



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

OPPONENT'S REPORT

Kristýna Čabartová, *The Evolution of the Hero and the Villain* (B.A. Thesis)

The theme of this study is very broad and ambitious, and the student is to be complimented for so bravely taking on this subject. However therein lies its greatest weakness: it would be too much for a Ph.D. thesis, let alone a B.A. one. The discussion of heroes and villains in chosen works of post-WWII fantasy with reference to inspirational sources the authors used (such as OE literature in the case of Tolkien) would be a plausible scheme, as it is, the use of highly disparate material spanning the whole history of English literature can be hardly justified (and is not sufficiently explained in the text).

Especially problematic is the use of terminology. Two different concepts of “fantasy” are used in the work, moreover with no reference to any theory apart from dictionary definitions. (This is the problem also with other terms applied in the thesis, such as “nihilism”.) The first of them, curiously used only until the year of 1945, “a genre of imaginative fiction involving magic” is too broad to acquire any analytical force, whereas the other concepts, “cross-over fantasy” and “high fantasy” are not defined at all except for the remark that they “operate on an adult level of meaning” (9). The latter statement is especially puzzling in the light of the fact that much discussion is devoted, in the second half of the thesis, to well-known examples of children’s literature, such as the first books of the *Harry Potter* series.

Also the choice of the individual texts can be hardly related to any pre-meditated scheme and gives a haphazard impression. While *Beowulf* is representative of OE literature, the choice of *Havelok the Dane* as a prototypical example of “fantasy-related” Middle-English romance is strange as it is a rather unusual text and moreover contains only a minimum of supernatural elements. I cannot think of any reason for its inclusion apart from its appearance on the syllabus of last semester’s medieval seminar. The bold leap from *Havelok* to *Dracula* is explained even less, while no attempt is made to delineate and structure the field of modern fantasy and to explain, for example, why J.K. Rowling was included whereas Terry Pratchett was not.

Moreover, there is a lack of any in-depth engagement with the texts. For example, the hero/villain dichotomy in *Beowulf* is not so black and white as described in the thesis: Grendel’s motivation is given sufficient space in the epic and there are even passages where both the hero and the villain are referred to by the same epithets. The view of *Dracula* as a partially positive character is not really explained (what are, for example, his good acts mentioned on page 44?) and in the character of Mina, Stoker’s novel already betrays the influence of incipient feminism a long time before the candidate allows for its appearance in fantasy. Arwen is not “slightly more active” (29) in *The Lord of the Rings* than Galadriel (as opposed to the film), to exemplify moral relativism and the decline of religion (albeit “partly” (28)) on the deeply Catholic Tolkien is difficult to substantiate. Even to see *Harry Potter* as morally relativist simply because the villains’ motivations are explained is misguided as the series puts great emphasis on the importance of moral choices people make – these, rather than backgrounds and motivations, truly constitute the hero/villain status.

The questionnaire at the end of the thesis is an original and potentially enriching idea, but again, method is lacking. The sample of respondents is haphazard and no attempt is made to



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explain what motivated the inclusion of these particular people, nor what exactly is the difference between the questionnaire and the focus group (34). Moreover, the results are given only fragmentarily, and no comprehensive overview is provided for the reader. Yet, the results of a survey that included eighty-one people are boldly presented as “conclusive” (39) and generalizable to include “all readers of fantasy” (40), regardless of their geographical location.

The standard of English is rather poor and the thesis is riddled with mistakes in grammar, spelling and punctuation, with the language sometimes bordering on the unintelligible. A few examples: “The peripheral are the character prototypes” (13), “The active are all the character that we meet and whose behavior in some way corresponds to figure I” (15), “fantasy allows in realism becomes ‘the most philosophical form of fiction’” (21), “aliened” instead of “alienated” (24), “Frodos” instead of “Frodo’s” (28), “mayor younger female characters” instead of “major” (30), or “the realization of religion ... on the nature of heroes and villains” (34). A good example of careless style can be found on page 29: “In *The Lord of the Rings* Galadriel functions an unseen character she is wise, but she is also a beautiful object of admiration perceived almost as a goddess much like women in chivalric romances, she also function as an ‘ideal mother’ both for her people and to Frodo.” The biggest factual blunder may be found in the following sentence, relegating OE literature to the antiquity: “After the fairly consistent trends present in the portrayal of a hero and a villain in Old English literature we continue into the Middle Ages.” (19)

Last, but not least: while the bibliography largely conforms to the rules, the footnote references give merely the author, title and page; in the case of a collection of essays (30), the particular authors and essays are not stated.

While featuring a number of potentially interesting ideas, the thesis clearly needs substantial revision. Therefore it **cannot be recommended** for defence at this stage.

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1 September 2014