

Anna Ohlídlová

Shakespearean Chorus and Prologue: its functions and effects in the play
(ÚALK, FF UK, Praha 2015, 58 pp.)

Supervisor's review

The thesis provides a survey and an analysis of the use of prologue and chorus in Shakespeare's plays, discussing both their formal features and their dramatic function. In this respect it definitely represents an ambitious project, especially for a BA thesis, since it ventures on a rather sparsely mapped field. The functions of prologue/chorus have so far been discussed predominantly in relation to individual plays, but there are relatively few comprehensive treatments of this feature.

The introductory chapter undertakes to place Shakespearean prologues/choruses in a historical context. Tracing the origins of all the features which appear in the core material, it tackles the two-pronged ancestry of English Renaissance drama, the theatre of Classical Antiquity (chorus) and English medieval drama (the dumb show), concluding with a brief discussion of the use of prologue/chorus by Elizabethan playwrights.

The terminology and criteria for analysis are coherently formulated in the chapter on *Romeo and Juliet*. From then on, the thesis follows the development of prologue in Shakespeare's drama in a chronological sequence. In the treatment of Shakespearean choruses the evolutionary perspective gives way to an ordering based on complexity of the relation between the commentary provided by the chorus and the dramatic action. While this reordering cannot be viewed as arbitrary, it deserves to be introduced by a more detailed and extensive explanation.

Anna Ohlídlová performs a thorough, perceptive and largely independent reading of the primary material and presents her conclusions clearly and coherently. Her complex survey meets the criteria for a BA thesis.

Nevertheless, I would like to make some general observations concerning the research presented in the thesis, which serve primarily as cautionary advice for future work (1,2,3), as well as suggest some more specific points which could be addressed in the defence (4,5,6):

- 1) Anna Ohlídlová's admirable direct and independent involvement with the primary material should be complemented by a more complex use of secondary sources. Even though her project has few precedents and she thus has to proceed without much guidance in the structuring of her overall argument, she could benefit from consulting a wider range of editions.
- 2) Ideally, the introductory chapter should also address more general theoretical issues relevant for the discussion of prologue/chorus, although in this specific case it would make the text exceed the space of a BA thesis, so the decision to focus on the evolutionary aspect appears strategic.
- 3) The text would benefit from an additional revision, which would eliminate occasional typos, punctuation errors and variations in the formatting of references.
- 4) If the introductory chapter is to provide a background against which Shakespeare's use of the prologue/chorus is to be assessed, it should provide more specific description of how this feature was employed in early modern drama prior to Shakespeare. The discussion of prologue is satisfactory, though it could refer the reader to a greater number of examples and illustrate with a representative passage, in the same way that the quotation from Sophocles demonstrates the functions of the chorus in Greek tragedy. However, could the author give an instance of chorus from a Renaissance play and compare it very briefly with the Shakespearean material?
- 5) While the continuity in the dramatic functions of the chorus (presenting the unstageable, supplying information beyond the scope of the plot) from its Greek

origins to Shakespeare shows clear in the thesis, would the author see any continuity in the “social” functions (the communal/normative aspect)?

- 6) Since the author gives prominent place to the “misplaced” punctuation in Quince's prologue to the play in the play in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, but seems to suggest this is but one among the several features which contribute to the perception of the entire speech as parodic, could she cite other specific manifestations of what she calls Quince's “ineptitude”, i.e. other instances which justify the parodic reading?

Conclusion: With regard to the fact that the thesis represents a solid and complex treatment of a difficult topic, and considering the reservations outlined above, I recommend the thesis for defence with the preliminary mark VERY GOOD to EXCELLENT (výborně), depending on the result of the defence.

Prague, 1 September 2016

Helena Znojemská, Ph.D.