



## FACULTY OF ARTS Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

### **Supervisor's Report**

#### **Emily Dickinson and the Puritan Tradition**

BA thesis by Natalie Emma Johnsonová

Natalie Emma Johnsonová's thesis examines the presence and impact of Puritan heritage on the life of Emily Dickinson and her revisions of this heritage in her poetry.

The thesis is clearly and logically structured: it is divided into two main parts, each of which consists of two main chapters. The first part (chapters "Understanding Puritanism" and "Emily Dickinson and Puritanism") is primarily contextual (outlining the main features of Puritanism that are relevant to the thesis and explaining the role the Puritan tradition played in Emily Dickinson's life) and creates a solid basis for the second part (chapters "This World and the Next" and "God") which offers the analyses of selected poems by Emily Dickinson, examining the ways in which Dickinson's poetry revises the Puritan religious tradition.

Natalie chose a fascinating but also challenging topic: Puritanism and its impact on American culture, on the one hand, and Emily Dickinson's poetry, on the other, are vast worlds that do not yield to examination easily. The thesis manages to deal with both in a way that makes both seem accessible, which is an achievement of its own, especially on a BA level.

This is certainly made possible, also thanks to – among other things – a very skillful work with a very good selection of secondary sources, particularly in the first part of the thesis. The scope of the relevant scholarly sources the thesis works with is impressive, anyway, and the student repeatedly demonstrates that she is perfectly capable of engaging with the extant criticism and using it to support her own conclusions. The second part (the readings of the poems) might perhaps benefit from more direct interaction with criticism, but we agreed in the process of writing that it also makes good sense to offer focused close readings centered around the primary texts in this part of the thesis. And Natalie's readings of the poems – some of them extremely difficult to analyze – are indeed very good. The choice of a very good topic (the revision of Puritan tradition) that she focuses on in her analyses, helps her to offer fresh insights into some of the essential features of Emily Dickinson's poetics (the hidden rebelliousness, the

fascinating use of ambiguity and contradiction, the tensions between the bodily and the



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spiritual, etc.). In a limited space of two chapters of a BA thesis, Natalie shows surprisingly many of the qualities that make Dickinson one of the greatest modern poets.

It should be stressed that from the beginning, Natalie worked on her thesis quite independently and did not need to be guided or helped too much. She was very passionate about her topic, which she navigated with determination and confidence. She knew what she wanted to write about and she never lost her goal from her sight. Both the choice of the topic and the selection of the material (including most of the secondary sources) were her own, with only occasional recommendations from the supervisor. At the same time, she was very responsive to advice and commentaries – she knew immediately what was asked of her and was always able to respond creatively by making adequate changes in the text of her thesis. I find this combination of independence and confidence, passionate interest, and the ability to accept advice particularly commendable, as all these seem crucial qualities of a good scholar.

I suggest the following topics/questions for discussion at the defense:

1. The thesis persuasively argues the importance of the Puritan heritage in Dickinson's life and poetry, but it seems to me that many of the concepts her poems challenge and revise can be seen as more broadly Christian. Could you offer your view on this issue?
2. One of the central principles of Dickinson's revisionist poetics seems to be the ambiguity of many of her poems; rather than negating and denying, she casts doubts and asks questions. Could you comment more on this feature of her poetry, perhaps giving some particular examples?

Overall, it was a pleasure to work with Natalie, her enthusiasm for her topic was contagious and her insights into the multilayered meanings of Dickinson's poetry possessed an inspiring freshness.

I am happy to recommend the thesis for defense and propose the grade of "excellent" ("výborně").

Prague, June 15, 2024

doc. PhDr. Mariana Machová, Ph.D.