Judgement of the opponent M.A. thesis Milena Vostalová:


Supervisor: Mgr. Štěpan Zbytovsky, Ph.D.

The M.A. thesis of Milena Vostalová fullfills all requirements. The scope of the investigation of more than 166 pages (including Bibliography and Tabel of illustrations) is far more than enough and there is no necessary item lacking in this M.A. thesis.

I have no objections as to the form. The writer masters the bibliographical system; a well-ordered arrangement, references and quotations are found to be correct. I only criticise the organisation of the bibliography, which should be in chronological or alphabetical order. The thesis contains almost all the necessary chapters like Introduction, ‘Schlussbemerkungen’, Summary in German, English and Czech, Bibliography and Table of illustrations, and Key Words.

When I switch from form to content, a few questions occur regarding the Introduction of the thesis. Here a number of preliminary questions are raised like: who was influenced by who; how the authors had impact on fellow-female-authors; what message the novel spread; if the authors identified with the heroine, or remained distant; what the reason was for the enormous success of the novel. These questions refer to various literary disciplines: comparative studies of mutual influences; study of influence on the public and influence on fellow-writers; study of the content of the novel; study of the reception of the novel and explanation of the success of the novel. In the conclusion one has to check all the questions. Milena did so, but in my opinion some of the questions are answered by using circumstantial evidence. ‘Influence’ for instance is a tricky term: using the same principles is not the same as following examples, nor is having success a sign of influence. I should like to invite Milena to tackle the above mentioned questions again in the oral exam, making a distinction between proof and circumstantial evidence.

The chapters on historical and philosophical backgrounds of the period and the history of the genre of the epistolary novel in relation to educational theories, demonstrate a fundamental, thoroughly historical approach. The argumentation is convincing, and shows Milena’s broad knowledge of the subject. One preliminary question comes up about the methodological background of this scholarly method: can you illustrate the theoretical background of it in -for example- the theory of semiology (Felix Vodičká or any other scholar)?

The core chapters on the comparison of Sophie von La Roche’s Geschichte des Frauleins von Sternheim with Betje Wolff’s and Aagje Deken’s Historie van mejuffrouw Sara Burgerhart show Milena’s analytical capacity, her good understanding of the writers intentions and her subtlety in interpretation. I do completely agree with her vision on the distinctions of the two novels in the field of sentimentality and the different social environment. Joost Kloek has put it sharply: in the preface of Sara Burgerhart the authors claim the girls’ education as a task for women. I should also emphasize that the authors want to demonstrate a thoroughly empirical study of Sara’s character: a topic of Enlightenment.
On the subject of ‘huiselijkheid’ (Hauslichkeit) I would like to cross words with my honoured colleague Maria Leuker, who considered in 1993 ‘huiselijkheid’ as a female virtue. As I demonstrated in my dissertation in 1997 ‘huiselijkheid’ is one of the four characteristics of the Dutch ‘volkskarakter’ (national character), equally for man and women. I do agree with Milena, that it is significant, that the novel does not end with a marriage, but with the demonstration of ‘huiselijk geluk’(domestic happiness).

Some of the publications are hard to find in Prague. For the sake of the completeness I add two articles:


Although the writer had to cope with the absence of a few specific scources of information, she managed to develop a very convincing judgement on the subject of the investigation. After all I can only conclude, that Milena Vostalová has written an first-rate M.A.thesis, in which she proved to be an excellent researcher on the difficult field of historical textual analysis.

Classification: excellent (1)

Prague, June 5th 2014

Doc. Ellen Krol, Ph.D.