

Survey of Alena Vosková's Bachelor Thesis

A. Vosková, according to her own words, describes representation of gender in certain chemical textbooks along with „the construction of science, the field and nature“ (p. v) therein. Let my critical points be expressed first, then, too, some praise; finally I am going to give an evaluation.

First and foremost, my principal criticism aims at the writer's unquestioned presuppositions. She understands „under-representation“ of women in the authorship of biochemistry textbooks and other more technical scientific fields as simply wrong (not using the word itself, to be sure, cf. pp. 43, 47, 2). Without taking pains to explain why the bare fact that women are seldom authors of chemistry textbooks should be problematic, she evaluates it this way. Be it as it may, right or wrong, I, as one without an interest in gender problematics, have no other possibility but to level criticism upon such unquestioning approach. Many would not be far from labelling precisely this an „ideology“, I presume. This is what I deem the one main problem of the thesis. Moreover, this induces a question: What kind of work do I have in front of me – philosophical, historical, or else?

The second serious problem is closely connected with the first one and appears to me as his corollary. There seems to lurk an enemy of the „correctly gendered“ mind ever near in the dark. Very often the enemy attacks from history, his proper name being „traditionally“. For example, on p. 7 the writer, basing herself on literature, conjures up the enemy: „Women and nature were [in the history] on lower stage than culture, art and sciences, which have been traditionally associated historically and symbolically with men.“ (Cf. p. 47.) This is a typical example of construing imperceptively how in the past the female element was downgraded and suppressed. Such an approach knows in advance what it wants to mine out of the past and creates evidence before consulting closely the documents we have. Rather, we have to study closely the role of women in ancient cultures and be prepared that their actual status has yet to be discovered. At the least, women were considered of lesser value than men only on social and political level, if I can speak for ancient Greeks. (By the way, Aristotle was not by far the first to construe the bipolar world, cf. p. 7.) This fully imperceptive approach to the past is a great mistake in my eyes. But it is not a mistake of hers, I hasten to add, but probably of the very young discipline itself, which only now starts to awaken.

Other problems belong to a different level. Even when I accept such pre-determined position for a while, I am confronted with some more problems. As one can feel in advance, the field of biochemical textbooks is not touched all too directly by gender problematics due to its extremely technical character. Even though the writer is able to see through the scientific „neuter-gender“ atmosphere very well, she is able to fill quite a small part of the thesis with her particular theme. It is only scarcely that I come over a mention of a „gendered“ approach of the textbooks themselves (positive examples: p. 35, 36). The fact that the thesis sifts through the introductions, forewords and one chapter of each textbook (cf. p. 4) under study make it the more clear that this field (biochemical textbooks) is rather awkward in relation to gender studies. Other questions, originally introduced as supporting the main question (p. 4), turn up as taking most space throughout Vosková's work. Of course, they are interesting as well, but why not reformulate the main question and title of the essay, then? That would not make a large part of its contents seem as a „filling“ of sorts and would be very easy, I am sure.

Criticism is usually connected with the words „traditionally“, „stereotypic“ or such (p. 14, 37, 46). It is not out of place to say that precisely what is stereotypical (traditional) – on the cultural level – is what is usually „right“. Those before us accepted it and, moreover,

validated by their lives. Anything traditional had to pass the judgment of many generations, always anew at that. Are we to doubt it so lightly? The traditional has its own weight and anything new has to fight its place against it through a conflict, which should be played out in a „fair-play“ form. Moreover, why could not be the fact that men and women have different domains acceptable? (cf. p. 47).

Unfortunately, the author lets herself to be manipulated by her secondary literature easily. I already mentioned Aristotle on p. 7, another example can be a reference to F. de Saussure on p. 15. Since the author probably used the reference to de Saussure from Silverman's book (as she acknowledges), it escapes her that the Swiss linguist has some more to say on language, which she could have used. According to de Saussure, no one made up a language and no one can change and manipulate it. He shows language as a living power, I would say, because it changes itself independently of its speakers. That would situate the usual corrective attitude in the field of gender (filling all the „his/hers“ into texts) in a different light. I am convinced that de Saussure's thoughts on manipulating language would offer a good service for gender studies (in the thesis the incorrect „his/hers“ are used just as well). My point is that, even though she mentions de Saussure in one respect, she is not able to use him in another gender-related issue.

One more remark to conclude the critical part of my survey. On p. 45 the author works with the idea that chemistry needs to be made „more attractive“ for women. I think this might be a problem in her own eyes: the thought introduces women as beings who have to be led rather passively, almost lured, so to say, to do what is right...

On the other hand, once she framed her thoughts (which I criticized above), she is able to work within the framework quite well.

She is able to state why she picked such seemingly bizarre field for her thesis (p. 14).

She contextualized her main question in clear and substantiated terms (chap. 1). The textbooks themselves are introduced clearly, concentrating on her main and supporting questions.

The author attains a great level of writing skills. She is able to connect her thoughts fluently and express them concisely.

I feel obliged to insist on some extra points for her English (but cf., e.g., p. 4, 5, 8, where some mistakes can be found) and for the decision itself to write in a foreign language, too.

By way of conclusion, I found the work itself well done, but its underlying premises, unfortunately, fail it. Even though the writer produced a very sympathetic, dedicated and correct text, I have to insist, that her uncritical premises definitely rob it of „A“. I propose a mid-level „B“.

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