

## Kristýna Čabartová, *An Analysis of Female Characters in Contemporary Fantasy*

BA thesis

Opponent's Review

The present BA thesis defines its goal as an attempt to decide whether the female characters of modern times' fantasy (from the end of WWII up to the present) tend to retain traditional features and roles or whether they assume radically new characteristics (ie., to use the terms of the thesis, if they are "exemplary" or "revolutionary"). I see several problems in the way this task is approached in the thesis:

- The student examines three texts from different post-war decades (though more than one volume of a series each time) and rightly states just at the outset that "it must seem overly ambitious to form a generalization about the traits of female characters in contemporary fantasy based only upon an analysis of [a] few characters from three authors, but that is not our aim" (18) Yet this is exactly what she eventually does when she concludes that the thesis "established that its [= contemporary high fantasy] heroines are becoming more dynamic, being more involved in the plots and generally acting more opinionated and active. They have also become more complex..." (45).
- The aforesaid tendency is demonstrated on texts in which female characters play mostly subsidiary roles, as the student herself very well knows. However, when she concedes, "Moreover, it is possible to observe these tendencies on a number of other texts in contemporary fantasy [in which women] become protagonists of the story; leading revolutions, manipulating heroes, leaving on quests and otherwise presenting themselves as key for these texts" (44), one cannot help wondering why these other texts were not selected for analysis. Is it so that even in these texts "female characters have not changed drastically as they keep to their repetitive roles and functions and continue [to] be subjected to stereotypes and gender expectations"? (43) And what are these expected "drastic" changes and presumed revolutionary roles if not those listed in the previous quotation?
- It seems that the texts in which the traditional female roles were established are mediaeval romances such as *Judith* (referred to on p. 12), a view supported by the concluding paragraph on p. 13. Nothing is said about the later development. But since the student claims that the turning point in the history of the fantasy genre came at the end of WWII, which "changed much of society and its ideas" (8), one would expect at least a brief comparison with the situation immediately preceding the war. Do late nineteenth-century fantasies such as McDonald's *Lilith* still construct traditional, "exemplary" female characters or do they endow them with roles radically different from those of mediaeval romances? Moreover, fantasy is a relatively recent genre, dating back to, say, the earlier 19<sup>th</sup> century; previous texts are hardly ever classified as fantasy (different generic terms are used with respect to them), so they may be regarded as prototypical or antecedent at best. Which complicates the matter even more. (Concerning this, Sarah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, 2008, should perhaps be consulted.)
- The method with which individual female characters are assessed seems inadequate. It basically consists in presenting a character's involvement in the story and an attempt to classify her according to Jill Savitt's and Vladimir Propp's taxonomy. The fact that the characters "more or less" fit these categories, though almost never perfectly, clearly indicates that a much more nuanced reading would be desirable. What should also be taken into account is the distinction between "fantasy" and "fairy-tale" or "folk-tale" (some clues can be found in Todorov's *The Fantastic*). Propp's book deals

with fairy-tales; is it legitimate to apply fairy-tale roles of women to a different (albeit closely related) genre?

- The inclusion of a questionnaire testing young fantasy fans may bring some interesting results and it is not an entirely weird idea. Yet the form of it raises doubts, as we do not know how competent the respondents were in judging literary issues and, what seems most disqualifying, why they were asked to deal with only two texts out of three (Ursula Le Guin's series was left out). The results can thus hardly be taken as relevant.
- The thesis contains a number of various language errors (spelling, grammar, or simple typos).

To conclude: Kristýna Čabartová submitted a BA thesis in which she managed to meet her goals only partially. The topic is ambitious and it evidently requires more experience with the genre and a more subtle approach. At this level, I can recommend the thesis for defence but cannot suggest a better preliminary mark than **dobře** (C).

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