

Opponent's Review  
on  
*THE SECRET FRIEND: KATHERINE MANSFIELD READS JANE AUSTEN*  
habilitation thesis  
by  
Janka Kaščáková, PhD

I regard Janka Kaščáková's habilitation thesis as a significant contribution to Katherine Mansfield criticism, which discusses a largely underresearched – would ignored be an exaggeration? – aspect of her works: Jane Austen's influence on the modernist author's writing. Mgr. Kaščáková convincingly argues that the comparative reading of two Mansfield short stories with *Emma* sheds new light on the modernist short story writer's use of free indirect discourse, just as well as discrediting critical commonplaces about her lack of compassion for her characters. Indeed, Mgr. Kaščáková's subtle analysis introduces an author who feels deeply both for her female characters, leading an insignificant life, entrapped in claustrophobic spaces and subjugated to oppressive father figures, and for the male ones, who often unintentionally inflict wounds on their daughters or spouses. Thus, while touching upon issues of the ethics of writing and reading, Mgr. Kaščáková's interpretations are also closely affiliated with feminist strategies of reading.

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The novelty of Mgr. Kaščáková's approach is hard to debate. On the one hand, her own review of all mentions made of the Austen-Mansfield connection clearly demonstrates the cursory nature of those references and the lack of in-depth analysis. On the other hand, works published presumably since the close of Mgr. Kaščáková's research project make equally scarce mention of Austen, if at all. For instance, in her *Katherine Mansfield and the Art of the Short Story* (2015), noted Mansfield scholar Gerri Kimber – though she devotes a chapter each to Mansfield's narrative technique and humour, major areas in which, according to Mgr. Kaščáková, the two authors are comparable – finds no reason to connect Austen and Mansfield. Even more fascinating is the way the Austen-Mansfield relationship seems to be a blind spot for a critic also referenced in the present thesis, Ruth Parkin-Gounelas: her 1991 monograph on Charlotte Brontë, Olive Schreiner and Katherine Mansfield contextualises those three authors in the female literary tradition and thus includes Austen in its scope. Yet, although Parkin-Gounelas mentions Mansfield's comparison between Woolf and Austen in the Woolf review (which is discussed in detail in the present thesis), unlike Mgr. Kaščáková, she finds no cause

to continue that train of thought, except for pointing out that Olive Schreiner disagreed with Mansfield on that head (121).

Without a doubt, such neglect of Mgr. Kaščáková's topic might also raise the question – of which she is fully aware – whether the connection between these two authors really exists and is significant or is only the product of the critic's wishful thinking. As a reader of Mgr. Kaščáková's well-argued, rigorous and unbiased analysis – which, incidentally, also reads very well – I am fully convinced of the opposite: she successfully demonstrates that tracking down Austen's potential influences on Mansfield and assessing their full implications is a fertile research area, which genuinely enriches readings of the latter's works. Actually, as is evidenced by the thesis, it even triggers fresh insights into the timeless qualities of Austen, and reveals for instance the darker potential fates of her central characters lurking “between the lines” or the relatively gloomier aspects of her irony. Focusing her comparative analysis on the thematic parallels, similarities of characters, narrative technique and use of irony, Mgr. Kaščáková offers a fresh look at her two chosen Mansfield stories. While doing so, she engages in a lively dialogue with existing Mansfield criticism and often strives to strike a compromise between contrasting views – most remarkably between extreme conclusions inspired by the diametrically opposed biographical images suggested by the Mansfield cult of Middleton Murry (Mansfield as almost saintly figure) and its overcompensation (Mansfield as a heartless writer) in more recent Mansfield research. Mgr. Kaščáková's thesis derives its persuasive power, among others, from her remarkable insistence on objectivity.

In my understanding, however, key to Mgr. Kaščáková's convincing argumentation is her outlining a trajectory which leads in Mansfield's career “from relative indifference to intense interest and creative appreciation” (21) with respect to Jane Austen. That is, the thesis organises the available traces of Mansfield's reading experience of Austen and her references to Austen in her critical writings into a coherent narrative of growing appreciation, which then substantiates the comparative analyses in the third, main section, “The Daughters of *Emma*: Mansfield Rewriting Austen” (84-140). The result is not “simply” an intertextual reading of “The Daughters of the Late Colonel” and “A Cup of Tea” in the light of Austen's *Emma* in Michel Riffaterre's broad sense of the word, i.e. based on the assumption that intertextuality is an inalienable part of the reading process and should not be limited to cases of the actual presence of one text in another – indeed, the connection between two texts is invariably established in the reader's mind. Though Mgr. Kaščáková's reading is not informed by the theoretical apparatus of intertextuality, Riffaterre's interpretation of the term puts the

appropriateness of her reading method beyond doubt, since Riffaterre's views legitimate the comparative analysis of one text in the light of another which is not cited, made an explicit allusion to or does not belong to the same generic category as the text under discussion – and this is the case with Mansfield's and Austen's works (Kaščáková 99).

Thus it is an added bonus of the thesis that Mgr. Kaščáková – who takes the traditional, philologically based study of influence to a whole new level – contextualises Mansfield's changing attitude to Austen in the latter's complex reception history (see her reading of Mansfield's review on *Personal Aspects of Jane Austen* by Mary Austen-Leigh) just as well as in the literary criticism of Mansfield's time, which unquestionably contributed to the emergence and technical experimentations/innovations of modernist writing (see the section on Mansfield's review of Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day*). Thereby, her reading of those two particular Mansfield short stories is a contribution to understanding not only Mansfield herself in the context of modernist innovation and a female/feminist alternative literary tradition, but also to interpreting those larger phenomena. In that sense, the nuanced views of the thesis fit into various (welcome) trends in present-day literary criticism. These include the redefinition of modernism(s), ongoing since the 1990s, the rediscovery and in-depth study of (female and/or colonial) authors hitherto assigned to a (relatively) peripheral position in literary history in general, and in particular, the in-depth study of Mansfield's highly innovative contribution to the genre of the short story.

It follows from the above that in my view the relevance of Mgr. Kaščáková's clearly formulated topic is beyond doubt. So is the significance of her contribution to research on Katherine Mansfield and her version of the short story – in general an unduly underresearched facet of English-language modernisms. To the best of my knowledge, Mgr. Kaščáková is the first to devote a consistent, book-length study to the three aspects of Austenian influence on Mansfield's writing: she combines the study of philologically documented literary influence with an analysis of Mansfield's relevant critical texts and short stories, to demonstrate how the former informs and to a certain extent shapes both of the latter. As such, this habilitation thesis is one of a kind; nevertheless, it engages in a lively critical dialogue with most recent Mansfield and Austen criticism. In other words, although Mgr. Kaščáková has very little to go by in terms of existing discussions of her precise topic, she still manages to connect her own ideas with the current critical discourses of Mansfield and Austen studies. Her rigorous analysis is delivered in flawless academic English, characterised by a fluency, lightness and even a sense of humour which might have been inspired by the two authors she discusses. She uses a clear and consistent

citation system. She adds footnotes with an impressive sense of proportion, which largely contributes to the above effect of fluency: fascinating additional information or necessary details of the critical dialogue are provided, but they do not interrupt the smooth flow of ideas in Mgr. Kaščáková's reader-friendly, clearly argued and logically structured text.

The thesis – for me, at least – mostly raises questions concerning its theoretical foundations and further potentials. I wonder whether Mgr. Kaščáková would consider the concept of intertextuality in a later attempt to broaden the theoretical platform of the present thesis while editing it for publication (provided it has not already been published). I would also be interested in her views on the possibilities of broadening the scope of her present research. That is, although *Emma* is evidenced to be Mansfield's favourite Austen novel (45), what is Mgr. Kaščáková's opinion about including other Austen texts in her comparative research project? Would she consider looking for other Mansfield narratives whose reading can be informed by a comparative analysis with either *Emma* or other novels of Austen?

Based on the above, I am fully convinced that Mgr. Kaščáková's habilitation thesis entitled *The Secret Friend: Katherine Mansfield Reads Jane Austen* meets the standard requirements for a habilitation thesis in the field of English literary studies.

16. 11. 2018

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