

Supervisor's report on M.A. thesis by Šárka Tůmová

“ELUSIVE FEMINISM: GENDER CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE POETRY OF ELIZABETH BISHOP”

In her thesis, Šárka Tůmová explores the way American poet Elizabeth Bishop dealt with, expressed and explored themes of feminism in her work. Bishop's feminism was unconventional mostly because of its strong sense of egalitarianism, as well as her sense that feminism should not limit the interpretation of her poems. This thesis insightfully highlights the way that Bishop avoided a particularly feminist strategy in her work and shows how Bishop's attitudes toward feminism influenced the way she wanted her poetry to be read. The thesis utilizes two points of view: Bishop's general interactions with feminist ideas, and how these were reflected in her poems. The result is an interesting, well-researched thesis that has repercussions for how we read Bishop as well as her contemporaries.

Bishop is often read as a feminist, and several of her most famous poems, including, for example “Roosters,” have been read in a specifically feminist context. This thesis suggests that a typical feminist reading of Bishop's work obscures a more nuanced interpretation that is actually closer to Bishop's intentions. The thesis contributes valuably to the discourse on Bishop, and also suggests that a revision of our understanding of much of the American poetry written by women since World War II is overdue.

The thesis contains an introduction, two chapters, a conclusion and a rich bibliography. The first chapter of the thesis establishes the feminist framework and introduces relevant feminist and gender theories, as well as a cultural context of Bishop's time, including other female poets. The second chapter explores how the concepts discussed in the first chapter are reflected in Bishop's poetry. Here Šárka's insightful close readings of the poems come to the fore. The thesis concludes by examining Bishop's response to developments in lyric poetry, which reflected the feminist rethinking of the masculine tradition in lyric poetry, and includes an analysis of the way Bishop constructed her poetic personae. This section of the thesis is particularly insightful, both in terms of the theories in question and how they apply to Bishop's poems.

Šárka put a great deal of effort into researching and writing the thesis, and did much of her work independently after an initial meeting. We did not get to collaborate as closely or in as timely a manner as I had anticipated, yet this did not seem to significantly hinder her work, and certainly the end result is more than satisfactory.

In light of the above comments, I have three questions to pose:

- 1) How should your arguments about Bishop's specific type of feminism influence the way we analyze her poems and her place in the 20th century canon?

- 2) You point out how typical feminist readings of some of Bishop's poems, such as "Roosters" may have obscured more subtle interpretations. Are these feminist readings invalid, considering what you prove about Bishop's feminism?
- 3) Did Bishop's particular feminism make her ahead of her time, or simply out of step? Is her feminism more relevant or common today than it was after World War II?

I hereby recommend the mark of 1 (výborně) for this thesis work.

Stephan B. Delbos, MFA, PhD

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