

Posudek oponenta na bakalářskou práci Barbory Maškové

“Shakespeare’s Drama and Homosexuality”

In her BA thesis Barbora Mašková performs a rather difficult task – she analyses three representative plays by William Shakespeare from the perspective of queer theory. As always, such an endeavour prompts many questions: what is it that we are actually performing if we take contemporary concepts and apply them to texts that were written in times when such conceptualisations did not exist? Is it not the same as applying ideals of formal realism to epics created hundreds of years before empirical philosophy? Can we (Should we) discuss issues of homosexuality in plays from a period that did not understand sexuality in the same terms as we do today? I suppose one answer to this dilemma is found in Ms Mašková’s thesis: it depends what exactly we are looking for, the methods we apply and how we work with the texts themselves. It must be said at the outset that the thesis is no anachronistic exercise, no attempt to feebly argue for or against any possible Shakespeare’s sexual orientation. It is rather a highly commendable attempt to rescue Shakespeare’s plays from precisely pigeon-holing them in the binary categories of sameness and alterity. After an introduction to the theoretical concepts utilised by queer theory and a brief encounter with the differences of the language of sexuality then and now, we plunge into precise and minute readings of all three plays’ passages which allow possible queer readings. Another important contribution of the thesis is its account of British and Czech stage (and TV or film) productions which explain their characters’ motivation precisely in terms of (more or less) repressed homosexuality (or at least, a strong sense of homoeroticism). It is cleverly shown that such versions may actually enrich the readings of the plays.

Despite my praise in the lines above, I do have some reservations and also questions:

1. The thesis could have been more carefully proof-read: capital letter in “České prostředí” (abstract), some confusion about which interpretation is actually “the oldest of those that will be dealt with” – Iago’s or Richard II’s (abstract), the manner in which block quotations (quotation marks, blankverse) are performed, Otoway instead of Otway (page 9).
2. My main issue is with the actual presentation of the stage productions. It seems that their analysis is based mainly on reviews and there is no (or little) direct, hands-on, encounter with the stagings. The insight of reviewers and individual actors are of course valuable, yet the intentions of the “producers” may not constitute definitive insight into the meanings of the plays as they are actually created on the stage. There is very little actual focus on the motifs, scenes, settings, symbolic objects, props etc. which are used to convey (or read into the play) possible meanings.

Thus, to use just a couple of examples, the Czech National Theatre production of *The Merchant of Venice* definitely worked with numerous objects (shoes, water, even bananas); moreover the relationship between Bassanio and Antonio was intricately rendered, amongst other, through Bassanio’s dancing movements that literally entwined Antonio in Act I.

Also, in the analysis of Trevor Nunn's production of that play, one review is given to vouch for the performance of Portia in not very flattering terms (that she gave the play "the feel of a high school production", page 27). That may be rather unfair, as it omits entirely the transformation she goes through during the trial scene, when she is not only jealous but even suffers terrible remorse when she realises things have gone too far and she must continue with the show to punish Shylock, even though Bassanio (and the world of Venice = the Weimar Republic) may not be worth it. The sense of an apocalypse drawing nigh is not only rendered in Goodman's performance but also through our (and the horrified Portia's) realisation that powers have been unleashed that are beyond control.

3. On page 44 a claim is made to the existence of "grounds for reading Richard II as [a] character displaying features of prominent homosociality and possibly even homosexuality". Although such readings are indeed fairly frequent, in this case the claim is unfortunately not very well supported by examples from the text itself, rather immediately afterward attention is shifted to Richard's display of feminine aspects. (Both claims are merely made, stated and taken for granted rather than textually explored.) Could Ms Mašková comment more on the issue of textual support of Richard's homosexuality and its links with his effeminacy (most of her treatment of the play focuses on the progress of the attachment to the Queen).

4. The theoretical chapter could obviously benefit from a more rigorous encounter with poststructuralist theories of the Same and the Other (from Luce Irigaray to Judith Butler) but it functions well as a basic exposition of the tenets of contemporary queer theory in relation to the analysed topic. [Similarly, another possible starting point could have a broader reading of the early modern constructions of sexuality and the literary (re)presentations of these. Not necessarily additional passages for analysis in the body of the thesis (its length and structure is sufficient), but perhaps a greater acquaintance with such texts.

Nevertheless, I do have one question in relation to the definition of Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick's concept of the homosocial. It is defined (page 13) largely in relation to patriarchy and in terms of relationships between men. Since much of the subsequent analysis hinges on relations to women (Portia, Emilia, Isabella), how does Sedgwick's conceptualisation account for women in the selected plays? What is the role of women in the homosocial world according to EKS? Also, to disagree a little with the distinction between homosocial and patriarchy, it can be argued that in some texts, homosocial desire is actually definitive of masculinity and subordination, not only of women as symbolic objects, but also in the sense of a hierarchy of men (e.g. the triangular transaction - of cuckoldry - between men of the possession of a woman in *The Country Wife*).

I find the BA thesis fully in compliance with the requirements and recommend it for defence with the preliminary mark of very good (**velmi dobře**).

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