

Posudek oponenta na bakalářskou práci Jamie Rose “Sapphism and Gender in Virginia Woolf and Radclyffe Hall“

Fully in accord with the statement made by Michael Warner in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (1993) that “queer struggles aim not just at toleration or equal status but at challenging institutions and accounts” (page xiii), the submitted thesis provides an innovative critical look at two early twentieth-century writers while building upon and severely challenging some of the established ideas recent work on them has brought up. Taking as its focus texts that provoke questions about gender and stand in firm opposition to the mainstream, both in terms of Woolf’s modernism (in topic and form) and Radclyffe Hall’s controversial theme, Jamie Rose’s thesis applies untraditional readings informed by intersectional feminism, queer theory and especially transgender criticism. Accusing especially radical lesbian feminists of conscious suppression and appropriation of other forms of identity, the thesis then boldly claims that for various reasons both Woolf’s novels and Hall should not be read as examples of lesbian literature: first, Mrs Dalloway is not to be understood as a closet lesbian at all but rather a bisexual person; second, Stephen Gordon, a sort of alter ego for Radclyffe Hall, is not a butch lesbian but a person on the trans masculine spectrum.

While applying transgender readings to literature is quite sound and justified, it is a shame that the thesis has missed the opportunity to produce a well-reasoned and fully substantiated case. First and foremost, the reader is oftentimes left perplexed by the vast amount of contemporary gender jargon, which is just simply taken for granted and not explained away at all. The result is confusion in the process of argumentation itself. True enough, the reader ought to be acquainted with the basic terms (the current meaning of queer, cisgender, or the difference between transgender and transsexual etc.), that is not my point. That is, rather, that the thesis should reflect the fact that terms have a history, are and have been used differently in different contexts and for different purposes. They have undergone tremendous semantic transformations and therefore become proof of the ways language comes to constitute reality. Also, the author’s preference for certain terminology is not fully explained. What exactly is “transfeminism”? How is the term “intersectional feminism” applied in the text? And, despite the fact that “queer” typically designates an indeterminate and open signifier with the ability to escape definition, the reader would like to know how Jamie Rose understands the term. Is it an umbrella term over and above transgender? Moreover, some critics would object to the simple equation of queer with bisexual, which seems to be happening in the analysis of Clarissa Dalloway, where the text keeps slipping from one identification to another. For example, Judith Butler would claim that bisexuality itself implies an erasure of other sexual identities (there are simply two sexes and the person plays with both).

The thesis, brimming with slangy colloquialism (e.g. page 28: “Orlando ... does [a] ... a great job of exploring gender”) and slipping into a sort of activist tone (see page 31, “I refuse to

repeat that slur any further”), is built on speculation and the subjective “I” of the author . I appreciate and value the heart-felt personal investment, the anger and sorrow at the loss and repression of a whole literary tradition, as mentioned in the conclusion. But the transgender politics agenda, which seems to dominate the thesis, could have been conveyed in a more appropriate language and displayed sensitivity to the texts presented. Although the need to speculate is often admitted by the author, the main problem of the thesis is that ultimately nothing can genuinely be proved. Consequently, the best passages are those where the text itself is analysed, albeit these are not very frequent and also tend to result in an indictment of current legal and social practices (see e.g. page 28). Also, some formal problems arise: asides from the main body of the text belong also to the footnotes (page 23) and on page 34, the set of references in the quotation and footnote 64 is unclear. The Czech abstract mixes *Paní Dallowayová* and *Paní Dalloway*. The constant “lead” instead of “led” is irritating.

The chapter on Orlando quite logically presents the book as a work challenging gender essentialism, aware of the sex/gender difference. The interplays between the socio-cultural construction of gender and the physical sex of the body and its appearance are pointed out but this is by now not a new thing to say about the novel at all. The passage on pronouns and the brief use of “they” in the novel is interesting. The resulting use of e.g. “themselves” in the body of the thesis text is a challenge but this perhaps goes beyond the scope of this report and the subsequent defence as this is/ought to be part of larger social debate. However, I was confused by the statement on page 34: “This criticism appears to stem primarily from the second-wave failure of recognising gender roles and gendered actions not as innate, but as ... socially constructed.” If second-wave means Anglo-American feminism which started in the 1960s and spread during the 70s and 80s (i.e. would encompass the likes of Marilyn R. Farwell, as quoted in the text, and Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, Germaine Greer, Dale Spender; but also French feminism, but that would be a different case), then that very much relied on the idea of gender as socially and culturally constructed.

I understand “intersectional feminism” as that strand which brings to focus the interplay between race, class and gender. An attempt to note the class complexities of *Mrs Dalloway* and *Orlando* is indeed quite correctly made. However, perhaps the refusal to deal with the “gypsies” in their section resulted in not realising the episode’s importance in showing the ways Woolf deals with the pleasures of class privilege, satirising that pleasure as well as celebrating it. The “gypsies” react to Orlando’s proud descriptions of the house and lineage with a kind of polite embarrassment.

While Woolf is more ambiguous about pronouns, Radclyffe Hall firmly assigns a “she” to Stephen. Could that problematize a sense of “trans masc” identification, since she seems to have seen Stephen firmly as a “woman”, at least linguistically gendered. I was wondering too that the idea of mimicry (as coined by Irigaray and also Joan Riviere and Judith Butler, who actually is in the bibliography, but not much alluded to) and the act of parody could be at play in this last, controversial, yet actually most traditional, novel. Also, Judith Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity*

(1998) has a whole chapter devoted to what she introduces as “the butch/FTM border wars”. The absence of theory is to be noted.

Although I have expressed quite a few reservations, I ultimately find the thesis compatible with the level of our other BA works and therefore recommend it for defence. The preliminary grade is

V Praze dne 4.9.2017

.....

PhDr. Soňa Nováková, CSc.