



12 November 2018

Opponent's Review of
Janka Kascakova's habilitation thesis entitled
The Secret Friend: Katherine Mansfield Reads Jane Austen

It has been an honour and pleasure to read and review Janka Kascakova's habilitation thesis as submitted to Masaryk University, Brno: an honour to be invited as an opponent and an academic and professional pleasure to read the thesis. On account of that, let me make my fundamental statement at the beginning: in my evaluation, the habilitation thesis meets the standard requirements placed on habilitation theses in the field of literary studies.

Being quite familiar with Mansfield scholarship I can claim that the topic of the thesis is both relevant and innovative in the field as no substantial research had been done on the – at first sight almost unlikely, but as proved by the thesis convincingly really existing – relationship between Katherine Mansfield and Jane Austen before this research whose results are convincing and provide a new perspective not only on the nuanced details of this specific relationship, but also on how Mansfield is embedded in the English women writers' literary tradition.

The thesis conforms to the requirements of academic research in general and to the standards of literary criticism in particular in all respects: it articulates a clear thesis statement, argues for it by using the methods of literary scholarship in a rigorous way, it explores areas that had remained not only underexplored but practically untouched by previous research and researchers, and expands it into a book-length monographic thesis. This innovative aspect makes the study a genuine contribution to the field not only of Mansfield and Austen criticism internationally, but may even open up new fields because the thesis proves that intertextual links between authors are possible even in apparently unlikely cases, and that these relationships may change the way how we think about literary tradition and individual talent – to refer to T.S. Eliot's relevant essay.

The thesis has a clear structure, and the structural units use various methods of investigation that in my understanding are the most appropriate to that particular unit. After a solid introduction that introduces the rationale behind the thesis and presents both the topic and the thesis, there are three main chapters: the first one points out, on the basis of Mansfield's letters and diaries, in which period of her life





Mansfield read Austen, and how she evaluated her in these private documents; the second main chapter analyses two reviews written by Mansfield that are relevant to Austen; and the third chapter, in turn, explores the real intertextual aspects between Austen and Mansfield, and argues that two texts of Mansfield's short stories ("A Cup of Tea" and "The Daughters of the Late Colonel") can be understood as the intertextual rewriting of Austen's *Emma* – in their own respective ways. The methods chosen are the following: philological-biographical explorations in the case of the first main chapter; the second main chapter uses complex methods, ranging from close reading to philology, to explore the potential implications of the two Mansfield reviews concerning her view of Austen; the third, and most extensive main chapter, in turn, uses primarily – and appropriately – close reading when comparing the two Mansfield short stories with Austen's *Emma*. The whole of the habilitation thesis uses formal criteria consistently and sufficiently: all the sources are properly indicated in all kinds of necessary documentation: both in in-text references and in the bibliographical data. Janka Kascakova has used an ample number of sources, she obviously knows and is capable of synthesising and analysing critical works on Mansfield, and she can also develop her own ideas based on existing criticism. The linguistic level of the thesis, including proof reading is exemplary (except perhaps for the repeated incorrect use of the phrase "on the contrary" – used rather in the sense of "in contrast").

The main points of her research are amply summarised in the introduction when the basic argument of the thesis is proposed saying at the deep level of understanding we can discover meaningful links between Mansfield and Austen in terms of narrative methods and topics of writing. The thesis is the consistent discovery of – and argument for – the importance of Mansfield's reading of Austen, not only for the sake of reading, but also for turning "Austen" to her own use in her own writings.

The first main chapter is a consistent analysis that shows the process how Mansfield learnt to appreciate Austen, starting from the early phase when Austen did not seem to mean anything for the modernists (let me add, I think primarily to the male modernists) to the period of life the already ill Mansfield spent in Switzerland, and, among others, engaged herself in an attentive reading of Austen's novels. Whereas the analysis of the previous phases is concentrated on contemporaries' comments on Austen, particularly this latter part is devoted to a detailed and subtle analysis of Mansfield's letters as communicative practices: Janka Kascakova analyses not only *what* Mansfield writes in her letters, but *to whom* and *how*, i.e. she considers the addressees of the letters of the letters, and explores how the addressee also affects the





mode of communication.

The second main chapter analyses two reviews of Mansfield's that are somehow related to Austen. One is a Mansfield review of Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day* including a reference to Austen; the other one is a review of a monograph on Austen. Although the analysis of the first is sometimes a bit meandering, discussing the - obviously uneasy - relationship between Mansfield and Woolf, it ultimately engages in a meaningful dialogue with the already existing criticism concerning this famous review of Mansfield's, and makes its point. The analysis of the review written on Mary Augusta Leigh's *Personal Aspects of Jane Austen* entitled "True Lovers", points out undercurrents in Mansfield's relation to Austen, and also how the review can also be seen as her long-time debate with John Middleton Murry. The interpretation of the two reviews shares a very important aspect: in their own ways, the subchapters point out Mansfield's at that time ambivalent, but changing relation to Austen.

Perhaps the most important chapter of the dissertation is the third main chapter entitled "The Daughters of Emma: Mansfield Rewriting Austen" because this is the chapter that deals with the question how two of Mansfield's short stories, which are still the most important productions of Mansfield's *oeuvre*, can be seen as intertextual rewritings of *Emma*. The two analyses are introduced by a general-theoretical subchapter mainly devoted to the question of free indirect speech and the point-of-view technique. I can fully agree with the argument in this chapter, but it could have been even more convincing if the dissertation had used more theoretical narratological sources, not only Mansfield- and Austen criticism analysing their mode of narration. Perhaps using terms like Mieke Bal's focaliser could have helped to sharpen the argument, and perhaps also not using phrases like "unnatural" narrator (p. 97) or "traditional" narration/strategy (several times) could have made the argument more professional.

Out of the two subchapters analysing the two short stories respectively, to me the really revelative and convincing one is the interpretation of "A Cup of Tea" and how it can be read as the rewriting of *Emma* because in this case - as the text convincingly argues - there is a very similar plot element shared by the two texts, which, however, is applied by Mansfield to reconsider and particularly recontextualise Emma and Harriet's relationship in a modern, modernist and urban context, which implies also concerns that could hardly be articulated so explicitly in Austen's age (like sexuality), but this interpretation of "A Cup of Tea" actually makes us also reconsider the interpretation of *Emma* too.





To me, a lot less convincing is the comparison of "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" for the reason that the parallels drawn between the short story and *Emma* are partly so general in narratological terms that on that basis a lot of other works using free indirect speech could also be compared, partly the interpretation needs to make so many remarks concerning how the two plots differ that the basis of comparison becomes rather shaky and slippery.

Also, in general, I think it would have done a lot of good to the argument if Janka Kascakova had used theories of intertextuality in the analysis of the short stories in this main chapter once what she discusses is actually intertextual relationships between the two authors. Going back to T.S. Eliot and Roland Barthes, and more recently elaborated on by Kristeva and Hutcheon, intertextuality has become a key notion in textual-cultural production, and has recently become a key notion in comparative textual analyses creating a theoretical discourse that enriches our understanding of how texts are related to each other. Acknowledging the thesis writer's wide and at the same time deep knowledge of Mansfield criticism, what I also missed was the use of culture- (or age-)specific explorations of gender that could have also contributed to a bit more theoretical explorations of these texts.

On the whole, however, and by way of conclusion, let me repeat my foundational claim that even if at some points and in some respects there is a space to improve the thesis when transforming it into a book as pointed out above, in my evaluation, the habilitation thesis meets the standard requirements placed on habilitation theses in the field of literary studies, and I strongly and with full conviction recommend conferring the title of habilitation on Janka Kascakova.

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