "resemble" should be used instead of "remind" in some cases.

To sum up: L. Vomáčková provided a detailed analysis of the four texts and proved to be able to notice and comment upon important details which helped her to distinguish between the different treatments of the topic in the selected novels. Her tendency, however, is to see the texts mostly as documents of the period's situation and to neglect conventions of representation and changing demands on novel writing. This is, unfortunately, a limiting factor of her method.

I **recommend** her thesis for defence and suggest the preliminary mark to be **two**.

PhDr. Zdeněk Beran

22 May, 2012