

OPPONENT'S REPORT

MA THESIS

Elusive Feminism: Gender Consciousness in the Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop Bc. Šárka Tůmová

Following a brief gender-focused introduction to the mid-twentieth-century U.S. cultural scene in general and the poetic stage in particular, the thesis focuses on Bishop's relationship to what Bc. Tůmová repeatedly calls "the feminist doctrine" (pp. 8, 9, etc.). First, she discusses Bishop's writing in her "literary milieu," among other things comparing Bishop with Marianne Moore and May Swenson as well as contrasting her with Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Subsequently, in the most substantial chapter of the thesis, Bc. Tůmová analyzes portions of Bishop's poetry with the objective of illustrating how it subverts gender stereotypes. On the whole, the text is well-written and supported with good secondary sources. There are, however, two major sets of problems that I would like the defense to address:

The first derives from Bc. Tůmová's misrepresentation of feminism. Already the term "feminist doctrine" implies a unified set of dogmas, which feminism has never been—a socialist or Marxist feminist whose critique is aimed at all forms of exploitation stands miles apart from a liberal or conservative feminist who is content with increasing women's participation in the existing system. The only difference established in the thesis is "French feminism" vs. "North American" feminism. Resting on that binary, Bc. Tůmová then argues that "while most of Bishop's female contemporaries who pronounced themselves feminist writers embraced the path of difference, taking arms against a sea of troubles—to follow in a corresponding Shakespearean fashion—and advocating a distinctly feminine way of writing, Bishop chose a path of an unusual egalitarianism" (7); further in the thesis she identifies feminism with gender separatism. This is wrong—and not merely because it disregards the various streams of feminism mentioned above but also historically. Moreover, speaking of feminism, the interpretation of Marianne Moore as an "advocate of French feminism" (28) is rather puzzling. Could Bc. Tůmová discuss these problems? How does she understand French feminism? Does she see any limits of the type of feminism she identifies with Bishop?

The second set of problems I see in the thesis, quite predictably, concerns its underlying assumption that art may be apolitical; on reading that "Bishop strongly disapproved of any form of agenda in poetry, which in her case predominantly involved the feminist agenda" (67) I want to ask Bc. Tůmová what in her view is poetry without any "agenda"? Also, the idea that feminism is somehow "reflected" (8, 12) in poetry or that one can discuss "the influence of feminist ideas [...] on poetry" (13) suggests that poetry is not generative of feminism but merely receptive of it.

However, to conclude with a more positive comment, the chapter that focuses specifically on Bishop's poetry and gender stereotypes (and in some cases their subversion) is quite interesting.

Proposed grade: Velmi dobře (2) or dobře (3).

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