

Supervisor's report on the MA thesis of **Martina Hrbková**
Gender Consciousness and Representation in Virginia Woolf's Writing in Light of Contemporary Feminism and Gender Theory

In the deluge of feminist scholarship on Virginia Woolf, this thesis surprises by the negotiation of the relationship between the theoretically advanced late feminism, namely Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine* and a foundational approach to gender studies represented by the work of Judith Butler. Although Cixous's theory seems to prevail in the first chapter, the author is far from imposing it on Woolf's work. On the other hand, she avoids labelling Woolf's feminism as a kind of "proto"-*écriture féminine* and aims at "a nuanced discussion" (1), contrasting Woolf's writings not only with the French theory but also with other trends, namely "intersectional feminism" and the constructionist interpretation of gender and sex. The reading of selected fictional works by Woolf, namely, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves* and *Orlando*, greatly benefits from the author's dynamic approach to the above mentioned methodologies. The thesis demonstrates that the scope of Woolf's writings is wider than feminist and that her representations of ambiguous of shifting gender identities anticipate the performative approach to gender and sex, theoretically formulated only in the 1990s by Butler.

The first chapter is remarkable for its subtle negotiation between the feminisms of Woolf and Cixous. The author uses Cixous to reveal potentialities of Woolf's notion of "woman's sentence" and to develop a persuasive reading of *Mrs Dalloway* based of the relationship of the style and the heroine's body and the subversive power of her writing oriented against phallogocentrism and phallogocentrism as well as against masculine rationality. Conversely, Woolf's representations of women's internal life (especially in *To the Lighthouse*) and their social interactions are used to point out the deficiencies of Cixous's theory. Such a balanced argument is very rare in graduate theses and is often missing even in academic publications.

Another notable feature of the thesis is its critical examination of Woolf's feminism, catching up with the ongoing debate about her racist and class prejudices and using the conclusions of intersectional feminism. Yet again, as in the previous chapter, the author works competently with different viewpoints expressed in Woolf's oeuvre, showing her as a critic of the Empire and traditional roles of women as supporters of its patriarchal order. A particularly successful section of the chapter is the reading of *The Waves* (often interpreted as symbolic modernist text about time), as an elegiac and simultaneously ironic text about the disintegration of the Empire.

The most innovative and persuasive reading of Woolf is developed in the third chapter which uses Judith Butler's performative theory of gender and sex to interpret Woolf's often slighted novel *Orlando*. Butler's theory is successfully used throughout the thesis (to rectify the conclusions of Cixous's and intersectional feminism) and plays a crucial role in explaining the "truth" of Orlando's shifting gender identities. This "truth" consists in the constructed nature of gender and sex based on heteronormativity. In the novel, the regulative, heteronormative ideal is represented in a humorous way by the three "Ladies", who resemble figures of medieval moralities: "Purity", "Chastity" and "Modesty". Whereas these "Ladies" are deeply shocked by Orlando's transformation, the allegorical character of "Truth" endorses (by her statement "We have no choice left but confess – he was a woman") the constructed and citational nature of the norms of sex. The productive use of Butler's theory in the author's interpretation of *Orlando* demonstrates the dynamic of Woolf's feminism, which was able to anticipate performative notions of gender and sex. This interpretation of the novel is fresh and inventive but would benefit from more confrontations with recent scholarship, where the gender performativity in *Orlando* has become quite a frequent topic.

The thesis considerably exceeds the standards of MA theses at our department. I recommend it for the defence and propose to grade it "výborně/excellent".

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