

“To the Great Detriment of the Post Office Revenue”

An analysis of Jane Austen’s early narrative development through her use and abandonment of epistolary fiction in ‘Lady Susan’

David Owen

Ph.D. Thesis directed by Professor Andrew Monnickendam
Departament de Filologia Anglesa, Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
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2. Direct Narrative and The Epistolary:

Catharine and Lady Susan

“Looking at the juvenilia as we must through the lens of the mature novels, what strikes one most is Jane Austen’s swift and sure progress towards the threshold of her distinctive way of feeling and telling. “Catharine” and *Lady Susan* represent major advances...”

(A. Walton Litz, “Jane Austen: The Juvenilia” 4).

As we have observed,¹ studies of the juvenilia such as those by Litz and Southam² have highlighted Austen’s progress from the burlesque of her very earliest writings towards the more serious undertakings of the later pieces. Most particularly, the texts in the collections known as *Volume the Second* and *Volume the Third*, as well as ‘The three Sisters’ in *Volume the First*,³ show that Austen is striving to find a narrative form that best adapts to her rapidly maturing requirements of character, plot and description; in doing so, she moves back and forth from direct narrative to epistolary,⁴ thus in effect assessing which of the two forms is the more suitable to these requirements. It has been conventional to assume that Austen became aware, at an early stage, of the limitations of the epistolary and—in spite of

¹ See p.67 ff. of this thesis.

² For Litz, see *Artistic Development* and “The Juvenilia”; for Southam, see *Literary Manuscripts and “Juvenilia”*.

³ Southam (*Literary Manuscripts* 16) gives the following dates of composition for the juvenilia: 1787-90, ‘Frederick & Elfrida’, ‘Jack & Alice’, ‘Edgar & Emma’, ‘Henry & Eliza’, ‘Mr. Harley’, ‘Sir William Mountague’, ‘Mr. Clifford’, ‘The beautiful Cassandra’ (sic), ‘Amelia Webster’, ‘The Visit’, ‘The Mystery’ (all *Volume the First*). 1790 June, ‘Love and Freindship’ (*Volume the Second*). 1791 November, ‘The History of England’ (*Volume the Second*), ‘Collection of Letters’ (*Volume the Second*). 1792 ‘Lesley Castle’ (*Volume the Second*), ‘The three Sisters’ (*Volume the First*), ‘Evelyn’ (*Volume the Third*). 1792 August, ‘Catharine’ (*Volume the Third*). 1793, ‘Scraps’ (*Volume the Second*), 1793 June, ‘Detached pieces’ (*Volume the First*), ‘Ode to Pity’ (*Volume the First*), observing that the contents in the three Volumes “are not ordered chronologically. Some of the earliest and last pieces are found in *Volume the First*, and it looks as if Jane Austen entered fresh material into whichever of the three notebooks was most conveniently to hand” (“Juvenilia”, 245). See also Introduction to this thesis, n.36.

⁴ For example, as the previous note indicates, the texts from 1792 include the epistolary ‘The three Sisters’ and ‘Lesley Castle’ along with the non-epistolary ‘Evelyn’ (a work, however, in which letters play a significant part) and ‘Catharine’.

her return to its certain use in *Lady Susan*, and possibly also in other works, as (it is posited⁵) a safe and known entity—was inevitably headed towards direct narrative as the conclusion to her early stylistic development. This chapter will consider the validity of such a perspective, through a comparison of—on the one hand—the culmination (both chronologically and stylistically) of Austen's juvenilia writings, namely the unfinished direct-narrative novella, *Catharine or The Bower* and—on the other—the epistolary novella *Lady Susan*, the first work to be written after *Catharine*, and one that is usually taken to signal "a retreat to a safer and more familiar ground".⁶ The objective of this analysis is to assess the attainments and limitations of *Catharine*, as well as those of *Lady Susan*, in order to suggest why, if the non-epistolary text was indeed the successful culmination of her early stylistic experimentation, she should so emphatically have rejected it in her next artistic undertaking, and to reach an understanding of what Austen may have attained by her use of the letter form in that epistolary novella.

2.1 *Catharine or The Bower*

Written in August 1792 when Austen was still only 16,⁷ *Catharine* is a remarkable literary achievement. In the sense that its stylistic form is closer to that of the mature fiction, it

⁵ See Southam's comments, cited in this thesis, p.6, and observations by Litz et al, n.17, Introduction to this thesis. For comments on the epistolary ur-forms of the novels, see thesis Chapter One, n.12.

⁶ Litz, "The Juvenilia", p.5.

⁷ As Southam indicates (*Literary Manuscripts* 15), *Catharine*, along with 'Love and Freindship', 'The History of England' and 'A Fragment' (which forms part of *Detached Pieces*), is "dated by a specific entry on the manuscript". Additionally, within 'Lesley Castle', the dates given for the letters (January 3 to April 13 1792) may well correspond to actual dates of composition. Southam also lists, within the same section, the evidence for approximate datings of five other pieces that do not specify their date of composition.

might be argued that it has—on these grounds alone—been accorded greater significance within Austen's early writings than any of the epistolary works.⁸ That, however, would be failing to recognise its inherent value independently of its place within Austen's stylistic development.⁹

The novella tells the story of Catharine (or Kitty) Percival, an orphan, living under the tutelage of her maiden aunt, the hypochondriac and rather neurotic Mrs Percival.¹⁰ A lively and sensitive girl, Catharine is largely deprived of contact with other young people thanks—in great measure—to her aunt's mortal fears of her charge being led into perdition by the temptations of local society (particularly where this involves the presence of men).

⁸ However, Marvin Mudrick—who has tended to hold opinions on the early works that were counter to most of his contemporaries—observes that *Catharine* (along with 'The three Sisters' and 'Lesley Castle') fails to rise to "the superb assurance of 'Love and Freindship'", (*Irony*, 25).

⁹ McMaster ("Juvenilia") compellingly identifies another area in which *Catharine*—in comparison with the other juvenilia and, particularly, with *Lady Susan*—can be said to mark an advance towards the mature novels. In her analysis, there are two major 'ethics' in Austen's fiction, an "ethic of energy" that demonstrably pertains to the vitality and excesses of the juvenilia (which McMaster [175] terms "Rabelaisian, carnivalesque"), and an "ethic of sympathy" that belongs to the restrained, balanced world of the later fiction. In this assessment, "*Lady Susan* marks the culmination of the ethic of energy, *Catharine* the triumph of the ethic of sympathy" (183). At the level of literary tone, we see this as a useful and plausible approach to distinguishing not only the juvenilia and the later fiction, but particularly *Catharine* and *Lady Susan*. Nevertheless, McMaster's argument here does not concern itself with the formal components of stylistic development in the two novellas and, as this thesis hypothesises, it is in this latter ambit that we posit *Lady Susan*'s advancement over *Catharine*. Furthermore, as we argue below (see p.207 ff. of this thesis), there are several important ways in which *Lady Susan* in fact reveals a more controlled, restrained form of writing, distancing the text from the tonal qualities of the earlier works. Finally, there is a sense in which McMaster's view—in keeping with that of a number of critics—appears to draw insufficient distinction between the undeniable forcefulness and vitality of the *character* of Susan Vernon and the markedly more balanced nature of the *novella* itself, an aspect that, in turn, is related to a specific way of reading *Lady Susan*, one in which all ambits of the work, characters, action and themes are deemed marginal to the eponymous heroine.

¹⁰ Southam suggests that Mrs Percival is "[a]t heart... a woman of kindness and common sense, not altogether unlike Mrs. Jennings" (*Literary Manuscripts* 42), in reference to the matchmaking busybody of *Sense and Sensitivity* who, in spite of her excessive delight in others' affairs, turns out to be a stalwart of the Dashwood sisters' world. However, there are moments—as Mudrick (27) observes—when the aunt is more clearly a foreshadowing of Mrs Norris (*Northanger Abbey*), all of which tends to support the 'provisionality' of such a character: a detailed enough delineation, but still a sketch, yet one whose various facets, though inconsistent in *Catharine*, are sufficiently complex for a variety of future uses.

Separated by circumstances from her two greatest friends—who, on the death of their father (their mother having died previously to this), are obliged to fend for themselves—Catharine spends a good deal of time, alone and in quiet contemplation, in the bower¹¹ that the three girls had built in happier times. This rather mundane existence is interrupted by the visit of Mrs Percival's relatives, the Stanleys, whose vacuous daughter, Camilla, provides Catharine with her first direct and somewhat unsatisfactory taste of the wide world beyond her aunt's protection. The visit is, in turn, interrupted by the unexpected return from France—and even more unexpected appearance at the Percival's home—of the Stanleys' son, Edward (less vacuous than his sister and considerably more worldly¹²). To Mrs Percival's horror, Edward flirts outrageously and publicly with her niece—though this confirms the aunt's much-stated belief that the nation is going to ruin¹³—leaving poor Catharine confused as to the veracity of Edward's feelings, as well, indeed, as to her own. The novella—at least that part of it which can fully be attributed to Jane Austen—breaks off with Edward's sudden departure from Mrs Percival's house, and with some discussion of the possible reasons for this. Four additional paragraphs, whose authorship has been

¹¹ Beyond its obvious indication of sensibility, the symbolism of the bower has given rise to considerable critical discussion. See for example *Catharine or The Bower* (McMaster et al, Eds.), pp.ix-x and Walton Litz's reference to David Paul's observations, *Artistic Development*, p.36.

¹² Knox-Shaw (67) calls Edward “[Austen's] first attempt at a realistic portrait of a young man, and he is the first in a long line of listless heroes who answer well to Ferguson's picture of the modern malaise in having plenty of energy, but nothing to do”. The reference is to Adam Ferguson, historian of the Scottish Enlightenment, read and admired by Austen's brother, James, and possibly by Austen herself. See Knox-Shaw, pp.63; 67.

¹³ The insistence of such observations has—predictably—been of particular interest to Claudia Johnson (3), who sees in the comments made by Catharine's aunt the onset of a political view systematically expressed throughout Austen's fiction. Johnson observes that such “portentous moralizing on female virtue would remain not simply a laughable but also a very mean undertaking that reflects back unfavorably onto the speaker”. She refers here to various statements by Maria Bennet (*Pride and Prejudice*) and Mr Price (*Mansfield Park*), suggesting that closer analysis of such remarks, the contexts in which they are made and the narrative tone of disapproval that surrounds them, reveal how “Austen's differences with conservative apologetics ... stand out in bold relief”.

considerably debated,¹⁴ marginally extend the basic outlines of the narrative, but are also unfinished.¹⁵

A closer assessment of the novella will confirm much of the positive criticism that has been made of it. Recognising its far greater maturity of style in comparison with the earlier juvenilia, Mudrick (25) aptly observes that, in this work, Austen has begun “to sacrifice parody for self-sustaining characterization and plot. She moves out to claim and occupy a world already recognizable as the world of the novels”. The critical term in this comment is ‘self-sustaining’, which we take to mean ‘internally coherent, logical, consequent’ as it applies both to character and events. In sharp contrast to the almost surrealistically ‘expressionistic’ world of the early juvenilia¹⁶ (or, indeed, in comparison even with ‘Evelyn’, the dreamlike work from the same year as *Catharine*) the novella is a significant step towards narrative realism, in which the actions, motivations and speech of the characters, and the events that occur to them or are caused by them, are—by and large—a plausible reflection of reasonable events in the world of actual human experience. Although there are elements in this novella that undermine such plausibility (as we will

¹⁴ See *Catharine or The Bower* (McMaster et al, Eds.), p.xv and Doody and Murray, *Catharine and Other Writings*, p.xviii. See also Southam, *Literary Manuscripts* 16-17.

¹⁵ Warren Roberts views the unfinished form of the novella as indication of the fact that the story—which he sees as clearly influenced by aspects of Eliza de Feuillide’s life (identifying the Comte de Feuillide with Edward Stanley [21])—had become indelicate, at a family level, given the execution of Eliza’s husband: “[i]n this view, [Austen’s] pen was silenced by shock waves that moved from a politically convulsed France into the quiet recesses of rural Hampshire; as the news from Paris worsened Austen found the writing of ‘Catharine’ inappropriate” (22). See also n.114, Chapter One.

¹⁶ This description is largely in keeping with the assessment of the early juvenilia made by Margaret Doody. See “The Short Fiction”, especially pp.88-93.

discuss),¹⁷ and although the overall effect is still somewhat removed from the clear sense of narrative transparency that Nathaniel Hawthorne saw in Trollope's novels, declaring them to be "just as real as if some giant had hewn a great lump out of the earth, and put it under a glass case, with all its inhabitants going about their daily business and not suspecting they were made a show of",¹⁸ *Catharine* is evidently a serious approximation to the realism of Austen's later fiction. This is not to undervalue the literary inventiveness of characters such as, for example, Catharine or Camilla (very possibly initial studies for Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey*¹⁹); rather, it is to draw attention to the manner in which these characters have developed from the anarchic unpredictability of writings even as close in time to *Catharine* as *Love and Freindship* (1790). This can be seen early in the novella through the following fragment of conversation in which Catharine and Camilla discuss their taste in books. It is a conversation that is clearly humorous but which avoids much of the juvenilia's almost surrealistic disjuncture between aspects of the external world and the characters' comment upon such a world:

[Catharine]: "You have read Mrs Smith's Novels, I suppose?" said she to her Companion—"

[Camilla]: "Oh! Yes, replied the other, and I am quite delighted with them—They are the sweetest things in the world—"

"And which do you prefer of them?"

"Oh! dear, I think there is no comparison between them—Emmeline is *so much* better than any of the others—" ...

"...do you think it is better written?"

¹⁷ See p.105 ff. of this thesis.

¹⁸ Cited in Le Faye, Letters, p. xviii.

¹⁹ An often-commented connection. See, for example, Litz, *Artistic Development* (37).

“Oh! I do not know anything about that—but it is better in *every thing*—
Besides, Ethelinde²⁰ is so long—”

“That is a very common objection, I believe, said Kitty, but for my part, if a
book is well written, I always find it too short”.

(*MW* 199: original spelling and punctuation maintained).²¹

Camilla's empty-headedness is perhaps a little too emphatic (though not greatly, as Isabella Thorpe was to show), yet this cameo of the inane would-be society butterfly is largely effective precisely because of its essential credibility, albeit—of course—within the specific cultural and historical context of the 1790s. For her own part, Catharine's dialogue shows her to be, on the whole, an entirely believable young adult, with a generous sensitivity that is easily appealed to, despite a certain gravity that her upbringing in Mrs Percival's company nevertheless makes perfectly comprehensible (though this section will outline a number of other reservations concerning Catharine's character). The scene is set, in other words, for a realistic encounter between two basically convincing characters—both of them rather inexperienced—in a recognisable world, busying themselves with conceivable issues and subjects. This in turn is fundamentally supported by one of the main areas of artistic success in *Catharine*, its dialogue, which (some rhetorical excess apart)

²⁰ The second novel by Charlotte Smith (1749-1806), published in 1789, *Emmeline* (1788) being the first. Camilla's comment here is not unreasonable: the novel takes up no fewer than five volumes.

²¹ All further citations from *Catharine*, *Lady Susan* and *Love and Freindship* maintain the original spelling and punctuation. For an alternative perspective on both this very fragment and on *Catharine* as a whole, see Butler (*War of Ideas*, 170-171): “The striking feature of the conversation is its implicit moral frame of reference. Catharine is right to take the issue seriously, because it is a test case, a trial attempt at defining the good, which is the process upon which the moral life depends”. This is certainly true, but we feel that it somewhat overstates its case: it is one thing to represent *implicit* morality (even the most rudimentary depiction of Good and Evil would do so); quite another thing is to establish a systematic frame of reference within which to consider more complex moral issues. This—in our view—is one of the fundamental achievements of *Lady Susan*, and is another ambit in which the later novella is clearly more developed than *Catharine*. See this chapter, p.161, ff.

largely attains a high degree of pragmatic plausibility. If we contrast this fragment of a section from *Love and Freindship*, the change in style is dramatically evident:

“My beloved Laura (said [Sophia] to me a few Hours before she died) take warning from my unhappy End & avoid the imprudent conduct which has occasioned it...beware of fainting fits...Though at the time they may be refreshing & Agreeable yet beleive me they will in the end, if too often repeated & at improper seasons, prove destructive to your Constitution Beware of swoons Dear Laura...A frenzy fit is not one quarter so pernicious; it is an exercise to the Body & if not too violent, is I dare say conducive to health in its consequences—Run mad as often as you chuse; but do not faint—”.²²

It is, obviously, wholly unreasonable to compare these two fragments in terms of their *plausibility*; the latter excerpt is entirely intentional in its farcical juxtaposing of the apparently reasonable advice offered to a friend with the absurd activity—and the equally absurd niceness of distinction between its various forms—that is under discussion. Its very aim is riotous comedy, comedy that depends, in this case, upon the humorous ridiculing of highly excessive—and therefore improbable—sensibility.²³ What the comparison reveals is not so much an increased technical capability, however—the parody in *Love and Freindship* required considerable skill in tracing sufficiently recognisable types and situations and in generating its humour—but rather a fundamental shift in stylistic objective, away from satire, farce and burlesque and towards the creation of a ‘narratively transparent’ world.²⁴ That is, as McMaster observes (“Energy Versus Sympathy” 185), with *Catharine* we start to see the “artistic management, by a trustworthy narrator, of a reader

²² *MW* 102.

²³ For a fuller discussion of *Love and Freindship*, see p.136 ff. of this thesis.

²⁴ See Introduction, n.7, for further reference to this term.

called on to sympathize and identify partially with the protagonist", both of which actions depend fundamentally on the writer having created a recognisable, realistic and credible world—just as those found in the fiction of Austen's mature writing.

In accordance with this, Litz sees *Catharine* as "Austen's first full-scale attempt to place a heroine in a completely realistic social situation and probe her reactions to the complex (and often contradictory) demands of conventional morality and social custom",²⁵ in addition to remarking on its draft-like condition for *Northanger Abbey*, and its series of 'firsts': the first hypochondriac of many in Austen's fiction (Mrs Percival), and the first time the Cinderella motif is used in her writings. He concludes his study of the novella with the observation that Catharine's reactions to the changes brought about within her world, and the impossibly rigid moral framework imposed on her by her aunt, drive her away from 'sense' and ever closer to 'sensibility', suggesting that the effects of these concepts on character, and the ways in which they might affect and be affected by plot, were not only already on Austen's creative horizon but were actually being worked on. Southam's assessment of the novella is largely in agreement. He calls *Catharine* "the most important of the early works" ("Juvenilia", 253), remarking that Austen now distances herself from the models of Richardson and Burney²⁶ and "begins to discover her own method for describing domestic life, her own way of moving the story along quietly and in the tempo of a country neighbourhood, where the most exciting events are the arrivals of visitors and

²⁵ *Artistic Development*, p.37.

²⁶ See p.97 of this thesis for further remarks by Southam on Burney.

a ball".²⁷ Indeed, this partly identifies the essential character of realism in this novella: the very modesty of its narrative scope, a modesty that appears to have its bearing on the basic 'believability' of character, dialogue and events. There are no wild excursions to the Highlands, no mysterious castles or vengeful aristocrats, no unexpectedly tragic events shockingly concertinaed into less than a single line, and no anarchic defiance of authority, moral, legal or otherwise. Instead, we have a family visit, a local ball and a rather trivial moment of flirtation that—very largely for its novelty—causes more of an impression than might be expected. And yet, to recall Mudrick's words, this is indeed "a world already recognizable as the world of the novels". Southam (*Literary Manuscripts* 38) also observes that *Catharine*, "far in advance of anything she had attempted before", probably owed much to the influence of Frances Burney; but he is at pains to point out the significant differences between the two writers, which—in his assessment—basically come down to the implausibility of Burney's "adventure stories", as against *Catharine*'s "principal episodes developed with due regard to their place in the structure of the plot".²⁸ And he

²⁷ A comment probably intentionally reminiscent of Austen's renowned dictum about the ideal subject for writing a novel: "3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on" (Letter of 9 September 1814; Le Faye (Ed), *Jane Austen's Letters*, p.275). See also Southam's comments that "Jane Austen maintained that she would never write outside the bounds of her experience [in reference to Austen's Letter 126, April 1]; she also insisted upon the truth of representation. 'Catharine' is the first artistic statement of these principles, which were self-imposed" (*Literary Manuscripts* p.39). This is a somewhat unreasonable observation to be applied to Austen at this stage—the letter in which these 'principles' were stated dates from 1816, a year before Austen's death and very nearly 24 years after *Catharine* was written. Had these been Austen's principles from an early age, they would not only have been flouted throughout much of the juvenilia but would also have been hugely ignored in *Lady Susan*, a world far removed from the writer's 'bounds of experience', even if we accept that her cousin Eliza may have given Austen some account of the *beau monde* (see Chapter One, n.114 and also this chapter, n.65).

²⁸ *Literary Manuscripts* p.39. However, we would suggest that this presents a misleadingly uniform picture of Burney that the nature of her work in general does not appear to support. For example, Burney's rather more serious tone in *Camilla* (though the early volumes are markedly less sombre than the later) contrasts with the riotous, carnivalesque quality throughout *Evelina* and would seem to argue for almost two 'Burneys', the earlier of which is surely the figure that can more accurately be said to have influenced Austen at this point.

indicates three other areas in which the novella is particularly noteworthy: in *Catharine*, Austen creates an entirely new type of heroine, the model for Elinor Dashwood and Elizabeth Bennet, young women with an extraordinary sense of assuredness; the characters of Camilla, Edward and Mrs Percival are entirely successful—given the modesty of Austen's aim (portraying flat, static figures that experience no development)—and, finally, there is a “serious and disapproving analysis of [Camilla's] deficient education” (*Literary Manuscripts* 41), a concern that would often repeat itself in Austen's later work and an indication that her attention is already focussed on contemporary issues of a sober character that particularly affected the young, single women of her social standing.²⁹

In summarising Austen's objectives in *Catharine*, Southam (“*Juvenilia*” 253) observes that she wished to show:

How character is formed and defined in the events of ordinary life and how speech and behaviour are determined by a complex of personal and social considerations. But this material required a less restrictive form and in [*Catharine*] ... there is much freer treatment of these issues in direct narrative.

²⁹ The historian David Spring has called this the ‘pseudo-gentry’: professional families living in the country, having social ambitions and wishing to be accorded the status of full gentry, to whom they have close ties. The difference, as he points out, is their lack of ‘power and wealth’ that comes from landed income; the pseudo-gentry must earn their living through paid employment. Spring observes, however, that this class *does* in a certain sense nevertheless belong to the group to which it aspires, “primarily because they sought to be taken [as such]” through acquiring the same indicators of status as the true gentry (Cited in Copeland, “Money”, p. 132). Scott, writing in 1815, identifies Austen's social milieu as “the middling classes of society” (*Quarterly Review*). *Catharine* is not the only early work to raise such issues in a more or less serious way. ‘The three Sisters’, in spite of the comic tone maintained throughout, clearly articulates the frequently desperate preoccupation with money, marriage and financial settlement felt by single women of Austen's social class. See Owen, Chapter Two. For additional specific comment, see Southam (*Literary Manuscripts* 40), and—more generally—Copeland, “Money” and *Women Writing About Money*. For a succinct introduction to the issue of income in Austen, see *The Economist* (110-111), December 24th 2005. For further discussion of ‘The three Sisters’, see p.125 ff. of this thesis.

That is, what we have identified as the considerable achievements of *Catharine*, both inherently and, especially, in comparison to the earlier juvenilia, are specifically linked to the narrative form in which the novella was written. Is it the case, however, that this 'less restrictive form' is entirely successful in enabling Austen to fulfil these objectives? A close reading of the text would suggest that it is patently not so, and indeed the views of those critics who have studied the novella in detail, whilst recognising the importance of *Catharine* (as we have seen in this section), are nevertheless in broad agreement that, most particularly in the areas of style and characterisation, it presents a range of unresolved 'technical problems'.

Stylistically, the major brunt of critical dissatisfaction is borne by the novella's inconsistency; this in part is due to a technical inability to attain—and maintain—a sufficiently high quality of writing throughout, and in part corresponds to an apparent uncertainty about exactly what *form* of writing (burlesque or more serious) is being aimed at. Both Mudrick and Southam observe that the novella is incapable of sustaining the style that otherwise characterises it as a significant step towards the mature fiction. Mudrick (25) claims that *Catharine* "lapses several times from presentation into flat amateurish description and narrative". In rather similar terms, Southam ("Juvenilia" 254) suggests that "the prose often lapses into an elegant and formal periodic manner, satisfying and polished after its fashion, but somehow distanced and anonymous, [...showing] an irrelevant

concern for stylishness". Both comments are reasonable, as the following fragment indicates:

The living of Chetwynde was now in the possession of a Mr Dudley, whose Family unlike the Wynnes were productive only of vexation & trouble to Mrs Percival and her Neice. Mr Dudley, who was the Younger Son of a very noble Family, of a Family more famed for their Pride than their opulence, tenacious of his Dignity, and jealous of his rights, was forever quarrelling, if not with Mrs P. herself, with her Steward and Tenants concerning tythes, and with the principal Neighbours themselves concerning the respect and parade, he exacted. His Wife, an ill-educated, untaught woman of ancient family, was proud of that family almost without knowing, and like him too was haughty and quarrelsome, without considering for what. Their only daughter, who inherited the ignorance, the insolence & the pride of her parents, was from that Beauty of which she was unreasonably vain, considered by them an irresistible Creature, and looked up to as the future restorer, by a Splendid Marriage, of the dignity which their reduced Situation and Mr Dudley's being obliged to take orders for a Country Living had so much lessened.³⁰

This section, particularly characteristic of the novella's opening phase, is in effect a stylistic impediment to the more effective flow of the narrative. In terms of what we have of *Catharine*, it is fair to say that the information given here is essentially excessive and even irrelevant (although Austen may have planned a fuller exploitation of the Dudley family at a later point), and that its Johnsonian rhetorical balance³¹—and the frequency—of paired

³⁰ MW 195-196.

³¹ Litz indicates, "The Juvenilia" 4-5, that much of Austen's early rhetorical style was based on—and (as a probable contributor) sharpened in—*The Loiterer*, the weekly periodical that her brothers James and Henry edited in 1789-90 whilst students in Oxford, and modelled in certain measure on the *Rambler*. Additionally, Knuth observes that Litz (in "*The Loiterer*") "gives evidence for the style and tone of the family's literary environment that produced the brothers' often epistolary imitations of Johnson's *Rambler* and their sister's early work [...pointing] to *Loiterer* N° 27 as bearing a close resemblance to *Lady Susan*" (218). However, Doody ("Reading", 347-348), disagrees that Johnson's rhetorical influence was as central to Austen's style as is commonly supposed, positing instead the stylistic importance to her of the Book of Common Prayer: "[i]t is (Continued on the next page)

items such as *pride and opulence, respect and parade, haughty and quarrelsome* does indeed seem to show an unnecessary concern with stylistic form over actual content.

What is also apparent, stylistically (as we have already mentioned³²) is Austen's uncertainty as to what kind of novel she is writing. The opening pages of *Catharine* are an uneasy mixture of the burlesque that we see in much of the earlier juvenilia, along with indications that something far more ambitious and serious in tone is being attempted. Southam's perceptive comment on this draws attention to the discrepancy between the portrait of "mild sentimental colouring"³³ given by the initial description of Catharine and the realistic description of characters and events that surround her. The novella's first paragraph apparently sets up a mock-heroic tone, as if preparing the reader for a humorous treatment of the story, as these ironic suggestions concerning Mrs Percival's 'tenderness' reveal:

Catharine had the misfortune, as many heroines have had before her, of losing her Parents when she was very young, and of being brought up under the care of a Maiden Aunt, who while she tenderly loved her, watched over her conduct with so scrutinizing a severity, as to make it very doubtful to many people, and to Catharine amongst the rest, whether she loved her or not.³⁴

here... that we must look for the origin of Austen's balanced and coordinated sentences rather than to the later and more partial influence of Johnson".

³² See p.99 of this thesis.

³³ *Literary Manuscripts* 40.

³⁴ *MW* 192.

This is almost immediately followed, however, by a lengthy and entirely serious passage on the bower, which, if stylistically still a little overly self-conscious, nevertheless approaches a 'neutrality' of narrative voice that broadly succeeds in harmonising content and style in favour of a more transparent mode of description:

To this Bower, which terminated a very pleasant and retired walk in her Aunt's Garden, she always wandered whenever anything disturbed her, and it possessed such a charm over her senses, as constantly to tranquillize her mind & quiet her spirits—Solitude and reflection might perhaps have had the same effect in her Bed Chamber, yet habit had so strengthened the idea which Fancy had first suggested, that such a thought never occurred to Kitty who was firmly persuaded that her Bower alone could restore her to herself. Her imagination was warm, and in her Freindships, as well as in the whole tenure of her Mind, she was enthousiastic.³⁵

This avoids the "entangled and artificial"³⁶ language typical of Austen's juvenilia burlesque pieces (and that so clearly privileges style over content), thus creating—as we have observed³⁷—an obstacle to effective narrative movement) and which is typical too, at times, of writing such as Burney's, so influential to *Catharine*.³⁸ Yet, between these extremes, we also find passages closer in apparent seriousness of tone to the 'bower' fragment, though evidently still marked by an artificiality of style that situate them largely within the realm of the language of emotional excess and burlesque, as the following section indicates:

³⁵ MW 193.

³⁶ The term is Doody's, in reference to Burney (Introduction to *Evelina* xv), but is clearly also apt for Austen in this context.

³⁷ See p.100 of this thesis.

³⁸ See Halperin, p.37, who observes that *Catharine* was "undoubtedly written both under and against the influence of such novels by Frances Burney as *Evelina* (1778) and *Cecilia* (1782)". On Burney's far-reaching influence on the women writers who followed her, see also Pearson ("Mothering the Novel").

In those days of happy Childhood, now so often regretted by Kitty, this arbour had been formed, and separated perhaps forever from these dear freinds, it encouraged more than any other place the tender and Melancholy recollections of hours rendered pleasant by *them*, at one [sic] so sorrowful, yet so soothing!³⁹

Stylistically charged expressions such as “tender and Melancholy recollections” or “sorrowful [and] soothing” sit uneasily with incipient narrative neutrality, and this shift between styles leaves the reader rather unsure as to the general tone and direction of the novella. Taken together, this stylistic inconsistency—both of tone and content—points to the fact that Austen’s artistic immaturity at this stage effectively prevents her from making the change, fully, completely and convincingly from the world of her earlier farce into the plausible reality of her later comedy.⁴⁰ Austen’s description of the aunt’s excessive reaction to the merest possibility of a cold provides a further indication of this problem:

“I am astonished at my own imprudence, said Mrs Percival; How could I be so forgetful as to sit down out of doors at such a time of night [it is only very early evening]. I shall certainly have a return of my rheumatism after it—I begin to feel very chill already. I must have caught a dreadful cold by this time—I am sure of being lain-up all the winter after it—” Then reckoning with her fingers, “Let me see; This is July; the cold weather will soon be coming in—August, September, October, November, December, January, February, March, April—Very likely I may not be tolerable again before May. I must and will have that arbour pulled down—it will be the death of me; who knows *now* but what I may never recover—Such things have happened—My particular friend Miss Sarah Hutchinson’s death was occasioned by nothing more—She staid out late one Evening in April, and got wet through for it rained very hard, and never changed her Cloathes

³⁹ MW194.

⁴⁰ This builds on Southam’s suggestions in *Literary Manuscripts* 42: “The situation was ripe for development. However, Jane Austen was not ready to translate farce in to high comedy”.

when she came home—It is unknown how many people, have died in consequence of catching Cold!⁴¹

Certainly, an over-reaction to a slight physical ailment (particularly if it is imaginary) is recognisable as hypochondria, and as such may be reasonably within the bounds of Mrs Percival's character; but the rather heavy detailing of this, the laborious counting out of the months, the theatrical suggestion of death as a consequence of this 'grave' oversight, all of this harks back more fully to the parody and caricature of writings such as *Love and Freindship* rather than looking forward to the gentle irony in much of the later fiction. That is, there are still too many elements here that typify her previous stage of literary development, causing a stylistic imbalance in the text (between the burlesque and the serious) and generally privileging the exaggerated, riotous and immediately comic effect over the quieter, more understated tone that she appears otherwise to be aiming for. In light of this, we therefore posit that what Southam termed the "less restrictive form" of *Catharine*, the direct-narrative mode, actually misled the inexperienced Austen into an insufficiently economic style of writing, by allowing her to give an uncontrolled rein to her highly competent but not always greatly relevant sense of literary creativity (an aspect of her early writing that Mudrick calls "glittering...but rather rambling"⁴²). As we will consider later, the sophisticated use of the letter form, in part through the physical constraint of the letter itself, goes some considerable way towards 'disciplining' this stylistic tendency.

⁴¹ MW233.

⁴² Mudrick, 139.

With respect to the characters in *Catharine*, Mudrick (27) comments that they are “miscellaneous..., more or less entertaining in themselves, but [have] no discernible relations with each other, or even with themselves from situation to situation”. As a general observation, however, this seems unfair: certainly, as we will consider below, there is a troublesome irregularity in Catharine herself, but the other characters—particularly Camilla, Edward and Mrs Percival, though clearly not dynamic in the sense that they undergo no change or development—are otherwise effective in their credible, though strictly limited, inter-connectedness. The difficulty is not so much with the ‘minor’ characters; rather, it is with Catharine: not unlike the problem of stylistic inconsistency in the novella itself, her character fluctuates between ‘modes of being’ that are too distinct—even incompatible—to be credibly tenable for a single individual within so short a period of time. Essentially, she ranges from the mock-heroic figure of Austen’s burlesque writing, through to the intelligent, articulate and assured young woman who finds Camilla so endlessly exasperating, then falls back into the role of sentimental heroine, an “ingénue of foolish simplicity” (Southam, *Literary Manuscripts* 39), when she comes into contact with Edward—though given her lack of worldly experience, this latter dimension to her character may not be entirely unrealistic. We have already seen how the text reflects Catharine’s apparently mock-heroic status at its opening (thesis, p.101); the change from this to the more self-possessed figure we see in her dealings most especially with Camilla is evident in the following sections:

[Mrs Stanley]: "Queen Elizabeth...lived to a good old age, and was a very Clever Woman"

[Catharine]: "True Ma'am...but I do not consider either of those Circumstances as meritorious in herself, and they are very far from making me wish her return, for if she were to come again with the same Abilities and the same Constitution She might do as much Mischief and last as long as she did before..."⁴³

...do you call it lucky, for a Girl of Genius & Feeling to be sent in quest of a Husband to Bengal, to be married there to a Man of whose Disposition she has no opportunity of Judging till her Judgement is of no use to her, who may be a Tyrant, or a Fool or both for what she knows to the Contrary. Do you call *that* fortunate?⁴⁴

In the first fragment, we almost hear the voice of Elizabeth Bennet, mildly ironic, self-confident and disarmingly outspoken wherever injustice (or perceived injustice) is concerned. In the second fragment, the strength of Catharine's convictions and by extension the vitality and seriousness of her character are emphasised through contrast with Camilla, whose failure—in response to this comment—to see even minimally beyond the perceived romanticism of such events into the stark social and financial realities that then configured women's lives acts as a touchstone with which to gauge Catharine's intellectual and emotional superiority. Camilla retorts:

I cannot conceive of the hardship of going out in a very agreeable Manner with two or three sweet Girls for companions, having a delightful voyage to Bengal or Barbadoes or wherever it is, and being married soon after one's

⁴³ MW 201.

⁴⁴ MW 205. This is one of the most renowned passages in the novella, reiterating the concern for the options facing single young women of reduced financial circumstances that Austen had already started to articulate (see this chapter, n.29) and is also of interest for its possible historical basis: Austen's maternal aunt, Philadelphia Austen (1730-1792), underwent a similar experience. See Le Faye, *Jane Austen's 'Outlandish Cousin'*, especially Chapter One, *My Dear Betsy*.

arrival to a very charming Man immensely rich—. I see no hardship in all that.⁴⁵

This is the side of Catharine's character that Litz calls "the more typical, perhaps autobiographical, Austen heroine, whose most seductive avatar is [as our previous comments concur] Elizabeth Bennet" (27). And it is an extraordinary feat, particularly given the writer's age, matched in the juvenilia perhaps only once (and then very briefly and inconsistently) by the delineation of Georgiana Stanhope in *The Three Sisters*.⁴⁶ Nor is this assuredness limited to her dealings with Camilla; we also see it in her responses to her aunt's excessive zeal for attributing national calamity to Catharine's personal 'misdemeanours' (to Mrs Percival's suggestion that Catharine had given "a bad example to the world", her niece replies [*MW* 233] "Pardon me Madam... but I *can* have given an Example only to You, for You alone have seen the offence") and it is even present, on occasion, with Edward. The initial repartee with her unexpected visitor (*MW* 215), an event that so threw her off her guard—being at that moment alone in the house—that she was for some instants physically afraid of the circumstances facing her, shows her to have an admirable ability to take control of the unpredictable, despite her sheltered upbringing. But even given all of this, her sense of assuredness is not sufficiently sustained to be entirely, fully effective: towards the end of her first conversation with Edward, we see Catharine's reversion to the character mode of sentimental heroine, her self-possession and the

⁴⁵ *MW* 205.

⁴⁶ However, another plausible candidate would be 'Miss Maria' (*A Collection of Letters*, 'Letter the third', *MW* 155-160).

seriousness of her early conversation now swiftly undermined by her visitor's charm, even in spite of its socially indecorous tone and content:

[Edward]: But my dear Miss Percival, what do you say to my accompanying you [to the ball]? And suppose you were to dance with me too? I think it would be *very* pleasant

[Catharine]: I can have no objection to either, I am sure, said Kitty laughing... on the contrary I shall be highly honoured by both, and I can answer for Your being extremely welcome to the Family who give the ball.⁴⁷

And this is again apparent, after Edward's sudden departure, when Camilla assures Catharine of her brother's affection for her:

"How can you be so ridiculous? Said Kitty smiling with pleasure; I do not believe him to be so easily affected. But he *did* desire his Love to me then? And wished I might not be married before his return? And said I was a Nice Girl, did he?"⁴⁸

It is not the fact that Catharine should react to Edward with such naivety—or to Camilla's opinions with such delight—that causes difficulties with her character at this point. We have suggested that, in a certain sense and given the lack of contact that she has had with other young people, this liveliness and openness is perfectly justifiable and coherent.⁴⁹ The

⁴⁷ *MW* 217. In fact, Catharine can do no such thing. Uninvited attendance at a ball was a severe breach of social etiquette, independently of whether or not the transgressor was related to other guests, as the hosts' reaction to Edward clearly reveals (*MW* 221). Her failure to comprehend the social inadequacy of her joint arrival with Edward, his uninvited presence and—prior to this—her enthusiastic participation in his flirtatious conversation (itself indicative of his lack of decorum and respect), can be read as further pointers to her character's return to the sentimental figure of the novella's opening.

⁴⁸ *MW* 237.

⁴⁹ Indeed, McMaster ("Juvenilia" 185) suggests that, with certain aspects of Catharine's characterisation, "[w]e are in the realm now of human and realistic character, of nuanced and subtle psychology".

difficulty arises from the manner in which 'this' Catharine so little resembles the Catharine we see, for example, in her remarks on Bengal or Queen Elizabeth. For, whilst we might be tempted into viewing this as a compellingly realistic portrait of the complex—sometimes incongruous—behaviour and attitudes of an over-protected, under-experienced young adult, it would more plausibly, in the broader context of the limitations of this novella, appear to indicate a stylistic discrepancy that Austen fails to address or resolve, leaving us with two almost unrelated characters who happen to share the same identity. As Southam observes (*Literary Manuscripts* 40), these contrasting aspects do not “compose a single, unified personality” and result in an imbalance of character that echoes the stylistic imbalance of the work as a whole.

A related technical difficulty presented by Catharine's character is the failure of external events to significantly shape her development through experience. Particularly, as Mudrick (27) points out, Mrs Percival's “extravagant malice” appears not to have influenced Catharine's personality or even greatly to have affected her actions: indeed, “[t]he author seems to be experimenting with characterization in a vacuum”.⁵⁰ That is, the character as we have it appears to be autonomous, closed, largely unaffected by the circumstances and action within *Catharine's* world in terms of its growth, and it is therefore reasonable to assert that this is still something of a provisional sketch—however capably drawn—rather than the fully effective study of personality that Austen's later work would produce. More direct and more fully detailed access to Catharine's thoughts would

⁵⁰ Mudrick, 27. In even clearer terms, Southam (*Literary Manuscripts* 42) suggests that Austen was unable “to make this sphere of violent external action a shaping element in the heroine's experience”.

surely have facilitated the attempt at greater consistency of character, as well as allowing insight into the manner in which events can both affect and give shape to personality, thus illustrating plausible growth and change. Such access could be attained in a variety of ways; one approach would be through a more developed authorial or narrative voice, capable of providing direct—even intimate—comment and reflection on the events being described, and so guiding and forming the reader's comprehension. But it is apparent that, at this stage of her writing, Austen had not yet been able to articulate such a voice sufficiently clearly. Her technical masterstroke in later writing was free indirect speech, a stylistic mode that essentially mixes dialogue with narrative comment in what Litz terms Austen's "major legacy to the nineteenth-century novel".⁵¹ Certainly, as Marilyn Butler has pointed out for this novella, there are moments when Austen comes very close to achieving such a technique,⁵² though never quite close enough for the fusion of speech and authorial comment to give us the intimacy of access that we have in the later novels. At this point it is useful to recall David Lodge's definition,⁵³ namely, that the technique ("which Jane Austen was the first English novelist to use extensively"):

... consists of reporting the thoughts of a character in language that approximates more or less closely to their own idiolect and deleting the introductory tags, such as "he thought"..., that grammar would normally require in a well-formed sentence... [and allows] the novelist to give the reader intimate access to a character's thoughts without totally surrendering control of the discourse to that character".

(Lodge, *The Language of Fiction*, 175).

⁵¹ "The Juvenilia" 5.

⁵² The writing "so closely tracks the heroine's consciousness that it often approximates to 'free indirect speech'", cited by Litz, "The Juvenilia" 5.

⁵³ Introduction to this thesis, n.4.

This helps us to appreciate that Catharine's dialogue in the novella pertains to a more 'static' mode of presentation in which speech and comment, character and narrator, are conventionally separated. Consider the following two extracts from *Catharine* in contrast to a fragment from *Emma*, this latter cited in Bray (*The Epistolary Novel*, 21-22). As we can observe, in the first very brief extract, although Catharine's displeasure and frustration with Camilla is made evident, the 'distance' between actor and reporter, between speech and comment, is strictly maintained by the narrative mode of description. The second extract, on the other hand, would indeed seem to make an attempt to closely 'track the heroine's consciousness',⁵⁴ yet it does so in a way that never breaks with the conventional relationship between narrator and narrated, which, as Leech and Short define it, makes obligatory use of the third-person pronoun and past tense.⁵⁵ That is, the fusion of both perspectives, that of Catharine and that of the narrator, does not occur. However, the third fragment is rendered more effective and dynamic precisely through the manner in which the narrative mode combines both comment and dialogue so that, in effect, we gain more intimate access to Emma's innermost feelings and emotions at this critical juncture in the novella.

"Well, said Kitty [after a disagreement with Camilla], this is a subject on which we shall never agree and therefore it will be useless to continue it

⁵⁴ See n.52.

⁵⁵ See Bray (2003), 22.

further, or to mention it again—" She then left the room, and running out of the House was soon in her dear Bower...⁵⁶

[Catharine] reflected on their past conversation [i.e., that with Edward], and tho' it had been on various & indifferent subjects, and she could not exactly recollect any speech on his side expressive of [his] partiality, she was still however nearly certain of it's being so. But fearful of being vain enough to suppose such a thing without sufficient reason, she resolved to suspend her final determination on it, till the next day, and more especially till their parting which she thought would infallibly explain his regard if any he had—.⁵⁷

'Have you any idea of Mr Knightley's returning your affection?'
'Yes,' replied Harriet modestly, but not fearfully—'I must say that I have.'
Emma's eyes were instantly withdrawn; and she sat silently meditating, in a fixed attitude, for a few minutes. A few minutes were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart. A mind like her's [sic], once opening to suspicion, made rapid progress. She touched—she admitted—she acknowledged the whole truth. Why was it so much worse that Harriet should be in love with Mr Knightley, than with Frank Churchill? Why was the evil so dreadfully increased by Harriet's having some hope of return? It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr Knightley must marry no one but herself!

(*Emma*, 335).

The above extract shows how Austen's use of free indirect style unifies the outlooks both of Emma and of the narrator, interconnecting their 'consciousness'. As Bray (22) observes, the questions "[w]hy was it so much worse that Harriet should be in love with Mr Knightley, than with Frank Churchill? Why was the evil so dreadfully increased by Harriet's having some hope of return?" are Emma's, not the narrator's. The final dramatic exclamation and the questions that precede it "would not be found in an indirect report of

⁵⁶ *MW* 206-207.

⁵⁷ *MW* 235.

thought... [however] their 'third-person pronouns and past tense'⁵⁸ are restrained, suggesting the continued perspective of the narrator”.

The veracity of Litz’s observation (“The Juvenilia” 5) that Austen possibly “felt [at the time of writing *Catharine*] that she did not have the skills needed for sustained “free indirect speech”” is moot. What *is* clear, however, is that the direct narrative mode as it stands in this novella does not allow sufficient access to the protagonist’s thoughts. As we have suggested,⁵⁹ such access—in revealing Catherine’s interests, ideas and preoccupations more intimately and accurately from the outset—would have been of considerable support in establishing a fuller portrait and, as a result, in attaining greater consistency of character, and would have facilitated a more complete development of that character in light of the experiences she undergoes.

We have observed⁶⁰ that a more refined narrative voice, such as that in free indirect speech, is one way of stylistically creating privileged understanding of character; another approach, of course, is the epistolary, which directly provides us with the transcriptions of intimate thought. As we will maintain in the discussion of *Lady Susan*, as regards establishing insight into character—and so delineating character development more effectively and consistently, as well as the manner in which character is affected by

⁵⁸ Cited from Leech and Short (*Style in Fiction* 325).

⁵⁹ See p.109 of this thesis.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

external events—it is Austen's sophisticated use of the letter form that succeeds where the direct narrative form, in the stage of development that we find it in *Catharine*, fails.

In short, and in spite of the very considerable progress that *Catharine* represents over the earlier juvenilia, there appears to be significant room for artistic improvement in the novella, particularly with respect to inconsistency in style and characterisation. As we have posited,⁶¹ stylistic irregularity in *Catharine* affects both the novella's quality and the precise form of writing being aimed at; inconsistency of character basically affects *Catharine*, whose portrait is inadequately uniform for complete plausibility. Furthermore, we are given little or no direct access to *Catharine*'s inner thoughts. Consequently, the character—insufficiently shaped and developed by circumstances—appears to be somewhat disconnected from the world she inhabits, an effect that has the further outcome of undermining the otherwise largely successful sense of reality achieved within the novella. We argue that these shortcomings, though in no sense the consequence of direct narrative *per se*, are nevertheless made more patent and are, in effect, aggravated by the use of this narrative mode in the context of Austen's level of technical competence at this time. We will argue⁶² in light of this that Austen's subsequent use of the epistolary, rather than a retreat in awe from the achievements of *Catharine* ("as if Jane Austen were frightened by what she discovered in writing [the novella]"⁶³), or a disappointed return to a technically less demanding form in light of her literary 'failure' in this stylistic experiment, actually

⁶¹ See pp.104 and 105 of this thesis.

⁶² See especially p.207 ff. of this thesis.

⁶³ Litz, "The Juvenilia" 5.

helps the young writer overcome these obstacles and leads, as a result, to her improved artistic capability.

A final comment should, naturally, be reserved for the unfinished character of the novella. Litz suggests—in our view, rather implausibly—that the work “remained unfinished because Jane Austen did not yet know enough of the world Catharine was about to enter”.⁶⁴ If this were to be the criteria for Austen’s early literary production, it would arguably have prevented her from even attempting to delineate the world of *Lady Susan*,⁶⁵ or indeed any other world that lay outside the immediate circle of her direct, personal experience. Others have suggested the difficulty of continuing the novella with such an unsatisfactory hero as Edward.⁶⁶ Southam (“Juvenilia” 253) suggests that Austen realised “the weakness in her drawing of the heroine. She may also have been dissatisfied with the style of the narrative, which is very far from the ideal manner of social comedy”, both of which are aspects that our assessment of the novella has highlighted. However, perhaps the most perceptive comment on the early termination of the novella, a comment that

⁶⁴ Litz, *Artistic Development*, p.39.

⁶⁵ In the sense that this comment appears to suggest a connection between personal experience and literary creativity, it is therefore curious that Litz (*Artistic Development*, p.41) strikes cautionary notes with respect to the notion of bibliographical events in Austen’s life as primary sources for her literary creation in *Lady Susan* (as does Southam, still more emphatically: *Literary Manuscripts* 143-149). However, Buck (203-204) rejects this approach, suggesting instead that Austen’s “own experience, limited though critics claim, offered models for her shocking heroine”. See also Knuth, 217-218. For additional comment, see the closing remarks both to n.114 (Chapter One) and n.27 (Chapter Two).

⁶⁶ *Catharine or The Bower* (McMaster et al, Eds.), p.xiii. The editors of this edition also suggest the possibility that “after returning to [the novella] between 1809 and 1811, she thought that she was too old to maintain the style of the existing part with any degree of continuity. After all, just as the *Bower* is the product of young, female hands, so is *Catharine*. And perhaps Austen wanted it to remain so, without the intrusiveness of “improvement”—a sentiment which Gilpin would certainly have approved”.

recognises and emphasises the essential *provisionality* of the work, is that by Marvin Mudrick (27), who observes that:

“Catharine” is, finally, a kind of grab-bag of attractive bits and pieces, of characters like the heroine and her aunt, of very tentative approaches to the perennial situation of the novels, the spirited middle-class girl in search of honorable marriage; a collection of fragments which Jane Austen will have the time and skill to sort and organize later.

In other words, what *Catharine* represents above all is not so much development from the earlier juvenilia—although this is unquestionably true and of undoubted significance—but rather a stylistic profile of Austen’s *potential* for future achievement once the technical difficulties that we have outlined in this analysis of the novella had been resolved. We maintain that, in large measure, the solution to these difficulties came with—and not in spite of—the next phase in Austen’s development: her refined and effective use of the epistolary in *Lady Susan*.

2.2 *Lady Susan*

Lady Susan is, in effect, the story of a clash of wills between Lady Susan Vernon, the eponymous heroine of the novella,⁶⁷ and her sister-in-law, Mrs Vernon, mistress of the house in which Lady Susan has invited herself to stay. Their conflict centres largely on the emotional control of Reginald De Courcy, Mrs Vernon’s brother and heir to the De Courcy

⁶⁷ This is the conventional view of Susan Vernon, which accords the principal focus of attention to her, and has been, consequently, to the detriment of the importance given to Mrs Vernon. Our reading of the novella seeks to redress this imbalance (see pp.160 and 166 of this thesis).

family estate, but also broadens to take in the fate of Frederica, Lady Susan's practically abandoned and certainly much mistreated daughter. Whereas Mrs Vernon represents "positive, constructive and socially cohesive values",⁶⁸ Lady Susan's Machiavellian scheming and duplicity stand for quite the opposite. In this sense, the novella essentially outlines two ambits, one whose members strive to ensure the triumph of what we might broadly call 'Good' (this would include Mrs Vernon, her mostly ineffectual husband, her parents, Mr Johnson and Mrs Manwaring), and another whose members appear bent on—and to delight in—undermining the order and propriety represented by the Vernon camp, seeking instead to ensure the prevalence of their own subversive values (this would include Lady Susan herself, Alice Johnson and Mr Manwaring).⁶⁹ Caught between these two worlds, pawn-like in a game that they cannot control, however much they may try and however much they believe themselves capable of affecting change, are Frederica and Reginald. Thus, the battle lines are drawn.

Exactly when *Lady Susan* was written has been the object of some controversy,⁷⁰ although it is now generally accepted to have been around 1794, with the non-epistolary

⁶⁸ Alexander and Owen, "Lady Susan: a Re-evaluation of Jane Austen's Epistolary Novel" (In Press [Spring 2006]).

⁶⁹ This scenario is largely in accordance with most critical assessment, which views Susan Vernon and her close companions as 'Bad', in moral contrast to the opposing camp (conventionally seen as weak as well as 'Good')—the victims of their schemes and objects of their scorn. Breaking with this dichotomy, Buck outlines a compelling alternative, based on Nodding's *Women and Evil*, which challenges the "dualistic thinking that has dominated systems of Western thought since Plato originated the either-or model" (202) consequently recognising in Susan Vernon the simultaneous quality of "wicked woman" and heroine. Such a view partly echoes the groundbreaking reading of this character by Mudrick, in which it is claimed that "[t]he world defeats Lady Susan, not because it recognizes her vices, but because her virtues have no place in it" (138): see pp.197-199 of this thesis.

⁷⁰ As indeed are the possible sources for this work, which is either seen as being based on characters and (in part) events in Austen's own life or else as deriving its style and content, markedly distinct from that of her (Continued on the next page)

conclusion being added several years later. Alexander and Owen summarise the dating issue—one that, for a number of reasons,⁷¹ is central to any acceptance of the role of the novella in Austen's early writing—in the introduction (ix-xii) to the Juvenilia Press edition:

The transcription of *Lady Susan* was made some time after 1805, since although the fair copy is undated two of the leaves (nos. 44 and 45) carry a watermark of this date; and it is generally assumed, following Mary Lascelles ... that the conclusion was added at this time. R.W. Chapman believed that the whole story was written about 1805, because of its sophistication. Brian Southam... disagrees, arguing that the style, structure, and characterization are similar to that of *Catharine*.... [adding that] "there is nothing in the "Conclusion" which would argue a date of composition much later than that we assign to the body of the work"... Family tradition suggests that *Lady Susan* was "an early production" ... and most critics now concur that "the body of the work" was probably written soon after *Catharine*... Thus a composition date of about 1794 is usually allotted to *Lady Susan* and it is one that accords well with the content and form of the novel, both of which look back to the juvenilia and also forward to the mature writings.

We agree with such a dating for the epistolary section of the novella and, largely in accordance with Lascelles *et al.*—on the stylistic grounds of the considerable discrepancy between the two modes of writing—also accept a c.1805-1809 dating for the conclusion.⁷²

later works, largely from French models. The autobiographical view focuses on the possible connection between *Lady Susan* and Eliza de Feuillide, as well as on a particularly unsavoury acquaintance of the Austen family, Mrs Craven (see Southam, *Literary Manuscripts* 145-149; Chapman, *Facts and Problems* 52 and Litz, *Artistic Development* 41). Literary sources include, somewhat controversially, Pierre-Choderlos de Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782: see Tomalin 84-85) in addition to, far more generally, the works of earlier eighteenth-century writers such as Sheridan and Fielding. I am grateful to Professor Juliet McMaster (personal correspondence 02/10/2005) for the suggestion that *Lady Susan* echoes certain parts of *Shamela*. For Susan Vernon as continuation of the tradition of the 'Merry Widow' figure, see Levine, 23-34. Butler, who has argued for a later dating for the composition of *Lady Susan*, ("Simplicity" 6: see also thesis, Introduction n.11), suggests that "[t]he main plot, involving an unscrupulous woman visitor to an English country house, imitates Maria Edgeworth's epistolary novel *Leonora* (1806)". See also this chapter, n. 31, n.65 and thesis, Chapter One n. 114 for further comment.

⁷¹ See p.183 ff. of this thesis.

⁷² See Alexander and Owen, "*Lady Susan*: a Re-evaluation of Jane Austen's Epistolary Novel" (In Press [Spring 2006]). "[I]n 1809...Austen appears to have been re-evaluating her earlier writing. She returned to (Continued on the next page)

Southam's view of Austen's epistolary novella is that it was written "as an exercise in correcting [the] technical and stylistic faults" present in *Catharine*.⁷³ This is an often-cited remark, but one little commented upon. And yet, the observation synthesises a basic problem in much critical assessment of *Lady Susan*: if, as the majority of critics maintain, *Lady Susan* was written in a regressive form, how coherent is it to then suggest the use of this very form for solving the 'technical and stylistic' problems of the more evolved narrative style used in *Catharine*? However, by raising such a paradox, Southam's view helps throw into relief the central hypothesis of this thesis, which is that it was precisely through the use of the epistolary in *Lady Susan* that Austen's later direct-narrative achievements were shaped and sharpened. And this in turn brings into question both the *regressiveness* of the epistolary as used in this novella and, beyond this, the validity of an evolutionary model that posits notions of novelistic development in terms of 'linear' progression from the *inferior* form of the epistolary to the *superior* form of the third-person narrative.

Catharine to update a literary reference (replacing Archbishop Secker's 1769 work on catechism with Hannah More's newly published *Cælebs in Search of a Wife...* At the same, she made other revisions to her juvenilia, including inserting the date "August 19th 1809" in *Evelyn*. Since this is the period associated with her revival of literary activity, it is possible that the fair copy and even the conclusion of *Lady Susan* were both made about this date, rather than as early as 1805 (which is simply the watermark on the paper she used)".

⁷³ *Literary Manuscripts* 46.

2.2.1 Critical Voices of Dissent

“There are... two large facts about *Lady Susan*: it is a quintessence of Jane Austen’s most characteristic qualities and interests; and it is her first completed masterpiece. Both facts have been generally ignored”.⁷⁴ The final phrase in Mudrick’s observation is not by any means an exaggeration, even today. Critically, *Lady Susan* has almost always been cast in a negative light: the traditional consensus has been that the novella is, artistically speaking, flawed, unsuccessful as an experiment and a regressive phase in Austen’s stylistic development. Indeed, *Lady Susan* might appear to be—from certain perspectives—little more than a curiosity, largely irrelevant to Austen’s later attainments. Such perspectives inevitably focus themselves on the formal properties of the work, that is, on its epistolarity. Knuth (219) reviews some of the major critical reservations, such as those made by Litz (“a dead end, an interesting but unsuccessful experiment in a dying form based on outmoded manners”, to which we would add his remark that “Jane Austen’s recognition of failure is reflected in the abrupt breaking-off of the letters and the inadequate Conclusion. It would seem that in *Lady Susan* she undertook a subject beyond her technical control”, *Artistic Development*, 45 & 44); Drabble (“[the form is] not suited to [Austen’s] talents”, *Lady Susan, The Watsons and Sanditon*, 9) and John Lauber, who sees the conclusion as proof positive that Austen “clearly had become impatient with the novel-in-letters form” (*Jane Austen*, 16), a remark closely mirroring Lascelles’ well-known position that the conclusion shows Austen “[having] lost patience with the device of the novel-in-letters,” (14). Even

⁷⁴ Mudrick, 138.

work of more recent production has maintained this view of *Lady Susan* as stylistically limiting, a form running counter-current to the type of development that Austen would need to undergo in order to progress more solidly towards her later work. Waldron (25), for example, suggests that if "Austen's drive was towards complexity of character and an escape from moral paradigms, it is easy to see why the novel-in-letters did not suit her".

The general view, then, appears to be that *Lady Susan*—however interesting—was a failure. This perception, as we have remarked throughout, one which underpins a great deal of Austen criticism, largely corresponds to the developmental view of the growth of the novel that deems the epistolary to be an unsuccessful prototype, and reinforces the notion that Austen's stylistic progress was effectively held in check until such a time as she saw fit to reject the constraints of the letter form.

We have already commented (thesis, p.61) on the manner in which the earliest criticism on Austen was not concerned with the epistolary, and have noted the tone of embarrassment with which Austen-Leigh (201) justified his publication of *Lady Susan* ("scarcely [a tale] on which a literary reputation could have been founded: but though like some plants, it may be too slight to stand alone, it may, perhaps, be supported by the strength of her more firmly rooted works"). Not until the more professional academic approaches of the first half of the twentieth century do we begin to see more balanced, critical assessment of Austen's novella raising the issues that broadly continue to be of concern to contemporary critics.

The first of these 'modern' critical considerations, as we have detailed (thesis, p.62), is Mary Lascelles' *Jane Austen and Her Art*. And although the attention she gives both to the epistolary—and more specifically to *Lady Susan*—is notably limited, her comments have nevertheless been of enormous significance. For whilst it is certainly true that Lascelles' assertions on the stylistically based rejection of epistolary form are unsupported and, indeed, are almost parenthetical to the basic concerns of her work, they nevertheless foreshadow the more comprehensive and textually argued positions of later critics, especially Southam and Litz.⁷⁵ Most importantly, Lascelles is the first to posit the idea that Austen abandoned the correspondence section of the novella for reasons of stylistic dissatisfaction; and she is the first to raise the possibility of a dating for the conclusion that is significantly later than the composition of the 41 letters, a view that is now broadly held.

Lascelles observes of *Lady Susan* that "the plot is wound up in a Conclusion which allows the author to make fun of the very device she has been employing" (13) and that as we have previously cited (thesis, p.62) "this Conclusion was [perhaps] added at some time nearer to the date of the fair copy, when Jane Austen had lost patience with the device of the novel-in-letters" (13-14). As no textual or other evidence is offered in support of these claims, they must necessarily remain simple speculation. We would observe, however, that this view is essentially a kind of *a posteriori* argumentation, seeking to fit a given explanation onto a 'problem' rather than exploring that problem as a means of generating a

⁷⁵ For precisely this reason, several of the observations in this section on Lascelles postpone fuller discussion to the more detailed assessment made within our specific review of each critic.

relevant and coherent explanation. Lascelles assumes (we imagine) that the ironic opening comments in the conclusion⁷⁶ are, at one and the same time, a joke made against the form of the correspondence section and an expression of irritation at the constraints of this form. We would interpret both the 'joke' and the irritation that Lascelles reads here as referring to the fact that epistolary communication may be deemed frustratingly unsustainable for a writer, since "by a meeting between some of the Parties & a separation between the others" (*MW* 311), it can become superfluous. In other words, it is a form that, it may be argued, justifies its use when distance and the need or wish to communicate are central elements in the narrative equation; when these elements are no longer pertinent—and they can be short-circuited simply by bringing characters into closer physical proximity or else by causing them to reject one another's friendship—the 'device' is no longer a viable form through which to direct the story.

Yet as we will argue more fully later,⁷⁷ it seems unreasonable to be suggesting, however obliquely and in however brief a way, that Austen was somehow unable to satisfactorily terminate the epistolary section: given that the first 41 letters are of a markedly competent stylistic level (and do not, in our view, provide any reason for suspecting that their completion will be problematic), why should they then be made an object of her ridicule or frustration? The answer to this difficulty, we would hold, is that Austen in fact felt *no* sense of ridicule or frustration with the epistolary section. And ironically, it is Lascelles' second major contribution to the criticism of *Lady Susan*, the

⁷⁶ See p.193 of this thesis for a fuller discussion.

⁷⁷ See n.185 to this chapter.

dating of the conclusion, which allows us to put forward this position. As we have seen,⁷⁸ Lascelles mentions the possibility that the conclusion, rather than belonging to the same period of composition as the correspondence section (c.1794), was instead added at a later stage “some time nearer to the date of the fair copy” (c.1805-1809).⁷⁹ This suggestion—now largely accepted—sees the conclusion as a direct consequence of Austen’s purportedly negative stylistic response to the epistolary. But the very fact of a later dating allows an alternative suggestion to be posited. This is an issue that we consider in much fuller detail below (thesis, p.183 ff.), reviewing and challenging the conventional positions—argued on the basis of the direct-narrative conclusion—of several critics, including Lascelles. Briefly, however, we will claim that the conclusion is not an indication of Austen’s stylistic dissatisfaction with the epistolary, and that it was added in direct narrative (probably in c.1805-1809) simply because that form of writing had, by this time, become Austen’s usual and preferred mode of expression. Furthermore, we will posit that the conclusion was added strictly for the purpose of providing closure to an unfinished project that Austen had always held in some affection, its formal discrepancy with the correspondence section not being an issue of concern at this time, as the work was no longer intended for publication.⁸⁰ In other words, we suggest that *Lady Susan* is concluded simply as a kind of literary exercise, a working out of narrative possibilities and problems, and that the discrepancy in form between the two sections has no broader significance than that.

⁷⁸ See p.122 of this thesis.

⁷⁹ See Introduction, n.11, and n.172, this chapter.

⁸⁰ For further comment, see this chapter, n.186.

There are two further comments by Lascelles that warrant attention, most particularly because—in our opinion—they indicate the manner in which *Lady Susan*, as a novella, has been undervalued and suggest how the epistolary, as a stylistic mode, has not been accorded anything like its deserved position in Austen's literary development.

The first of these is a throwaway remark made at the beginning of *Jane Austen and Her Art*, buried in a footnote (n.8, p.13) that accompanies the question of dating outlined above. Lascelles observes that “[f]or all its sharp wit, I do not think [*Lady Susan*] very different, in ability or temper, from... *The Three Sisters*”. Certainly, *The Three Sisters* marks an important step in Austen's early development, particularly as it represents—on the whole, though with many exceptions—a concerted attempt to create and sustain a sense of plausible reality, as we suggested in the Introduction (p.2 and n.6), and is a significant move away from the essentially burlesque pieces of the very early epistolary juvenilia. But to equate this work ‘in ability and temper’ to *Lady Susan* is, we would argue, a serious underestimation of the later work, and one that appears to pay scant regard to the evident artistic limitations, on the one hand, of *The Three Sisters*, and to the equally evident attainments, on the other hand, of *Lady Susan*. In our assessment, the specific nature of these attainments (presented in section 2.2.3 as advantages with respect to *Catharine*, although this is also a comparison applicable in many senses to other earlier works), which we posit to be fundamental to Austen's stylistic development and which foreshadow a number of characteristic aspects of her later fiction, is of a significantly distinct level of literary quality to that found in *The Three Sisters*. This latter work differs from *Lady Susan*

most particularly in the range of inconsistencies that it presents. Generically, the work seems unable to decide whether it is burlesque or a more serious narrative reflection on the issue of money and marriage. In consequence, its characters are unevenly presented: Mary Stanhope is little more than a farcical caricature, whereas Georgiana, originally something of a schemer herself (if only to escape being trapped or tricked into marriage) increases in stature throughout, finally coming to represent the voice of rationality within a household of moral and material disorder. Mr Watts is an offensive boor at the outset, and remains so to the end. No sustained attempt is made at developing his character, at exploring the nature of his limitations, or at contrasting his values with alternative ideas of greater worth. And the uncertainty of genre seems also to affect the presentation of the mother, a pivotal character in the novella, who is sometimes seen, sympathetically, as having a difficult yet necessary task on her hands (that of ensuring the financial stability—and therefore, the survival—of her genteel but poor family); yet at other times she appears to be little more than a money-grabbing tyrant, forcing whichever of her daughters should succumb to her bullying into an disagreeable and distasteful marriage. The plot is simplistic and essentially undeveloped, and wherever it does appear to be opening up horizons for advancing the narrative along less restrictive lines (specifically, the excursion to the Duttons and the meeting with Mr Brudenell), this is not expanded upon. The overall sensation is of a promising sketch—it is very little more than that—which has within it the seeds of several possible stories. All of these sit uncomfortably together within the confines of a single narrative, with Austen clearly not at all sure which of these possibilities to select and

develop. In short, the contrast with *Lady Susan* could hardly be more marked;⁸¹ Lascelles' comparison is therefore difficult to understand unless we see it within the broader context of a general critical dismissal of *Lady Susan* as an unsatisfactory experiment, an experiment that seems to many critics to have actually recognised its own failure simply by dint of having shut down the epistolary section and by having ended the novella in what is seen, most particularly by those in accordance with Watt's view of novelistic development,⁸² as the 'triumphant' mode of direct narrative.

The second comment refers more specifically to Austen's use and rejection of the epistolary. Lascelles observes (124) that:

[Austen] is quite incurious about the form of the novel: that is, she tries on (as though they had been dresses) the two shapes that are in current use—the novel-in-letters, and the story directly and methodically related by an impersonal narrator—and then, having ascertained which is the better fit, adopts it and makes no further experiment.

Leaving aside the manner in which this appears to propose that Austen's later fiction effectively corresponds to preconceived patterns, as well as positing a frankly implausible effortlessness of achievement, it is also extraordinary for suggesting just how little the epistolary has contributed to Austen's writing (so little, in Lascelles' view, that it could be cast aside for a 'better fit', never to be thought of again), and—most centrally—for failing to appreciate any consequences that the epistolary might have had on Austen's mature

⁸¹ For further and fuller assessment of *Lady Susan*, see p.144 ff. of this thesis, and section 2.2.3.

⁸² Evidently, Lascelles' work predates Watt's account by a number of years, yet her general dismissal of the epistolary is clearly in agreement with Watt's views.

fiction. That is, from Lascelles' perspective—at least inasmuch as this comment may generally be said to represent her opinion on the issue—it would appear that Austen, when making use of the epistolary form, carried out no experimentation with it, and, on abandoning it for direct narrative, unencumbered by any literary insight she may have gained from the novel-in-letters, moved readily into the newer mode of writing.

However, as we will posit for *Lady Susan*, this is simply not tenable. For whilst it may be conceded that Austen carries out no formal experimentation with epistolary style in this novella (which is, from such a perspective, a conventional series of correspondence exchanges), she most certainly tests and explores the full range of potential that the epistolary offers, developing incipient narrative voice, establishing reader sympathy, using irony to reinforce or distance such sympathy, creating a moral framework within which to articulate the thematic concerns of her narrative and exploiting the polyphonic possibilities offered by the form as a means of attaining and presenting a complex, multifaceted and entirely plausible reality.⁸³ As Laurie Kaplan observes (80), “In *Lady Susan*, although Jane Austen works within the neoclassical form (letters), she constantly experiments with content (the evil heroine who tells her own story)”.

Furthermore, although Lascelles' 'costume change' observation is a neat image, it does not seem to be quite so effective in terms of its critical validity. Expressing stylistic

⁸³ See p.144 ff. of this thesis, and section 2.2.3.

alteration through the metaphor of changing from one dress into another suggests—to our mind—that Austen would have undergone a complete transformation of or break with epistolary form, on the one hand, and consequently that her subsequent writing would have shown a total absence of residual influence, on the other. We argue, in contrast, that Austen's use of direct narrative was actually influenced, and in a number of ways, by the attainments that she had achieved through the epistolary in *Lady Susan*. This would include stylistic issues such as free indirect style, the use of narrative irony (and its *subversive* possibilities), the articulation of action through a clearly defined moral framework and perhaps even the nature of the later plots themselves.⁸⁴

And beyond these questions, there is also the evident presence and function of epistolary form embedded into the fabric of the direct-narrative mode in which the later novels are written: letters as sources of opinion and information; letters as acts of communication and expression; letters as texts for reading as well as misreading, for comprehension as well as confusion. These implanted letters, as it has often been remarked,⁸⁵ are an obvious consequence of Austen's continued interest in the narrative and stylistic possibilities that the letter-form offers, and as such argue strongly for a greater

⁸⁴ See section 2.2.3. For a discussion of the influence of moral and political content on plot, and particularly on the plots in Austen's later fiction, see Gary Kelly (1997: 162-165).

⁸⁵ Ian Jack observes that, even after *Lady Susan*, Austen maintained a "closeness to the epistolary tradition" (178). For further discussion of epistolary 'vestiges' and influences in the later fiction, see—amongst others—Bray (2003: esp. pp. 124-131); Epstein (*Female Epistolary Tradition*), who comments not only on letter writing in the mature novels but also on the significance of its corollary action, letter reading (404); Harding (*Regulated Hatred*, Appendix A) and, less directly, Susan Pepper Robbins (219).

centrality of the epistolary in Austen's development, rather than the marginal significance that Lascelles—and many other critics—would prefer to accord it.

Another central figure in Austen criticism, and one whose voice has almost unequivocally expressed *Lady Susan* to be a failure, is A. Walton Litz. As we have already observed,⁸⁶ Litz's position as regards the epistolarity of the work is that it is "a dead end, an interesting but unsuccessful experiment in a dying form based on outmoded manners" (*Artistic Development* 45). In keeping with Southam, Litz sees *Lady Susan* as a regressive step, "a retreat to a safer and more familiar ground".⁸⁷ This suggested retreat is, in fact, seen as so considerable that it comprehends "the literature of earlier decades" (*Artistic Development* 41): in Litz's view, Susan Vernon—a type pertaining to past times—is an implausible misfit in the world of Austen's literary creations—and is a character whose extraordinarily calculated and self-controlled nature is simply unbelievable:

Lady Susan differs from the predatory females of [Austen's] later fiction in her thoroughgoing *hypocrisy*, and the fact that we can use this term—instead of duplicity or insincerity—points to an eighteenth-century milieu. Lady Susan is too consistently herself to be believable in the world of Jane Austen's other works; she would be out of place in any of the novels, for she is the only character in Jane Austen's fiction who is completely free of self-deception and illusion... [She is] perhaps as far removed from reality as the Man of Feeling.

(*Artistic Development* 41. Emphasis in the original).

⁸⁶ See p.120 of this thesis. Litz's view of *Lady Susan*'s epistolarity is very largely negative; however, see n.166 (this chapter) for his recognition of the form's effectiveness in establishing character insight and dramatic irony.

⁸⁷ "The Juvenilia" 5. For further comment on the notion of regression to the security of a well-known form, see n.107 below.

Beatrice Anderson, whose compellingly alternative critical arguments are informed by the study of psychology, has challenged Litz's assumption of the implausibility of Lady Susan's character, positing instead (193) that it represents "an excellent model for a personality disorder that has been documented in psychological literature for over a century and a half", the condition in question being sociopathy. On a strictly literary level, however, we would also take issue with Litz's view of Susan Vernon's unrealistic nature. As we will detail more fully below (thesis, p.154 ff.), there is the need—on the one hand—to recognise and carefully distinguish between the imperturbable, socially compliant and essentially moderate Lady Susan of public appearance and the radically different facet of this same person that we see in the outbursts of indignation and anger vented in her intimate letters to Mrs Johnson (a discrepancy that we view as convincingly realistic and effectively articulated precisely because of its epistolary presentation). And on the other hand, we would also argue that Lady Susan is not, in fact, such a unique character in Austen's fiction. Certainly, as Southam observes, "[a]lone of Jane Austen's central characters she is drawn without affection or sympathy, a woman totally unprincipled...",⁸⁸ and it is the case that other unprincipled women in Austen's fiction are usually younger and somewhat ingenuous (Lucy Steele in *Sense and Sensibility* or Mary Price in *Mansfield Park* being obvious examples), but that of course is not the same as suggesting that there are no other characters of importance in Austen's fiction who are at once both highly confident and

⁸⁸ *Literary Manuscripts* 49.

cunningly duplicitous. Taking issue with Litz's assertion that only Susan Vernon is free from self-deception and illusion, Alexander and Owen⁸⁹ ask:

But is this really the case? Are there no other outstandingly self-assured yet hypocritical characters in Austen's novels, all of them set well after the mid eighteenth century? Mrs Norris in *Mansfield Park* is surely one candidate, as—arguably—are Lady Catherine in *Pride & Prejudice*, General Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* and Mrs John Dashwood in *Sense & Sensibility*.

That is, whilst it is clear that none of the heroines in the later fiction share any of the characteristics presented by Susan Vernon, and whilst the characters referred to above are in no sense based on nor are they mere versions of Lady Susan, they do nevertheless point to the fact that Austen continued to depict the effect of such characters—proud, arrogant, obstructive, hypocritical—on those around them. Litz's reply to this would be, we assume, that unlike Lady Catherine or Mrs Norris, Susan Vernon is never adequately countered by a moral force-for-good, that there is no Elizabeth Bennet or Fanny Price in the novella to offset Lady Susan's wicked ways, and that it is this lack of balance that creates the sense of implausibility.⁹⁰ And this we assume on the basis of Litz's most poignant criticism of *Lady Susan*: that the epistolary form prevented Austen's fuller control of the novella's moral tenor, through denying her the authorial voice required for such purposes, a factor that leads to the reader's sympathy inevitably—and from Litz's perspective, presumably erroneously—lying with the most dynamic character, Lady Susan Vernon:

⁸⁹ "Lady Susan: a Re-evaluation of Jane Austen's Epistolary Novel" (In Press [Spring 2006]).

⁹⁰ We challenge the notion of such an imbalance in *Lady Susan* on p.143 ff. of this thesis. See also thesis, pp.160 & 166 in which, in consequence, we posit the 'co-valency' of Mrs Vernon and Lady Susan.

The epistolary form precluded any significant authorial comment, yet her irony had not evolved to a point where she could establish a presiding moral vision by implication. The result is a tug-of-war in which the reader's sympathy goes to the most vital character, and in which the author finds it impossible to make the badly needed social and moral discriminations.

(*Artistic Development 44*)

There are several assertions made here, all of which we would take issue with. It is obviously the case that, strictly speaking, epistolary form essentially precludes authorial comment, although writers have always made use of extra-textual devices by which to retain or inject a measure of control.⁹¹ However, a lack of direct authorial comment does not exclude an 'overseeing' narrative perspective, or voice, by which the author is able to direct the plot, its thematic concerns, the presence and purpose of irony and the attribution of sympathy. Indeed, as we argue more fully from p.166 ff. of this thesis, and in spite of the apparent feasibility of Litz's formal reservations, it is our view that *Lady Susan* presents exactly such a latent authorial-narrative voice through Mrs Vernon (who, in this light, is the moral core of the novella); that the irony in the novella is sufficiently complex and complete to shape a 'presiding moral vision' and that Austen's careful and skilfully controlled assignation of sympathy and antipathy effectively ensures—in contrast to Litz's view—that, as readers, we identify with and feel represented by the interests and concerns of Mrs Vernon. None of this is to suggest that Lady Susan is anything other than a vital, dynamic and immensely forceful character; but to grant her this due is not to grant her 'victory' in the moral struggle that the novella depicts; rather, it is to recognise the

⁹¹ Commonly, this was the pretence of editing letters that had simply 'fallen into' the author's hands, as is the case in the humorous prefatory section to *Shamela*, in which Fielding plays with this device over some five pages.

considerable odds against which Mrs Vernon is obliged to fight—on the whole, successfully—throughout the novella.

Litz's closing remarks on *Lady Susan* in *Artistic Development* (45) are particularly controversial, raising as they do the issue of the political 'monitoring' that may have influenced the termination of the epistolary section (and which we consider in Chapter Three, p.247 ff.), as well as suggesting that the "style and narrative technique" of the novella are inferior to the earlier *Catharine* and *Love and Freindship*. Referring briefly to political issues, Litz observes that:

Apparently the assumption is that *Lady Susan* must possess a great artistic potential because it deals directly with the social realities treated more obliquely in the later works; and Jane Austen's abandonment of the piece is explained on grounds of conformity or cowardice.

(*Artistic Development* 44)

This view basically rejects the argument supporting a non-stylistically motivated abandonment of the epistolary section (a position posited most forcefully by Favret and Watson, outlined on pp.53-55 of this thesis, whose arguments highlight the very real social pressures facing women writers in the 1790s, pressures for which the terms 'conformity' or 'cowardice', though not directly Litz's own, are inadequate—not to say wholly insensitive—descriptions). However, as we will argue in Chapter Three, a closer assessment of the social context in which Austen was writing *Lady Susan* reveals that political forces were particularly influential in shaping acceptable (and therefore

publishable) narrative form, and that this factor merits more careful consideration than Litz's somewhat cursory rejection would suggest. Pragmatically, Litz also seems to be critical of the view that dealing directly with social realities is artistically meritorious (as the rather caustic adverbial "apparently" suggests), favouring instead the tangential treatment accorded such issues in Austen's later fiction.⁹² In turn, this supports the notion that the only effective yardstick by which to judge Austen's work is in terms of the mature fiction. But, as Doody has most persuasively shown for the juvenilia as a whole:

Some damage has been done to [Austen's] early works by the determined tendency to consider them only or chiefly in the light of the great works to come... We should, however, try to imagine that the world is not composed of inevitabilities. It was not utterly inevitable that Jane Austen should have written *Pride and Prejudice* or *Emma*. She could, of course, have written no long novels at all... These early works show us what we have a hard time accepting, that Jane Austen *could* have written very differently from the mature Austen we have known for so long.⁹³

In other words, we cannot—merely on the basis of the existence of the later fiction—assume that in 1794 Austen was necessarily writing towards the production of such fiction and therefore consider early texts such as *Lady Susan* as simple blueprints, designs of an inferior calibre, rejected in frustration at their inability to articulate Austen's artistic temperament and objectives. In fact, it is the very inadequacy of such arguments⁹⁴

⁹² However, whilst *Lady Susan* may deal transparently with social realities, we argue (Section 3.3) that its treatment of the political realities central to the novel is, in our view, entirely tangential.

⁹³ *Catharine and Other Writings*, xxx-xxi (emphasis in the original). See also McKellar (206), who suggests that critics and readers alike should "grapple with the possibility that [*Lady Susan*] is not trying to be *Emma* and failing, but trying to be something quite different—and succeeding".

⁹⁴ See p.186 ff. of this thesis for a fuller assessment and challenge of the critical arguments supporting stylistically motivated rejection of the epistolary.

that makes it indispensable to consider alternative suggestions for Austen's abandonment of the form, as Chapter Three will detail.

Litz's closing shot at *Lady Susan*, by means of rejecting any non-stylistic justifications for Austen's abandonment of the epistolary, is to posit the transparency of the novella's inferiority both to *Catharine* and to *Love and Freindship*: "it should be obvious that *Lady Susan*, in terms of style and narrative technique, is neither as brilliant as *Love and Freindship* nor as promising as *Catharine*".⁹⁵ We have already closely considered the narrative and stylistic limitations of *Catharine* (thesis, pp.89-116), and will assess the manner in which *Lady Susan* improves on this earlier, direct-narrative work in a later section (thesis, p.207 ff.). With respect to the brilliance, as Litz sees it, of *Love and Freindship*, we would repeat our observation on Lascelles' comparative view of *The Three Sisters*:⁹⁶ that it appears to pay scant regard to the evident artistic limitations, on the one hand, of *Love and Freindship*, and to the equally evident attainments, on the other hand, of *Lady Susan*.

It seems obvious to us, as an initial observation, that a comparative assessment of *Lady Susan* and *Love and Freindship* is fundamentally unfair to the latter work. Finished when Austen was not yet fifteen years old, it is evidently a far less mature piece of writing

⁹⁵ *Artistic Development* 44.

⁹⁶ P.125 of this thesis.

than *Lady Susan*.⁹⁷ Beyond this, however, is the essential point that *Love and Freindship* in our view never really strives to be anything other than parody⁹⁸, indeed, this is its very purpose, although we recognise that this is not void of a certain implicit moral intent (which we assess more fully below). The principal target of this parody is the novel of sentiment or sensibility that, by 1790 “had reached its greatest popularity as well as its greatest absurdity”.⁹⁹ As such, it is therefore an essentially *derivative* work, not because of its epistolary form but because it depends directly, for its characterisation, plot and humour, on earlier writings. In this sense, it cannot reasonably be compared to the creative originality of *Lady Susan*, a work that—as we argue from p.142 ff. of this thesis—significantly forwards Austen’s stylistic development. Put briefly, *Love and Freindship* aims at none of the objectives that *Lady Susan* both sets out and attains. Indeed, in spite of the evident merits of this early work, it is clear to us that Litz’s opinion of its comparative superiority cannot be sustained.

⁹⁷ In *Volume the Second*, the manuscript in which *Love and Freindship* was written and/or copied, the following date is appended to the novella: “Finis June 13th 1790”. See note 3, this chapter, for Southam’s dating of the juvenilia pieces. As a marginal point of curiosity, on its first page this manuscript contains one of Austen’s very few phrases in Latin (“Ex dono mei Patris”): see Doody (“Reading” 355) for further related comment.

⁹⁸ However, this is a view not shared by Mudrick, who claims that in this work (and also in *The Three Sisters* and *Lesley Castle*, two other early epistolary works, along with the direct-narrative *Catharine*) “Jane Austen begins to sacrifice parody for self-sustaining characterization and plot, she moves out to claim and occupy a world already recognizable as the world of the novels” (*Irony*, 25), a comment that we have already cited on p.92 of this thesis. We fully concur with the critical view that sees significant and inherent literary merit in the juvenilia writings, but, although we have accepted the validity of this observation for *Catharine*, we cannot agree that the expressionistic and often anarchic scenarios of these other juvenilia pieces are ‘already recognizable’ as the world of the later fiction.

⁹⁹ Litz, *Artistic Development* 19. The Novel of Sentiment aimed at illustrating “the alliance of acute sensibility with true virtue. An adherence to strict morality and honour, combined with copious feeling and a sympathetic heart, were (with whatever consequences of failure or humiliation) the marks of the man or woman of sentiment” (Drabble, Ed. *Oxford Companion*, 196). As the *Companion* entry observes, deriving from the works of Marivaux, Richardson and Sarah Fielding, popular novels of sentiment include Brooke’s *The Fool of Quality* (1765/66-1770), Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey* (1768) and MacKenzie’s *The Man of Feeling* (1771).

Not simply because it was written before Austen's fifteenth birthday (although this alone is an astonishing feat), *Love and Freindship* has attracted considerable critical acclaim. Marvin Mudrick (*Irony* 25) speaks of its "superb assurance". Litz (*Artistic Development* 31), recognising some depth in the novella's thematic purpose, suggests that the "criticisms of literary conventions are more obviously criticisms of a moral attitude". Most particularly, it is the surprising effectiveness and maturity of the objects of its parody that are of greatest interest. Butler (*War of Ideas* 168) observes that the novella presents "an unequivocal relationship with the sentimental novel, a tilt at both form and content". Going further still, Southam (*Literary Manuscripts* 26) draws attention to the parodying of the sentimental novel and to "the mishandling of the letter as a narrative form"—a considerably ambitious literary undertaking for a fourteen year-old writer:

Jane Austen not only displays and laughs at sentimental conduct but on a more serious level questions its motives. It is shown up as nothing more than an expedient code of self-indulgence, a form of egoistical snobbery. Almost imperceptibly, burlesque becomes a satire on affectation.... At the opening of [the work] the occasion of the correspondence is made to appear clumsy and ludicrous, and in the rest of the work the ...story exposes the limitations of the letter for dealing with such material.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Southam goes on to observe (26-27) that this is not "an outright rejection of the epistolary convention. Jane Austen acknowledged its use for certain kinds of material, and within two years was experimenting seriously with the letter as a device for social observation and character drawing". We would suggest that her experimentation, culminating in at least *Lady Susan* and possibly in other works, goes considerably beyond social observation and character drawing, as we detail from p.142 ff. of this thesis. Furthermore, whilst we accept the view that *Love and Freindship* parodies the inadequate and implausible use of the epistolary, we do not accept that it represents even a partial rejection of the form *per se*, since, as we have argued throughout, it would therefore be entirely incongruent for Austen to continue using this very form in such a considerable manner for a further four or five years, or more.

The novella is seen, critically, not only as an indicator of Austen's precocious creative maturity but also of her heightened receptive sensitivity to contemporary literary taste and fashion. Litz (*Artistic Development* 19) makes the perceptive point that in the decade following *Love and Freindship*, "the number of attacks and burlesques would rapidly increase" on the novel of sensibility, and that, in effect, Austen's parody of the form coincides precisely with the onset of that mood-shift in popular taste. He also asserts that this is repeated with *Northanger Abbey*, marking the growth of popular reaction against the Gothic novel.¹⁰¹

Such timing attests to her familiarity with the literary scene as well as to her artistic shrewdness, and makes it possible for us to view *Love and Freindship* and *Northanger Abbey* as definitive comments on the history of late eighteenth-century fiction.¹⁰²

Yet, as we have already observed, *Love and Freindship* is nevertheless fundamentally burlesque. Whatever its posited deeper purposes (and we accept the veracity of the critical insights outlined above), it essentially privileges the bizarre, unrealistic and farcical over a more plausible, balanced and moderate delineation of the absurdity of its targets. That, of course, is its point, and it makes this point by dramatically exposing the ludicrousness of the later novels of sensibility in exactly the same terms, style and language

¹⁰¹ This is, however, a view that is open to question: the Gothic novel remained popular well beyond this date, suggesting that the dawning decline that Litz perceives here may well actually be located considerably later.

¹⁰² In our view, as we will argue in Chapter Three (p.267 ff.) it is precisely this 'artistic shrewdness' that motivates Austen's abandonment of the epistolary mode. What is curious is that Litz perceives such sensitivity in *Love and Freindship* yet fails to attribute this condition to Austen's stylistic shift in *Lady Susan*, reinforcing the idea that stylistically motivated rejection of the epistolary is an unquestionable article of faith in the criticism of Austen's works and in the assessment of her stylistic development.

as these very novels. Almost any fragment of the work would support this point, but we present "Letter 6th" in which the heroine, Laura, describes the arrival (on an inevitably cold and dark winter's evening) of the "unfortunate Stranger" about whom she adds "no sooner did I first behold him, than I felt that on him the happiness or Misery of my future Life must depend" (*MW* 80):

The noble Youth informed us that his name was Lindsay—for particular reasons, however, I shall conceal it under that of Talbot. He told us that he was the son of an English Baronet, that his Mother had been many years no more, and that he had a Sister of the middle size. "My Father (he continued) is a mean and mercenary wretch—it is only to such particular friends as this Dear Party that I would thus betray his failings. Your Virtues, my amiable Polydore (addressing himself to my father), yours Dear Claudia, and yours my Charming Laura, call on me to repose in you my confidence." We bowed. "My Father, seduced by the false glare of Fortune and the Deluding Pomp of Title, insisted on my giving my hand to Lady Dorothea. "No, never," exclaimed I. "Lady Dorothea is lovely and Engaging; I prefer no woman to her; but know, Sir, that I scorn to marry her in compliance with your Wishes. No! Never shall it be said that I obliged my Father." We all admired the noble Manliness of his reply.¹⁰³

This is extremely effective parody, striking at the heart both of the generic conventions of the later form of the novel¹⁰⁴ (the inclemency of setting, the stranger's visit, familiarities taken in an implausibly short time, high-minded rejection of worldly interest, filial conflict) and of the absurdly mannered and improbable language with which such conventions are expressed. That said, however, it is primarily risible rather than more fully comic. There is no sustained attempt at developing the main characters of Laura and Sophia

¹⁰³ *MW* 80-81.

¹⁰⁴ Litz (*Artistic Development* 181-2, n. 4) remarks that "[c]omic reactions to popular fiction, while rare before 1790, flourished in the last decade of the century". As further reference, he cites Shepperson's *The Novel in Motley* (particularly Chapter V), and Rogers' "The Reaction Against Melodramatic Sentimentality in the English Novel, 1796-1830".

beyond the theatrically exaggerated sensibility of their every statement; there is not—nor can there be—the slightest plausibility of plot or motivation (again, this is intentional); and, beyond the obvious consequence of ridiculing such literary form, which is by implication to stand in opposition to—or at least not in full support of—its moral assumptions,¹⁰⁵ there is no real articulation of a moral framework within which to present sustained, alternative values (notwithstanding the justifiable anger of Sir Edward and MacDonald). We can accept that Austen *implicitly* undermines the immorality of false sensibility through this parody, but that is not at all the same thing as undertaking such an enterprise in a more serious, less burlesque manner, by means of realistic character and action, the establishment of complex moral conflict, the use of narrative and dramatic irony and the controlled and calculated assignation of sympathy by which to modulate reader response beyond the gratifying but limited reaction of laughter. In our view, however, this is precisely what Austen achieves in *Lady Susan* (as we argue in detail below) and it is in this sense, once again—as we observed with *Lascelles*¹⁰⁶—that we signally fail to agree with Litz's view of the 'obvious' superiority of *Love and Freindship* to *Lady Susan*. As we have suggested (thesis, p.127), this critical position seems to us to be configured primarily by the conventional tendency of rejecting *Lady Susan* outright as a failure (a tendency based upon seeing the epistolary as an inferior stage of novelistic development and upon assuming that the direct-narrative conclusion is evidence of Austen's own agreement with this view). In

¹⁰⁵ "Austen shows that the final corruption of the individual "moral sense" is selfishness and she demonstrates that false sensibility is founded upon self-interest" (Litz, *Artistic Development* 20).

¹⁰⁶ Thesis, p. 127

our assessment, however, the posited inferiority of *Lady Susan* simply does not withstand close assessment, as the following section will aim to show.

In keeping with his judgement on all of Austen's early writings, it is Southam's reading of *Lady Susan* that we see as particularly important, because of the extensive consideration it gives to the work, and for the manner in which his opinions synthesise many of the general critical reservations that have been made of the novella. Fundamentally, these opinions derive from the belief that *Lady Susan* is regressive, and that this regression was occasioned by Austen's failed experiment in direct narrative when writing *Catharine* (*Artistic Development*, 46).¹⁰⁷ Rather than active engagement with work aimed at improving her abilities as a writer—something she had unquestionably been doing since the age of twelve—what is suggested is that Austen now marks a retreat, presumably disappointed and dismayed at the current limitations of her own abilities, and—for purposes of which a fuller explanation is not given by Southam—decides to write a novella in a 'lesser' form whose ability to control she feels far more assured of. In this light, the idea would appear to be that *Lady Susan* is, as it were, as much an exercise in restoring Austen's supposedly battered artistic confidence as an attempt to rectify "technical and

¹⁰⁷ This view is weakened, however, when Southam says of *Lady Susan* that "[t]here is no precedent for a short epistolary novel largely designed to exhibit [a character such as Lady Susan Vernon]" (*Literary Manuscripts* 47). The notion of epistolary regression refers primarily, of course, to form rather than to the specific literary characteristics established by the use of that form. Yet it does appear to militate somewhat against the basic argument of Austen's return to a 'familiar' stylistic mode for reasons of artistic comfort and/or insecurity (see this page) if, at the same time this gave rise to an *unprecedented* result. In our view, this points instead to the fact that *Lady Susan* is a singular achievement; viewing the novella principally as regressive fails to take account of the ways in which it forwards Austen's stylistic development, as we argue within this section on Southam's criticism.

stylistic faults".¹⁰⁸ Whatever the case, her return to this "less demanding form" is far from successful, at least in Southam's assessment. Although the plot is recognised as being effective, albeit in a somewhat qualified manner, this gain is deemed to be offset by Austen's regression in the choice of subject and in its handling: "[i]t is clear ... that what we choose to call its originality or maturity is won at the cost of a radical simplification in subject-matter and technique" (*Artistic Development*, 48). Specifically, as regards subject-matter in this novella, Southam sees "a marked absence of dramatic life and variety"; with respect to technique in the dialogue and action, he notes a lack of the "immediate force" found in Austen's later writing, and—more significantly—an excessive emphasis placed on a single, all-dominant character, Susan Vernon, whose over-centrality represents an artistic imbalance at the core of the novella itself: "[s]uch concentration upon a central figure is an economy of purpose which involves economy of means" (*Artistic Development*, 48). But in addition to the perceived limitations of "dramatic life and variety"—an issue also raised in a fuller and more complex manner by Bray (*Epistolary*, 122-123),¹⁰⁹ associated with what is seen to be Austen's inability to articulate and express emotional tension and conflict through the epistolary form—and beyond the over-powering presence of Lady Susan's character, Southam's major criticism of the novella, one that strikes directly at its form, is that of the "drastic simplification of character" (*Artistic Development*, 50):

Lady Susan is built up (like the work itself) by the accumulation and fitting together of a series of limited and disparate observations. In the later novels Jane Austen evolved a mode of presentation which unites and reconciles the

¹⁰⁸ *Literary Manuscripts* 46. See p.119 of this thesis.

¹⁰⁹ For further discussion, see p.50 ff. of this thesis.

different points of view through the author's narrative, the total and mediating point of view that can divine relationships and comprehend meanings far beyond the range of epistolary fiction. In a unified and inclusive medium characters can be presented with a force of dramatic insight and realism unattainable in a fragmented treatment. Moreover, the judgements declared upon Lady Susan are rigid statements of approval or disapproval; none of the correspondents is capable of more. Not until the 'Conclusion' [in which the epistolary is replaced by third-person narration] is there any relaxation of this serious and unsubtle mood. By then Jane Austen must have realised that neither the form nor the material of study was adequate to embody the view of life, both sympathetic and ironic, in which her imagination could be most fully engaged.

(*Artistic Development* 50)

Clearly, these comments are not simply an assessment of the perceived shortcomings of Austen's novella, but more than this, point to what are seen as the limitations of the epistolary mode as a genre, taken as a whole. The passage is central to Southam's reservations about the artistic merits of *Lady Susan*, and it contains a series of important observations that require careful assessment, most particularly as they are—we would argue—of a highly questionable character, although presented as fact rather than opinion.

The first claim is that both the character of Susan Vernon and, indeed, the novella in itself are constructed from a number of "limited and disparate observations". Closer analysis, however, suggests that this view is open to challenge. On the one hand, it appears to overlook the fact that amongst the most significant and sustained information we receive on the character of Susan Vernon is that which is derived, not only from 'limited' observations made about her *by others*, but also from Susan's *own* remarks on the events

and people that surround her. These remarks reveal aspects such as her cynical exploitation of the Vernon's hospitality (Letter Two); her petulant frustration with her daughter (Letter 22); her ironic disdain for those who oppose her plans (Letter 29, with the comment to her confidante, Alicia Johnson, that the latter's husband is "just old enough to be formal, ungovernable & have the Gout—too old to be agreeable [sic], & too young to die"); as well as her icy imperturbability (most notably the astonishing equanimity with which she receives Alicia's adverse news, in Letter 33), and are therefore a significant complement to the views given to us on Lady Susan by the other characters, thus undermining Southam's claim to the limitedness of this information. And, on the other hand, where the novella *does* present us with 'disparate' observations on Susan Vernon, far from being limited, they would appear to be broad and numerous, encompassing the detailed, extensive and carefully considered remarks made by Mrs Vernon, her brother Reginald and their father, Sir Reginald. Not only are these observations frequent and substantial, they also amply convey the complexity and deceptiveness of Lady Susan herself, as we will now consider.

With Mrs Vernon, for example, her comments on Lady Susan express doubts over an ability to discern the latter's genuine character, indicating a deep sense of unease brought about primarily by previous awareness of Susan's behaviour and attitudes, yet candidly admitting to the impossibility of publicly attributing to her anything that is remotely amiss or inapt. By means of this literary device, Austen clearly advances the complex, duplicitous character of her eponymous heroine and establishes a tension between

what is apparent and what is real that runs through the entire novella, as Mrs Vernon's remarks in Letter 6 highlight:

I must for my own part declare that I have seldom seen so lovely a Woman as Lady Susan. She is delicately fair, with fine grey eyes & dark eyelashes; and from her appearance one would not suppose her more than five & twenty; tho' she must in fact be ten years older. I was certainly not disposed to admire her, tho' always hearing she was beautiful; but I cannot help feeling that she possesses an uncommon union of Symmetry, Brilliancy and Grace. Her address to me was so gentle, frank & even affectionate, that if I had not known how much she has always disliked me for marrying Mr Vernon, & that we had never met before, I should have imagined her an attached friend.¹¹⁰

Furthermore, in the rapidly shifting sands of the younger Reginald's emotional response to Lady Susan, the comments made about her character reveal to enormous effect the manner in which she is able to counter, undermine and then overcome even the most determined opposition to her fuller social acceptance. This is most dramatically evident in the swift transition we see in Reginald, both through his own remarks on Susan and through Mrs Vernon's information on her brother's transformation. The move is from thinly disguised contempt, expressed with an evident sense of moral superiority, through to a markedly less hostile attitude, and then on from this to an almost fiery defence of the virtue of his new-found friend, indicated by the following series:

My dear Sister [writes Reginald to Mrs Vernon in Letter 4]

I congratulate you & Mr Vernon on being about to receive into your family, the most accomplished Coquette in England. As a very distinguished Flirt, I have been always taught to consider her; but it has lately fallen in my

¹¹⁰ MW 251.

way to hear some particulars of her conduct at Langford, which prove that she does not confine herself to that sort of honest flirtation which satisfies most people, but aspires to the more delicious gratification of making a whole family miserable.¹¹¹

I will not disguise my sentiments on this change from you my dear Madam [Mrs Vernon writes to her mother in Letter 8; the 'change' refers to Reginald's decision not to return as yet to his parents' home], tho' I think you had better not communicate them to my Father, whose excessive anxiety about Reginald would subject him to an alarm which might seriously affect his health & spirits. Lady Susan has certainly contrived in the space of a fortnight to make my brother like her. In short, I am persuaded that his continuing here beyond the time originally fixed for his return, is occasioned as much by a degree of fascination towards her, as by the wish of hunting with Mr Vernon...¹¹²

To impute such a design [i.e., matrimony: Reginald is replying, in Letter 14, to his father's missive of concern] to Lady Susan would be taking from her every claim to that excellent understanding which her bitterest enemies have never denied her Her prudence & economy are exemplary, her regard for Mr Vernon equal even to *his* deserts, & her wish of obtaining my sister's good opinion merits a better return than it has received Every person of Sense however will know how to value & commend her well directed affection, & will join me in wishing that Frederica Vernon may prove more worthy than she has yet done, of her Mother's tender care.¹¹³

In Bakhtinian terms, then, such comment provides an obvious polyphony, a multiplicity of viewpoints that enriches our understanding of the complexity of Susan Vernon's character. And yet, even if we were to accept that the construction of character, as established by the comments of third parties, was a stylistic weakness rather than compellingly plausible collective perception, it would seem somewhat ingenuous to refer to these comments as "disparate", within the context of *epistolary* fiction. Given that these remarks are necessarily forwarded by individual letters and that such letters are both

¹¹¹ MW 248.

¹¹² MW 254-255.

¹¹³ MW 263-265.

personal (that is, their authorship is not shared) and of a certain physical constraint (that is, a single letter cannot realistically be expected to occupy the entire narrative), what else could this comment be other than disparate? In the obvious absence of an overseeing narrative voice,¹¹⁴ one which “unites and reconciles the different points of view”, it is an inevitable consequence of epistolarity—and particularly within a text that presents a range of distinct writers—that the perspectives provided should be disunited and non-reconciled. We may choose to perceive this as a problem, most particularly if our model of stylistic effectiveness is the unifying third-person narrative of Austen’s later fiction (as Southam’s comments would appear to be suggesting); but, since disparateness is a necessary condition of polyphony, and given that the polyphonic information we receive on Susan Vernon actually contributes to a more effective construction of her character, as we have argued here, why should this be deemed to be unsatisfactory? The answer, presumably, lies in the belief of the technical superiority of direct narrative, a position from which—in the case of certain critics—it seems to be impossible to recognise the validity and effectiveness of what Austen has actually achieved through the epistolary mode.

In particular—and this is Southam’s second claim in the passage cited above—the notion expressed is that third-person narrative is a necessary condition for establishing deeper emotional and psychological reflection, and is the means by which to approximate reality, in contrast to epistolarity, which is unable to achieve such results: “[i]n a unified and inclusive medium characters can be presented with a force of dramatic insight and

¹¹⁴ However, see thesis p.166 for comment on incipient narrative voice in *Lady Susan*.

realism unattainable in a fragmented treatment". As Bray has shown, the belief that Austen's use of the epistolary in *Lady Susan* is psychologically limiting has been commented on by other critics: "Gard [observes] that there is an absence of 'subtle introspection' in *Lady Susan*; ...Epstein suggests [that] her 'experimentation with the epistolary form' may have 'led her to see the need for a new narrative expression of internal, psychological conflict'".¹¹⁵ But, even conceding that the type of reflection presented in *Lady Susan* is dramatically different from the often histrionic introspection that forms part of certain epistolary writing such as some of Richardson's,¹¹⁶ we would argue that this position fails to account for the fact and consequence of the psychological tension created and expressed between Mrs Vernon and Lady Susan (outlined more fully from

¹¹⁵ Bray, *Epistolary*, 123. The citations are from Gard, *Art of Clarity*, 308, and Epstein (*Female Epistolary Tradition*), 416. Austen's abandonment of the epistolary is discussed more fully in Chapter Three.

¹¹⁶ This point is also referred to in Bray (*ibid*), through Gard's observation (in comparison with Austen) of "Richardson's much finer resources: the close, nervous, subtle introspection of some of his most interesting letters" *Art of Clarity*, 308. It might equally be argued, however, that it is precisely this 'close nervous, subtle introspection' that creates psychological implausibility and a distinct lack of realism in much of Richardson's writing (an aspect, in fact, that Lascelles comments on in assessing Austen's epistolary models: see thesis, p.63). For instance, in *Pamela*, the heroine's almost obsessive detailing of each fleeting instant in which she contemplates or describes various courses of action, or reviews the characteristics of her 'imprisonment' (the style that Richardson famously termed "writing to the moment" in a letter of 1756 to Lady Bradshaigh [the Forster Collection, vol. 11, f.80: see Bray (2003) 20])—despite the intimacy and immediacy that this undoubtedly affords—frequently overstretches all reasonable credibility, collapsing into bathos. An example of this is Pamela's account of her first attempt to escape from Mrs Jewkes. Written almost simultaneously to the action it describes (as its grammatical form—the use of the historical present along with the preterit and perfect forms—clearly shows), she relates the events to her parents in the following way: "I have been in the garden, and to the Back-door; and there I stood, my Heart up at my mouth. I could not see I was watch'd; so this looks well. But if anything should go bad afterwards, I should never forgive myself, for not taking this Opportunity. Well, I will go down again, and see if all is clear, and how it looks out at the Back-door in the pasture. (...) I have been down again; and ventur'd to open the Door, and went about a Bow-shoot into the Pasture; but there stood that horrid Bull, staring me full in the Face, with fiery Saucer Eyes, as I thought. So, I got in again; for fear he should come at me" (*Pamela*, 152). Certainly, contemporary readers may have felt that they were almost participants in the actions and feelings being expressed (and this, of course, is Richardson's major legacy), yet it is no surprise that the comic implausibility of such immediacy—Pamela seems scarcely able to eat her dinner without putting pen to paper to give us an intimate account of it—was one of the elements that Fielding satirises so effectively in *Shamela*, a work likely to have been familiar to Austen, and perhaps even an influence on *Lady Susan* (see Alexander & Owen, *Lady Susan*, xviii and this chapter, n.65 and n.70).

p.207 ff. of this thesis). Briefly, if the criterion for stylistic effectiveness is to be “dramatic insight”, then the Catherine-Susan conflict is surely successful. For not only is this conflict presented directly through the characters’ dialogue, but each participant also provides their own perspective and reflection upon it through their subsequent correspondence on the events. A revealing example of this is the episode centring on Sir James Martin, in which the arrival of this unexpected guest throws into relief what appears to be Lady Susan’s attempts to marry off her daughter, Frederica. First, we have Mrs Vernon’s account of the affair given to her mother in Letter 20. It is an account that seems to restrict itself to a more or less objective recollection of events, though, as we will see, this is not actually the case:

Frederica as pale as ashes came running up, & rushed by me into her own room. I instantly followed, & asked her what was the matter. “Oh! Cried she, he is come, Sir James is come—& what am I to do?” This was no explanation; I begged her to tell me what she meant. At that moment, we were interrupted by a knock at the door; it was Reginald, who came by Lady Susan’s direction to call Frederica down. “It is Mr. De Courcy, said she, colouring violently, Mama has sent for me & I must go.” ... In the breakfast room we found Lady Susan & a young Man of genteel appearance, whom she introduced to me by the name of Sir James Martin [who] is now desperately in love with Frederica, & with full encouragement from Mama.¹¹⁷

The stylistics of this excerpt reveal a number of ways in which Mrs Vernon provides her own gloss on the situation, manipulating it to her own requirements (criticism of Susan Vernon and an implicit plea for moral support in her struggle) even before the reader—who, lest we lose sight of this crucial point, is not of course the fictional Lady De Courcy but is, in fact, ourselves—becomes fully acquainted with the purpose of Sir James’

¹¹⁷ MW 275-276.

visit. First, there is the dramatic cliché “pale as ashes”, a description that deliberately raises narrative expectations of a negative kind—a textual indicator that bad news is about to be broken. Then we are told that Reginald specifically “came by Lady Susan’s *direction*”, a signal that he is now firmly under Susan’s control. This is followed by Frederica’s “colouring violently”, a cleverly ambiguous comment that simultaneously suggests the fear Lady Susan instils in her daughter, but which also points to Frederica’s feelings for Reginald, an issue that Mrs Vernon had already raised with her mother (Letter 18). And finally, there is the ironic closing remark “with full encouragement from Mama”, an aside aimed at exposing Susan’s far-from maternal preoccupations, whilst at one and the same time clearly suggesting the unsuitability of such encouragement.

Mrs Vernon’s introductory remarks on the visit are very shortly followed by an exchange of dialogue between herself and Lady Susan in which Susan provides a perfectly plausible explanation of Sir James’ interest and her own apparent acquiescence. It is an explanation that is watertight in its construction, delivered at a rate that brooks no interruption, is designed to emphasise her paramount concern for Frederica and which very cunningly both appeals to Mrs Vernon’s maternal concerns (thus establishing shared ground and limiting the possibility of open conflict) and—by taking the verbal initiative—forces Mrs Vernon into a position from which criticism is rendered impossible:

“I was never more surprised in my life than by Sir James’s arrival, & the suddenness of it requires some apology to You my dear Sister, tho’ to me as a Mother, it is highly flattering. He is so warmly attached to my daughter that he could exist no longer without seeing her. Sir James is a young Man

of an amiable disposition, & excellent character; a little too much of the Rattle perhaps, but a year or two will rectify that, & he is in other respects so very eligible a Match for Frederica that I have always observed his attachment with the greatest pleasure, & am persuaded that you & my Brother will give the alliance your hearty approbation. When you have the happiness of bestowing your sweet little Catherine some years hence on a Man, who in connection & character is alike unexceptionable, you will know what I feel now; tho' Thank Heaven! you cannot have all my reasons for rejoicing in such an Event. Catherine will be amply provided for, & not like my Frederica indebted to a fortunate Establishment for the comforts of Life." She concluded by demanding my congratulations. I gave them somewhat awkwardly I beleive; for in fact, the sudden disclosure of so important a matter took from me the power of speaking with any clearness. What can one say of such a Woman, my dear Mother? such earnestness, such solemnity of expression! And yet I cannot help suspecting the truth of everything she said.¹¹⁸

This alone, albeit provided exclusively through Mrs Vernon's own correspondence, would offer considerable "dramatic insight" into the conflict that is developing between the two women. Mrs Vernon, on the one hand, prepares herself by what we might call her reconnoitring of the enemy—sizing her up through the accounts given of Lady Susan to Lady De Courcy and, in a certain sense, already doing battle indirectly through letters designed to expose, criticise and declaim. On the other hand, we are shown that Lady Susan, taking control of seemingly adverse situations, is able to turn events to her own advantage and to wrong-foot Mrs Vernon into expressing acceptance of Susan's plans.

But the epistolarity of *Lady Susan* is able to go further still, also providing us with intimate access to Lady Susan's own reflection on these events (Letter 22). As expected and as we will now consider, her private perspective is one radically in contrast to the mild

¹¹⁸ MW 276-277.

plausibility that her 'public' face presents in conversation with Mrs Vernon. Taken together with her sister-in-law's report, this completes the range of "insights" into the episode in question and delineates a compelling psychological portrait not only of Lady Susan (apparently placatory though in fact shaping events to her suit her needs; privately enraged at any challenge to her authority), but of Mrs Vernon, too (perceptive to the wily schemes that Lady Susan is devising, morally opposed to such schemes, but also aware of her current inability to counter her opponent's as yet faultless public propriety):

This is insufferable! My dearest friend, I was never so enraged before, & must relieve myself by writing to you, who I know will enter into all my feelings. Who should come on Tuesday but Sir James Martin? Guess my astonishment & vexation—for as you well know, I never wished him to be seen at Churchill. What a pity that you should not have known his intentions! Not content with coming, he actually invited himself to remain here a few days. I could have poisoned him; I made the best of it however, & told my story with great success to Mrs. Vernon who, whatever might be her real sentiments, said nothing in opposition to mine. I made a point also of Frederica's behaving civilly to Sir James, & gave her to understand that I was absolutely determined on her marrying him. She said something of her misery, but that was all. I have for some time been more particularly resolved on the Match, from seeing the rapid increase of her affection for Reginald, & from not feeling perfectly secure that a knowledge of that affection might not in the end awaken a return. It is true that Reginald had not in any degree grown cool towards me; but yet he had lately mentioned Frederica spontaneously & unnecessarily, & once had said something in praise of her person.

... I had no great difficulty in convincing De Courcy when we were alone, that I was perfectly justified, all things considered, in desiring the match; & the whole business seemed most comfortably arranged. They could none of them help perceiving that Sir James was no Solomon, but I had positively forbidden Frederica's complaining to Charles Vernon or his wife, & they had therefore no pretence for Interference, tho' my impertinent Sister I beleive wanted only opportunity for doing so.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ MW 280-281.

This letter, written to Alicia Johnson in the context of the strictest intimacy and therefore free from all public constraints on decorum,¹²⁰ is in stark contrast to the seemingly gentle, sensitive and maternal Lady Susan who has just pressed her case with her sceptical sister-in-law. We see here in the clearest—and truest—of lights her fury at anyone and anything that contradicts her Machiavellian schemes.¹²¹ We see her, too, laying bare the details of her plans for Frederica and, in doing so, referring less than obliquely to feelings of sexual jealousy held against her own daughter. Finally, pointing to her disdain for Mrs Vernon (“my impertinent Sister I beleive wanted only opportunity for [interfering]”), she effectively confirms that their respective positions on this, as indeed on everything, are antagonistic. That is, she defines Mrs Vernon as The Enemy, and our understanding of their conflict—and of the attitudes, motivations and fears that underlie this—have unquestionably been deepened by the epistolary mode’s “force of dramatic insight” that Southam would deny it.

The other dimension of the direct-narrative writing that Southam sees as “unattainable in a fragmented treatment” is realism, a charge echoed by Litz’s view that the character of Lady Susan is simply unbelievable, a throwback to an early style of writing.¹²² There is a distinction to be made here: Southam’s remarks are intended for the work as a whole,

¹²⁰ See the comment by Alexander and Owen on p.158 of this thesis.

¹²¹ McKellar (213) observes that not even Alicia Johnson is exempt from Lady Susan’s anger at being contradicted or thwarted: “[i]nconveniencing Lady Susan, or pointing out the limitations of her “dominion”, cries out for condign punishment. Even Alicia prefaces her announcement that their correspondence must end [Letter 38] with a plea that Lady Susan will not be angry with her for what is clearly Mr Johnson’s fault”.

¹²² Litz, *Artistic Development*, 41. This comment may actually reflect Litz’s possible discomfort at the notion that Austen appeared to relish creating a virago at least as much as she enjoyed portraying Elizabeth Bennet.

whereas Litz's comments on the novella in fact attach themselves to the heroine rather than to the text. That said, however, both comments are open to objection. On the one hand, we would argue, in view of what we have posited for the psychological insight that the epistolary mode of presentation contributes to highlighting the Catherine-Susan conflict, as well as to the manner in which it very ably traces Reginald's fall from hostility into infatuation, that it is precisely this psychological validity which lends the novella a degree of plausibility. This plausibility is lacking in earlier works such as *Catharine*—in which access to the character's inner thoughts is mostly not available (an issue that, amongst other questions, we consider in further detail from p.207 ff. of this thesis). On the other hand, whilst we have recognised that epistolary approaches such as those found in some of Richardson's writing, in which it can sometimes seem that every fleeting emotion is described, analysed and conveyed at extraordinary length and in exceptional detail, may indeed seriously undermine narrative credibility (see n.116 to this chapter), this is emphatically not the case with *Lady Susan*, or with its 'heroine'. On the contrary, a believable sense of realism is maintained throughout exactly because of the plausible contrast established between the careful, measured and largely sensitive language of the 'publicly-addressed discourse', whether this be in the form of a letter, such as Letter One, or, more usually, in the form of reported dialogue, as Letter 20 revealed, and the far less cautious tone that private correspondence facilitates. The epistolary is a literary form, in other words, that is able to show both modes of discourse in dramatic, yet fully believable, juxtaposition. The clearest example of this comes from Lady Susan herself at the very

outset of the novella (Letters One and Two), which present us with almost perfectly inverted images of the same character:

My dear Brother

I can no longer refuse myself the pleasure of profiting by your kind invitation when we last parted, of spending some weeks with you at Churchill, & therefore if quite convenient to you & M^{rs} Vernon to receive me at present, I shall hope within a few days to be introduced to a Sister whom I have so long desired to be acquainted with. My kind friends here are most affectionately urgent with me to prolong my stay, but their hospitable & chearful dispositions lead them too much into society for my present situation & state of mind; & I impatiently look forward to the hour when I shall be admitted into your delightful retirement. I long to be made known to your dear little Children, in whose hearts I shall be very eager to secure an interest. I shall soon have occasion for all my fortitude, as I am on the point of separation from my own daughter.¹²³

You were mistaken my dear Alicia, in supposing me fixed at this place [Langford, from where she intends to travel to Churchill, her brother-in-law's home] for the rest of the winter. ... At present nothing goes smoothly. The Females of the Family are united against me. You foretold how it would be, when I first came [here]; & Manwaring is so uncommonly pleasing that I was not without apprehensions myself. We are now in a sad state; no house was ever more altered; the whole family are at war, & Manwaring scarcely dares speak to me. It is time for me to be gone; I have therefore determined on leaving them. I take Town in my way to that insupportable spot, a Country Village, for I am really going to Churchill. Forgive me my dear friend, it is my last resource. Were there another place in England open to me, I would prefer it. Charles Vernon is my aversion, & I am afraid of his wife. At Churchill however I must remain till I have something better in veiw. My young Lady accompanies me to Town, where I shall deposit her under the care of Miss Summers in Wigmore Street, till she becomes a little more reasonable. She will make good connections there, as the Girls are all of the best Families. The price is immense, & much beyond what I can ever attempt to pay.¹²⁴

¹²³ MW 243-244.

¹²⁴ MW 244-246

Every one of the justifications provided in Letter One (and which appear to detail a quiet, retiring, thoughtful character, fundamentally domestic and maternal in her interests) is not simply undermined; it is radically overthrown. Either form of discourse—the quiet plea for domestic retreat that the first letter presents or the cascade of schemes, infidelities and disdain brought with the second letter—is, in itself, difficult to credit: the one appears too saintly, the other seems excessively malevolent. But taken together, these opposed forms provide a perfect and plausible justification for one another (remarks made in the first gain ironic depth in light of the second, and vice-versa), and allow us to construct in a very short space of time a reasonably accurate portrait of Lady Susan, of her motives and of her aims.

There is, however, another objection in terms of plausibility that might be made of Lady Susan, namely, the almost psychotic manner in which she responds against those who are an obstacle to her plans (basically, Mrs Vernon, Reginald and Frederica). The tirades brought on at such times are, we might say, disproportionate, and seem to fit uncomfortably within the generally moderate tone of the novella as a whole, as the following remarks suggest:

At present my Thoughts are fluctuating between various schemes. I have many things to compass. I must punish Frederica, & pretty severely too, for her application to Reginald; I must punish him for receiving it so favourably, & for the rest of his conduct. I must torment my Sister-in-law for the insolent triumph of her Look & Manner since Sir James has been dismissed Thwarted.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ MW 293–294.

However, what is essential to recall here is that such remarks are *always* made in absolute epistolary confidence; they are never presented in a public manner. The letter form provides us with the means through which we can understand Lady Susan's psychological 'whole', but it must not be interpreted outwith the privacy in which it is expressed. As Alexander and Owen have argued:

...when Lady Susan is on her most outrageous form, she is often also at her most humanly realistic: pride, jealousy and the wish for revenge are some of the aspects that her letters reveal; yet such revelation is always made in the context of strictest intimacy. Even Mrs Vernon is forced to accept that the public face and behaviour of Lady Susan are impeccable. To articulate these concerns openly would indeed be unrealistic, even histrionic, as well as revealing an improbably scant regard for socially expected comportment. But to do so privately, and to friends who 'enter into all our feelings'—even given the vehemence that Lady Susan shows—is surely a none-too-uncommon reality, one with which we are readily able to identify, if not sympathise.¹²⁶

In short, far from limiting the sense of realism within the novella, as Southam suggests (as, in part, does Litz), the epistolary mode in *Lady Susan* facilitates the succinct and effective juxtaposition of public and private discourse through which a fuller psychological and emotional portrait of the participants can be constructed, an aspect that significantly contributes to establishing and maintaining a strong degree of plausible realism throughout the work.

¹²⁶ "Lady Susan: a Re-evaluation of Jane Austen's Epistolary Novel" (Alexander & Owen, In Press [Spring 2006])

Nor would Southam's other reservations on the epistolary presentation of character appear to bear close examination: his essential position is that the formal limitations of the novella create restrictions within the presentation of the characters themselves—and therefore of what they represent—to the effect that "...judgements declared upon Lady Susan are rigid statements of approval or disapproval". Certainly, in spite of Catherine's initial doubts (discussed below) it cannot be denied that Lady Susan essentially elicits either unconditional approbation or else emphatic censure, with perhaps only Reginald reflecting feelings that lie in between these polar opposites—for reasons we have already outlined.¹²⁷ And we should not, of course, ignore or seek to lessen the fact that a number of the characters in *Lady Susan* are little more than cameos, thus offering essentially cameo-type interventions; even Frederica, reminiscent of the "put-upon heroines of Samuel Richardson",¹²⁸ is more of a conventional literary type than a dynamic, innovative creation. Yet, with Mrs Vernon, the novella's principal source of reflection upon Lady Susan's character, the 'statements' are anything but rigid. Indeed, we would argue that the mark of *Lady Susan's* greater artistic maturity with respect to Austen's earlier works is precisely the emotional and psychological breadth with which Mrs Vernon expresses the close assessment of her sister-in-law's behaviour and motives. This assessment is, ultimately and profoundly, negative. But it is also initially qualified in ways that are complex and—for Mrs Vernon at least—deeply confusing, as she struggles to reconcile her prior prejudices and opinions with Susan's apparently irreproachable conduct, an experience that leaves Mrs

¹²⁷ See p.146 of this thesis.

¹²⁸ Terry Castle, Introduction xxvi–xxvii, *Northanger Abbey, Lady Susan, The Watsons and Sanditon*.

Vernon outmanoeuvred for some considerable part of the novella. We have already had occasion to observe the confusion felt by Catherine Vernon at the outset of the novella;¹²⁹ it is a feeling that persists, however, even in moments of particular crisis when Lady Susan's true nature would appear to be beyond doubt. But such is Mrs Vernon's uncertainty that she begins to call into question her own judgement and the criteria upon which such judgement is based. In Letter 15 (to her mother) we find her observing that:

[Lady Susan] has been talking a great deal about [Frederica] to me, she talks vastly well, I am afraid of being ungenerous or I should say she talks too well to feel so very deeply. But I will not look for Faults. She may be Reginald's Wife. Heaven forbid it! but why should I be quicker sighted than anybody else? M^r Vernon declares that he never saw deeper distress than hers, on the receipt of the Letter—& is his Judgement inferior to mine?¹³⁰

An awareness that Austen has—in the novella's 'alternative' central character—gone beyond the rigidity of simple approval or disapproval—that is, perception and appreciation of this preliminary mental confusion, and its subsequent modification into an unambiguous conviction of Lady Susan's malevolence (supported by a series of moves and schemes aimed at countering Susan's own plans) is central to a reassessment of the novella in which Catharine Vernon's co-valency with her wayward sister-in-law is recognised,¹³¹ as it

¹²⁹ See p.145 of this thesis.

¹³⁰ *MW* 267.

¹³¹ "Her eleven letters to her mother observing Lady Susan's behaviour are surely meant to balance the eleven self-revealing letters of Lady Susan to Mrs Johnson" (Alexander and Owen, introduction to *Lady Susan*, xviii). However, as Chapter Three of this thesis will consider in fuller detail, recognition of Catherine's co-valency is by definition to recognise that Lady Susan still remains a considerable foe. Indeed, we would argue that the nature of the peril Susan represents would be undermined if her vitality were not so forcefully projected. But this, in turn, can give rise to interpretative ambiguities of a political kind. We will posit that the Susan-Catherine antagonism reflects the Jacobin/anti-Jacobin conflict that affected the England of the 1790s, (Continued on the next page)

provides us with evidence for the inner moral struggle that Mrs Vernon has had to undergo—requiring of her a stubborn belief that Lady Susan's words and actions are a façade, and demanding of her the strength of will to overcome both her own self doubt and, it should be recognised, her emotional isolation¹³²—before being able to mount the generally successful defence of her values that, once decided upon, engages her for the rest of the novella. Mrs Vernon has to struggle hard, first to come to terms with her conflicting notions of Susan's character, then to counter and overcome the threat that Susan Vernon represents for the moral and emotional stability of the entire Vernon family. Furthermore, and in consequence, we would assert that a failure to see how Austen undermines fixed assertions of approval or disapproval leads to a consequent failure to perceive the nature and import of the moral conflict taking place between Mrs Vernon and Lady Susan (an issue considered more fully from p.167 of this thesis). Alexander and Owen, distinguishing this aspect of *Lady Susan* as one that differentiates it from her earlier writings, express the following opinion:

Only if we appreciate the two women as broadly equal can we more fully understand Austen's developing sense of moral conflict; *Lady Susan*, in fact, would seem to be presenting us—through these two opposing forces whose own positions are so clearly and intimately established—with an incipient moral sense of responsibility, a significant step forward from the world of her juvenilia writings. This is the very aspect that characterises Austen's authorial perspective in the later fiction and, most especially, the element that defines her greatest characters. Indeed, this particular struggle, between

and that the novella's failure to unequivocally 'defeat' Lady Susan may give rise to assuming (quite erroneously, in our view) that Austen harboured Jacobin sympathies.

¹³² Her mother's support is assured, but it can only be offered through her letters; her brother's allegiances are shifting by the day in favour of Lady Susan, and Mr Vernon (perhaps diplomatically glossed by his wife as being too good natured to perceive any malice in others) is wholly ineffectual in providing the moral sustenance Catherine most surely requires.

a character almost irresistibly attractive and yet (to us) transparently immoral, on the one hand, and, on the other, a counter-force whose chief attribute is her quiet goodness and persistence in the face of sometimes overwhelming adversity, foreshadows a similar conflict—attenuated by Austen's later technical maturity—between Fanny Price and Mary Crawford.¹³³

But it is exactly because this conflict is not a rigid positioning, *ab initio*, of Good against Evil, but rather, one in which the true quality and extent of Susan's disruptiveness is not at first openly revealed to all—indeed is deliberately kept ambiguous for some substantial time—that Mrs Vernon's insight and resolve are the more admirable and convincing, allowing us to comprehend more fully her position as a counterweight to Lady Susan.

Inevitably, our reassessment of *Lady Susan* also needs to account for what is, in effect, Southam's critical *coup de grâce* against the novella, a comment that is worth recalling in full, as it is the core of his belief in the stylistic limitation and unsuitability of the epistolary to Austen's developing literary abilities:

Not until the 'Conclusion' is there any relaxation of this serious and unsubtle mood. By then Jane Austen must have realised that neither the form nor the material of study was adequate to embody the view of life, both sympathetic and ironic, in which her imagination could be most fully engaged.

¹³³ "Lady Susan: a Re-evaluation of Jane Austen's Epistolary Novel" (Alexander & Owen, In Press [Spring 2006]).

That is, this view is one that sees the rejection of the epistolary—along with the “material of study”¹³⁴—as indicating Austen’s awareness that the letter form was *the* stylistic obstacle to attaining the type of writing that characterises her later work; its rejection is therefore seen as the triumph of stylistic development over stylistic restriction, leaving the door open for her to establish the sympathetic and ironic view of life that will more fruitfully occupy her creativity.

But there are difficulties with this perspective. Certainly, what Southam terms Austen’s *sympathetic and ironic view of life* is not as markedly present in *Lady Susan*, nor indeed in much of the juvenilia¹³⁵ with the exception—as regards sympathy—of *Catharine*, as McMaster has very ably shown.¹³⁶ We interpret ‘sympathetic’ to refer here particularly to the literary tone of the mature fiction, one which characterises Austen’s major novels, attained through an omniscient, omnipresent narrator, through the use of free indirect style and through the creation of characters who, for all the sometimes trying circumstances of their own lives, are greatly removed in emotional calibre from the dramatic wickedness of Susan Vernon, and therefore engage our sympathies far more readily (the term is further defined below). Nevertheless, having said that, we would suggest that there is an *incipient*

¹³⁴ Other critics have expressed agreement with the notion of *Lady Susan*’s ‘unsuitability’. As we have already indicated (thesis, p. 65), perhaps the most notoriously negative opinion is that of Chesterton, who observed that “[he] for one would willingly have left *Lady Susan* in the waste-paper basket” (Preface to the 1922 edition of *Love and Freindship*, cited in Q. D. Leavis, *A Critical Theory of Jane Austen’s Writings*).

¹³⁵ We are not suggesting here that the juvenilia is lacking in irony; clearly, it is not. However, as our assessment of irony both in Austen’s mature work and most especially in *Lady Susan* will detail, the ironic voice of the juvenilia is primarily related to burlesque and riotous comedy, and is thus of a significantly different character to the more attenuated irony that Southam sees as part of Austen’s “view of life”.

¹³⁶ “Energy Versus Sympathy”. See this chapter, n.9, for a brief outline of McMaster’s distinction between the energetic but largely unsympathetic juvenilia and sympathetic but less energetic writing such as *Catharine*.

sense of sympathy in *Lady Susan*, which is expressed chiefly by Mrs Vernon. In addition to this, we also find that there is a certain ironic perspective, presented both by Lady Susan and Mrs Vernon. To ignore this is, in turn, to overlook the ways in which Austen has exploited epistolary form in the novella precisely in order to better attain a degree of sympathy and irony with which to establish parameters for the moral conflict at the heart of the novella. Before advancing this point, however, and prior to a more precise definition of what we understand by literary sympathy, there is the need briefly to address a related and important question, which is the discrepancy between a modern reader's notion of what or who may deserve sympathy, and opinion on the same question that would have been applicable in the case of Austen's time. Our reason for raising this issue is that, quite possibly to many modern readers, the dynamic unconformity of Susan Vernon—and very particularly, her strong projection of feminine power—is greatly preferable to and much more positively evaluated than the seemingly priggish sense of decorum and propriety that appears to be Catherine Vernon's main characteristic.¹³⁷ However, we would argue that this issue needs to be approached with an awareness of and sensitivity towards what Kelly ("Religion and Politics" 156) terms "the Revolutionary aftermath" in order to see that, for determined social and political views within Austen's world—ones that we will argue she identifies with—it is precisely those elements that we may now find so attractive in Lady Susan that are to be distrusted, and, in contrast, it is exactly what we might now deem to be

¹³⁷ See, for example, Drabble's introduction to *Lady Susan, The Watsons and Sanditon* in which she records her "admiration for [Lady Susan's] worldliness, intelligence and vitality. She is Machiavellian, but there is an attractive quality to her plotting... Lady Susan is sexually confident [and] unashamed of her selfishness... In *Lady Susan*, the opposition is dull... Mrs Vernon is motivated against [her sister-in-law] by obvious sexual jealousy. There is no acceptable positive world to set up against Lady Susan's corrupt one" (13, 15). We strongly disagree with the opinions expressed here, as this chapter and section 3.3 of the following chapter indicate.

Catherine's staid sobriety that was the positive, desirable quality sought after as a means of ensuring social stability.¹³⁸ In short, we would emphasise that our use of the term *sympathy* should be understood in light of what it was likely to mean for Austen and her potential readers rather than what it may mean to ourselves: for modern readers, this may often and more readily attach itself to strong-willed, independently minded characters who, aided by the force of their self-belief, carve for themselves a path that might well run against the grain of broader social acceptability (and cause offence or still greater harm in doing so) but through which they remain, above all, true to their own wishes. For Austen—and, we conjecture, for her contemporary readers in agreement with her views—it appears that this form of behaviour and attitude would repel sympathy, as it reveals excessive individualism attained at the price of disregarding or disrespecting the mores of personal conduct governing proper, reasonable and desirable social intercourse.

In what sense is there any degree of such sympathy to be found in *Lady Susan*, and in what ways does it work towards establishing a moral framework? To answer these questions, we need to establish still closer agreement as to what the term 'sympathy' indicates in our context. On a general level, it can be understood as a means by which reactions are called forth from the reader towards a given individual and within a given work; thus "a writer may be said to manipulate the readers' sympathies by the depiction of a good or bad character".¹³⁹ More specific to the circumstances of Austen's early writings, McMaster speaks of it as "nuanced and subtle psychology, of an artistic management, by a

¹³⁸ For further related comment, see thesis Chapter Three, n.86.

¹³⁹ Gray, entry for 'Sympathy' (283).

trusty narrator, of a reader called on to sympathise and identify partially with the protagonist".¹⁴⁰ Two obvious objections raise themselves here: *Lady Susan* largely has no narrator and the protagonist is, surely, Lady Susan Vernon herself. What kind of moral framework would Austen be constructing, and for what purposes, if we were 'manipulated' into sympathising with such a character? We would counter these objections, however, by suggesting that, whilst the epistolary form of this novella evidently precludes a 'formal' narrator (although the non-epistolary conclusion to *Lady Susan* represents the abrupt intrusion of a third-person voice suddenly observing, interpreting and drawing to a close the action that has hitherto taken place through an entirely different form of presentation), it does *not* preclude 'embryonic' narrative voice. Furthermore, in the sense that—in our view—it is the positive, constructive and socially cohesive values that, on the whole, are those that triumph in the novella, this narrative voice pertains most particularly to Mrs Vernon, who, in addition and in light of this, should certainly be seen as 'trusty'.¹⁴¹ And so, whilst the orthodox critical view is that this novella is 'about' Lady Susan, we would suggest that, more accurately, it actually concerns the moral conflict between Lady Susan and Catherine Vernon (whose co-valency we have already argued for).¹⁴² We would also suggest that it is Catherine who most closely approximates to the protagonist, once we recognise both the moral struggle being delineated and the significance—at moral and political levels¹⁴³—of attempting to defeat Susan Vernon's negative, destructive and

¹⁴⁰ "Juvenilia", 185.

¹⁴¹ This position is also put forward by Alexander and Owen in their introduction to *Lady Susan*, xviii: "...though lacking [Susan's] wit and ruthlessness... [Mrs Vernon's] commentary can be seen as a forerunner to the clear-sighted Austen narrator of the novels".

¹⁴² See p.160 of this thesis.

¹⁴³ See thesis, Chapter Three, section 3.3.

socially non-cohesive schemes and values. Thus, to summarise, *Lady Susan's* epistolarity does not prevent the establishment of sympathy; we argue that this is created through the figure of Mrs Vernon, whose struggle calls for us to identify with her, against Lady Susan, in defence of the positive values that Catherine Vernon represents. Recognising this allows us to perceive more clearly in what ways Austen constructs the moral framework of the novella, and to what ends.

The establishment of our sympathy for Mrs Vernon is best seen, we believe, through observing the manner in which Austen systematically contrasts the attitudes and actions of the two sisters-in-law, creating a parallelism through which the reader can clearly discern the radically contrasting values held by each character and also see the means that each employs in attempting to foster and advance these values.

In their respective letters, Lady Susan always writes (with the exception of Letter One, the duplicity of which we have discussed on page 156) with a view to undermining what we have termed socially cohesive values, and the institutions of such values, namely marriage, the family, motherhood and—at a more abstract level—trustworthiness and honesty, whereas Mrs Vernon (although not above pragmatically manipulating her writing to suit her needs)¹⁴⁴ corresponds in order to affirm the very values that Susan attacks. Letters Two and Three illustrate this difference to clear effect. In Letter Two, apart from providing a radically distinct picture of Susan's character and motivations to that presented by Letter

¹⁴⁴ See thesis, p.150.

One, Lady Susan openly informs Alicia Johnson of her sabotaging of the Manwaring marriage; she also reveals herself to have no concerns for Frederica beyond getting her off her hands to the most suitable 'purchaser' and she outlines the extent of her moral unreliability—deliberately misleading the affections of Sir James and cynically presenting herself to the Vernon family as emotionally fragile (having recently been widowed and obliged, allegedly for the sake of Frederica's better education, to part from her daughter), earnestly in want of quiet domestic society:

The Females of the Family are united against me. You foretold how it would be, when I first came to Langford; & Manwaring is so uncommonly pleasing that I was not without apprehensions myself. I remember saying to myself as I drove to the House, "I like this Man; pray Heaven no harm come of it!" But I was determined to be discreet, to bear in mind my being only four months a widow, & to be as quiet as possible,—& I have been so; My dear Creature, I have admitted no one's attentions but Manwaring's, I have avoided all general flirtation whatever, I have distinguished no Creature besides of all the Numbers resorting hither, except Sir James Martin, on whom I bestowed a little notice in order to detach him from Miss Manwaring...¹⁴⁵

In stark contrast to this, Letter Three, the first written by Mrs Vernon, is effectively a celebration of social cohesion. The intimacy of *her* correspondence is not the outpouring of amoral confession to a confidante but the quiet familiarity of a faithful daughter candidly expressing her worries—as she does throughout—to her mother (the strength of their long-distance communication contrasting sharply with the strained communication between Lady Susan and her daughter, even when under the same roof). Though its purpose is to cancel the arrangement, the letter concerns a planned family reunion for Christmas—

¹⁴⁵ MW 244-245.

whereas Letter Two concerns the *dissolution* of a social group—and discusses the family ties that justify Susan's reception by Mr Vernon. It also highlights the relationship between Susan and Frederica and concludes, again in affirmation of social cohesion, by referring to the writer's brother and father, thus encompassing the entire family in one and the same letter. It therefore cannot escape our attention that, in juxtaposition with Letter Two, this letter initiates Austen's delineation of the two moral ambits in the novella—that represented by Mrs Vernon and that represented by Lady Susan—placing in clear focus the values that form the core of these ambits. In the sense that, even this early on in the novella, we have been presented with a character who apparently undermines positive moral values and with one who appears to support them, Austen has thus begun to draw our sympathy towards the preoccupations and concerns of Catherine Vernon.

This is seen further through the notion of maternal and filial affection. Lady Susan undermines her daughter at every turn, treating her publicly with a total absence of warmth, and treating her privately (both in person and through the comments made about Frederica in her intimate correspondence) with utter disdain. Perhaps unsettled by what her daughter's maturity implies for Susan's own age and prospects, perhaps sometimes moved by jealousy—particularly as she senses first Frederica's interest in Reginald and then Reginald's apparent response to such interest—and at other times simply convinced of Frederica's inferiority of character and spirit, even a brief (and, thus, far from exhaustive) review of Lady Susan's remarks on her daughter will unambiguously highlight the drastically non-maternal character of her feelings. Here, she gives Alicia Johnson her frank

assessment of Frederica's worth, a view not even minimally attenuated by maternal partiality:

You are very good in taking notice of Frederica, & I am grateful for it as a mark of your friendship; but as I cannot have a doubt of the warmth of that friendship, I am far from exacting so heavy a sacrifice. She is a stupid girl, & has nothing to recommend her.¹⁴⁶

Susan's comments in the following excerpt, on the other hand, pertain less to her opinion of her daughter than to the measured, premeditated cruelty to which she subjects her, and reveal—in passing—the entirely self-centred basis of her 'maternal' plans:

You know on what I ground my hope, & it is certainly a good foundation, for School must be very humiliating to a girl of Frederica's age; & by the bye, you had better not invite her any more on that account, as I wish her to find her situation as unpleasant as possible. I am sure of Sir James at any time, & could make him renew his application by a Line. I shall trouble you meanwhile to prevent his forming any other attachment when he comes to Town...¹⁴⁷

Letter 19 presents us with an even darker side to Lady Susan's character, one that houses a visceral sexual jealousy, and which—despite the easy derision with which Susan appears to dismiss Frederica's 'challenge'—implicitly conveys her sense of discomfort and unease at the unexpected presence of such competition:

Frederica is returned on my hands, and having now nothing else to employ her, is busy in pursuing the plan of Romance begun at Langford. She is actually falling in love with Reginald De Courcy. To disobey her Mother by refusing an unexceptionable offer is not enough; her affections must likewise be given without her Mother's approbation. I never saw a girl of her age, bid

¹⁴⁶ MW 252.

¹⁴⁷ MW 253.

fairer to be the sport of Mankind. Her feelings are tolerably lively, & she is so charmingly artless in their display, as to afford the most reasonable hope of her being ridiculed & despised by every Man who sees her.¹⁴⁸

Lady Susan's final letter (Letter 39) provides still further proof of her perilously psychotic nature—drawing up careful schemes of punishment for whomsoever should have the temerity to question her superiority or should in any way complicate her plans. More central to our present concerns, however, the very last words we hear directly from Susan Vernon in the novella are those of a dark and veiled threat against her daughter, boding ill indeed for Frederica, and reminding us once again of the inflexible coldness that characterises Susan's relationship with her daughter:

I am now satisfied that I never could have brought myself to marry Reginald; & am equally determined that Frederica never shall. To-morrow I shall fetch her from Churchill, & let Maria Manwaring tremble for the consequence. Frederica shall be Sir James's wife before she quits my house. She may whimper, & the Vernons may storm; I regard them not. I am tired of submitting my will to the Caprices of others—of resigning my own Judgement in deference to those, to whom I owe no Duty, & for whom I feel no respect. I have given up too much—have been too easily worked on; but Frederica shall now find the difference.¹⁴⁹

Derision, contempt and scorn are the undercurrents to these observations and point to the manner in which Susan's relationship with Frederica signally fails to establish the family and social cohesion vital to any healthily functioning society (an issue of obvious

¹⁴⁸ MW 274.

¹⁴⁹ MW 308.

political ramifications, and one which is discussed more fully in section 3.3 of this thesis). Indeed, as we have already seen when comparing Letters Two and Three,¹⁵⁰ what Lady Susan represents is social dissolution—a breaking down of connections. Like Mrs Vernon, she too is both mother and (obviously) daughter; yet about her own mother we hear nothing, and the only time we are ever given direct information from Frederica—Letter 21—the clear impression we receive about this relationship is one of prohibition, restriction, intractability. That is, in the case of Lady Susan Vernon, the mother-daughter relationship, a vital source of a broader social and emotional stability, is one of utter disconnectedness.¹⁵¹

Unlike her sister-in-law, however, Catherine Vernon communicates openly and often with her mother, and, although we have nothing direct from her own children, her frequent reference to them and her concern for their welfare stands in evident contrast, within the ambit of the maternal and filial, to Lady Susan. Beyond this, however, we also observe that Catherine Vernon assumes a custodial role over the all-but-abandoned Frederica, initially in an emotional sense at Churchill, and then literally so at the close of the novella, when Lady Susan only too willingly cedes her daughter to the care of the Vernons. And so at last—and paradoxically, through her own selfish schemes—Lady Susan actually triggers the events

¹⁵⁰ See p.167 of this thesis.

¹⁵¹ As we have already observed (see final comments, n.113 to this chapter), this relationship is simply a more forcefully expressed version of many such relationships in Austen's fiction (Catherine Vernon being a significant exception) and may reflect a certain tension that existed between Jane Austen and her mother (see, for instance, Park 402).

by which her daughter receives the maternal support and concern she had never accorded her when the chance and obligation were fully hers.

Of all the many references made about Frederica by Catherine throughout the novella, Letter 18 is amongst the most significant in this respect:

My dear Madam

I am very glad to find that my description of Frederica Vernon has interested you, for I do believe her truly deserving of our regard, & when I have communicated a notion that has recently struck me, your kind impression in her favour will I am sure be heightened. I cannot help fancying that she is growing partial to my brother, I so very often see her eyes fixed on his face with a remarkable expression of pensive admiration! He is certainly very handsome—& yet more—there is an openness in his manner that must be highly prepossessing, & I am sure she feels it so. Thoughtful & pensive in general her countenance always brightens with a smile when Reginald says anything amusing; & let the subject be ever so serious that he may be conversing on, I am much mistaken if a syllable of his uttering, escape her.

I want to make him sensible of all this, for we know the power of gratitude on such a heart as his; & could Frederica's artless affection detach him from her Mother, we might bless the day which brought her to Churchill. I think my dear Madam, you would not disapprove of her as a Daughter. She is extremely young to be sure, has had a wretched Education & a dreadful example of Levity in her Mother; but yet I can pronounce her disposition to be excellent, & her natural abilities very good.

Tho' totally without accomplishment, she is by no means so ignorant as one might expect to find her, being fond of books & spending the chief of her time in reading. Her Mother leaves her more to herself now than she did, & I have her with me as much as possible, & have taken great pains to overcome her timidity. We are very good friends, & tho' she never opens her lips before her Mother, she talks enough when alone with me, to make it clear that if properly treated by Lady Susan she would always appear to much greater advantage. There cannot be a more gentle, affectionate heart, or more

obliging manners, when acting without restraint. Her little Cousins are all very fond of her.¹⁵²

In itself, this letter's strongly positive view of Frederica is interesting for so markedly contrasting with Lady Susan's own assessment of her daughter's qualities and abilities, and for its indication both of the absolute fear that Frederica feels for her mother and of the sad consequences that this fear has had on the young woman's development. However, more than this—and far more than simply being a matchmaking proposition—it represents Catherine's attempts to stabilise the tempestuous personal circumstances surrounding Frederica (the direct upshot of Lady Susan's disregard and lack of concern for her daughter) and to bring her into the order and stability of the Vernon fold. It obviously parallels Susan's own marital schemes for her daughter, but places in their stead an arrangement based fundamentally on respect for Frederica's personal inclinations and interest, articulating this in terms not of the plotter's *individual* gain, but rather by setting the proposal within a determinedly *collective* framework, that of the family (the letter, about marriage, is written from a daughter to a mother; it concerns the family's brother/son; it suggests the suitability of Frederica as a daughter-in-law; it emphasises Frederica's acceptance by the family in the shape of her cousins and is articulated from the perspective of the writer's maternally custodial role). Catherine's words are, once again, deeply supportive of socially cohesive action as a means of countering the emotional and social corrosiveness of Susan Vernon's behaviour, and of its consequences. Whereas Lady Susan

¹⁵² MW 272-273.

stands for social dissolution—as we have argued¹⁵³—Catherine Vernon emphatically underlines the importance of social union. And although our knowledge of this is derived basically from Catherine's own letters, the rapidity with which Frederica appears to identify with and respond to the maternally wholesome environment at Churchill (which for her, unlike the surrogate environment of her evidently detested boarding school or the peripatetic existence that she would seem to be condemned to in her mother's company, represents the security and stability of a real home) is another pointer to the manner in which Austen orchestrates our approval in favour of Catherine Vernon.

Finally, there is one further ambit in which we can observe how sympathy is attached to Catherine in light of Susan's attitudes and assertions. Although minor in comparison to the issues we have just outlined, and although the remarks made are (perhaps) not intended to be taken literally, they nevertheless reinforce a basic pattern. Lady Susan avails herself of the chance—at the very close of the novella's epistolary section—to once more engage Alice Johnson's dedicated support, unashamedly suggesting to her that she should seize all opportunity to worry Mrs Manwaring to an early grave:

Have I not reason to rejoice? Manwaring is more devoted to me than ever; & were he at liberty, I doubt if I could resist even Matrimony offered by him. This Event, if his wife live with you, it may be in your power to hasten. The violence of her feelings, which must wear her out, may be easily kept in irritation. I rely on your friendship for this.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ See p.172 of this thesis, and also the discussion of Letters 2 & 3 (thesis, p.167).

¹⁵⁴ *MW* 308.

Mrs Vernon, in contrast, earnestly strives to avoid worrying her mother and, most especially, her father (ill suited through poor health to putting up with 'violence of feelings', exactly as with Mrs Manwaring), minimising or even withholding bad news from Churchill, although nothing less than the integrity of the Family itself is in the balance:

I will not disguise my sentiments on [Reginald's change of attitude towards Lady Susan] from you my dear Madam, tho' I think you had better not communicate them to my Father, whose excessive anxiety about Reginald would subject him to an alarm which might seriously affect his health & spirits.¹⁵⁵

I return you Reginald's letter, & rejoice with all my heart that my Father is made easy by it. Tell him so, with my congratulations; but between ourselves, I must own it has only convinced me of my Brother's having no present intention of marrying Lady Susan.¹⁵⁶

Thus, systematically and through carefully constructed parallels, Austen ensures that it is Catherine Vernon who elicits our sympathy, and draws the parameters within which the central moral conflict of *Lady Susan* is established and maintained.

As we observed in the preceding section, and have argued against, Southam claims that the epistolary mode could not adequately encompass the sympathetic "view of life" that most successfully preoccupied Austen's literary talent. In Southam's assessment, this inadequacy also extends to the idea of her sense of irony, which—from such a perspective—is presumably deemed to be exclusive to the terrain of the third-person narrator. Certainly, narrative irony is a key means by which (amongst other attainments)

¹⁵⁵ MW 254-255.

¹⁵⁶ MW 266.

Austen's later writing directs reader response, suggests the underlying truth of otherwise opaque or complicated motives and engages or disengages sympathy. Instances of this are numerous in any of her major novels, but *Pride and Prejudice* provides some particularly memorable examples. The novel's renowned opening ("It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife")¹⁵⁷—an ironic inversion of the social reality facing single women of Austen's own class, particularly as their late twenties drew nigh¹⁵⁸—both directs response (eliciting humour) and outlines basic thematic concern. The equally renowned reaction of Elizabeth Bennet on first seeing Darcy's home and estate ("at that moment she felt, that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!")¹⁵⁹ ironically reveals the stark truth underlying the heroine's growing attachment to Mr Darcy, namely that property—as well as propriety—has played its considerable part in shaping her now very changed feelings.¹⁶⁰ And, perhaps most centrally, the narrator's ironic voice is essential to establishing or undermining the sympathy attached to any given character. In the proposal scene between Elizabeth and Mr Collins, although narrative discourse occupies a mere 29 lines of the entire chapter,¹⁶¹ which is otherwise written in dialogue, it is nevertheless almost clinically precise in its

¹⁵⁷ *Pride and Prejudice* 5.

¹⁵⁸ See n.29 to this chapter. Although we have used 'class' throughout in a fairly loose sense, it is nevertheless worth recalling that the term may in fact give rise to serious misunderstanding about both the social structure of Austen's day and—more centrally to our concerns—about Austen's reaction to this structure. Graham Martin (131) argues convincingly that "[Austen's] fictional world is not concerned with quasi-Marxist adversarial relationships between economic groups, but with an older, hierarchical structure of interrelating duties and responsibilities, shortly to be transformed, and already incorporating a good deal of flexibility, but still taken for granted in [her fiction]".

¹⁵⁹ *Pride and Prejudice* 235.

¹⁶⁰ See Tanner (19-20) for a discussion of "property" and "propriety" in Austen's writings.

¹⁶¹ (Volume 1, Chapter XIX)

careful, perfectly timed undermining of Mr Collins' pomposity (having the incidental advantage of doing so without requiring Elizabeth to utter a single syllable against him):

[Mr Collins to Elizabeth]: "But before I am run away with by my feelings on this subject, perhaps it will be advisable for me to state my reasons for marrying..."

The idea of Mr. Collins, with all his solemn composure, being run away with by his feelings, made Elizabeth so near laughing that she could not use the short pause he allowed in any attempt to stop him farther...

Pride and Prejudice, p. 103

We posit that *Lady Susan* also makes use of this type of irony, and for broadly similar purposes. Furthermore, since we have forwarded the notion of Mrs Vernon representing incipient narrative voice,¹⁶² we consequently argue that the irony she expresses functions exactly as the third-person narrative irony we have just outlined in *Pride and Prejudice*. That is, although considerably less extensive in *Lady Susan* than in Austen's later fiction—and though obviously less 'detached' in the sense that it belongs not to an indeterminate voice removed from the events but rather to one of the actual participants—Mrs Vernon's use of irony nevertheless contributes to shaping reader response, draws attention to certain issues of thematic or narrative importance and, again of central relevance, modulates the attribution of sympathy. A very brief yet highly significant example of this is Letter 17, in which Mrs Vernon's correspondence finally begins to move away from what had hitherto been less than fully disclosed suspicion towards more evidently open criticism of Lady Susan's character. The narrative circumstances are Frederica's unplanned arrival at

¹⁶² See p.166 of this thesis.

Churchill following her escape from boarding school, an event that has triggered Lady Susan's seemingly deepest distress (shared unconditionally by Reginald who, at this stage is now wholly enthralled by the woman he so recently saw fit to ridicule):

M^r Vernon returned on Thursday night, bringing his niece with him. Lady Susan had received a line from him by that day's post informing her that Miss Summers had absolutely refused to allow of Miss Vernon's continuance in her Academy. We were therefore prepared for her arrival, & expected them impatiently the whole evening. They came while we were at Tea...

Lady Susan who had been shedding tears before & shewing great agitation at the idea of the meeting, received her with perfect self-command, & without betraying the least tenderness of spirit. She hardly spoke to her, & on Frederica's bursting into tears as soon [as] we were seated, took her out of the room & did not return for some time; when she did, her eyes looked very red, & she was as much agitated as before.—We saw no more of her daughter.

Poor Reginald was beyond measure concerned to see his fair friend in such distress, & watched her with so much tender solicitude that I, who occasionally caught her observing his countenance with exultation, was quite out of patience. This pathetic representation lasted the whole evening, & so ostentatious & artful a display has entirely convinced me that she did in fact feel nothing.¹⁶³

We observe, first, the ironically juxtaposed description of Lady Susan's emotional distress before Frederica's arrival with her reportedly "perfect self-command" when her daughter is also present—a discrepancy of response that calls into question the veracity of her true feelings. This discrepancy is then repeated on Susan's return from her private discussion with Frederica (the irony suggesting, of course, that such a reaction is simply a performance for public consumption). Finally, at its most heightened expression,

¹⁶³ MW 269-270.

Catherine's irony voices her frustration at Reginald's inability to perceive Susan's deception ("Poor Reginald was beyond measure concerned to see his fair friend in such distress, & watched her with so much tender solicitude"), drawing attention to Susan's cynically triumphant monitoring of his reaction to her dramatically articulated plight ("I... occasionally caught her observing his countenance with exultation"). Only in the final sentence does Catherine's irony of tone wholly subside, now giving way entirely to the expression of unmitigated contempt and anger.

In other words, the articulation through ironic voice of this 'window' onto the narrative, like the creation and assignation of sympathy itself, functions as a means by which Austen configures the framework within which the novella's moral conflict takes place. However, this is not restricted to Catherine Vernon alone: Lady Susan is also given to using irony as a means of reflecting upon the world that surrounds her. But whilst Catherine's use of irony—in our view—reinforces her role both as incipient narrator and as the moral core of the novella, in addition to fostering the attribution of reader sympathy in her favour, with Susan Vernon, the opposite is the case. Her use of irony serves to emphasise the malevolence of her character and, as a result (and *pace* Mudrick),¹⁶⁴ prevents any sympathy attaching to her. Once again, Letter Two is a clear example of this: it ironically—and radically—reverses the gentle benevolence of the preceding letter, instantly alerting us through its extraordinary discrepancy in tone with the first missive to the practical certainty

¹⁶⁴ Mudrick's assessment of *Lady Susan* (Irony 127-140) does not assert that reader sympathy lies with Lady Susan, or is even meant to do so. However, it is clear from his remarks that his personal sympathy most certainly is with the eponymous heroine. See also pp.197-199 of this thesis.

of her belonging to a "bad set" (Catherine's own term in Letter 27 to describe Lady Susan). Another example, one that draws attention to Susan's despotic nature and thus, as we are arguing, distances her from our sympathy, is to be found in Letter 19. Susan writes to Alicia about Frederica's escape from school, indicating that this event had been caused by her reception of Lady Susan's letter, effectively ordering her to marry the witless Sir James:

I lost no time in demanding [Frederica] the reason of her behaviour, & soon found myself to have been perfectly right in attributing it to my own letter. The purport of it frightened her so thoroughly that with a mixture of true girlish perverseness & folly, without considering that she could not escape from my authority by running away from Wigmore Street, she resolved on getting out of the house, & proceeding directly by the stage to her friends the Clarkes, & had really got as far as the length of two streets in her journey, when she was fortunately miss'd, pursued, & overtaken.

Such was the first distinguished exploit of Miss Frederica Susanna Vernon, & if we consider that it was atchieved at the tender age of sixteen we shall have room for the most flattering prognostics of her future renown. I am excessively provoked however at the parade of propriety which prevented Miss Summers from keeping the girl; & it seems so extraordinary a peice of nicety, considering what are my daughter's family connections, that I can only suppose the Lady to be governed by the fear of never getting her money.¹⁶⁵

The first paragraph is expressed literally, almost free from ironic voice (not entirely, however: Susan simply cannot resist the opportunity to ridicule the limited abilities of her daughter to take full advantage of her escape—"she... had really got as far as the length of two streets in her journey"). But the second paragraph represents a significant shift of voice, from the essentially direct to the fully ironic. The first of its two comments (Frederica's 'atchievement'), very far from expressing concern at the event or at its possible

¹⁶⁵ *MW* 273-274.

causes or consequences, chooses instead to belittle the capacity of her daughter—ironically juxtaposing the stylistic magnificence of the phrase “the first distinguished exploit of Miss Frederica Susanna Vernon” with the fact that she had only managed to get around the next corner before being caught again—and to hint at, among other things, the still greater paucity of maternal support that her daughter’s aspirations will receive hereafter. The second comment (aimed at the school’s principal who had refused to allow Frederica to continue boarding: “the Lady [was] governed by the fear of never getting her money”: *MW* 274) is most certainly to be taken in conjunction with Susan’s earlier remark to Alicia in Letter Two, in which she frankly states that “The price [of Frederica’s schooling] is immense, & much beyond what I can ever attempt to pay”. In both cases, however, the effect is basically the same: it reinforces Lady Susan’s moral and emotional untrustworthiness. In the first case, Austen once again reveals Susan’s utter inadequacy as a mother and also reasserts a far more serious charge: her absolute animosity towards her daughter. In the second case, by indicating her complete unwillingness to respect accepted codes of behaviour (here, the socially imperative code of trust underlying all commercial exchange), Austen provides us with yet another ambit from which to contemplate Susan’s profoundly anti-social character.

In short, it appears transparent to our reading of *Lady Susan* that Southam’s assumption of the formal inadequacy of the epistolary mode, as it concerns the effective attribution of

sympathy and use of irony, is clearly insufficient.¹⁶⁶ Moreover, as we have argued,¹⁶⁷ this assumption also prevents recognition of a variety of factors that are key to reassessing the nature of the novella's importance and that are essential in according it a far more central position within Austen's stylistic development. Most particularly, we have highlighted incipient narrative voice, identified with Catherine Vernon; the attribution or disengagement of sympathy, and the use of irony—all of which factors, we suggest, contribute to establishing a moral framework in which the events and concerns of the novella take place and are assessed, both by the characters themselves and, most essentially, by Austen's readers.

Finally, to conclude this lengthy assessment of Southam's view, broadening the focus at this point to include other critical voices, we now need to challenge the assertion—a tenet of much Austen criticism—that the direct-narrative conclusion represents Austen's realisation of the inadequacy of epistolary form, causing her not only to jettison the correspondence section of the novella and to terminate it in what is viewed as the more stylistically assured and competent manner of third-person narration, but also to give up

¹⁶⁶ Curiously, this very aspect is recognised by Walton Litz, otherwise basically dismissive of the attainments of *Lady Susan*. In *Artistic Development* (42), he observes that “[s]ince Lady Susan’s hypocrisy involves a complete contrast between her outer appearance and her inner feelings, the epistolary form is well suited to recording her career. Through the letters to her London friend and confidante, Mrs. Johnson, we are informed of her true feelings and intentions, while the letters of those around her provide a running account of her social behavior. As a result we are placed in an admirable position for estimating the success or failure of her “acting” and we can appreciate, like a theatrical audience, the dramatic irony of the situations”.

¹⁶⁷ See, for example, p.163 of this thesis.

wholesale on the epistolary as a narrative and stylistic mode.¹⁶⁸ The following section will therefore assess critical opinions of the non-epistolary conclusion to *Lady Susan*, most particularly the question of when the section was added and what this is said to imply for Austen's attitude towards the letter form; her termination of the epistolary section *per se* will be considered more fully from p.225 ff. of this thesis.

As we have seen,¹⁶⁹ Southam observes that, by the conclusion, Austen "must have realised" that the epistolary mode simply could not serve her stylistic requirements or artistic temperament. This apparently assumes that the date of composition for the conclusion is essentially contemporary with that of the work as a whole (c.1794), and that, at this very time or thereabouts, Austen had clearly and definitively perceived the limitations of the epistolary on her burgeoning stylistic requirements and characteristics.

The belief that the conclusion belongs broadly to the same period as the correspondence-based section has not always been Southam's position, however. His earlier critical work dated the closing section—in accordance with the views of Lascelles—to around 1805.¹⁷⁰ But his opinions definitively change with *Jane Austen's Literary Manuscripts*, in which he forwards the notion of a broadly contemporary dating of the direct-narrative portion with respect to the novel-in-letters. As we have already detailed

¹⁶⁸ In addition to the established views of Lascelles, Southam and Litz—all of which concur in attributing to the conclusion its valedictory character with respect to the epistolary, see also thesis, p.120 for recent argument (Drabble, Lauber, McMaster, Waldron) along very similar lines.

¹⁶⁹ See p.144 of this thesis.

¹⁷⁰ See Southam's comments in 1962, two years previous to the publication of *Literary Manuscripts*, that "The 'Conclusion' was probably added later, perhaps at the time of the transcription, sometime after 1805" ("Mrs Leavis and Miss Austen", 27).

(Introduction, n.11), his single assertion in support of this argument—one that is disappointingly weak for a critic of Southam's perception and sensibility—is that, stylistically, the conclusion “has something of the stiffness we find in ‘Catharine’”, positing as a result that it was added shortly after the composition of the correspondence section.¹⁷¹

Yet this is not a view that has largely been shared. Most major critics both before and after Southam (Lascelles, Mudrick, Litz) suggest that the conclusion is a later addition, very probably made at the time of the novella's revision into the extant manuscript form.¹⁷²

Why should an apparently arcane issue of textual history have any degree of bearing on Austen's view of epistolary effectiveness in *Lady Susan* and beyond? Because, irrespective of individual positions with respect to the date of the conclusion, the general critical consensus has been that the novella's closing section functions metonymically as Austen's 'impatient' rejection of the epistolary¹⁷³—proof in textual form of her dissatisfaction with its limitations and of her emphatic, indeed even *dramatic* change of stylistic mode, given the context of the sudden and unexpected interruption of the third-person voice.

However, we argue that none of the opinions positing the form of *Lady Susan's* conclusion as evidence for Austen's stylistic frustration with the epistolary is either logical

¹⁷¹ *Literary Manuscripts*, 46

¹⁷² In addition to the Introduction, n.11, see also p.118 of this thesis. It is worth recalling—as n.11 and p.118 indicate—that both Chapman and Butler have argued for a later composition (c.1805) for the entire novella, a view not generally accepted. It is of interest to observe that Chapman's view derives from his belief that the 1805 dating is warranted by the novella's 'sophistication' (*Facts and Problems*, 52): clearly, *Lady Susan's* stylistic maturity and effectiveness with respect to the earlier juvenilia is very much underlined when a critic of Chapman's standing delivers an opinion on the basis of such criteria.

¹⁷³ See Lascelles, 13-14. See also Litz, who terms the conclusion Austen's “jibe at the epistolary methods” *Artistic Development*, 41.

or sustainable. We would also emphasise that this is an issue of considerable importance, as it challenges—and we believe undermines—a critical article of faith that has, remarkably, never been subjected to closer analysis, having always been accepted as a self-evident 'fact' of Austen's artistic development.

In our assessment of possible approaches to the non-epistolary conclusion, there are three positions that can be taken by those critics (the majority) who believe that this section represents Austen's rejection of the letter form.¹⁷⁴ The first of these would hold that the conclusion was added at a later date (probably c.1805-1809), but that it still clearly reflects the frustration that Austen evidently felt with the epistolary at the time of abandoning the novella (c.1794). The second position would also hold that the conclusion was added at a later date (again, probably c.1805-1809) but, rather than viewing this as a reflection of Austen's stylistic ideas from the mid 1790s, it would see the conclusion instead as a 'statement of principles' expressing opposition to the epistolary, pertaining to the time of adding this closing section. Both positions, however, obviously share the same fundamental view that the conclusion unambiguously represents Austen's rejection of the epistolary on stylistic grounds. The third position is that the conclusion was added very shortly after the epistolary section (c. 1794), thus basically belonging to the same period of composition. It also holds that the non-epistolary closure indicates Austen's complete dissatisfaction with the novel-in-letters.

¹⁷⁴ The order in which these positions are presented here is of no significance.

Critics such as Lascelles, Litz, Drabble, Lauber, McMaster and Waldron—in positing a later date for the composition of the conclusion—hold either the first or second positions with respect to *Lady Susan*. As they are not generally forthcoming on the issue of exactly when, in their view, Austen can be said to reject the epistolary (immediately after finishing Letter 41, in c.1794, or on writing the conclusion, in c.1805-1809), we cannot with any certainty assign these critics more definitively to one or other position, although we believe that it is more likely that they hold the second, given its greater apparent plausibility. Position three is that held very notably by Southam (after 1962)¹⁷⁵, and those in agreement with his opinion, most particularly Susan Pepper Robbins, who is of the view that “*Lady Susan* was begun in letters in 1793, but concluded abruptly in a narrative voice in 1794”.¹⁷⁶

As regards the first position, if the conclusion was indeed added after 1794 (which most critics agree on), then—assuming that the shift from the epistolary does, in fact, reflect Austen’s stylistic dissatisfaction with the form¹⁷⁷—this could only reasonably be taken to represent her attitudes and beliefs as they stood at this subsequent time (probably c.1805). To assert that a significantly later formal modification continues to embody Austen’s stylistic views held when writing the main section of the novella, perhaps an entire decade previous to this, is far-fetched indeed. More precisely, it is mere speculation, and of a kind

¹⁷⁵ See n.170, above.

¹⁷⁶ Pepper Robbins, 215-216.

¹⁷⁷ This is, however, an assumption that we see as open to considerable challenge. In fact, we emphatically dispute the notion that the non-epistolary conclusion is proof of Austen’s stylistic dissatisfaction with the form: there are other reasons—equally plausible or more so, in our view—for this shift in literary mode, as we will argue in Chapter Three.

that is futile—we might even say impossible—to pursue.¹⁷⁸ Clearly, if we accept a later dating for the conclusion, then its direct-narrative form cannot with any solid degree of reliability be deemed to be the consequence of Austen's stylistic ideas of ten years earlier. That is, although the novella—once abandoned—is certainly taken up again in direct narrative, this fact alone cannot prove, *ipso facto*, that Austen's failure in 1794 to terminate *Lady Susan* as an epistolary novella was due to any stylistic dissatisfaction that she may have felt with the form at that time. Put bluntly, what Austen thought about the epistolary in 1805 or later and what she had thought of it in 1794 are, patently, very distinct matters.

With the second position,¹⁷⁹ if the argument should then be that the later dating, although not necessarily indicative of Austen's stylistic beliefs of the mid 1790s, nevertheless clearly represents her unambiguous frustration at or rejection of the epistolary form in c.1805-1809—an argument that would appear, initially, to be more reasonable than the first position outlined above—important objections to the plausibility of this still remain. Let us assume that, as most critics concur, Austen wrote the epistolary section of *Lady Susan* in or around 1794, and left it unfinished (at Letter 41). Let us also assume that, by c.1805-1809 when she came to make the fair copy and complete the story, Austen no longer felt the epistolary mode to be an adequate stylistic vehicle for her writing (this is a realistic assessment, consistent with what we know of her work from this period).¹⁸⁰ Yet,

¹⁷⁸ Lascelles, *ibid*, admits as much and candidly states that such assumptions are “mere guess-work” (14).

¹⁷⁹ We have already outlined the basis of this ‘second-position’ argument: see p.124 of this thesis.

¹⁸⁰ In November 1797, Austen had begun work on the definitive version of *Sense and Sensibility*; in 1798-99, the early form of *Northanger Abbey* (originally entitled *Susan*, then *Catherine*) was drafted in direct-narrative mode and was presented for publication in 1803. From 1803-1804, *The Watsons*, an unfinished direct-narrative novella, was written. For further details, see Southam, *Literary Manuscripts* 52-53 and Litz, (Continued on the next page)

even given all this, is it really feasible to suggest that Austen would copy out the text, faithfully maintaining its now putatively undesirable epistolary section in its entirety, and then provide it with a direct-narrative ending *merely to express irritation and dissatisfaction*—more than ten years later—with a form that she had already ceased using? Would it not be more reasonable to propose, instead, that the form of the conclusion is simply in accordance with the narrative style that had, by then, become her natural and preferred mode of composition and expression?¹⁸¹ And this, in fact, would seem to point to a more likely reason for the non-epistolary conclusion:¹⁸² by 1805, Austen clearly had the technical competence to entirely re-write *Lady Susan*, had she so wished, in the direct-narrative style that she had been consolidating since at least the late 1790s. That she chose to write only the conclusion in this way would appear to suggest, first and foremost—given that she never made any known attempt to provide a reworked version of *Lady Susan*—that Austen no longer deemed the story suitable for publication at this time,¹⁸³ perhaps for artistic reasons, perhaps for others (as we will consider from p.225 ff. of this thesis). And so, at the stage of adding the conclusion, we suggest that she was toying with the novella purely for her private creative purposes, much as a painter might continue and conclude a series of old preparatory drafts for a work that had never been completed. On the basis of

“Chronology”, 47. See also Southam’s view that “the course of Jane Austen’s development from 1793 to 1805 is away from the letter, which she discarded in favour of direct narrative” (*Literary Manuscripts* 46). This latter comment is a view that of course we do not essentially dispute, although our assessment of the reasons underlying such a change is at odds with Southam’s account.

¹⁸¹ Lascelles (14), referring to *First Impressions* (1796-1797), suggest that it was this work that “showed her what was her own *proper mode of expression*” (emphasis added), which—if we accept the observation—places Austen’s stylistic preference for direct narrative some six or seven years prior to the non-epistolary termination of *Lady Susan* and clearly supports the assertion that we are making at this point.

¹⁸² We would once again emphasise, at this point, that this suggestion limits itself to accounting for the *form* of the non-epistolary conclusion; this is not at all the same as positing reasons for Austen’s termination of the epistolary section itself, which we consider more fully from p.225 ff. of this thesis.

¹⁸³ See this chapter, n.186.

the conclusions in her mature fiction, it is clear that Austen prefers a distinct and unambiguous sense of closure. Consequently, in returning to and making a fair copy of this late juvenilia piece, she is effectively providing a dénouement for the plot, drawing the project to its completion.¹⁸⁴ Indeed, the extant fair copy of which the conclusion is part strongly suggests Austen's continued affection for the 1794 text, as she takes the considerable pains required to copy it out—very probably revising it in ways that we cannot know, since the earlier version has not survived—and, in providing it with an ending, she promotes it from 'well-defined but incomplete' to a work that, despite the stylistic discrepancy between the two sections, is effectively 'finished'.¹⁸⁵ That is, in our opinion the non-epistolary conclusion is not a stylistic 'declaration' against the letter form; it has no function other than that of a literary exercise, giving closure to the narrative. This, we posit, was done for Austen's own, personal artistic purposes, very possibly those of working out the consequences of plot and character, and is expressed in the stylistic form that came most readily to her by about 1805. Furthermore, the difference in stylistic modes between

¹⁸⁴ At a rather less than productive time in her career, this act of revision and conclusion may have been of great artistic support and value to Austen: "gravelled authors know the stimulus that can come from the mere act of fair-copying, the sense of writing resumed" (Townsend, 16). Mudrick (*Irony* 140) suggests that both the fair copy as a whole and the conclusion in particular were "mere putting to paper of something with which the author, at the time, had no artistic sympathy". We would agree inasmuch as this points to the termination of the novella as a literary exercise, and in the sense that it indicates that Austen had moved on, stylistically, from the 1790s. However, whilst the novella may no longer have excited her artistic sympathy, we argue here that the work must clearly have still been held in some considerable affection for the revision to be made at all, and for the conclusion—by which the work gains its closure—ever to have been written.

¹⁸⁵ Southam's view (*Literary Manuscripts* 46) is that Austen, "growing tired of the plot, and finding its complications awkward to handle, ... abandons the letter and rounds off the story, disposing of the characters and completing the action summarily". In our view, however, it is not tenable to suggest that this closure is in itself indicative of the unsuitability of the epistolary to Austen's writing or of any complexity that *Lady Susan* was, purportedly, beginning to represent: an author capable of composing a correspondence novel "with a variety and cleverness rarely equalled in the eighteenth century" (Litz, *Artistic Development*, 52), and of sustaining this over 41 letters, was surely in a position to finish the job effectively.

the two sections would not—we believe—have been an issue of any preoccupation for Austen since, by this time, the work was no longer intended for publication.¹⁸⁶

The third position with respect to the conclusion is that put forward particularly by Southam, namely, that the direct-narrative interruption was essentially contemporary to the composition of the epistolary section (“...there is nothing in the ‘Conclusion’ which would argue for a date of composition much later than we assign to the body of the work”).¹⁸⁷ This would also appear to be a more logical position than the first argument considered—in which a later dating for the conclusion is nevertheless taken to reflect Austen’s stylistic beliefs of ten years previous to the addition. Certainly, the conclusion’s indication of frustration with the epistolary could more effectively be posited if we assumed the two modes of writing to be of similar dates of composition.

Yet Southam’s view also presents a number of difficulties. In his opinion, Austen eventually comprehends that the epistolary mode cannot serve her purposes nor, indeed, adequately reflect her artistic ‘spirit’.¹⁸⁸ But is it reasonable to suggest that this realisation should have taken fully 41 narratively developed and remarkably well-written letters—

¹⁸⁶ To our knowledge, this suggestion is not challenged by any critical source. McKellar (205) remarks that “[n]owhere in her surviving letters does Jane Austen mention working on *Lady Susan*, let alone submitting it to a publisher”. However, it is important to the discussion of *Lady Susan* within Austen’s development to recognise—as we posit in this thesis—that the novella was originally written with publication very much in mind. But once the epistolary section had been terminated, all subsequent revision and conclusion of the work was, in our view, simply for Austen’s private, creative purposes.

¹⁸⁷ *Literary Manuscripts* 46.

¹⁸⁸ *Literary Manuscripts*, 50.

which, as we have shown,¹⁸⁹ are of evident literary effectiveness—to have dawned on Austen? In light of her awareness, through *Catharine*, of what direct-narrative form appeared—at least in theory—to be capable of facilitating for her stylistic development, is it not therefore more reasonable to assume that the posited need to return to third-person narration was likely to have occurred to Austen at a far earlier stage, perhaps after 10, 15 or even 20 letters, but not at almost the very end of the story? As we have already remarked (Introduction, p.5), it is surely unrealistic to suggest that Austen carried out this substantial creative achievement—and to such a full extent—whilst, at the very same time, chafing impatiently at the epistolary's limitations. And why, if the conclusion represents Austen's coming to terms with the inadequacy of the epistolary mode, would she not then have rewritten the entire novella in direct narrative? Is the suggestion here that the conclusion was written—most conveniently for critics and literary historians if this were to be the case—simply to record for posterity her irritation with a declining stylistic form? If her realisation was, indeed, that the epistolary could not serve her purposes, and if her reaction to this was one of frustration or contempt,¹⁹⁰ it would seem more coherent either to abandon the project outright (never to return to it in any form), or else—and perhaps more artistically credibly—to modify the entire novella in terms of the mode of writing that she had allegedly perceived, at this still-early stage of her development, to be superior. Austen took neither such course of action.

¹⁸⁹ See pp.142 to 183 of this thesis.

¹⁹⁰ See note 173, this chapter.

This final observation is, we would argue, of particular relevance in light of the chronology of Austen's work. For if—as it is frequently maintained—she went on to write the epistolary ur-forms of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* after leaving off the composition of *Lady Susan*,¹⁹¹ it then becomes untenable to posit—from the position of arguing for a similarly dated conclusion—that the direct-narrative closure represents her abandonment of the epistolary on grounds of stylistic inadequacy. Were this so, how could we then rationally explain her return to this very form, not once but twice, subsequent to its alleged rejection?

Thus the prevailing critical view, as we have seen,¹⁹² is that there is a categorical connection of 'cause and effect' between the termination of *Lady Susan*'s epistolary section and its continuation in direct narrative, and that this connection points to Austen's emphatic stylistic rejection of the epistolary as an inferior literary mode. It is undeniable that the conclusion opens with a certain degree of wry—though decidedly mild—irony (far closer to that of her later writings than to the acerbic humour of the earlier juvenilia). This irony is arguably aimed at the quantity of correspondence that had hitherto taken place, possibly (though again, this is pure speculation) with the suggestion that this was excessive or even unrealistic—hence the opening paragraph's 'great detriment' and 'assistance to the State'. Certainly, it might be maintained that the irony here undermines the entire justification for epistolary communication by obliquely suggesting the greater validity (and reliability) of personal contact:

¹⁹¹ See thesis Introduction, n.12. However, see thesis, pp.275-277 for further discussion of *First Impressions*.

¹⁹² See p.186 of this thesis.

This Correspondence, by a meeting between some of the Parties & a separation between the others, could not, to the great detriment of the Post office Revenue, be continued longer. Very little assistance to the State could be derived from the Epistolary Intercourse of M^{rs} Vernon & her neice, for the former soon perceived by the stile of Frederica's Letters, that they were written under her Mother's inspection, & therefore deferring all particular enquiry till she could make it personally in Town, ceased writing minutely or often.¹⁹³

In contrast, however, we would assert that it is one thing to recognise a degree of irony in Austen's language at this critical point; it is quite another to magnify our reading of this, interpreting it as her ridiculing of the epistolary tradition in general, or seeing this section as, in effect, her leave-taking of the correspondence novel for its stylistic unsuitability (McMaster calls this narrative switch "a farewell alike to the epistolary mode that had dominated the eighteenth-century novel and Austen's own fictions, and to the energy-driven personnel who had dominated them").¹⁹⁴ In light of our preceding arguments, we would assert that there simply does not appear to be sufficient grounds to reach such a conclusion, other than by the fairly rigorous use of heavily speculative interpretation.

These are theories, then, that in our assessment have imposed the assumption of the evolutionary model of novelistic development (which, as we observed in the Introduction,

¹⁹³ *MW* 311. There are, of course, other compelling interpretations of this particular passage that see the target of Austen's irony not so much as epistolary form—or its posited stylistic limitations—but rather the broader political context that censured the implications of epistolary narrative (an issue that we will be considering more fully from p.247 ff. of this thesis). See Watson, 83: "Like Edgeworth, Austen secures a version of subjectivity by recourse to a State institution, while here at the same moment belittling the power of epistolary intercourse to do very much to undermine the State".

¹⁹⁴ "Juvenilia", 184.

views the epistolary as an unsuccessful and soon-terminated proto-form) onto the convenient facts that *Lady Susan* was begun as a correspondence novel and was concluded in direct-narrative style. As we see it, little or no regard is paid by the critics positing these views to alternative causes for the non-epistolary conclusion, for such is the continued strength and general acceptance of Watt's ideas¹⁹⁵ that these critical opinions of *Lady Susan*'s termination have never been called into question.

However, having assessed the positions in favour of such a perspective, we argue that there *is* no cause and effect between the uncompleted epistolary section and its direct-narrative conclusion; the discrepancy of form does not indicate—either at the time of terminating the epistolary or at the moment of resuming the novella in direct narrative—the stylistic rejection of the earlier of these two modes. Theories positing the conclusion's supposed ulterior pragmatic purpose (i.e., to articulate the rejection of the epistolary) take us not only into the realms of speculation—but also and more specifically lead us into the arena of essentially *implausible* speculation, and it is our opinion that they should be viewed and valued as such.

Beyond what we see as the importance of having challenged a hitherto unquestioned critical belief lies the still greater significance of the implications that this brings in its wake, which are more fully detailed in our conclusions (see thesis, p.280 ff.). Briefly, these include the assertion that Austen's early stylistic development is far more directly affected

¹⁹⁵ See Jan Fergus's comments on the continuing validity of Watt's notion of novelistic development, thesis, p.9.

by the epistolary than conventional accounts suggest; that some of the most characteristic features of Austen's mature style—present in *Lady Susan*—were therefore configured well in advance of the time of composition of the later works, and to a far fuller extent than is usually recognised; and that the inclusion of 'embedded letters' in the later fiction is, in this light, more than simply the *vestiges* of an abandoned form but rather their consciously selected use on the basis of Austen's full awareness of their narrative and stylistic value; that is, their literary worth is clearly too great to have cast aside. Finally, on a more general note, the implications of this challenge to the orthodox critical positions is that, in turn, it also challenges the 'Wattsian' notion of novelistic evolution that confers a secondary, marginal role to the epistolary, suggesting instead that for Austen the form in many critical senses points the way forward, stylistically, in a manner that her experiment with direct narrative in *Catharine* had largely failed to do.

2.2.2 Critical Voices of Assent.

Whilst the more conventional critical response to *Lady Susan* has essentially been negative, as we have just seen,¹⁹⁶ there are nevertheless a number of critics who have found much to admire in the novella, particularly its narrative maturity, its startlingly effective use of the epistolary form and the manner in which, stylistically, it foreshadows certain aspects of the mature fiction, such as narrative authority, irony and psychological insight. Before considering those specific aspects of the novella that we posit to have resolved the technical

¹⁹⁶ A fact about which Mudrick frustratedly remarks: "...by everyone else [*Lady Susan*] has been treated, if at all, as a piece of inconsequential juvenilia" (*Irony*, 139).

limitations of *Catharine*, in order to balance somewhat the views of Lascelles, Litz, and Southam (et al.), and as means of supporting the notion that the epistolary mode in *Lady Susan*, far from leading to a failed experiment, actually resulted in significant artistic gain for Austen, we now briefly outline the opinions of these critics.

An early and consistent champion of *Lady Susan* (not only the work but also, and more controversially, its eponymous heroine) is Marvin Mudrick.¹⁹⁷ He particularly admires the novella for its unflinchingly direct handling of "social fact", a quality of *unattenuatedness* manifestly absent in Austen's later writing, in which such issues are more tangentially expressed:

Lady Susan is uniquely characteristic of its author. It holds in steady focus, for the only time in [her] work, her essential subject, that complex of hard, avoidable social facts which is always at the center of her awareness, but which elsewhere—except in her letters—propriety compels her to represent obliquely, piecemeal, in the literary disguise of burlesque, or, at her limit of social uneasiness, not at all.

(*Irony as Defense and Discovery*, 127)¹⁹⁸

Specifically, Mudrick recognises that Austen's use of the epistolary contributes directly to a more effective delineation of Susan Vernon's complexity and duplicity, and that the polyphonic possibilities of correspondence-based observation ("cumulative and contrapuntal", 127), in their very indirectness create a richer, fuller portrait of characters

¹⁹⁷ See also p.66 of this thesis for an outline of Mudrick's work on *Lady Susan*.

¹⁹⁸ This assessment of the novella is one that moves Litz to specifically disagree with Mudrick (*Artistic Development* 40-45), seeing it as a misreading of the work (ibid., 44): "The importance of *Lady Susan*... is inflated by all those critics who see Jane Austen's irony as a ruthless and dispassionate instrument, and who feel that most of her later works are a shying away from the hard social realities embodied in *Lady Susan*" (ibid., 43).

and events than would otherwise be the case were the narrative form different. He, too, recognises that Mrs Vernon articulates a moral counterbalance to Lady Susan's hypocrisy, or at least she attempts to do so. In marked opposition to the view that we posit of Mrs Vernon,¹⁹⁹ however, Mudrick sees her as simply unequal to the fight ("she feels, apparently that she ought to be Lady Susan's nemesis. Yet she is as powerless as her brother", 134). In this sense, although fully in accordance with Mudrick's overall view of *Lady Susan* as Austen's "first completed masterpiece" (138), we disagree with the notion of imbalance that his opinion of Mrs Vernon implies; furthermore, such a view—in our assessment—fails to take account of the significant elements such as incipient narrative voice and attribution of sympathy by which Austen systematically creates a framework from within which Mrs Vernon becomes the moral point of reference and in which Susan Vernon can, in effect, be more closely perceived and thus judged to be wanting. But ours, of course, is a reading of *Lady Susan* that is in opposition to Mudrick's opinion. For, not only does he suggest that Susan Vernon is limitlessly superior to her peers ("It is clear that [she] triumphs over Mrs. Vernon whenever she wishes to, over Reginald, over everyone else", 137), but also that Lady Susan should be seen not as a culprit, but rather as the victim of a society not sufficiently deserving of her talents:

The ultimate tragic victim is Lady Susan, the beautiful woman who must waste her art in pretense, her passion in passing seductions, her will on invertebrates like her daughter and Reginald... Energy, in her immobile bounded conventional world, turns upon and devours itself. The world

¹⁹⁹ See p.160 ff. of this thesis.

defeats Lady Susan, not because it recognizes her vices, but because her virtues have no room in it.²⁰⁰

Hugh McKellar (*Sport or Cinderella*) also champions Lady Susan, though somewhat less passionately than Mudrick, and from the position—rather than that of defending or justifying her arrogant superiority—of observing instead that, on the one hand, Susan Vernon's need for control is perfectly reasonable; on the other, that the problems she causes are often more in the minds of those who surround her than a consequence of her own (mis)doing. McKellar suggests, perfectly reasonably, that the paramount preoccupation with income, property, wealth and proprietorship in Austen's times provides an obvious justification for Susan Vernon's desire for 'dominion': "[i]f ownership and property rights obsess all the people you know, will you not likewise grasp, and cling to tenaciously, whatever your society allows you to hold?" (211). We see Lady Susan's struggle for social acceptance²⁰¹ as therefore directly related to this attitude of control: recognition—if not approval—of a socially validated 'profile' facilitates the ability to acquire 'holdings' (we recall that Susan escapes Langford precisely because her *credentials of acceptability* within the circles of her own class had been seriously jeopardized by her anti-social behaviour).²⁰² Put conversely, if the society in which Susan Vernon moves had effectively ostracised her, she could have made no attempt to control, dominate and claim Reginald.

²⁰⁰ Mudrick 138. See n.69 for further related comment.

²⁰¹ A process that we traced indirectly through Reginald's shifting attitudes. See p.146 of this thesis.

²⁰² See *Lady Susan* Letter Two, and comment, p.157 of this thesis.

Additionally, and in marked contrast to a more conventional view that inevitably emphasises Susan Vernon's malevolent influence, McKellar inverts this perspective (211) to suggest that her power derives not so much from what she can do but from what she causes others to fear:

And still the people around her take fright, perhaps less at what she actually does than at the feelings they project onto her from within themselves. Invariably, she wreaks less havoc than lies within her power; are the onlookers dimly but uncomfortably aware that they, if possessed of such power, might exercise less restraint?

Certainly, this is a novel and interesting position, although it is one that we ultimately find unconvincing: Susan Vernon's *potential* for trouble is obviously part of what causes the initial prejudice expressed by Mrs Vernon and Reginald; it is also the factor underlying Sir Reginald's concerns set out in the letter to his son (Letter 12). However, the greatest cause for reaction against Lady Susan, as voiced by Catherine Vernon, is motivated not by a projection of inner feelings but rather by a response to real events, real occurrences and genuine causes for objection.

But in our view, it is not McKellar's idea of Susan Vernon's personality that is of most critical interest. Rather, there are two other areas of comment that are of greater relevance to the work as a whole. The first of these is his assertion (206)—akin to the position of Margaret Anne Doody²⁰³—that Austen's novella should be viewed as a text that

²⁰³ See p.135 of this thesis.

was perfectly acceptable to her, exactly as she copied it into her manuscript, and not as a failed experiment:

Granted, anyone capable of transmuting the letters which allegedly comprised "First Impressions" into *Pride and Prejudice* could presumably have worked a similar miracle on *Lady Susan* had she wished. But we are the ones who wonder why she failed so to wish, and who assume that, having made the fair copy, she gave *Lady Susan* up for a bad job. Have we created a problem where she saw none? Did she leave *Lady Susan* alone because she thought it was all right in its way as it stood, or felt that extensive changes were less apt to improve it than to spoil it?

In other words, McKellar takes issue with the conventional critical notion that sees the novella both as a failure and as recognition of the unacceptable limitations of the epistolary on Austen's developing stylistic requirements. As we have already argued,²⁰⁴ by the time of the non-epistolary closure (but, critically, not before this) it is plausible—we would say more plausible than the alternative view—to see *Lady Susan* as a draft work that was not remodelled, though the ability to do so was evidently not lacking, since Austen no longer had the wish to take the project any further.²⁰⁵ Beyond this, in McKellar's argument on this issue we find implicit support for our view that critical perspectives which insist on cataloguing *Lady Susan* as an unsuccessful attempt to create work in the vein of her later writings are presented with less than satisfactory textual support. Additionally, they impose a determined notion of novelistic development onto this work that, we argue, is entirely

²⁰⁴ See p.189 and Chapter Two n.186 of this thesis.

²⁰⁵ See p.225 ff. of this thesis for reasons underlying Austen's termination of this 'project'. See thesis p.267 ff. for McKellar's views on publication restraints pertaining to *Lady Susan*.

open to challenge. Such perspectives, in effect, do indeed create a problem where Austen saw none.²⁰⁶ For, as McKellar (213) justly observes, if in a somewhat particular manner:

...we reproach Jane Austen for not bringing *Lady Susan* into line with the expectations her longer novels have aroused in us... [yet] Since she, for whatever reason, made no effort to bring this book before the public, we are in a way eavesdroppers, and must risk being surprised or displeased by what we were not supposed to hear.

The second area of comment that we see as an important affirmation of *Lady Susan* is McKellar's indication of the novella's extreme economy of style²⁰⁷ (a direct consequence of its epistolarity) and its complex yet fully believable narrative interconnectedness. Whereas McKellar notes that, in her juvenilia writings, Austen often appears to draw attention to the debilities of the epistolary ("a letter written to fill up the sender's time and directed to an acquaintance with small reason to care about its content is bound to seem artificial"),²⁰⁸ *Lady Susan* reveals the manner in which Austen is aware of the specific strengths of the form, and puts it to particularly effective use. Most especially, McKellar (208) highlights the stylistic economy that this use of the letter form affords, avoiding

²⁰⁶ McKellar's explanation for the critical dissatisfaction with the novella is that the modern world of standardisation has come to expect predictability from products, processes and people in a way that Austen's world neither sought nor would have understood. In his view, then, by producing a work that is so radically at odds with the later 'representative' writings, Austen falls foul of critical expectations. He ironically observes that "people have a right to know what they can expect from you, and to complain if they get something different" (210).

²⁰⁷ This is an issue also considered in section 2.2.3 (thesis, p.207 ff.).

²⁰⁸ McKellar 208. This is similar to Southam's views on the epistolarity of *Love and Freindship* (see n.100, this chapter). As we observe in the footnote cited, however, although the juvenilia plays with inadequate use of the letter—and beyond this, of course, thereby parodies writing that employs the epistolary form in implausible ways—we argue that the epistolary *per se* as a literary mode is not the object of Austen's ridicule, as its subsequent and serious application in *The Three Sisters* and *A Collection of Letters* avows.

unnecessary and cumbersome information given merely for the purposes of narrative contextualisation. This economy brings with it the additional benefit of involving the reader as an observant and competent spectator and interpreter of events:

Since almost every letter is addressed to a relative or close friend of long standing, economy of expression can be achieved on two fronts. No one has to waste time and energy on constructing, or penetrating, facades; these people can spell out what they think and intend. Neither does any writer drag in by the hair, for readers' benefit, masses of information which the recipient could hardly help having already. We accumulate as much background knowledge as we need to follow the plot, but we are deemed intelligent and alert enough to pick up and fit together scattered details mentioned in passing by various writers.

Finally, McKellar identifies the interconnectedness and plausibility of the novella's narrative strands. Citing the manner in which careful attention to clues reveals that Susan Vernon's financial difficulties are, in fact, of her own making, he observes that this "fabric of information is woven so carefully that if you try to rearrange the details, casually strewn though they look, you start the whole thing unraveling. The texture is as tight as the time frame, and yet nothing seems strained or implausible" (209). We concur fully with this opinion, adding only that the 'carefully woven fabric' is simply another way of recognising the effects of polyphony on our understanding of given events, actions and characters. Southam also observes the apparently "casually strewn" narrative details, but terms them "disparate observations" (see thesis, p.143). Yet, whereas Southam sees this as a specifically limiting aspect both of the epistolary form and of *Lady Susan*, McKellar

emphatically recognises what we have already suggested:²⁰⁹ that it is precisely such 'disparateness' that contributes to a fuller, more complex and more comprehensive view of Lady Susan Vernon.

Deborah Knuth's "*Lady Susan: A Bibliographical Essay*" is a brief and highly useful review of the novella's critical history. For our current purposes, however, its particular interest is the reference made to the studies by a number of critics giving support to Austen's text as a work of importance and value in its own right, and as a significant step in her stylistic progress towards the later fiction. These critics include Lloyd W. Brown (1973); Julia Epstein (1989) and Susan Pepper Robbins (1989).

Lloyd Brown's analysis of the novella (*Bits of Ivory*) focuses on and emphasises Austen's control over epistolary form. His essential point is that the letter is an ambiguous medium—one that both reveals and conceals—as well as one that has the basic function of self justification, through existing for the purpose of communicating the writer's own views. In Brown's opinion, Austen is entirely successful in her use of the letter form to explore the self-justification of Catherine and Susan and in undermining their attempts to conceal their own personal motives in the clash of wills that is *Lady Susan* (an analysis that accords fully with our discussion of the stylistics in Catherine Vernon's Letter 20, which

²⁰⁹ See pp.144-148 of this thesis.

includes assessment of Lady Susan's own pragmatic strategies of concealment and self-justification²¹⁰):

Both Lady Susan and Mrs. Vernon are engaged in the letter writer's perennial business of self-justification. And, as usual, Jane Austen subverts this instinctive process in order to have each correspondent betray herself unwittingly...What Jane Austen has done is to translate the psychological potentialities of her inherited epistolary forms to the dominant theme of *Lady Susan*—the ambiguities of self.

(149, 152-153)

Brown's is a view, in other words, that recognises the achievements of *Lady Susan* in light of and not in spite of its epistolarity.

Julia Epstein's *The Ironic Pen* (a study of the politics of Frances Burney's writing), along broadly similar lines to Brown, provides an affirmative assessment of *Lady Susan* primarily through its effective use of the epistolary. The aspect that Epstein (50) highlights is the letter form's inherent suitability for conveying duplicity, an element that is in turn entirely adequate for Susan Vernon's deceitful purposes. We agree completely with Epstein's evaluation,²¹¹ but would add to her remarks—in light of our analysis on p.145 ff. of this thesis—that the notion of duplicity is not conveyed *exclusively* through Susan's own letters; rather, it is also established through the polyphonic views on her character and actions that the novella presents its readers.

²¹⁰ See p.150 ff. of this thesis.

²¹¹ For additional comment on Epstein and the epistolary, see thesis, pp. 71, 149 & 216.

Susan Pepper Robbins, (along with Lloyd Brown), rather than focussing on the attainments achieved through and because of epistolary form, emphasises the novella's position of importance in Austen's stylistic development towards the narrative mode of the mature fiction. Specifically, she contrasts Austen's subversive and anarchic use of the letter form in the juvenilia with the more considered, controlled use of the form in *Lady Susan* (a point that we have already drawn attention to),²¹² observing that the novella is a "turning point towards the definitive authority of the narrative voice".²¹³ This again is in full accordance with our own assessment of the epistolary achievements in *Lady Susan*, which we have argued (thesis, p.166) establish an incipient or embryonic narrative voice identified with the presiding moral authority of Mrs Vernon, a point that we will assess further in section 2.2.3. Although in agreement with Robbins, Lloyd Brown also traces *Lady Susan*'s formal and stylistic legacy in the later fiction, thus emphasising not only its centrality to Austen's definitive change in narrative mode but also the manner in which Austen incorporated specific aspects of epistolary form into her subsequent writings: "[t]he mature novels are appreciably influenced by the structural functions and psychological insights of letter writing" (155). More than simply recognising the legacy of the letter, this points to the continued influence of the epistolary on Austen's work,²¹⁴ argues forcefully for a re-evaluation of the form in the process of her stylistic development and suggests, once again, that *Lady Susan* is not the experimental failure that Lascelles, Litz and Southam (et al.)

²¹² See this chapter, n.100 and n.208.

²¹³ Knuth, 219.

²¹⁴ See also p.129 of this thesis.

describe, but rather a work that provided specific technical substance to Austen's developing skills, as we will detail in the following section.

2.2.3 Improving on *Catharine*

Given Southam's overall views on *Lady Susan*, it is at least curious to find him calling the novella "an exercise in correcting [the] technical and stylistic faults" of *Catharine*, a paradoxical opinion that we have already commented on (thesis, p.119).²¹⁵ We dispute the idea that *Lady Susan*'s achievements can so readily be dismissed as a mere 'exercise', but in all other senses, it is certainly the case that this epistolary novella overcomes a range of technical and stylistic limitations that Austen was unable to resolve in *Catharine*. Drawing on our analysis of and references to *Catharine* and *Lady Susan* in sections 2.1 and 2.2 of this chapter, we will now consider the manner in which *Lady Susan* in effect improves on *Catharine*, suggesting once again that the notion of 'regression' conventionally associated with Austen's return to the letter form represented by *Lady Susan* is more than questionable.

There is, however, a note of caution to be struck before continuing: we are positing that Austen's stylistic development was forwarded because of and not despite the epistolary mode in *Lady Susan*; furthermore, we also posit that, in this later novella, Austen was able to overcome a number of stylistic limitations in spite of *Catharine* having been written in

²¹⁵ The citation is from *Literary Manuscripts*, 46.

direct narrative—a mode generally deemed to be evolutionarily superior to the epistolary. Our hypothesis therefore challenges the *regressiveness* of the epistolary. But what we are decidedly *not* suggesting (in spite of our recognition that both these works stand in synechdochic representation of their respective genres)²¹⁶ is that the epistolary mode is thereby shown to be a form of writing that is more advanced, more sophisticated or more effective than third-person narrative. This would not only be a non sequitur; it would also be a singularly untenable generalisation. Hugh McKellar (209) memorably expresses the same caution by saying that he “would by no means [champion] *Lady Susan* at the expense of the six novels any more than [he] would advise music lovers to eschew *Fidelio* and the *Choral Symphony* and embrace the arrangements of Scottish folksongs and German peasant dances which Beethoven made from time to time”. We naturally disagree with the idea implicit in McKellar’s words that *Lady Susan* is a ‘lesser’ mode, but fully concur that the defence of this correspondence novel cannot be made ‘at the expense’ of the form in which later non-epistolary writings were written.

That said, however, our view is that *Lady Susan*—precisely through its epistolarity—was able to resolve a number of stylistic issues that the direct-narrative *Catharine* could not. What this tells us is not—of course, and to reiterate the point just made—that third-person narrative is therefore inferior to the letter form, but rather that, at the specific stage of artistic development in which we find Austen in these early texts, the epistolary was better able to create, reflect and support the stylistic developments that are

²¹⁶ See Introduction, p. 14.

evident in *Lady Susan*. In this sense, then, it cannot be maintained that the correspondence novel is a regressive step in Austen's writing: it is *Lady Susan*, not *Catharine*, that most directly paves the way for the major novels of Austen's maturity; and it is through the epistolary, not the direct narrative, that Austen is able to articulate and develop the narrative and moral frameworks of her later fiction. This, we believe, is what should occupy us in the discussion of correspondence and direct-narrative modes in Austen's early writings; not (especially for *Lady Susan*) the largely unsubstantiated and predictable dogma of epistolary regression.

Our analysis of *Catharine* (thesis, pp.89-116) suggested a number of stylistic and technical limitations that Austen appeared unable to resolve. These include inconsistency both in style and characterisation (very largely that of Catharine herself). In stylistic issues, we observed that there seemed to be uncertainty as to the kind of writing that was intended—a serious attempt to delineate events in the life of Catharine or else the parody of a sentimental heroine. This, in turn, was aggravated—in our view—by an undisciplined use of the narrative mode, which appeared to give an overly free reign to Austen's rhetorical excesses, an element that certainly contributes to the vitality and humour of the early juvenilia writing, but which sits particularly uneasily with attempts at a more sober form of writing. As regards characterisation, the inconsistency essentially concerns the implausible discrepancy between the 'different Catharines' we see throughout the novella (mock-heroic figure; giddy-headed flirt; independent and outspoken individualist). This, if not directly due to a lack of authorial access to the protagonist's intimate thought, is at the very least

heightened by it, and it is a lack that is passed on to the reader. Fuller access would, we argue, have necessarily facilitated a more uniform presentation of character. Finally, Catharine appears to be insufficiently shaped and affected by often fairly significant external circumstances, thus appearing to be largely disconnected from her environment. The broader consequence of this, in our view, is to undermine the general plausibility of the novella as a whole. In contrast, it is our opinion that the epistolary mode of *Lady Susan* allows Austen to systematically resolve each of the limitations and difficulties we have outlined above, and by these means (which we now consider further) to make a significant step towards the writing of her later fiction.

As we have seen for *Catharine*,²¹⁷ what Southam perceives as the advantages of a “less restrictive form” (“Juvenilia” 253) actually seems to contribute to the tonal inconsistency that characterises certain sections of the work. Austen appears to be unable to determine a fixed authorial voice by which to guide the development of the novella, moving from the mock-heroic tones of *MW* 192, through to the narrative neutrality of *MW* 193 and then beyond this to the language of excessive sentiment that we see in *MW* 194.²¹⁸ This difficulty, in our assessment, stems from Austen’s discomfort with the precise nature of the third-person narrator, an entity that is necessarily undefined and whose function may therefore appear unclear. For whilst, in the fragment from *MW* 192, it might seem that the narrator is establishing the parameters for a comic or parodic handling of narrative events, this fades on the very next page with the emergence of a more authoritative voice, balanced

²¹⁷ See thesis, p.101 ff.

²¹⁸ All excerpts cited on p.101 ff. of this thesis.

and judicial in its pronouncements, giving rise to a more solemn and restrained narration of plot. But that in turn also fades as the authorial voice then takes on the colour of sentimental fiction, leaving the reader at a loss as to what validity can be accorded this narrative figure.

Lady Susan, on the other hand, is characterised throughout its epistolary section by a remarkable degree of tonal consistency (although we will consider Susan Vernon's disruptive 'outbursts' below). Evidently, the apparent difficulty of establishing a coherent narrative voice is not directly tenable to a correspondence novel, although we have argued (thesis, p.166) that an incipient narrative perspective is articulated through Mrs Vernon. Beyond this, however, it seems clear that Austen is able both to establish and maintain tonal consistency in this later novella by disciplining her objectives. By this we mean that, in *Lady Susan*, Austen clearly perceives that her narrative and thematic aims—if they are to be effectively presented—require sharper definition, calling for the consistent and coherent creation of the novella's two conflictive worlds, largely obliged to carry out their conflict under conditions of public propriety. Put simply, this means that Mrs Vernon, in private, must plausibly articulate the values she represents and should not stray from this; in private, Lady Susan must also do the same thing; and in public both women must be called upon to act civilly at all times. The framework thus sets up three ambits that require of Austen a consistent presentation of events and character in order that the resulting clash of wills be successfully drawn. An over-reaching or confusion of these aims (such as the introduction of parody or sentimentalism) would undermine the scheme. As we will also argue below

when considering the issue of character more fully, these objectives are successfully achieved because the epistolary form facilitates unmitigated access, from the outset, of the intimate recesses of the characters' thoughts. This is an aspect that—within the narrative events of *Lady Susan*—the introduction of irrelevant or discordant tonal elements could only serve to diminish. Indeed, not only does epistolary form facilitate such access; it actually requires it. For, in the sense that the novella has no narrative figure called on to interpret and present characters and events to us (with the concomitant risk that a 'confused' narrator may in turn confuse readers with respect to what is described, as happens in the tonally inconsistent *Catharine*), we are mostly given all information directly. Through this economy of style, we are therefore able to rapidly determine the nature and import of events as they occur, and are not distracted into having to determine the kind of narrative that we are being presented with. Thus, through an effective use of the epistolary, Austen learns the value of consistency of tone, an element that *Catharine's* shifting narrative voice never achieves.

In much the same way as it resolves the tonal inconsistencies evident in *Catharine*, *Lady Susan* is also able to resolve the inconsistency of character that we claim to be a particular weakness in the earlier novella. *Catharine*, as we have seen (thesis, pp.105-109),²¹⁹ displays a range of character traits that are too diverse to be plausible within the very limited timeframe of the novella, an aspect that Southam views as Austen's failure to

²¹⁹ See, too, this cited section for a range of fragments from *Catharine* illustrating the arguments made at this point.

“compose a single, unified personality” (*Literary Manuscripts* 40).²²⁰ There is a sense in which the protagonist appears to be a sketch for at least three character types, two of which (the mock-heroine and the skittish flirt) pertain to the novels of sentimentality, whereas the more thoughtful and earnest Catharine who passionately debates history, politics and literature is a type who clearly points towards Elizabeth Bennet.²²¹ There are important consequences to an insufficiently well-determined character acting as the protagonist of the novella: in the sense that Catharine might reasonably be expected to generate and attract reader sympathy, uncertainty as to the real nature of her character acts as a significant impediment to this. For whilst the flashes of spirit we glimpse in her debates with Camilla or her aunt are successful in facilitating our sense of identity with Catharine’s views, her values and her plight, the frivolity she often shows in her conversation with Edward, and her initial presentation as a figure of mock-heroic adventure militate against her capacity to act as the serious core of narrative events. Again, as we have argued throughout,²²² this inconsistency is due in very large measure to the lack of direct access we are given to Catharine’s thoughts. Object of the narrator’s attention, she nevertheless remains a stranger to us, as indeed she must, since the narrative perspective is never able to sufficiently determine exactly *which* Catharine we should become more fully acquainted with. More intimate access to Catharine’s personal perception of things would inevitably have provided a more consistent, coherent presentation of character, avoiding the diversity of traits that—we argue—undermine her plausibility.

²²⁰ Also quoted on p.109 of this thesis.

²²¹ See thesis, p.106.

²²² See, for example, thesis p.109.

Austen's eventual solution to this problem is her outstandingly effective use of free indirect speech, a stylistic device that combines the consciousness and perceptions of both narrator and protagonist in a way that ensures full access to a character's thoughts, whilst maintaining narrative control over that character.²²³ Fusing epistolary insight with a more developed and sensitive narrative voice will allow the mature Austen to maintain such coherency and consistency in her later work.²²⁴ But the resolution of the difficulties we observe in *Catharine* did not come, initially, through free indirect speech; rather, it came through Austen's effective exploitation of epistolary form. In drawing most particularly Lady Susan and Catharine Vernon, Austen was able to create stable, coherent and utterly plausible characters precisely through the ability to fully access—and thus dramatically present—her characters' thoughts and motivations. The single ambit of *Lady Susan* in which there is a notable discrepancy of tone, and apparent discrepancy of character presentation, is with Susan Vernon's dramatic outbursts of indignation. But, as we have observed (thesis, pp. 152-154), these are always articulated in the context of private discourse and, far from undermining the general plausibility of the narrative, actually add to its realism by facilitating a more rounded, complex portrait of the eponymous heroine. Indeed, whilst we have recognised that the minor characters in the novella are little more than cameos, suitably occupying cameo roles (thesis, p.159), the characters of both Lady Susan and Catherine Vernon are coherent, vital and realistically drawn throughout. For the

²²³ See an assessment of this in *Catharine* and *Emma* (thesis, pp.110-113); see Introduction to this thesis, n.4, for fuller discussion of the term and further reference.

²²⁴ See section 4, Conclusions and Implications (thesis, p.280 ff).

characters quite literally speak for themselves, without the need for an inconsistent narrator making a variety of attempts to present their essential nature to us, as is the case with *Catharine*. One consequence of this is that, although Catharine's range of emotions is somewhat limited (and should therefore be relatively simple to convey), the narrative approximation to her character is overly diverse, undermining the attempt at a realistic portrait. In contrast, Catherine Vernon is seen to reflect a far broader range of emotions (self-doubt, worry, irritation and happiness), but her essential identity is never in question as these emotions are made manifest directly by her own words, always in coherence with what we see and know of her character. Lady Susan also shows a range of emotions and emotional states: compliance, anger, jealousy and breathtaking cool-headedness. Yet she, too, in spite of the gulf between her public demeanour and private outrage, is always unquestionably the same character (complex and deceptive, to be sure, but certainly not schizophrenic). The epistolary and polyphonic presentation of these characters generates a vast deal of information on their essential natures, as our discussion of this very point in *Lady Susan* has shown (thesis, pp.144-148) and, therefore, Austen is constantly able to draw on a clear understanding of what is or is not coherent and consistent for her characters. The corollary of this is that their actions and interactions are made the more plausible throughout.

Once again, the broad canvas offered by the "less restrictive form" of direct narrative appears to have caused Austen to be insufficiently coherent in drawing her main character in *Catharine*, whereas in contrast the directness of the epistolary form takes us

swiftly and unequivocally to the basic features of Susan and Catherine Vernon, facilitating a regular presentation of character and supporting the broader consequences of this on the novella, particularly the nature of the moral conflict (and what it represents) between the two sister-in-laws and the establishment of reader sympathy for Catharine Vernon.

We have referred to and discussed the conventional criticism levelled against the epistolary mode which claims that the form is inadequate for the expression of plausible psychological introspection.²²⁵ For example, Southam observes that “[i]n a unified and inclusive medium [i.e., third-person narrative] characters can be presented with a force of dramatic insight and realism unattainable in a fragmented treatment”; Epstein suggests that Austen’s use of the epistolary possibly “led her to see the need for a new narrative expression of internal, psychological conflict”.²²⁶ However, we posit that not only is this manifestly not the case with *Lady Susan*, for which we have detailed the plausibility of the psychological struggle that Catherine Vernon undergoes in order to face up to the challenge represented by Lady Susan (see thesis, p.161), in addition to the clash of mental wills that their conflict represents and which is admirably portrayed through the polyphonic possibilities offered by the epistolary. But we also posit that this takes on particular relevance and validity in light of a specific limitation seen in the presentation of Catharine. This is the manner in which Austen fails to show her as being shaped by and connected to the broader experiences of her own life, an aspect that led Mudrick to suggest that “[t]he

²²⁵ See for example, thesis p.149.

²²⁶ Southam, *Artistic Development* 50; Epstein, *Female Epistolary Tradition* 416.

author seems to be experimenting with characterization in a vacuum".²²⁷ Most particularly, her apparent disconnectedness from the stifling, overbearing control that her aunt attempts to exercise over her, far from arguing for a philosophical indifference to changing emotional fortune (an aspect most dramatically clear in Lady Susan's case, for example), suggests instead a significant lack of plausible motivation and response in the portrayal of Catharine's character. This would again appear to be the result of a narrative inability to adequately convey believable attitudes and reactions for the novella's protagonist, coherently related to the events that should, in plausible circumstances, be shaping and affecting Catharine's interventions. Epstein's belief that the 'narrative expression of internal, psychological conflict' pertains, by implication, to third-person voice is therefore open to question. We suggest, at this point, that it is not the given stylistic mode that determines the successful delineation of psychological plausibility but rather the use that is made of that form in expressing and conveying inner conflict. In this sense, it is clear that *Lady Susan* is far more effective than *Catharine*, and—beyond this—we would again emphasise that the successful manner in which Catherine Vernon and Lady Susan realistically react against and are connected to their own worlds—and to the events that affect them within those worlds—consequently adds to the general plausibility of the novella as a whole. In other words, the principal characters in *Lady Susan*, responding coherently to the events that shape their responses (anger where anger is expected; frustration where this is in order, and so on), reacting—in addition—in accordance with the public or private contexts in which they find themselves at any given point and with what

²²⁷ Mudrick, 27, also cited on p.109 of this thesis.

we know to be in keeping with their essential natures, and, above all, doing so through a stylistic medium that allows us uninhibited access to these reactions facilitates an insight into effective character delineation that, for Austen, the third-person narrative in *Catharine* was unable to provide.

The presence of an omniscient third-person narrator is generally taken to be a stylistic advance over literary forms in which this narrative mode is not available, namely, first-person narration and the epistolary novel.²²⁸ For example, Southam (*Artistic Development* 50) has termed direct narrative “a mode of presentation which unites and reconciles the different points of view through the author’s narrative, the total and mediating point of view that can divine relationships and comprehend meanings far beyond the range of epistolary fiction”. It is therefore clear, in this sense, that the presence of a third-person narrator in *Catharine* should, in theory at least, be viewed as a positive element in Austen’s stylistic development, and one that very specifically foreshadows her later attainments. However, our assessment of the novella highlights the manner in which this narrative voice is largely ineffective: its overly diverse presentation of Catharine’s character undermines her plausibility; its stylistic inconsistency as regards the literary genre being presented creates uncertainty and—as we have suggested (thesis, p.211)—may actually lead to readers’ distrust of the narrative figure itself. We would also draw attention to two further ways in which the narrative voice in *Catharine* fails to make the stylistic

²²⁸ For further discussion, comment and reference, see thesis pp.143 and 149.

contribution that we initially expect of it. The first of these is the quality of its irony; the second is its insufficient penetration of Catharine's consciousness.

Whereas we have argued that the use of irony in *Lady Susan* is instrumental in establishing the attribution of sympathy in favour of Catherine Vernon, in configuring the broader framework within which the central moral conflict occurs and in distancing and undermining any possible sense of reader sympathy or identity with Lady Susan herself (thesis, pp. 163-176), the irony—such as it is—is considerably less effective in *Catharine*. Specifically, we would argue that it has two particular limitations: in the sense that it closely resembles the quality of parody, it is frequently overly evident and ostentatious; and in the sense that this parodic voice is then replaced by other narrative tones (of seriousness and of sentimentality), it adds to the overall lack of tonal consistency that we have highlighted throughout for the novella. As we observed for the fragment from *MW* 195-196 on p.100 of this thesis, an excessive interest in what Southam terms “an irrelevant concern for stylishness”²²⁹ causes this attempt at ironic voice to act as an impediment to narrative flow, adding practically nothing to a fuller representation of Catharine or of her world and its concerns. And, as our consideration of the series of fragments from p.101 ff. of the thesis has underlined, the tonal imbalance between the narrative irony of Catharine's mock-heroic introduction and the rapid shift from this into entirely distinct modes of writing leaves us questioning whether Austen has any further purpose for her irony in this novella beyond the limited rhetorical objectives of parody.

²²⁹ “Juvenilia” 254.

The second difficulty we posit for the narrative voice in *Catharine* concerns the failure of the narrative perspective to adequately relate to and identify with the novella's protagonist. The basic drawback we perceive—in opposition to the views of Marilyn Butler²³⁰—is the lack of penetration between narrative and protagonist consciousness (thesis, pp.110-113). Unlike the fusion of outlooks afforded in free indirect style, the relationship between the narrator and the events narrated in *Catharine*—and most particularly where these effect the heroine herself—is static and conventional, never creating closer insight into Catharine's perspective. As we have already suggested (thesis p.213), rather than heightening our understanding of the novella's central character, the narrative voice in fact acts against deeper acquaintance and leaves Catharine almost as much a stranger to us at the novella's unfinished closure as she is at its opening.

In light of this, we posit that whilst the narrative voice in *Catharine* is sometimes positively detrimental to advancing the stylistic concerns of the novella, its equivalent in *Lady Susan*, in sharp contrast, is fundamentally constructive of a variety of stylistic advancements that this novella demonstrates with respect to *Catharine*. For whilst it is evidently the case that we cannot talk in strict, formal terms of a narrative perspective in the epistolary section of the novella, we have argued (thesis, p.166) that there is an effective identification of Catherine Vernon's own perspectives with the over-riding values that the novella seeks to defend and promote, creating in effect an embryonic narrative voice

²³⁰ See n.52 to this chapter.

through this character. The function of such a perspective is to establish the characteristics of the moral conflict that occurs between the two antagonistic ambits of *Lady Susan*, and specifically to do so through the attribution of sympathy. In this sense, there is therefore a 'fusion of interests' in which the basic concerns of Catharine Vernon are made intimately clear to the reader, whose reaction is thus directed, narratively, towards being positively disposed to these preoccupations. Conversely, such identification with Catherine Vernon effectively brings with it a consequent sense of antipathy towards Lady Susan, who is—we argue—increasingly seen not in her own terms but through the prism of her sister-in-law's values. In this sense then, however paradoxical it may initially appear, we posit that *Lady Susan* resolves to considerable effect the limitations of narrative voice that we have identified in *Catharine*, in turn suggesting Austen's growing understanding of the need to establish the closest possible access to the protagonist's consciousness if the concerns and interest of that protagonist are to be viewed clearly, comprehensively and with sympathy.

Finally, we would draw attention to the manner in which *Lady Susan* disciplines the deficiency of stylistic control in *Catharine*, through its extreme economy of form and through ensuring the absence of the distractive rhetorical excess that, as we have argued (thesis, pp.100 & 219) undermines effective narrative flow and creates considerable tonal imbalance throughout the earlier work. There is an obvious sense in which the physical limitations of *realistic* correspondence—which is certainly what we have in *Lady Susan*²³¹—necessarily impose an economic form of writing. However, it was not inevitable

²³¹ See Southam's related comments, thesis p.13.

that Austen should have opted for such epistolary verisimilitude, most especially in light of models such as Richardson,²³² and the comparison with *Catharine* in this sense is telling. For whilst certain sections of the earlier novella—although amusing—are basically of questionable relevance to the story (we have highlighted, for example, the long and disconnected description of the Dudley family),²³³ in *Lady Susan* in contrast, as Hugh McKellar (208) observes, “each of its letters has a specific purpose. The sender always has information that the recipient wants or needs”. Nothing is superfluous; nothing is irrelevant. Once again, the effect of this is to heighten the novella’s plausibility and to avoid any stylistic component that might undermine or distract from the force of the moral conflict shaping up between the two women. And, whilst the range of rhetorical voices we hear in *Lady Susan* is considerable, most particularly the stylistic variations that Susan Vernon’s radically different interventions provide us with, Austen’s strict avoidance of parodic and sentimental language consequently avoids the rhetorically excessive and implausible language that affects much of *Catharine* (especially in certain narrative description and in the aunt’s exaggerated forms of speech).²³⁴ That is, whereas the overall rhetorical effect of *Catharine* is imbalanced and at times excessive, and is thus a textual factor clearly militating against narrative plausibility, Austen’s subsequent novella is seen to have disciplined these particular stylistic shortcomings from the earlier work, strongly suggesting that the limitations we have outlined here were patent to her and therefore that

²³² For further comment, see Chapter Two n.116.

²³³ Thesis, p.100

²³⁴ See, for example, thesis pp. 102 & 103.

Lady Susan is indeed, as Southam most paradoxically observed, “an exercise in correcting [*Catharine*’s] technical and stylistic faults”.²³⁵

As a coda to this section in which we have put forward the specific ways in which *Lady Susan* improves on *Catharine*, and in drawing this chapter to a close, there is one remaining objection that we need to address, which, albeit minor, is nevertheless reasonable in its reservations with respect to our general line of argument. This concerns the age-related difference between the 16-year-old adolescent who wrote *Catharine* and the young adult of 19 or 20 who wrote *Lady Susan*.²³⁶ This difference alone might be forwarded as a reason to justify the greater quality of her epistolary novella, rather than any intrinsic merit in the text itself. And, in a sense, that is quite true: Austen’s relatively inexpert stylistic control over the component features of *Catharine* corresponds in large measure to the limitations of her age. Indeed, Litz recognises as much when he suggests that, in 1792, Austen still “did not have the skills needed” to bring *Catharine* up to the level of her later direct-narrative novels.²³⁷ But to posit Austen’s difference in age (and therefore of relative ability) at the time of writing both works as a reason for *Lady Susan*’s greater stylistic effectiveness is simply untenable: precisely this difference in artistic ability ought therefore to argue in favour of an increased capacity to handle the direct-narrative mode more effectively by the mid 1790s. And so, assuming—as we surely must—an increased technical ability when

²³⁵ *Literary Manuscripts*, 46.

²³⁶ As we have previously commented (this chapter, n. 3) *Catharine* was left off and deemed finished in August 1792, four months before Austen’s seventeenth birthday; *Lady Susan* was probably written (but not concluded) in 1794 or 1795. See also Southam (*Literary Manuscripts* 16) and Litz (“Chronology”).

²³⁷ “The Juvenilia” 5.

Austen came to write *Lady Susan*, why then did she nevertheless return to the epistolary? Because, as we have just outlined, it is the stylistic vehicle that, at this stage in her literary development, better resolved the pending artistic preoccupations that are transparent in *Catharine*. However, accepting this brings a difficult and somewhat uncomfortable consequence in its wake: if—as we have hypothesised throughout—the epistolary mode was so effective in supporting Austen's stylistic progress, and if—as we have also posited—its literary advantages were patent to her at the time, for what reason then was this form abandoned, to be finally and definitively replaced by the third-person narrative novels of her mature fiction? This is the issue that we now address in the following chapter.