

Posudek oponenta na bakalářskou práci Robina Semráda “British Booktrade at the Turn of the 18th Century and the Career of James Lackington”

As the fates of many eighteenth-century booksellers testify, the book trade has always been a rather risky business. *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature 1740-1830* mentions the fate of low-born Richard Chandler who became a rich bookseller before he was 20 years old, but by 1744 and 31 years of age went bankrupt and committed suicide. His partner, by 1759, completely reversed the situation and published such acclaimed artists as Sterne. Book-selling, lending and publishing was an unpredictable trade, but some figures loom large as success stories. Such a one is the life of James Lackington, the son of a shoemaker. His business practices are the substance of the submitted thesis written by Robin Semrád, which is contextualized by an excursion into the phenomenon of circulating libraries and the growth of readership at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The founding premise is that booksellers were not simple mediators between the author and the reader, but actually influenced readers' tastes and thus also exerted an influence on the literature of the period, not inevitably a negative one at that.

While the topic discussed is of immense interest and importance to any full(er) understanding of the culture of the time, the first thing that strikes any reader of the thesis is the stylistic clumsiness and tendency to overuse the definite article (page 12 even talks of “the Great Britain”). Also, numbering the chapters would certainly have made orientation much easier. And perhaps the decision to deal with Lackington as an entirely separate and last chapter was not the best one. Perhaps better would have been a reversed perspective, as to how he actually epitomizes the tendencies and changes in literary business and through these to present the history of related phenomena like the libraries etc.

The history of publishing and the book trade are presented primarily from an economic perspective. However, the introduction displays a tendency to one-sidedness (or, rather too obviously siding with politicized readings of business enterprise and budding laissez-faire capitalism) and an over-reliance on Mises' *Human Action*. Perhaps instead we could have received an actual reading and analysis of the self-narrating strategies (i.e. how he constructs an image of himself and for what purpose) of Lackington's *Memoirs* and *Confessions*. As such, the introduction is probably the weakest part (seconded by the chapter on Readers). It is very vague and the topics that are meant to be discussed (page 10) are not clear at all.

On page 10, state regulation is mentioned, implying that this was mainly through control of speech and religious views expressed. Does this mean censorship? Therefore, should we not get some kind of data about the legal practices and patterns of control, like e.g. libel laws? Who was held responsible and why – the publisher or the author? How did these laws and persecution affect the writing of the time, especially in political tracts and pamphlets, and how did people differentiate between “truth” and seditious libel or scandal?

How and why did circulating libraries influence the styles and topics of writing? I realise the numbers are difficult to get, but some estimates do exist – how many people (or rather, what percentage) borrowed books in relation to the book-buying public?

On page 31 pedlars are mentioned. Are these the same category as “chapmen”, a term frequently referred to in literature about bookselling practices?

The “conger” phenomenon could have been explained much more. It is not clear at all how the system worked and whether it had any significant influence on the literary production of the time. Some critics claim that through their manipulation of the copyright laws and monopoly they actually brought about an increase in the prestige of literature as a kind of luxury commodity and consequently culture for the more sophisticated and a subject of serious enquiry and conversation.

To conclude, the thesis presents a range of immensely interesting topics but these remain largely unconnected – circulating libraries, literacy, readership, bookselling and printing. What I miss are some numbers and data. This text is ostensibly historical, but it does not provide all that much hard information on the history of the book trade and its practices. Although I find the early parts rather weak, from the chapter on booksellers onwards we get to a much higher level: case studies, documents, dates, and improved language. Yes, and of course I appreciate the quotation about the “first king of Bohemia” and his shoes (page 41).

In light of all these considerations, I find the thesis fully in keeping with the requirements on BA theses and certainly recommend it for defence. The suggested provisional grade is excellent to very good with the final grade depending on the defence itself

(výborně až velmi dobře).

V Praze dne 5.9.2017

.....

PhDr. Soňa Nováková, CSc., MA