

Posudek vedoucí na diplomovou práci LENKY VOMÁČKOVÉ

“Representing Courtship and Marriage in the English Novel 1780-1860”

Eighteenth-century England witnessed two remarkable and interconnected literary events: the emergence of the novel and the establishment of the professional woman writer. The submitted dissertation selects several late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels by women, which feature a female protagonist and focus on what was then deemed the most appropriate feminine sphere – that of woman’s place in the domestic realm - and on her transition from one family to another through love and marriage. These well-chosen texts indeed document the centrality of the courtship and marriage plot to women’s writing of the time. Lenka Vomáčková traces this literary convention over the period of eighty years through its subtle but crucial transformations, firmly locating her analysis in the broad socio-cultural context: the conduct book gender construction, texts on education, women’s “nature”, social role and position, even the situation of women “out of the marriage market” (old maids and elderly widows) is commented upon.

The gist of the dissertation lies in the subtle critical close reading of the selected four novels (*Evelina*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Mill on the Floss*), which all depend on the marriage plot. Such classic heroine-centered novels comment on how conventions determine images of women in (and out of) literature. Simultaneously, these novels mark the transition from arranged marriages to the nuclear family based on mutual affection, and thus, as the dissertation proves, love within marriage was to be the *idée fixe* of the novel as the definitive genre of the new age. Marriage was consequently conceived as women’s proper and “natural” destiny; their character, education and behavior were discussed almost exclusively in relation to it. This can indeed be construed as having reduced women’s sphere into a domestically circumscribed space and as bringing about the mentioned centrality of the marriage plot. The thesis is valid and social convention indeed does colour and shape women’s image. Yet, the dependence of the women’s novel on this type of plot cannot and maybe also should not be explained away only as a matter of extra-textual circumstances. Possibly, also certain conventions related to the literary genre itself and to literary forms of representation accompanying the novel’s transformations somehow required this connection. For example, could the novel be considered a continuation of the romance genre? The female protagonist as taking the place of a “quester”? (Note: In the dissertation the heroines are frequently described as being on a quest for husbands.) Or, the traditional women’s novel representing the protagonist as the ideal of an integral self seeking an achieved, finished identity, realized in conclusive union with another – or her – self? Marriage (or, for that matter, death, as in *Clarissa*) at the end of the narrative signifying this union. Or, in Brownstein’s words “to choose another so as to choose a self” (as quoted in the dissertation on page 61). The paramountcy of the plot in relation to the genre could have been developed more.

The submitted dissertation provides fresh and nuanced readings of the primary texts. As the author charts the development of the marriage plot she uncovers themes and echoes

that link all the novels together, and also connect them to women's lives and perceptions. This is a critically acute analysis which fulfills all the requirements for an MA dissertation in structure, form, style and language (although, for all the care that was definitely taken in the preparation, final proof-readings did miss some minor errors, such as the constant use of flatters instead of flatterers, misspelled Pemberly etc.)

I fully recommend the dissertation for defence with the preliminary mark of excellent (výborně).

V Praze dne 21. 5. 2012

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vedoucí práce
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