

**“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’*

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### 3. Austen's Abandonment of the Epistolary

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"You may hold me acquitted of the vile vanity of wishing to hold myself forth as despising to reap any profit".

(Walter Scott, 1802. *Letters*, 1, 163)

In the absence of further concrete evidence, all that we can certainly affirm is that Jane Austen left off using the epistolary mode in the mid 1790s at the end of Letter 41 of *Lady Susan*: thereafter, what is currently extant to us of her writing is entirely non-epistolary. Austen may have written correspondence-based ur-forms for *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*;<sup>1</sup> but, although many might heartily concur with Margaret Drabble that "[t]here would be more genuine rejoicing at the discovery of a ... new novel by Jane Austen than by any other literary discovery, short of a new major play by Shakespeare, than anyone can imagine",<sup>2</sup> not a single paragraph of the posited works has ever been found. Consequently, it is our view, as we stated at the outset of this thesis (p.14), that the use of these ur-texts to support any hypothesis on Austen's stylistic development can be of no sustainable validity, and involves us, moreover, in a particularly frustrating form of critical speculation, since nothing that is suggested about these works can ever be subjected to textual scrutiny.

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<sup>1</sup> See thesis Introduction, n.12.

<sup>2</sup> Introduction (7), *Lady Susan, The Watsons and Sanditon*.

This chapter therefore attempts to ascertain what reasons are plausible for Austen having abandoned the epistolary in *Lady Susan*—the text that stands in representation of Austen's serious, sustained use of the epistolary mode—and to determine which of these reasons, in our opinion and on assessing the available evidence, seems most likely to have influenced her definitive change to third-person narrative. The areas we identify as potentially valid justifications for this change are the following: insurmountable stylistic difficulties of form; the influence of Austen's reading of contemporary fiction; the force of social and political pressure in the wake of the French Revolution, and Austen's sensitivity to commercial tendencies within the ambit of publication.

Naturally, it is entirely possible that Austen's final decision to give up on epistolary writing was a response to all (or most) of these factors cumulatively. Be that as it may, as an initial approach to this question, it is essential to assess each area separately in order to weigh more precisely the manner in which these concerns affected Austen's writing, and to what degree.

### 3.1 The Influence of Form

We believe our lengthy analysis in Chapter Two of Austen's use of the epistolary in *Lady Susan* to have demonstrated the paucity of the critical arguments positing the stylistic limitations of the form at this stage in her development, and in that sense it would be tautological to repeat those views here. However, it should be observed that a number of

critics, even accepting the manner in which the epistolary advances Austen's progress as a writer, have nevertheless suggested the essential *provisionality* of the form, emphasising its purely pragmatic use as a means by which Austen was able to attain certain specific stylistic objectives, only to abandon its use once these objectives had been achieved. As we outlined in our introduction (p.3), Lascelles (124)<sup>3</sup> and Figes (41) on a somewhat less than positive note put forward the idea that Austen simply made use of a then-popular form—which had the added advantage to the novice writer of being a readily available model—rejecting it once she had gained fuller technical resourcefulness. Seen in this way, the letter form is purely a means to an end, although one that provides Austen with the creative opportunity to hone her rapidly increasing skills. More positively, however, Butler (*War of Ideas* 168); Deborah Kaplan (*Female Friendship* 163-78) and Epstein (*Female Epistolary Tradition* 399-416) interpret Austen's use of the epistolary as a way of developing the ironical—and sometimes subversive—voices of her later writing. That is, it is deemed from this stance to be a vehicle by which to arrive at a specific stylistic purpose; thereafter, however, the claim is that it is set aside in favour of third-person narrative.

Evidently, from the perspective taken by this thesis, it is constructive that these critical positions, most particularly those of Butler, Deborah Kaplan and Epstein, at least go some way to recognising the stylistic progress achieved by Austen through her use of the epistolary. Yet we would maintain that none of these positions gives a sufficiently plausible reason for Austen's change of stylistic mode once her aims had been met. If these

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<sup>3</sup> See thesis, p.62 & pp.122-130.

objectives had not simply been attained but also, more essentially, had actually been *made attainable* by the epistolary mode, why then should Austen immediately have proceeded to terminate its use and have opted instead for an entirely distinct literary form? Without reference to other contributing factors, that is, without going beyond the issue of form, the suggestion does not appear to be logical. It seems, in this light, that we are once more faced with the prevalence of an 'evolutionary' notion which sees it as simply inevitable that Austen should have been developing stylistically in the general direction of third-person narrative. For, in assessing these arguments that posit the provisional character of epistolary form in Austen's artistic progression, if the underlying idea is that she was consciously developing a series of stylistic factors with a view to subsequently incorporating these into direct narrative, is it not more reasonable to assume that Austen would, instead, have chosen to develop such factors directly within a third-person narrative format, as she had done with *Catharine*, an experiment in composition that had given her full access to assessing this mode? Stated conversely, it is surely *unreasonable* to posit Austen's conscious development of these stylistic factors within a letter-based format, only to then alter her mode of narrative presentation at the very moment she had successfully gained control over those factors precisely by her use of the epistolary form.

Again, therefore, in spite of the frequency with which we encounter assumptions of the formal limitations or *provisionality* of the epistolary for Austen's writing, a closer assessment both of the argumentation and—above all—of the main texts corresponding to this assessment (largely, *Catharine* and *Lady Susan*) highlights the manner in which these

assumptions are very clearly open to question, and force us to look elsewhere in ascertaining more plausible reasons for Austen's abandonment of the epistolary.

However, in the sense that most critical assessment of Austen's rejection of the epistolary mode as a whole is largely focused on the perceived shortcomings of *Lady Susan* (as we have argued throughout), there is one significant issue that might be termed a 'formal limitation', and which our discussion of the novella has so far only indirectly considered. In terms of the established critical voices of Southam and Litz, this would be called the *over-centrality* of Lady Susan Vernon herself (indeed, both these critics make precisely this objection to the novella)<sup>4</sup>. We have claimed, in contrast, that Mrs Vernon is an equally forceful if less obviously dynamic figure and that there is, in effect, a co-valency between the two central characters (thesis, pp. 160 & 166). Recognising as much, however, is implicitly to recognise that Lady Susan is never fully or unambiguously undermined, an issue that we raised in Chapter Two, n.131. Given our reading of the novella that posits the struggle between contrasting moral and social values,<sup>5</sup> failure to dissolve this apparent ambiguity towards Susan Vernon, that is, failure to delineate a stronger Catherine Vernon (who we see as the novella's embryonic narrative voice and moral core) could indeed be seen as a formal weakness, one that the epistolary not only falls short of resolving but also towards which it actually contributes by giving us such direct, intimate access to Lady Susan's thoughts and motivations.

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<sup>4</sup> For Litz, see thesis, p.132; for Southam, see thesis, p.143.

<sup>5</sup> Thesis, p.166.

Having said that, however, it seems improbable that a mere imbalance of character should have proven itself to be beyond Austen's very obvious ability to overcome by the mid 1790s. In that sense, it consequently appears disproportionate to suggest that Austen's termination of *Lady Susan* (and therefore of her use of the epistolary inasmuch as her extant writing is concerned) should primarily have been occasioned by this factor, most especially when taking into account the considerable advantages that—as we have also argued throughout—the letter form represented for Austen's developing style. Nevertheless, as we will consider in fuller detail in sections 3.3 and 3.4, we posit that this formal difficulty actually gives rise to a far greater difficulty, one of political interpretation, and therefore—beyond this—of public acceptability, and, hence, of the novella's *publishability*. Taken together, these factors could very plausibly have led Austen to believe that her current epistolary project needed rewriting entirely.

Before assessing this, however, we first need to consider another area that, in principle, also offers itself as a feasible source for Austen's decision to give up on the epistolary, which is the question of her own very extensive, enthusiastic reading of contemporary fiction, and, most particularly, the possible influence that such reading may have had on Austen's decision to modify her form of narrative writing.

### 3.2 The Influence of Reading

“The record of what any individual has read is almost always incomplete”. Doody’s observation (“Reading” 347) precisely highlights one of the central problems in determining the character and content of Austen’s reading, namely, the difficulty of ascertaining with any reasonable degree of certainty exactly what kind of writing and, more precisely still, which particular works Austen chose to give her attention to. Certainly, a number of excellent studies<sup>6</sup> confirm both the breadth and specificity of Austen’s reading, of which Pearson (*Women’s Reading* 143) observes that “her letters and the dense allusiveness of her fiction suggest a wide range of ‘miscellaneous’ reading and a full internalisation of some favourite texts”. Yet such studies focus—correctly—on *all* forms of writing that were influential to Austen, throughout her life. For the concerns of this thesis, however, we need to restrict our assessment to a relatively short period, in theory from about 1792 to 1796 or 1797, the years in which whatever reading that may have had a close influence on the preparation, writing and eventual termination of *Lady Susan* is most likely to have taken place. In practice, however, in order to allow for the consideration of as broad a range of potential works as possible, in certain cases this will mean assessing the years 1790-1799. Furthermore, our concern is not with Austen’s reading in general but, far more specifically, with her access to contemporary prose fiction, and with the reaction that she may have had to this. For, although the picture that emerges of what Austen read is, on the whole, inevitably unclear, some approach must be made to assessing this question if we are

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<sup>6</sup> See for example Doody (“Reading”); Lascelles (chapter two), Waldron, Grundy and, more generally, Pearson (*Women’s Reading*, esp. 142-151).



to gain insight into why, since we have discounted reasons of formal inadequacy *per se*, Austen shuts down her use of the narrative form that, as we have continually posited in this thesis, was instrumental in developing and facilitating her growing artistic skills.

Broadly restricting ourselves to the defined time frame, we will focus on the following areas in determining what Austen read and what influence this may have had on her stylistic ideas: literary references in her personal letters in or around the time period of our interest—including some recollection late in the first decade of the 1800s of her reading from the 1790s; literary subscriptions pertaining to Austen or to her family and, more generally, epistolary prose fiction available through this means and for which it is plausible to suggest her familiarity or awareness (although this of course is of far greater difficulty to establish); and finally an assessment of the fiction, both epistolary and direct-narrative, which was published in this specific period and which seems likely to have been read by Austen herself, or, again, for which her general awareness seems reasonable to assert. In short, our focus here will be on what Austen *certainly* read; what she *probably* read, and what—in our view—she *possibly* read.

As we have just observed, our interest lies most specifically in the approximate period of 1792 to 1796 or 1797, prior to and immediately after the likely time at which *Lady Susan* was set aside, unfinished (1794 or 1795)<sup>7</sup>. However, the extant letters begin on January 9-10 1796, and would therefore seem unlikely to provide any direct light on what

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<sup>7</sup> See thesis, p.118.

Austen read before *Lady Susan*. Yet, whilst Austen's personal letters<sup>8</sup> offer relatively few patent indications of her reading—albeit with some notable exceptions—they have nevertheless left us with a vast network of “allusions to novels, often to matters so minute as to prove an extraordinary knowledge of the works in question”,<sup>9</sup> which allow us to gain considerable insight not only into the works that she was interested in, but also into the aspects of those works that became memorable to her:

She can remember Tom Jones's white coat, evidently as a sartorial error (January 9 1796). She picks up *Tristram Shandy* in a reference to “an uncle Toby's annuity” (September 14, 1804); ... A phrase in French reminds Austen as she writes it of Mme. Duval, a character in *Evelina* whom she goes on to quote (February 8, 1807). Her nephew's contention about Jane Austen's intimate knowledge of *Sir Charles Grandison* is borne out by the reference to James Selby (a very minor character in Richardson's novel) and his “thirst for travelling”, which was “so much reprobated” (September 14, 1804).

Doody, “Reading” 357.

With the letters, we have no alternative but to focus our attention on the years following the epistolary termination of *Lady Susan*. Specifically, we take into consideration the three-year period from January 9-10 1796 to January 9 1799. In this period, the letters provide five discrete references to prose fiction. Austen writes of Fielding's *Tom Jones* (Letter 1)<sup>10</sup>; Burney's *Camilla* (Letters 4 and 5, of which Doody [“Reading” 357] says

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<sup>8</sup> For a fuller discussion of Austen's letters and of the changing critical reaction to their content, see thesis, pp.78-85.

<sup>9</sup> Doody, “Reading” 357.

<sup>10</sup> *Jane Austen's Letters*, Ed. Deirdre Le Faye. We recognise that *Tom Jones* (published 1749) is substantially different to the other works cited in this correspondence in that it is not contemporary to the letters' composition and therefore obviously does not reflect contemporary literary tendencies. See also n.13, this chapter, on *The Female Quixote*.

“[s]ometimes we catch Austen in the process of reading a novel, as we do with *Camilla* in August and September 1796”.); *The Midnight Bell* (Francis Lathom, 1798: Letter 9);<sup>11</sup> *Arthur Fitz-Albini* (Sir Samuel Egerton Brydges, 1798: Letter 12)<sup>12</sup> and—although obviously not an example of her reading in the same sense as the other works mentioned here—of Austen’s own *First Impressions*, the first reference in the personal correspondence to her mature writing (Letter 17). In addition to these works, Austen’s Letter 50 of February 8 1807 refers to her re-reading of *Clarentine* (published in 1798 and presumably first read by Austen at or around this time), by Burney’s younger sister Sarah Harriet Burney—this letter suggesting that the novel is not a work capable of withstanding continued scrutiny.<sup>13</sup>

The inclusion of *First Impressions* in the letters at this stage in Austen’s career is more than an incidental curiosity, since, taken together with the other works mentioned here, it effectively acts as a pointer to her stylistic preoccupations, as we will consider further below. *First Impressions*, a proto-version of *Pride and Prejudice* (under which title the novel was, in Cassandra Austen’s words, “[p]ublished afterwards, with alterations &

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<sup>11</sup> One of the “Northanger novels”, the eight Gothic works referred to by Austen in *Northanger Abbey* (for further comment, see <http://www.litgothic.com/Topics/northanger.html>). Although the letter indicates that it is Mr Austen who is currently reading the novel, the date of correspondence (October 24 1798) and of composition for *Northanger Abbey* (1798-1799) suggests that Austen had just read the work herself, or was about to do so.

<sup>12</sup> Of particular interest is Austen’s reaction to this novel (which Letter 12 indicates that she was reading in November 1798), most especially because of what it reveals of her own stylistic criteria: “Never did any book carry more internal evidence of its author. Every sentiment is completely Egerton’s. There is very little story, and what there is told in a strange, unconnected way. There are many characters introduced, apparently merely to be delineated.” (Le Faye 22).

<sup>13</sup> This comment is a useful indicator not only of *what* Austen read, but of *how*: “Austen read and reread novels, even minor or mediocre [works, which] are allowed a second trial and are supposed to bear the weight of reperusal” (Doody, “Reading” 357). Other letters also refer to Austen’s earlier reading; these include Letter 49 of January 7 1807, which talks enthusiastically of her re-reading of Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* (published 1752). However, there is no indication of when the work was first read; furthermore, Lennox’s novel is evidently not contemporary with the composition of *Lady Susan*.

contractions"),<sup>14</sup> is—in our assessment and in contrast to certain critical sources<sup>15</sup>—non-epistolary, a position we will support more fully in section 3.4. Austen's reference to the novel in Letter 17 (January 9 1799, to Cassandra) implies that she already saw her definitive move away from the correspondence form—begun by *First Impressions*—as now pertaining firmly to the past.<sup>16</sup> That is, it is plausible to suggest that, by this time and very probably well before it, Austen's stylistic concerns had moved definitively beyond the epistolary.

Indeed, what is of particular significance in the works referred to within these letters—and we would emphasise at this point that, to our knowledge, this observation has not been made before in relation to Austen's stylistic development—is that not one of them is (in our view) an epistolary work. Clearly, there are obvious methodological objections to be made of any attempt to extrapolate from such a small sample of works, and from focussing upon so limited a period of time. Quite apart from the ever-present problem of attempting to use Austen's correspondence to gain insight into aspects of her life and work (principally, Cassandra's excision or destruction of a considerable portion of her sister's letters),<sup>17</sup> it must also be the case that what is *not* mentioned of her reading in the letters very surely vastly outweighs what *is* referred to. However, as we have observed throughout this thesis with the question of the posited

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<sup>14</sup> Southam, *Literary Manuscripts* 53.

<sup>15</sup> See thesis Introduction, n.12.

<sup>16</sup> "I do not wonder at your wanting to read *first impressions* [sic] again, so seldom as you have gone through it, & that so long ago" (Le Faye 35).

<sup>17</sup> See thesis, Chapter One n.141.

epistolary ur-forms of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, speculation on writings (of whatever kind) that we do not have—and therefore cannot assess—can only be futile. On the other hand, Letters 1 to 17 and Letter 50 *do* point to a certain tendency in Austen's reading interests, however partial and open to question these letters may be as sources upon which to base such an observation. And that tendency is, if not a determined rejection of epistolary writing—a claim that we do not make and which would, in all events, be incautious to sustain on the basis of these works alone—then at the very least a marked preference for direct-narrative prose fiction. Furthermore, Austen's familiarity with—indeed, evident enjoyment of—Burney's *Camilla*<sup>18</sup> can be taken as supporting our assertion: published in 1796, this novel consolidated Burney's movement away from the epistolary mode of *Evelina* (published anonymously in 1778) that had been established by her direct-narrative novel *Cecilia* (1782). The rapidly increasing commercial success of Burney's writing was something that Austen would not have been ignorant of (in fact, as a subscriber to *Camilla*—see thesis, p.239—she played a small but direct part in that very success),<sup>19</sup> and, even were we fully to accept the validity of Southam's comparison of the two writers,<sup>20</sup> the influence that this must have had on Austen's stylistic decisions, and at such a critical point, is surely substantial. In fact, the tendency that we are positing here on the basis of Austen's reading interests—and specifically the manner in which such interests reveal her stylistic concerns—is one also underlying the other ambits of Austen's reading that we will now consider.

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<sup>18</sup> For example, see Letters 4 and 5 for the manner in which Austen plays affectionately with references to the novel, which in itself is further indication of the extent to which the work had permeated her thoughts.

<sup>19</sup> “[Burney] earned £20 for *Evelina*, £250 for *Cecilia*, and £2000 for *Camilla*”, Robertson (Ed.) 4.

<sup>20</sup> See thesis, p.97.

Subscription to prose fiction, by which means such fiction became available to an ever-broader public on a scale hitherto unimaginable,<sup>21</sup> provides us with one of Austen's more renowned comments on the Novel: "[a]s an inducement to subscribe [to a new subscription library] Mrs. Martin tells us that her Collection is not to consist only of Novels, but of every kind of Literature &c. &c.—She might have spared this pretension to our family, who are great Novel-readers & not ashamed of being so" (Letter 14, December 18 1798). The comment usually draws attention—and correctly so—for indicating Austen's refusal to denigrate what was still sometimes felt to be, at that time, an inferior type of writing.<sup>22</sup> But it also hints at Austen's continually favourable disposition towards subscription-based reading (initially suggested by her name on the *Camilla* list, two years prior to this letter: see p.239). This in turn makes it feasible to look at those few subscription works that we can certainly or probably link to Austen's reading, and therefore at what this may suggest to us of her specific literary and stylistic interests (though, as we will see, very little indeed can be said about this). Also, and in our view far more fruitfully, it makes it reasonable to take into account the epistolary subscription fiction produced at

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<sup>21</sup> See Gardside, *Subscribing Fiction in Britain* (Web).

<sup>22</sup> A view that is notoriously echoed in *Northanger Abbey* (Ch.5, p.22) in the only extended narrative outburst that the mature Austen ever allows herself: "'I am no novel-reader—I seldom look into novels—Do not imagine that I often read novels—It is really very well for a novel.'" Such is the common cant. "And what are you reading, Miss—?" "Oh! It is only a novel!" replies the young lady, while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame. "It is only *Cecilia*, or *Camilla*, or *Belinda*"; or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language". The sense of the Novel's inferiority was something that would persist well into the Romantic period, as Gary Kelly (*Romantic Fiction* 196) observes: "most prose fiction was considered subliterate, suitable for children, women, and the lower classes. ... Most novels published during the [Romantic] period were dismissed by critics and even readers as "the trash of the circulating library", to be rented, read quickly, and forgotten".

this time, on the assumption that some of this fiction may well have been familiar to Austen herself.<sup>23</sup>

But before considering this further, we need first to address an additional methodological issue, which is the question of to what extent subscription literature is representative of the production of literature, taken as a whole. Peter Garside's study of this fiction offers the following suggestion:

In some cases, the answer must be negative. A fair number [of works]... are formulaic in the extreme, either through ineptitude or ultra-cautiousness on their author's part, and a handful were evidently dragged out just for the occasion. A prefatory notice to *Wareham Priory* (1799) observes that 'As this Novel was written a few years before the French Revolution, the reader will not be surprised to find young men making France and Italy part of their continental tour'; while the 'relict' Sarah Cobbe in the Preface to a highly predictable *Julia St Helen* (1800) freely acknowledges that the work 'is not mine, but has been kindly obtained for me by the deceased author's relatives' (I, [vii]). In other cases, it is possible to trace a more positive trajectory, which, if ultimately reactive rather than innovative, does nevertheless suggest that subscription authors could be aware of recent trends and fresh expectations.

Garside, *Subscribing Fiction in Britain, 1780-1829* (Web).

That is, the case can be argued both ways, depending on the given works we choose to assess, and therefore we should exercise caution in assuming that the trends detectable in subscription publication reflect those of literary production at a broader level. That said, however, the particular value for us of this fiction is that it is not only a gauge of

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<sup>23</sup> In fact, Austen's access to such fiction came not only through subscription libraries but also through her membership of a Hampshire book club (see St Clair 253, 260 and 669).

contemporary creative tendencies but also—and of perhaps still greater importance, as we will consider more fully below—of the literary taste and preferences shown by its readers. The fact that Austen was an ‘unashamed’ novel reader and subscriber is significant for her writing in that it affirms her *connectedness* to these tendencies and preferences, and reminds us, too, of her palpable sensitivity to the changing world of prose fiction in the 1790s.

With subscription literature, what we certainly know of Austen's involvement (either personal or through her family)<sup>24</sup> is the following: she was one of the 1,058 subscribers in the list of names prefixed to Burney's *Camilla* in 1796, appearing as ‘Miss J. Austen, Steventon’;<sup>25</sup> in 1775, ‘Miss Austen, Steventon, near Overton’ is found in the subscription list for Mary Sherwood's *The Tradition* (the author attended the same school as the Austen sisters, though at a slightly later period, and—assuming their knowledge of this—it may explain their interest in the novel).<sup>26</sup> It is more than probable that ‘Miss Austen’ refers here to Cassandra, the convention being to distinguish only the younger female siblings by their initials. Austen's brother Edward (who, on adoption, changed his name to Knight), his wife and his adoptive mother, Mrs Knight, all feature as subscribers to the 1799 novel *Wareham Priory; or, the Will: A Novel, Founded on Facts, by the Widow of an Officer*, and it is feasible that Austen herself may then have read or at least have heard

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<sup>24</sup> Letter 14 effectively recognises that the ‘privilege’ of being named subscriber usually fell to the elder sister before the younger. Jane writes to Cassandra: “I have received a very civil note from Mrs. Martin requesting my name as a Subscriber to her Library which opens the 14<sup>th</sup> of January, & my name, or rather Yours is accordingly given” (Le Faye 26).

<sup>25</sup> See Garside, *Subscribing Fiction in Britain* (Web).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*



something of the work.<sup>27</sup> Finally, although not recorded as subscribers, there is a remote chance that the Austen family would have read the 1797 subscription novel *Munster Abbey*, putatively by 'Sir Samuel Egerton Leigh' (though Garside questions this attribution), distantly related to the Austen Leighs, hence the possible interest.<sup>28</sup>

Whilst, in our view, the influence of Austen's participation in and awareness of subscription fiction on her commercial sensitivity to literary styles and tendencies is of fundamental significance (as we will posit more fully in section 3.4.), it is obvious that an assessment of her role as subscriber only reliably informs us that she owned a copy of *Camilla*; we cannot with any certainty assume anything more. Consequently, unlike our observations on the works referred to in her personal letters, the fact that these subscription works are also non-epistolary cannot safely be assigned any particular value with respect to Austen's possibly changing assessment of epistolary style. However, if we focus not on Austen's own subscription activity (direct or otherwise) but rather on the nature of epistolary fiction published in this manner—with a view to determining whether this may have shaped Austen's views on the form—the results of this assessment are far more suggestive. To reiterate our justification for considering these works, given Austen's active participation in subscription-based reading and also her marked enthusiasm for the Novel

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<sup>27</sup> Garside, Op.Cit.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. In positing her potential interest in this novel, it is of relevance to recall that Austen identified herself strongly with the political heritage of the Leighs, as Southam ("An Easy Step to Silence" 10) recognises: "[Austen was] unhappy with the anti-Stuart prejudice of [her] brothers who were staunch and patriotic Hanoverians. For Jane Austen inherited Stuart sympathies. These came down on her mother's side, the Leighs, famed in history as the "Loyal Leighs" with their "inflexible loyalty to the House of Stuart" (citing M.A. Austen-Leigh's *Personal Aspects* 14-15).

(she is a 'great Novel-reader & not ashamed of being so'),<sup>29</sup> we posit that her access to contemporary fiction made available through such means would have brought Austen into contact with a number of the epistolary subscription novels produced at this time.

Garside's *Subscribing Fiction* provides a checklist of subscription titles published from 1780-1829. Within our period of consideration, we find five epistolary novels,<sup>30</sup> dating from 1790, 1797, 1799 and 1800 (2),<sup>31</sup> all of them written by women<sup>32</sup> except, perhaps, for the last work whose authorship is unknown. Clearly, this is a very small number of works and as such we must again be wary of generalising the extent to which they may be representative. In fact, for precisely the same decade, Beebee's select bibliography of European epistolary fiction<sup>33</sup> lists 31 English-language works (some of which are translations), more than six times the number in Garside's subscription checklist,

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<sup>29</sup> Doody ("Reading" 358) observes of Austen's enthusiasm for the Novel that "her reading within the genre is... catholic (she has tolerance for the mediocre)", a view that would support Austen's basic willingness to familiarise herself with a broad range of works that a more fastidious reader might not have been prepared to give time to.

<sup>30</sup> The checklist in fact records eight epistolary novels if we include those referred to from the chronological outset of the list. The three novels not included in our argument are dated 1783 (*Burton-Wood* by Anna Maria Mackenzie [Austen was 8]), 1788 (*The History of Lady Caroline Rivers* by Miss Elizabeth Todd [Austen was 13]) and 1789 (*Eleonora, a Novel*, by Mrs Ann Gomersall [Austen was 14]). As such, if Austen was ever familiar with these works, they may have been of interest to her early juvenilia writing; however, for their dating, it seems unreasonable to cite them as 'contemporary' influences on *Lady Susan*. For further comments on sources and on the debate surrounding such influences, see thesis, Chapter Two, n.65 and n.70.

<sup>31</sup> The works are *The Citizen, a Novel* (Mrs Ann Gomersall); *Clara Lennox; or, the Distressed Widow* (Margaret Lee); *Wareham Priory; or, the Will* (? Mrs Adams); *Edwardina, a Novel* (Catherine Harris) and *Idalia: a Novel Founded on Facts* (Anon.).

<sup>32</sup> This also favours Austen's potential interest in these works, since, as Doody ("Reading" 358) remarks, in addition to the breadth of her catholic literary tastes as regards quality, Austen's preferences are also relatively narrow as regards authorship and content: "she likes domestic fiction by women writers".

<sup>33</sup> Beebee 231-258.

though the full number must of course be higher, as Beebee's bibliography is partial.<sup>34</sup> What is of greatest interest to us in the works that Garside cites, however, and this is—in our view—a factor that could very plausibly have been influential to Austen's developing view of the epistolary mode, is the stylistic content of these novels: they are in most cases domestic fiction, but it is fiction of a markedly, indeed effusively, sentimental character.<sup>35</sup> Given that four of the five novels were written at a time when the popularity of Gothic fiction was rapidly extending<sup>36</sup> (and, it should be noted, such fiction was predominantly written in direct-narrative mode), sentimental fiction in letter form would appear to run counter-current to the trends in literary style and taste of the mid-to-late 1790s. Recalling Litz's observations on Austen's sensitivity from as early as 1790 to the popular mood shift against the Novel of Sentiment (thesis, p.139), as suggested by *Love and Freindship*, we therefore posit that—inasmuch as these subscription novels may either have been known to Austen (however indirectly) or else in the sense that they reflect a broader inclination of much epistolary fiction from the mid-to-late 1790s to concern itself with clearly outmoded stylistic considerations and content—this reinforces the tendency we have observed with reference to reading in Austen's personal letters, though in a distinct manner. That is, whereas allusion to Austen's reading in the letters within our selected period appears to point to her marked preference for direct-narrative writing, the epistolary subscription texts that Austen may have read over approximately the same period, or else otherwise may have

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<sup>34</sup> This figure should also be read in light of the 20 epistolary works listed by the *British Fiction 1800-1829* database for the subsequent ten-year period, 1801-1811 (q.v.), beyond the eighteenth-century heyday of the epistolary form.

<sup>35</sup> See Garside's comments on each work, *Subscribing Fiction* (Web).

<sup>36</sup> "The first important experiment in the genre, written half in jest, was Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764, subtitled *A Gothic Story* in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 1765). [However,] [t]he great vogue for Gothic novels occurred in Britain and Ireland in the three decades after 1790" (Drabble, Ed., entry for 'Gothic Fiction').

been familiar with or aware of, can plausibly be taken to have provided her with a *justification* for this direct-narrative preference, since it appears that the epistolary mode—to the extent that epistolary subscription writing represents this—had become identified with a style of fiction that was no longer a reflection of current literary tendencies or public taste.

In this final section of our assessment of Austen's reading, we now turn to focus on the major prose-fiction works published throughout our period of consideration.<sup>37</sup> These works will include direct-narrative and epistolary novels, published conventionally or made available through subscription publication. By 'major'—although we recognise that this is a problematic and somewhat unsatisfactory term, not least because novels now deemed *major* may not have been thought so at the time of their publication—we refer to those works that, as Garside's comments, "were amongst the most popular and better-known novels of the late eighteenth century"<sup>38</sup> in terms of what is indicated by contemporary circulating-library catalogues.<sup>39</sup> It goes without saying that the list of works we cite here makes no claim to be complete; rather, it aims simply to draw general attention to those works that, because of their marked contemporary commercial success, were very probably known to, if not actually read by, Austen herself.

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<sup>37</sup> Centring our attention exclusively on prose fiction necessarily means that other works of a fundamentally significant character, such as Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) or Jane West's *The Advantages of Education* (1793) are not considered here. The general importance of such works in both creating and responding to the Jacobin/anti-Jacobin struggle of the 1790s will, however, be considered in section 3.3.

<sup>38</sup> Garside, *Collections of English Fiction* (Web).

<sup>39</sup> See Garside, *Ibid.*

In accordance with what we have posited for Austen's reading as this can be determined through her letters and through her contact with subscription fiction, we argue that the major works of this period, in confirming the tendency towards a decreasing use of the epistolary<sup>40</sup>, provide Austen with a clear awareness of literary trends, and that this, in effect and in conjunction with the other factors we consider in this chapter, obliges her to reassess her own writing and, ultimately, to abandon the stylistic form of *Lady Susan*.

In 1792 (the year in which Austen was writing *Catharine*), the main prose fiction works published were the epistolary *Desmond* by Charlotte Turner Smith<sup>41</sup> and Robert Bage's *Man as He Is*. Smith's fifth novel, *The Old Manor House*, was amongst the principal prose fiction works of 1793. 1794 (the year in which Austen was most probably writing the epistolary section of *Lady Susan*) saw the publication of William Godwin's first-person narrative *Caleb Williams*, as well as Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Sake Dean Mahomet's epistolary *The Travels of Dean Mahomet*. Whilst 1795 was a year of no major prose work, 1796 was, in Garside's words "a bumper year in the production of English fiction",<sup>42</sup> with the appearance of M.G.Lewis's *The Monk*; Frances Burney's *Camilla*; Robert Bage's *Hermsprong or Man as He Is Not*; John Moore's *Edward*; Jane West's *A Gossip's Story*; Elizabeth Helme's *Farmer of Inglewood Forest*; Mary Robinson's *Hubert de Sevrac*; Eliza Parson's *Women as They Are*; Elizabeth

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<sup>40</sup> Reflecting this general tendency, Beebee's select bibliography lists 21 English (or English-language) epistolary works from the period of 1792-1797, but only 13 English works from the following five-year period of 1798-1802.

<sup>41</sup> See thesis, Chapter Two, n.20 for additional comment.

<sup>42</sup> Garside, *Collections of English Fiction* (Web).

Inchbald's *Nature and Art*; Mary Hay's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*; Charlotte Smith's *Marchmont* and Regina Maria Roche's *Children of the Abbey*, "one of the most successful novels of all in the circulating libraries".<sup>43</sup> In 1797, the final year of our assessment for major prose fiction (*Lady Susan*'s closure at Letter 41 was now, by this point, some two years in the past; Austen was now working on and concluding *First Impressions*<sup>44</sup>), Radcliffe published her fifth and final novel, *The Italian*.<sup>45</sup>

Of these works, only Charlotte Smith's *Desmond*, Dean Mahomet's *Travels* and Godwin's *Caleb Williams* are not third-person narratives. In addition, almost all of these works fall, more or less clearly, into the genre categories of Gothic and Jacobin/anti-Jacobin writing, reflecting both the developing literary tendencies of the 1790s and the growing political debate that was taking root in English society in light of the French Revolution. In other words, these works—of considerable contemporary popularity—reflect generic preoccupations that are markedly distinct from the focus on the sentimental<sup>46</sup> that we have observed for some of the epistolary fiction produced at broadly the same time (see thesis, p.241-243), in turn pointing both to a major shift in literary tastes—

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> See Litz, "Chronology" 47 and further related comment, thesis p.276.

<sup>45</sup> This list is drawn from Garside (Op. Cit. and *Subscribing Fiction*); *Time-Line of Literature of the 1790s*; *Literature in Great Britain, the Victorians and their Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Precursors: A Chronology* and Drabble (Ed.), Appendix 1.

<sup>46</sup> See Mudrick (38, n.3): "Michael Sadleir, having examined the file of catalogues of the Minerva Library, presents statistics which demonstrate that Gothic novels, fairly popular before *The Mysteries of Udolpho* was published but still far outnumbered by novels of sentiment and sensibility, flooded the market in the latter half of the 1790s". The tendencies we have observed in our period of assessment for major prose fiction—namely, an increase in Gothic and Jacobin/anti-Jacobin works and a decrease in the epistolary and novels of sentiment—are more than confirmed if assessment is broadened to take in the years immediately following our review, that is, up to and into the nineteenth century.

foreshadowing Romanticism—and to the increasing politicisation of literary production.<sup>47</sup> In the following section we will put forward a political reading of *Lady Susan* that, in the specific social contexts of the mid-to-late 1790s, may—for its complexity and (unintended) ambiguity—plausibly have led to Austen's termination of the novella. However, on strictly literary grounds and in light of her probable or possible awareness of the works we have listed here, we argue that Austen's familiarity with these texts must have caused her to realise that the formal property of *Lady Susan* (and the generic style that this was associated with) was the very antithesis of the kind of writing that was now both gaining critical acclaim, and—most particularly—commercial success.

Julia Prewitt Brown (50) has suggested that Austen experiments with the epistolary merely to burlesque a sentimental and outdated form. We entirely reject the notion that Austen parodies the epistolary in *Lady Susan* (unlike her use of the form in the juvenilia, its sustained and serious application in this novella systematically belies such a view). However, in accordance with what Austen read and perceived of contemporary prose fiction—as we have assessed this through references in her correspondence, through her participation in and awareness of subscription fiction and in light of the major prose fiction works published in the approximate period corresponding to the composition of *Lady Susan*—we concur that she would have recognised the epistolary as no longer reflecting

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<sup>47</sup> See Butler's remarks in the *New York Review of Books* (letter in reply to Irvin Ehrenpreis): "[i]f we were to look with fresh minds at the more intelligent novels of the 1790s, or even at the work of modern historians on that period, we should find it less easy to overlook its most striking single aspect—the politicization of virtually all discourse, "literary" as well as overtly ideological, Jane Austen's along with the rest".

contemporary tastes or preoccupations, and that it was increasingly, in effect, 'a sentimental and outdated form'. To these reservations we need also add a still further reason for deeming epistolary form to have become inadequate, which is its increasingly closer association with social and political views that, for Austen, were simply unacceptable, as we will now consider.

### **3.3 The Influence of Politics**

'Politics and Jane Austen' is a subject fraught with difficulty. On the one hand, there has been a considerable reluctance or even inability to accept the view that Austen's writing not only reflects political ideas but also, beyond this, that it has in fact its own specific political content. And there is a further difficulty, which is that certain critical positions refuse to validate as 'political' those admittedly tangential, indirect aspects and factors in her writing that others—in contrast—see as signposts to Austen's ideas on the contemporary structure of her society and on the various currents that gave it shape.

It has been something of a commonplace to assume that Austen was ignorant of the political events of her world, or at least chose most emphatically to ignore them. Writing to Thomas Hardy in 1917, Frederic Harrison remarked that:

[Austen was] a rather heartless little cynic...penning satires about her neighbours whilst the Dynasts were tearing the world to pieces and



consigning millions to their graves... Not a breath from the whirlwind around her ever touched her Chippendale chiffonier or escritoire.<sup>48</sup>

This notion of Austen can be traced back to the *Memoir* by James Edward Austen-Leigh (“[h]er own family were so much, and the rest of the world so little”)<sup>49</sup> and to the enthusiastic appraisal of Austen’s works by the Janeites, an enthusiasm that expressed delight in her storylines but which was seldom matched by any attempt at deeper critical understanding (“Dear books! Bright, sparkling with wit and animation, in which homely heroines charm, the dull hours fly, and the very bores are enchanting”).<sup>50</sup> Such an image of the non-political Austen, domestically engrossed and rather more the droll entertainer than the critical, ironic observer perceived by later academic assessment<sup>51</sup> has been strengthened by the manner in which her mature writing—the major novels with which most readers are more familiar, as opposed to the juvenilia or unfinished works—effectively bury all direct political reference under the apparently apolitical surface of their narrative.<sup>52</sup> In learning to interpret these references we need to recognise their implicit and indirect nature, for, as Laurie Kaplan (81) reminds us, “[t]he good reader’s role is to engage [Austen’s] text in active enquiry”. Yet, in turn and from certain critical quarters, this has given rise to

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<sup>48</sup> Cited in Kent, 59. On the same page, Kent ironically observes that “[w]hile the French Revolution raged, Jane Austen barely looked up from her petit point”.

<sup>49</sup> J.E. Austen-Leigh 11, cited by Honan (*Biographies* 18). This quotation is taken from the first edition of 1870.

<sup>50</sup> Anne Thackeray in the *Cornhill Magazine*, 1871, cited by Southam (“Janeites and Anti-Janeites” 238).

<sup>51</sup> Most obviously, Harding, Mudrick and Trilling.

<sup>52</sup> This in turn has been forwarded as a major factor facilitating Austen’s continued popularity, markedly unlike other contemporary women writers who are now no longer known to a broad readership. Butler (“History, Politics and Religion” 194) observes that “the conservative Austen was luckier with posterity than her rivals. Their campaigning soon looked unfashionably didactic, while her ladylike avoidance of “themes” has always been received as proof of her artistry”. However, we would add that this comment is equally applicable to the conservative women writers of Austen’s time (for example, Hannah More, Jane West or Sophia King), whose didacticism is no longer either appreciated or readily understood.

questioning whether such implicit content can validly be deemed political at all. Gard (*Clarity* 15-16), for example, says of Austen that:

She is remarkably unpolitical for a novelist—except, of course, in the rather tiresome sense, which modern critical theorists are eager to point up on almost any occasion, that everything is in a wider way implicitly political.

However, as a number of studies on the political dimension to Austen's fiction have most persuasively argued,<sup>53</sup> it is precisely through understanding this 'rather tiresome sense' that we begin to perceive the specific quality of Austen's politics, to see the manner in which her work is articulated within the framework of a highly particular society at a critical moment in its history and to understand that Austen's form of thinking and of expressing that thought through her work takes place in response to the changes and challenges of her times.<sup>54</sup>

It seems arbitrary to insist that a writer, a social animal like the rest of us, takes in ideas from books while remaining impervious both to ideas derived from experience and to the general cultural ambience. The literary concept of the source of one book in another book denies the work done in other disciplines on the way we acquire our general opinions, ideology or world view. Political scientists do not nowadays attribute our political beliefs to some inner debate prompted by a book or a speech or the guidance of a

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<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Butler (*War*); Johnson (*Women, Politics & the Novel*); Roberts, and Kelly (most especially "Religion & Politics" for specific comment on interpreting political content through narrative mode; plot; range of incident; form and tone).

<sup>54</sup> Indeed, it is in this 'tangential' sense that one of the most renowned and controversial criticisms of Austen's broad political concerns has been articulated—though it is one not at all related to *Lady Susan* and only very marginally of possible interest to *Catharine*, through that novella's reference to India. This is Edward Said's discussion of slavery in *Mansfield Park* (in *Culture and Imperialism*), an issue that clearly highlights the manner in which Austen's form of referring to the wider contexts in which her narratives take place is indirect, and requires careful attention to often seemingly insignificant detail. Said's view on *Mansfield Park* has most notably been challenged by Susan Fraiman.

parent, teacher, or friend. Social ideas and socialization are inseparable; our theories relate to our perceptions of ourselves as members of a limited group within a larger one, society. This makes our politics intuitive, not analytical; interested, but not narrowly self-interested—for we idealize our group and consider that the community will benefit if we prevail. An account of Austen's politics that relied too heavily on the conclusions of the political scientist, anthropologist or social historian would be unduly reverential to generalities, over the specific evidence available in her individual case; but to glean her opinions from her writings without attention to her circumstances is equally unsatisfactory. She thought, and changed her thinking, along with certain groups in society, who were living, as it happens, through a time of national crisis.<sup>55</sup>

We posit that *Lady Susan* can be read as the expression of a very specific political view. As such, it directly addresses the social and political preoccupations of the mid 1790s in England, in the aftermath of the French Revolution and in light of the great debate between the Jacobin and anti-Jacobin view not only of this conflict and of its consequences, but also of how contemporary society should be evolving, what dangers it faced and what solutions were being put forward either to herald the change that the one faction sought to promote or else to maintain and strengthen the status quo that the other sought to defend. Furthermore, we posit that the political message Austen intended to express through this novella is significantly at odds with the result that she actually achieved, and that this factor—in addition to other political considerations affecting narrative mode that we discuss below—forced Austen to realise the general unsuitability of her work as a reflection of her own ideas and within the climate of political repression that was steadily taking hold of 1790s Britain.

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<sup>55</sup> Butler, "History, Politics and Religion" 190-191.

But there is a question that must first briefly be addressed before further considering the political character of *Lady Susan*, which is why writing, including both fiction and non-fiction, should have been so much in the centre of contemporary political debate, in what sense and in what ways it sought to contribute to the debate and—ultimately—why it was deemed necessary to exercise social and political control over it.

The major tensions within British society in the 1790s derived from discrepancies over the French Revolution. Opponents of the Revolution were appalled primarily by the spiral of violence and discord—social, political and religious—into which France had been plunged; supporters, on the other hand, pointed to the great advances both in individual and collective rights and freedom that were being established with the overthrow of the *Ancien Régime*. In terms of public debate made available through a host of printed works, this basic division was primarily articulated by Edmund Burke (*Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790), in opposition to the Revolution, and by Tom Paine (*The Rights of Man*, 1791-92), in support. Ames<sup>56</sup> observes that:

Burke's criticism of radicalism [warns] of the spread of French-Jacobin ideals to British soil. He criticized heavily the reform works like those [of] Joseph Johnson and his circle of writers published. Burke's attack (in part a reaction to the reformer Dr. Price, a leading advocate of social reform) set off a storm of political controversy concerning the most fundamentally esteemed principles that many saw as the basis of English civilized life in the 1790s: Reason, Truth, Liberty, Virtue, Justice, and God.

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<sup>56</sup> *Politics of the 1790s* (Web).

Paine's reply, Ames adds, "engages its reader in the general concerns and cause of social reform", countering tales of French blood-letting with instances of "specific and general abuses perpetrated by those holding power".<sup>57</sup> That is, from the outset of this social fraction, contrasting ideas were pitted against one another in Habermas' public space "through the medium of print"<sup>58</sup>. And, within this print-based *war of ideas* we find not only works of political analysis and discussion, but also a range of other works supporting or undermining the Jacobin or anti-Jacobin positions.<sup>59</sup> The process is complex indeed by which debate through print changes from being initially hailed by both sides as a positive—even necessary—sign of a vigorous culture,<sup>60</sup> into (most especially for opinions held on women writers) a source of moral and political distrust.<sup>61</sup> In very broad terms, there was a general feeling in the early 1790s that 'literature', by which most forms of writing were meant, not simply the literary,<sup>62</sup> was the way through which Truth would be determined. In his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), Godwin states the belief that:

[f]ew engines can be more powerful, and at the same time more salutary in their tendency, than literature... it is sufficiently evident that the human mind is strongly infected with prejudice and mistake. The various opinions prevailing in different countries and among different classes of men upon the same subject, are almost innumerable; and yet of all these opinions, only one

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Brewer, 6 (see thesis, Chapter One, n.50).

<sup>59</sup> Writers expressing a basically Jacobin attitude include Robert Bage, Thomas Holcroft, William Godwin, Elizabeth Inchbald, Charlotte Smith, Mary Hays, Mary Wollstonecraft, Helen Maria Williams, Mary Robinson and Anna Plumptre. Those expressing anti-Jacobin views include Jane West, Henry James Pye, Laetitia Hawkins, Charles Lloyd, Isaac D'Israeli, Elizabeth Hamilton and Hannah More.

<sup>60</sup> See Keen, 27: "As the political divide widened... a belief in the centrality of print culture to British liberty remained one point on which opposed critics could still find some measure of common ground".

<sup>61</sup> For detailed accounts of how this process affects the production of women writers, see especially Watson and Heckendorn Cook.

<sup>62</sup> See Kelly, *Women, Writing and Revolution* 9.

can be true. Now the effectual way for extirpating these prejudices and mistakes seems to be literature.<sup>63</sup>

Yet the very success of print as an 'effectual way' of publicly confronting discrepant social and political ideas was to sow the seeds of its rapid demise. For, whilst for some time, participation through print effectively created "a shadow government of enlightened public opinion",<sup>64</sup> the conservative backlash that gained impetus—as the seemingly interminable wars with France dragged on (1793-1802) and as the Reign of Terror (1793-94) either confirmed suspicions or clouded earlier assent of the Revolution—gave rise to an increasing sense of wariness against the openness of literary expression, deeming it to undermine public order and social stability:

Conservative thinkers worried that literary freedom led to political unrest, that the universalist rhetoric of the public sphere reflected the particular interest of the professional classes, and that the legal distinction between speculative and seditious works could no longer be relied upon to regulate the free play of intellectual debate... What was ultimately at stake in these debates was the proximity of the literary and political public spheres.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> *Political and Philosophical Writings* III, 14-15, cited in Keen, 28. See also Kelly's reference (ibid) to T.J.Mathias' view of 'literature': "the great engine by which... all civilized states must ultimately be supported or overthrown"

<sup>64</sup> Keen, 27.

<sup>65</sup> Keen, 7. See also his comment (ibid, 9) that the 1790s "constituted the moment of greatest crisis in a larger cultural moment—now known as the Romantic period—which was itself characterized by a crisis in the meaning of literature that 'forced writers to see that the possibility of alternative readings merged with the possibility of alternative social orders'" (citing Klancher, 160).

With the growth of this distrust of literary freedom came the consequent drive to monitor and discipline literary production, seeking to ensure that this avoided articulating content that might be subversive of or opposed to conservative values, and promoting works that offered unequivocal support and illustration of such values. This was particularly aimed at controlling the role of women, and, not least of all, of women writers. As Kelly observes:

...women writers became important concerns in the British Revolution debate. The turn against feminism accelerated in both Britain and France after the avant-garde political amorosness of the early Revolutionary salons seemed to degenerate into courtly decadence during the Directory of the mid-1790s. In Britain, conservative conduct books for women, such as Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*, were published in new editions. In the later 1790s women writers such as Elizabeth Hamilton and Hannah More, though similar in background to feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays, rejected Revolutionary feminist 'civic' woman for a renewed model of 'domestic woman' as professionalized custodian of the 'national' conscience, culture and destiny.<sup>66</sup>

We have already suggested a general sense in which *Lady Susan* can be read politically (thesis 36). However, and especially in light of the brief historical contextualisation that we have just outlined, we now posit more specifically that there is a highly particular political character to the novella and that, in a direct way, Austen was attempting to underline the moral and social perils of Jacobin irresponsibility in the figure of Susan Vernon (superficially attractive but profoundly disruptive) and to put forward—in Kelly's terms—a conservative custodial figure in the guise of Catherine Vernon, whose duty it was to defend her moral and domestic realm (of 'conscience, culture and destiny')

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<sup>66</sup> *Women, Writing and Revolution* 21.

against insidious attack from an outside world. From this perspective, it seems patent to us that—whilst we agree, in terms of Austen's work as a whole, she may be said to represent “the progressive element within the tradition of conformity”<sup>67</sup>—the ‘Tory’ view of life particularly noted in her later novels<sup>68</sup> marks its first and considerably unattenuated presence in *Lady Susan*. In contrast to Roberts' view (44) that “the themes of community and social continuity...do not appear in...*Lady Susan*”,<sup>69</sup> we argue that this novella can be read precisely as a defence of conservative ‘English’ communal values against the dangers of social discontinuity that were perceived in the Jacobin threat. To quote again from Roberts, Austen's Burkean conservative ideology<sup>70</sup> in *Lady Susan* is, in effect, “a prescription for keeping English society stable and vital, and protecting it from the subversive forces that threatened what was most valuable in English life”.<sup>71</sup> And whilst it is certain, as we observed on p.248, that the political intent we argue for in *Lady Susan* is never an overt, propagandistic declaration of principles,<sup>72</sup> it is our view that Austen's delineation of the novella's two main characters, the intimate access provided to their personal thoughts—and, thus, to their essential values—as well as the manner in which Austen directs the attribution of sympathy against Susan Vernon, are clear pointers to the underlying message of conformity with contemporary conservative ideology. Claudia Johnson's view of Austen's political tendencies is, of course, significantly opposed to what

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<sup>67</sup> Spencer 169.

<sup>68</sup> See for example, Butler (*War of Ideas*; “History, Politics and Religion”), Kelly (*Women, Writing and Revolution*; “Short Fiction”) and Roberts (especially chapters one and three).

<sup>69</sup> However, See Roberts (129) for the assertion that “in writing *Lady Susan* [Austen] ... made ... the moral subversion of society central to what she was doing”.

<sup>70</sup> Roberts 42.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> This accords with Butler's view (“History, Politics and Religion” 194). See this chapter, n.52.



we posit for *Lady Susan*; indeed, she rejects all critical attempt to locate Austen's sympathy within the conservative ambit, observing that:

[a]ssertions about [Austen's] 'Tory conservatism' are based not on statements by or about Austen in her novels or letters—no such statement exists—but rather on the belief that because she was a member of a certain class she reflexively accorded with all its values and interests.<sup>73</sup>

The case for Austen's Tory beliefs as an inheritance of family values has been strongly made by Butler, Southam and Roberts,<sup>74</sup> amongst others, though we agree that this 'inheritance' need not imply Austen's 'reflexive accordance' with such values. Yet Johnson appears to reject Austen's purported conservatism in part because there is no *explicit* comment ('statements') on her political opinion in her writings.<sup>75</sup> Kelly, however, has shown in considerable analytical detail that the literary expression of political beliefs does not require a writer to make open statements about these beliefs,<sup>76</sup> which is the critical position that we most fully accord with in positing the political content of *Lady Susan*. Briefly recalling the salient aspects of Austen's treatment of her two main characters will

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<sup>73</sup> *Women, Politics and the Novel* xviii.

<sup>74</sup> For Butler, see especially "History, Politics and Religion"; for Southam, see "*An Easy Step to Silence*"; for Roberts, see his introduction and chapters one and three.

<sup>75</sup> For argument essentially in agreement with Johnson on this point, see Pearson (*Women's Reading* 149-150), which, observing that "[i]t is demonstrable from [Austen's] borrowings that she knew the key novels of the conservative reaction, More's *Coelebs*, Jane West's *A Gossip's Story*, Elizabeth Hamilton's *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, Opie's *Adeline Mobrai*", suggests that in Austen's work (and citing most particularly *Pride and Prejudice*) "the moral authority of the conservative text is challenged". This point is one that we see as open to question, though clearly—in referring to the later fiction—beyond the scope of our concern. Nevertheless, we evidently disagree that such a view is applicable to *Lady Susan*, unless the only valid presiding perspective is taken to be that of Susan Vernon, a position we have argued emphatically against throughout.

<sup>76</sup> "Short Fiction".

underline the specific manner in which this novella makes a determined attempt to defend conservative values.

Our analysis of *Lady Susan* drew attention to the manner in which Austen's control of the assignation of reader sympathy markedly in favour of Catherine Vernon and, consequently, to the clear detriment of Lady Susan (thesis, 163-176). As we indicated in this analysis, the principal and reiterated characteristic features of Catherine Vernon point unambiguously to her position as *defender* of social cohesion and of morally positive values. This affects a number of aspects, including the exemplary fulfilment of her domestic role as wife, daughter, sister and mother (and even foster-mother), in each one of which roles she is called upon to rigorously articulate a 'wholesome' alternative to the corrosive presence of Susan Vernon. It also includes the need for her to shore up the imperilled *hegemony* (at stake is the moral vitality of the De Courcy line) by putting forward a strategy that aims at restoring the propriety of social order, through the marriage of Reginald and Frederica. The restoration of this order, temporarily threatened by Lady Susan, brings with it the idea that this is a natural and correct resolution, dramatically in contrast to the alternative fate that so nearly befalls the De Courcy family, a fate that Sir Reginald aptly terms "a Match, which *deep Art* only could render probable, and must in the end make wretched" (Letter 12, *MW* 261, emphasis added). We also observe that Catherine Vernon's defence of her 'society' is one that appeals to and acts in favour of communal values. Her plans are discussed openly and in a spirit of mutual confidence with her mother; they involve marital union—the inclusion of new and acceptable family members—and

they identify as desirable an ordered, regulated but decidedly non-tyrannical society in which events should occur with due deference to propriety, yet which seeks benignly to ensure the happiness of those who celebrate its values, as Catherine's rescue of Frederica reveals (thesis, 174).

In contrast to this, there is the destructiveness of Susan Vernon's "deep Art", a phrase that precisely conveys the *unnaturalness* of all that Lady Susan represents. It is not simply that she stands in opposition to the values defended by her sister-in-law, although that is true and of obvious political import. More specifically, however, is the subterfuge with which she prepares her (always illicit) schemes, continually passing herself off for something she plainly is not, presenting herself as a mild, moderate and compliant presence in the Vernon home when, in fact, she utterly despises her hosts' values, holding them in absolute contempt. Additionally—and of particular significance—whereas Catherine Vernon emphasises communal responsibility, Lady Susan stands for hedonistic, self-centred pleasure, even to the extent of ignoring her own daughter's personal happiness and emotional stability. That is, she places her own wants above her maternal—and thus social—obligations. Indeed, as we have observed (thesis, 171), Susan's abject failure to maintain family and social cohesion in her relationship with Frederica (in contrast to that which occurs with Catherine), marking yet another way in which Lady Susan characterises disruption and disunity, is an element of clear political significance. Finally, it should not be overlooked that Lady Susan is the outsider. 'Home', in this novella, is where Catherine Vernon and her family live; *theirs* are the perspective and values with which we are

systematically directed to identify. The crisis produced in *Lady Susan* is the disruption of this domestic order by a person who represents the ideas and values of a foreign world (specifically, the ever-untrustworthy town in opposition to the country, a place that Susan Vernon despises,<sup>77</sup> and a constant factor in Tory ideology that seeks to root the *wholesomeness* of traditional social order within the natural context of the rural world).<sup>78</sup> We argue, then, that this novella delineates specific constructive, cohesive and affirmative social values that Austen herself saw as politically desirable and necessary, and contrasts these with the values of disruption that emphasise personal preoccupation—in effect, the Jacobins' 'individual rights'—at the expense of communal obligation.<sup>79</sup> Inasmuch as this reading of the novella is concerned, these Jacobin values are presented as leading to social turmoil and mistrust, and to the breakdown of the 'natural' structures of family order upon which the Tory notion of decent, moral society depends.<sup>80</sup>

Given such an interpretation, particularly in view of the increasingly conservative political environment of the mid-to-late 1790s, why should a novella whose underlying sympathies concur with the broader national political sensibilities that were swiftly gaining

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<sup>77</sup> "[T]hat insupportable spot, a country village" (Letter Two, *MW* 245-246).

<sup>78</sup> See, for example, Kelly ("Religion and Politics").

<sup>79</sup> "As Marilyn Butler has pointed out, the theme of individual rights was central to English Jacobin novels of the 1790s. Reacting against this ideology, conservative, anti-Jacobin writers argued for the necessity of a social code that would limit those rights, seeing the individual in relationship to the community" (Roberts 36-37).

<sup>80</sup> It should be emphasised, however, that whilst our reading of *Lady Susan* points to what is, in effect, a dichotomous situation—communal order versus individualistic disorder—we are not suggesting by this that the novella accurately or fairly reflects the complexity of the contemporary political context. It is too easy and plainly wrong to exclusively identify positive communal values with conservative political ideas and to see sympathy for the 'Jacobin' position as tantamount to support for anarchy. That such a dichotomy might appeal to contemporary conservative taste, however, is clearly a factor that may have motivated Austen's careful and systematic contrast of the novella's two central characters.

the upper hand in the Jacobin/anti-Jacobin struggle be seen by its author not merely as problematic but also as a work that simply could not be continued? We posit that there are two answers to that question: one concerns the centrality of Lady Susan; the other is the political 'value' that was increasingly being associated with the epistolary.

To begin with the epistolary, we have already outlined the critical positions of—especially—Mary Favret and Nicola Watson with respect to the idea that letter-based correspondence fell into social, moral and political disrepute throughout the 1790s (thesis, pp.53-56). Reviewing this notion through the political reading we have suggested for *Lady Susan*, we would emphasise the following aspects. Epistolary writing showed itself to have the capacity to adapt and be adapted to a remarkably broad range of circumstances and requirements (see thesis, Chapter One, especially sections 1.1 and 1.2). Yet it is precisely this flexibility that caused it to be the object of political suspicion, a point made patent by Favret's study in *Romantic Correspondence*.<sup>81</sup> Most specifically, in a way that mirrors the initial bi-partisan acceptability of social debate articulated through print (thesis, p.252), epistolary form appealed to writers, particularly women, on either side of the Jacobin/anti-Jacobin divide, for the directness of its formal properties and for its stylistic ability to establish contact with a broad public:

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<sup>81</sup> "Favret shows how the 'looseness' that made the familiar letter available to women writers in the eighteenth century, and that helped it cross class bridges in an increasingly literate society, also led it into the political realm: such promiscuity tainted its image, and this suggests one reason for the dwindling of epistolary fiction" (Gilroy & Verhoeven 11).

The multiple, often contradictory resonances of the letter in this period help us to understand why it continued to appeal to women writers from both ends of the political spectrum, being the form chosen for Mary Hay's *Letters and Essays, Moral and Miscellaneous* (1793) and Mary Robinson's impassioned *Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Subordination* (1799), as well as Laetitia Matilda Hawkins's *Letter on the Female Mind* (1793), a conservative response to [Williams] that placed politics completely out of bounds for respectable women ... Importantly, letter texts enabled an informal register that suited polemical writers who wished to reach as wide an audience as possible.<sup>82</sup>

Recalling the observation that the eventual conservative response to the use of print for the public debate of political and social issues was active discouragement, in the belief that literary freedom could foment unrest (thesis, 253), it is easy to see that this discouragement focussed unfavourably on epistolarity, identifying it with potentially seditious—or, at the very least, destabilising—activity. Beyond this, and as we suggested in section 3.2 in reference to the epistolary fiction of the early-to-mid 1790s that Austen may have been familiar with or aware of, an additional negative association was made with epistolary form in works of fiction, namely, its propensity to reflect the sentimental. This tendency, “paradigmatically represented by Rousseau’s ambiguous plot of illicit passion in *Julie*, came to be seen as a marker of a dangerous, individual excess, a potentially revolutionary energy that had to be expelled or marginalised in the formation of a new national identity and political consensus”.<sup>83</sup> The association of the epistolary with ideas that

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid 12.

<sup>83</sup> Gilroy & Verhoeven, 5, summarising Watson’s essential ideas in *Revolution*. This quotation is also given in thesis, p. 55. In terms of our reading of *Lady Susan*, there is the clear presence both of an illicit passion (between Susan Vernon and Manwaring, a passion that brings Manwaring’s marriage to the verge of ruin; the destructive potential of this, as ever in this novella, being counterbalanced by Catherine’s attempts to arrange (Continued on the next page)

were in turn associated with Jacobinism, together with the increasing unacceptability to the prevailing conservative climate of the letter's use in political debate, led to what Watson sees as a 'disciplining' of literary form—from the epistolary to third-person narrative, the latter mode deemed both to undermine the self-centredness of correspondence and to represent a more socially acceptable form of literary expression: "discipline...replac[ed] the individualism of epistolary self-representation with communally accredited systems of right reading...designed to produce both the ideal domestic subject and, by extension, the fully national subject".<sup>84</sup> We posit that this highlights a particular difficulty with *Lady Susan* that Austen appears to have been unable to resolve: whilst it is clear to our political reading of the novella that she wished it to be supportive of positive conservative *communal* values, the literary form used in this novella was increasingly perceived to reflect morally and politically tainted *individualism*. As a result, the novella's epistolarity is—in this particular period—too politically suspect a vehicle with which to attempt the articulation of conservative social ideas, and too much associated with individualism to convincingly advance communal concerns. In other words, the negative association of epistolary form and Jacobin ideology militates against Austen's intentions—it sends out the wrong message—and, additionally, acts as an interpretative factor that undermines appreciation, *ab initio*, of what we have termed the *co-valency* of Catherine Vernon, instead encouraging—for associated political reasons—greater attention to fall directly upon Lady Susan. It is to this over-centrality of this character that we now turn.

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a marriage) and of the "revolutionary [or at least disruptive] energy" of Susan Vernon's perilous "individual excess".

<sup>84</sup> Watson, 108. This quotation is also given in thesis, p.56.

In section 3.1 of this chapter, we indicated that our position—held throughout our interpretation of *Lady Susan* and in opposition to more traditional critical opinion that unhesitatingly attributes greater centrality to Lady Susan—in favour of the co-valency of Catherine and Susan Vernon (thesis, 229) leads to an obvious formal problem, which is that however much we argue for the strength of Catherine Vernon's moral position, this is always more or less balanced by the power of Lady Susan's malice. We suggest that this intentionally points to the potency of the threat that Lady Susan represents, and that to have articulated such a character (and therefore such a threat) in a less dynamic manner would have produced a hollow victory for Catherine Vernon. As far as a political reading of the novella is concerned, however, this has clear consequences: if Catherine Vernon represents social order and Lady Susan stands for its opposite, why then is Lady Susan not less unambiguously undermined? Austen's failure to address this issue is a problem of literary form, but it is one that brings with it political implications that cannot have been intended. We have argued (*passim*) that the directness of the epistolary mode is a fundamentally successful factor in establishing intimate access to a character's thoughts and motivations, and—in *Lady Susan* and for Susan Vernon—that its polyphonic quality contributes to the construction of her dynamism, realism and vitality.<sup>85</sup> Certainly, it may be the case that the vigour with which we now perceive Lady Susan would not have been so transparent to contemporary readers; modern readers of the novella perhaps interpret Lady Susan more affirmatively than they do Catherine Vernon through a misunderstanding of the

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<sup>85</sup> Particularly, see thesis, pp.154-158.



contemporary importance of Mrs Vernon to the 1790s' Tory view of what was socially desirable (a misunderstanding that we would argue is also tenable for *Mansfield Park's* Fanny Price, often perceived as insipid in contrast to the evidently more dynamic Mary Crawford).<sup>86</sup> But even recognising greater strength in Catherine Vernon, it seems fair to suggest that the force of character we see in Lady Susan is broadly similar to that which Austen must also have perceived in her. The political consequences of this, in terms of the novella's interpretation, is that an evidently Jacobin figure is seen, if not to be triumphant, then at least never to be unambiguously undermined. Taken together with the increasing unacceptability of epistolary form, this imbalance more than simply negates what we posit as Austen's conservative political intention in the novella; it actually leaves the novella open to being interpreted, at least in part—and obviously in stark contrast to what Austen surely intended—as a pro-Jacobin narrative. With her final epistolary contribution (Letter 39), far from being outmanoeuvred and sunk in despair by the sudden downward turn in her fortunes and by the thwarting of her carefully developed plans, Lady Susan shows a remarkable ability to adapt herself to adversity, makes the most of her new circumstances and faces her future with admirable optimism. By this, Austen may very well—and very coherently—have intended to express Susan Vernon's utter disconnection from all

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<sup>86</sup> This assertion is supported by Kelly ("Short Fiction" 156), though from a different perspective—that of religion: "[modern] readers' preference for Mary over Fanny exemplifies a secularization of literary culture since Austen's day that has made it difficult to understand how Anglicans such as Austen would have considered it vital in the Revolutionary aftermath to fill country vicarages with Edmunds and Fannys rather than Henrys and Marys". For what we would deem a modern misreading of Austen's work in light of the unperceived value of her characters to Austen's own society, see Kingsley Amis's view (142) that "Edmund and Fanny are both morally detestable and the endorsement of their feelings and behaviour by the author...makes *Mansfield Park* an immoral book" (for related comment, see the discussion of 'sympathy', thesis p.164). It is of interest to note, however, that Austen's mother found Fanny Price to be "insipid" (Park 347).

reasonable, responsible social conduct, an intensely self-centred indifference to the need to accept the consequences of her actions. Yet, in apparently conveying such astonishing equanimity, this episode might easily be read as an apology for Jacobin 'virtue'. Catherine Vernon's final epistolary words (Letter 41), in contrast, are marked not only by caution but also by evident pessimism, a fact that might be seen as heralding the failure of the values she has been attempting throughout to defend.<sup>87</sup>

We posit that Austen made the decision to abandon the novella on perceiving these considerable political difficulties. The solution would have meant entirely re-writing the work, modifying its mode from epistolary to third-person and addressing the imbalance of Lady Susan's character, ensuring—in addition—that the values she represents would ultimately and unambiguously be thwarted (though clearly this is what is eventually to happen in the Fanny Price-Mary Crawford conflict of *Mansfield Park* which, in a certain sense, the conflict in this novella foreshadows). For a project that seems by about 1795 to have been almost complete, this solution would surely have required a considerable deal of creative energy, and it is difficult to imagine that this could be brought to bear on a work that—we argue—had proven itself to be so at odds with contemporary tastes and requirements. Furthermore, although, as we posit, *Lady Susan* had pointed the way forward stylistically with respect to the limitations encountered in the third-person narrative *Catharine* (see thesis, Chapter Two), Austen may still have felt herself unready at this stage

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<sup>87</sup> For a distinct political reading of *Lady Susan*, see Pepper Robbins. Her basic notion is that narrative voice replaces epistolary form since the letter, "emblem of public meaning, is inappropriate to this dangerous world" of revolution and individualism (221).

to write a revised *Lady Susan* in direct narrative. Indeed, assuming the 1794-95 date of epistolary termination for *Lady Susan*, it would still be some time before Austen was to produce an entire novel in direct-narrative form.<sup>88</sup>

In short, from the political perspective of the 1790s, *Lady Susan* has two insurmountable drawbacks: its epistolarity and the over-centrality of Lady Susan Vernon. Both of these factors create an interpretative ambiguity that could even have led to a political reading of the novella that would be—in our view—wholly opposed to what Austen had intended. Given these difficulties, in addition to the factors brought to her attention through her reading of contemporary fiction (thesis, section 3.2), we argue that Austen chose to abandon her novella and turn her creative attention elsewhere.

There is, however, one final ambit to be considered in Austen's rejection of the epistolary, which is the commercial. We assert that this factor—in the sense that it is the consequence of all the other aspects that we have considered in this chapter, and also, as we will indicate, because of Austen's powerful sense of professional ambition—is of most critical importance in leading to the definitive determination to set *Lady Susan* aside, and in shaping Austen's understanding of the need to radically modify the style and content of her

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<sup>88</sup> Austen attempted to publish *First Impressions*—a novel that we posit to have been non-epistolary—in 1797. See thesis, p.272 for fuller discussion. Additionally, Cassandra Austen's memorandum states that *Sense and Sensibility* was begun in November 1797 and that "North-hanger Abbey [sic, and thus an interesting pointer to Austen's pronunciation of the novel's title, in accordance with the Hampshire dialect or family pronunciation that in all probability was that spoken by Austen] was written about the years 98 & 99" (Southam, *Literary Manuscripts* 53).

writing if she was ever to succeed with a public larger than that gathered in her father's front parlour.

### 3.4 The Influence of Commercial Concerns

Hugh McKellar (206) makes the point that *Lady Susan* may have been abandoned not for formal or political reasons but because, in relation to the contemporary literary market, the novella's length made it impossible to sell:

[O]nly by padding it till all the effect of its pace was ruined could [Austen] have produced the wherewithal for a volume bulky enough to persuade a potential purchaser of getting his money's worth, whereas it is a shade too long to fit into a single issue of a literary magazine. What becomes of a script that is the wrong length for any medium within your reach, and yet too tightly knit for easy expansion?

His answer lists a range of options (including creating "enough other material" to produce a marketable work, and giving up on the work but allowing it to live on within the family, since it proves popular, both of which things were, in fact, to happen). This is an interesting and innovative view of Austen's attitude to her text, but we nevertheless feel that his argument—though it recognises them—does not sufficiently emphasise the main issues affecting Austen's development, modification and abandonment or completion of her 'scripts', which are her clear sense of commercial astuteness and, obviously linked to this, her fundamental objective in novel writing, namely, publication. At this stage, we would emphasise here more fully a point that we have made less directly throughout: whilst, by

the time of *Lady Susan*'s revision and conclusion (c.1805-1809), our view is that Austen no longer intended this work for publication,<sup>89</sup> during the composition of its epistolary section and up to the point of its abandonment (that is, c.1794-95), publication had very much been her objective; it was, however, one that she would soon see as simply unfeasible.

There is a general reticence to accept that Jane Austen was commercially motivated and it is a reticence that closely mirrors popular objection to seeing Austen as political (as we outlined on pp.247-249). Once again, the reluctance can be traced back to the early and careful family-managed projection of Austen as a happily domestic woman, wholly untouched and untroubled by anything as tendentious and squalid as politics or financial gain. Nevertheless, Jan Fergus's 1997 study<sup>90</sup> tellingly juxtaposes Henry Austen's account of his sister's unassuming amateurishness—as related in his 1818 'Bibliographical Notice' (printed along with *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*)—with a rather less than amateurish comment made by Austen five years previous to the Notice, in a letter to another brother, Frank. Henry Austen somewhat sanctimoniously observes that:

[n]either the hope of fame nor profit mixed with her early motives... [S]o much did she shrink from notoriety, that no accumulation of fame would have induced her, had she lived, to affix her name to any productions of her pen... in public, she turned away from any allusion to the character of an authoress.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> See thesis, p. 190 ff. and the corresponding n.186.

<sup>90</sup> "The Professional Women Writer".

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

These remarks should obviously be taken in light of the then-prevailing and largely negative attitudes towards women authors,<sup>92</sup> although Henry Austen's are clearly an attempt to configure an acceptable—and of course saleable—public façade for his sister's image as an integral part of her literary legacy. In direct contrast to this, Jane Austen tells Frank that “every copy of S[ense] & S[ensibility] is sold &... it has brought me £140 beside the Copyright, if that sh<sup>d</sup> ever be of any value. I have now therefore written myself into £250—which only makes me long for more”.<sup>93</sup> It is not simply that Austen concerns herself here with literary profit, though this in itself wholly undermines the version that Henry Austen would have us believe of his sister, but also of significance is that her thoughts should focus so clearly on market-related issues such as the potential value of copyright, a concept that turns on the question of public acceptance—in the hard-nosed professional sense of ‘volume of sales’.

We conjecture in this section that Austen developed a sense of commercial acumen, within the literary ambit, at an early age. This acumen underscores the stylistic accuracy of her early burlesques and is responsible for her keen perception of shifts in public taste, as we have already observed (thesis, 139); but, consequently, it also obviously accounts for the clarity with which Austen understands the contemporary literary market and, as such, determines her eventual decision to close down the epistolary *Lady Susan*, through recognition that—as a work initially intended for publication—it was no longer a viable commercial project. In this sense, this section of the thesis goes a step beyond viewing

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<sup>92</sup> See Op.Cit. 13 (‘Cultural Context’).

<sup>93</sup> Letter 317, July 3 1813 (cited in Fergus, Op.Cit. 12).

Austen's literary decisions simply in light of contemporary political factors. For, whilst an understanding of how those factors allowed us to see that Austen was sensitive to the social and political pressure of conservative repression on her writing,<sup>94</sup> and indeed (as we have posited), to observe how she responded to this pressure, such a perspective takes no account of Austen's commercially driven creativity, or of the ways in which this was also to shape her literary choices. That is, a fuller picture of her relation to epistolary form requires us to assess not only the 'political Austen', but the 'commercial Austen', too.

Austen's grasp of the literary market, and the wish to direct her creative energies towards publication within this market, came about at an early age. Garside<sup>95</sup> puts forward the idea that her participation (as reader/purchaser) in novel subscription brought home the enormous potential of the literary market, and the commercial possibility that involvement as a writer within this world appeared to offer:

[A]t an early stage Jane Austen caught sight of the subscription method as a way of bringing female novelists into the public eye. 'Miss J. Austen, Steventon' appears as one of 1058 subscribers in the list prefixed to Frances Burney's *Camilla* (1796)... [N]ews of the subscription probably came through her maternal relations—the vicar at Great Bookham, where Burney

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<sup>94</sup> Pearson (*Women's Writing* 150) goes somewhat beyond this and claims that Austen shows a "resistance to the texts of conservatism", citing Austen's distaste for West's *A Gossip's Story* and More's *Coelebs*. We agree that Austen's reaction to these two works does not appear to have been enthusiastic. However, it does not follow that this reaction is necessarily political. In our view it simply indicates dissatisfaction with these novels at an artistic level. That is, we do not accept the extrapolation of Austen's dislike for *Gossip* and *Coelebs* to a more general view of her political leanings. Indeed, to our mind, Pearson goes on to identify precisely where Austen's objections to such texts principally lie (in their form, not their content), and to suggest how Austen resolves the shortcomings of her contemporaries, correcting "what she must have seen as their artistic faults, *the palpable design of political novels and their tendency to mechanistic planning and melodramatic excess*" (ibid, emphasis added). See also Butler's related comments, this chapter n.52.

<sup>95</sup> Subscribing Fiction (Web).

completed the novel, was the Revd Samuel Cooke, Jane Austen's godfather, whose wife Cassandra (née Leigh) was a cousin of Jane Austen's mother (also born Cassandra Leigh). In this way could subscription lists grow by spreading through the grid of gentry society. Jane Austen almost certainly must have fantasised about such a list emanating outwards from herself, and her *First Impressions* was begun only three months after Camilla's appearance in July 1796... [Austen] waited another twelve years to publish,<sup>96</sup> and then did so privately at her own risk; though these interventions in subscription probably gave her a useful early glimpse of the public readership now available for fiction.

As we have just argued, the motivation that this 'early glimpse' afforded was added to Austen's sharp sense of literary fashion, or, more precisely, to her keen understanding of what constituted popular literary taste—a factor that her exposure to the works of subscription fiction must evidently have strengthened. Litz's comment on Austen's sensitivity ("[s]uch timing attests to her familiarity with the literary scene as well as to her artistic shrewdness")<sup>97</sup>—an observation made partly in reference to *Love and Freindship* (June 1790) and that therefore locates this sensitivity at a markedly precocious stage in Austen's writing—implicitly emphasises the fact that Austen *always* wrote with a creative eye firmly fixed on popular tendencies, suggesting that she not only perceived the way in which public tastes could change, but also that, in large measure, she modified her writing in order to adapt itself to such change.

We posit that it is precisely such perception and sensitivity, along with the other factors outlined in this chapter, which leads Austen to abandon the epistolary mode in *Lady*

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<sup>96</sup> This comment appears to suggest that the delay was Austen's choice, whereas, as we indicate on thesis p.275 ff. for *First Impressions*, it is more accurate to say that she was *obliged* to wait for eventual publication, her first attempts failing to convince the publishers.

<sup>97</sup> *Artistic Development* 19. Also cited on p.139 of this thesis.



*Susan*. Her awareness of the type of fiction that was becoming increasingly popular, and of its direct-narrative mode of expression (as well as her perception of other successful forms of writing, considered below), and her consequent awareness of the outmoded sentimentality of much epistolary literature, together with the increasingly negative political connotations of its formal properties, were (as Doody remarks) "hard lessons which taught her that her kind of writing was...not suited to the contemporary public".<sup>98</sup>

We believe, in addition, that this view is strengthened not by further reference to *Lady Susan*, but rather by assessment of two unrelated literary events: on the one hand, Austen's first recorded steps in the activity of professional writing and, on the other, Hannah More's publication of the *Cheap Repository Tracts*.

Designed as a response by the Evangelical movement to counter what was seen as the rapid moral and political degradation of the lower classes, largely in light of the extraordinary success of *Paine's Rights of Man* and of the proliferation of likeminded and widely available pamphlets, "Hannah More proposed to take over the whole of English popular literature for the greater glory of God and the security of the nation" (Altick 73-74),<sup>99</sup> through the publication of a series of moral tales known as the *Cheap Repository Tracts*, some fifty of which were written by More herself. The series began in March 1795

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<sup>98</sup> *Catharine and Other Writings*, xxxi.

<sup>99</sup> See Altick 72-77 for fuller details. This account emphasises the irony, one perceived even at the time, of the Evangelical movement's achievement through Sunday schooling of increased rates of literacy amongst the poor, which in turn facilitates access to works such as Paine's that were strongly critical of the political positions defended by conservatism, with which the Evangelicals identified themselves.

and officially ended over three years later, in September 1798. All aspects of the project—content, format, pricing and distribution—had been meticulously planned and were efficiently executed. Within a year, an astonishing 2,000,000 copies had been sold, of which Altick (75) comments that “[t]here had never been anything like it in the history of English books”. In considerable measure, the success of this venture was aided by the decision to make the *appearance* of the tracts as similar as possible to the very pamphlets that had provoked More’s reaction.<sup>100</sup> Additionally, special print runs were arranged in order to respond to demand from the gentry, indicating that the publication was acceptable to a very broad social spectrum, far in excess of its initial target readership.

Given the unprecedented success of the tracts,<sup>101</sup> Austen could hardly have been unaware of them. In fact, her book-club membership (see n.23, this chapter) may even be an indication of the likelihood that she read pamphlets in addition to novels and other works.<sup>102</sup> Clearly, More’s tracts are a significantly different kind of writing to Austen’s novella and it may be objected that any comparison between the two is untenable. Certainly, centrally important aspects such as the works’ perceived readership and their particular literary objectives are poles apart. But we would argue that the success of the *Cheap Repository Tracts* might plausibly have given Austen considerable pause for thought, particularly at a moment in which her decision to abandon the epistolary was so

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<sup>100</sup> “Decked out with rakish titles and woodcuts” (Altick 75, citing Spinney, “Cheap Repository Tracts” 295).

<sup>101</sup> Indeed, its only contemporary rival in terms of sales was *Paine’s Rights of Man* (Altick 70-71), for which precise figures are difficult to obtain and open to considerable doubt.

<sup>102</sup> See St Clair’s related observations (259-260) on the gender differences in book borrowing, noting that “men [took] the non-fiction and pamphlets from the subscription libraries and the book clubs”, with his comment that Austen, notwithstanding this tendency, borrowed works in all forms of writing.

recent and, perhaps, still susceptible to review. In one sense, although entirely different genres and written for fundamentally different purposes, both undertakings make specific use of formats more habitually associated, at that time, with the work of writers whose ideologies More and Austen were not in accordance with, an aspect that Spinney (cited in Altick 75) memorably terms “sheep in wolves’ clothing”. Rather than this acting against her commercial interests, it might be argued that Austen could have perceived, through recognising More’s strategy, that the use of the epistolary to articulate conservative ideas would have the advantage of an attractive and popular form to recommend her novella. This however, we see as unsustainable in light of what we take to be the clearest message sent out by More’s astounding success, a message that Austen—in our view—cannot have failed to comprehend: that the growing sense of a need to effectively counter Jacobin ideology demanded a response—not only for the working classes but for other levels of society, too—that was as simplistic and unambiguous as possible. Indeed, it was precisely the “simplicity and brevity”<sup>103</sup> of More’s response that accounted for the tracts’ broad-based acceptability. Looking around her at this publishing phenomena, albeit one in a distinct field of literary activity, it seems reasonable to speculate that Austen could see in this that the ambiguity and over-centrality of Susan Vernon’s character that we have already pointed to as a clear problem, the insufficiently emphatic countering by Catherine of Susan’s destabilising social and moral effects and, finally, what might from a determined perspective be termed the novella’s general lack of narrative simplicity (an aspect actually contributed to by its epistolarity, as our assessment in Chapter Two outlined) could only

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<sup>103</sup> Altick 74, citing Roberts, *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs Hannah More* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., 1834), II, 424-25.

confuse and undermine what we regard as Austen's political intentions in the novella. It could not, in consequence, be expected to appeal to a market that appears to have been seeking an increasingly unambiguous, unattenuated response to Jacobin ideology. We therefore conjecture that in More's publishing success, a crucial event in countering Jacobin ideas and in reasserting the dominance of conservative notions of political, religious and moral propriety in the 1790s, Austen would very clearly have perceived the broader social reasons why *Lady Susan*, seen from the perspective of its political stance, could not have been accepted as a viable commercial undertaking, and would, in light of this, have been confirmed in her decision to draw it to a close.

Immediately subsequent to this period in the mid 1790s, there was an attempt made to have *First Impressions* published. This is another element that allows us to suggest that Austen had understood the clear commercial limitations to epistolary writing, as we now consider more fully. Contact with a London publisher called Cadell, of the publishing house Cadell and Davies, was made through George Austen in November 1797 (the novel having been written between October 1796 and August 1797).<sup>104</sup>

Sir—I have in my possession a manuscript novel, comprising 3 vols., about the length of Miss Burney's *Evelina*... I shall be much obliged... if you will inform me whether you choose to be concerned in it. ... Should you give any encouragement, I will send you the work."<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> See Southam, *Literary Manuscripts* 53, and Park, 123.

<sup>105</sup> Cited in Chapman, *Facts and Problems* 43.

Mary Lascelles (14) wryly observes Cadell's response to have been that he "declined to be concerned in it". Conventional accounts of Austen's *oeuvre* usually—though not exclusively—classify *First Impressions* as the epistolary forerunner to *Pride and Prejudice* (see thesis, p.15).<sup>106</sup> As we have observed throughout, however, this has not been proven, nor can it ever be, since the work is not extant. Nevertheless, we posit that, in light of the attempt in 1797 to publish this novel at least two years after what we see as Austen's well-justified abandonment of the epistolary mode, *First Impressions* cannot logically be maintained to have been epistolary. Though this is an assertion that contradicts much critical orthodoxy,<sup>107</sup> we feel that such orthodoxy is based on the flimsiest of justifications (for example, Harding's suggestion that the recollection in 1869 by Austen's niece, Caroline Austen, of having overheard as a child that *Elinor and Marianne* was in letter form, was in fact erroneous and actually applied to *First Impressions*,<sup>108</sup> or Southam's belief that George Austen's letter, in referring to *Evelina*, therefore implicitly indicates the epistolary form of his daughter's novel, whereas in fact the context would simply appear to be referring fairly explicitly to length). If, as we have advanced, it was entirely clear to Jane Austen in c.1794-95 that the epistolary mode was not one that would facilitate the publication of her writings, why would she then have made the attempt, two years later

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<sup>106</sup> See Southam, *Literary Manuscripts* 58-60. See also thesis, Introduction, n.12.

<sup>107</sup> Whilst in 1964 Southam (*Literary Manuscripts* 58) observed that "it has been assumed that [*First Impressions*] was [Austen's] first major essay in direct narrative"—presumably in reference to Lascelles (14)—his alternative theory positing that the novella was epistolary has in fact become orthodox, to the extent (as we observed in our Introduction, n.37) that the novella is now frequently and uncritically acknowledged to be in letter form.

<sup>108</sup> See Harding 214. Critical assessment of the plausibility of an epistolary forerunner to *Pride and Prejudice*, from the stylistic assessment of the latter novel, is perfectly feasible (see, again, Harding 214 ff. or Southam, *Literary Manuscripts* 58-60). However—even leaving aside the essential futility of speculating in such textual detail over works that are no longer extant, the political and commercial contexts that we have outlined in this chapter, in our opinion, strongly militate against this likelihood.

when the political climate was still more repressive and when the stylistic tendency towards direct narrative was yet more pronounced, to publish a novel in the form of letters? On this basis, the direct-narrative *First Impressions* we posit—the first work that directly links Austen to the commercial world of literary publication—effectively confirms her abandonment of the epistolary mode two years earlier for reasons of commercial astuteness. In our view (though this leads us uncomfortably into the kind of non-confirmable speculation that we have eschewed throughout), assuming a direct-narrative form for *First Impressions*, the significance of this attempt at publication lies in what would therefore (arguably) have been Austen's swift application of the lessons learned in *Lady Susan* to a third-person narrative format and, above all, in the fact that it confirms Austen's determined drive to be a published author,<sup>109</sup> having rapidly adapted her writing to the tastes and requirements of the contemporary market.

Returning, however, to 1794-95, in light of her keen awareness both of commercial trends and of the component features of contemporary stylistic tendencies, we therefore argue that it must have been patent to Austen by the mid 1790s—on the basis of those works that she saw gaining commercial success and on observing the way in which epistolary fiction was failing to reflect the developments in style and content that were increasingly being articulated by third-person narrative—that *Lady Susan* was now significantly out of step with public taste:

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<sup>109</sup> Another factor that tends to belie Henry Austen's 'portrait' (see p.268).

...raffishness was out of favour, and morality—especially as that concerned the moral behaviour of young ladies—was steadily gaining ground. As Claudia Johnson has shown, the era of the Napoleonic Wars brings a backlash against cultural experimentation, and particularly against the representation of women in fiction. The courtship novel is returned. It is softened, moralized, made safer.<sup>110</sup>

Thus, building on Litz's hint,<sup>111</sup> we suggest that Austen's finely sensitised commercial 'nous' led her to see that *Lady Susan*—in spite of the many and significant stylistic and formal advances that the process of its composition had provided her with—was commercially unfeasible, and that to continue such a project made no sense whatever to someone for whom, as Jan Fergus suggests, "being a professional [i.e., published] writer was, apart from her family, more important to her than anything else in her life".<sup>112</sup>

We have already outlined (thesis, p.226) that Austen's reasons for abandoning the epistolary mode—as this can be seen and assessed through *Lady Susan*—are, indeed, an accumulation of a variety of factors: issues of form, the influence of her own reading; social and political pressures brought to bear on (particularly women's) writing and her sharp awareness of commercial factors affecting publication. We posit that these factors converged in leading Austen to a realisation that the novella could not be concluded in its current form with the remotest chance of its being accepted for publication in the mid 1790s. And so, very probably after considerable reflection and most surely with much reluctance—not least because of the effort that had already been put into its writing—

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<sup>110</sup> Doody, "Short Fiction" 93.

<sup>111</sup> *Artistic Development* 19.

<sup>112</sup> "The Professional Women Writer" 13

Austen chose to shelve her last extant epistolary work, to give up on the letter form and to turn her full attention to the narrative mode and content of the 'softened and safer' courtship novel; given the eventual outcome, it was a decision of extraordinary prescience.



## 4. Conclusions and Implications

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**“In bringing her works into line with the new era... Austen underwent a sort of personal and authorial revolution. That revolution made her publishable”.**

**(Margaret Anne Doody, “The Short Fiction” 86)**

We began this thesis by putting forward three hypotheses with respect to *Lady Susan* and the epistolary mode in Austen’s early stylistic development (Introduction, pp.6-7). These were, first, that Austen’s fuller artistic maturity and technical effectiveness were gained through use of the epistolary in *Lady Susan*, thus solving a range of stylistic problems deriving from the direct-narrative mode in *Catharine* that Austen had been unable to resolve up to the composition of *Lady Susan*. Second, that the use of the epistolary after *Catharine* is not therefore (as has often been critically supposed) a reversion in stylistic frustration and disappointment to a safer and more familiar form, but rather Austen’s well-measured insistence on a mode that, at this point in her creative evolution, better facilitated her developing stylistic aims (specifically, incipient authorial control or ‘voice’, the establishment of a moral framework within which to develop both plot and character, insight into character and the creation of plausible realism). Third and finally—in contrast to another commonly held critical supposition—that Austen’s abandonment of the epistolary is not primarily the consequence of formal constraints but derives from other factors such as the political climate of the 1790s and its influence both on writers and on certain literary forms, from Austen’s access and response to other fiction published at broadly the same time as *Lady Susan* and, largely in consequence of all this, from Austen’s

sharp and effective sense of public taste and literary trends. Our comparative analysis of *Catharine* and *Lady Susan* in Chapter Two and our assessment in Chapter Three of the range of factors that we deem to be plausible causes for Austen's abandonment of the epistolary mode lead us to conclude that each one of the hypotheses set out in this thesis is proven, as we now summarise.

First, as our analysis of both novellas throughout Chapter Two of this thesis has shown, we very firmly conclude that it is through *Lady Susan*, and specifically through the frequently maligned narrative mode of the epistolary that Austen attains both greater creative maturity and far broader technical competence, and, as a result is able to resolve the difficulties patent in *Catharine* that, at the time of its writing, Austen had as yet been unable to overcome. Our fuller assessment of the implications deriving from these conclusions is outlined in the final part of this section, but it is clear that this conclusion raises two issues that will need to be addressed: the first is the relative position of influence given to *Lady Susan* within Austen's work in general and the second, closely connected to this, is the marginality traditionally accorded to the epistolary mode in accounts both of novelistic development and, in this specific case, of Austen's own literary evolution

Second, we conclude—again emphatically—that the notion of stylistic 'regression' in *Lady Susan* is both an erroneous and inadequate means of accounting for Austen's achievements in this novella. It is erroneous because the novella represents a systematic series of artistic advances over *Catharine* (as our comparison in thesis, Chapter Two

highlighted) and, more generally, over the earlier works as a whole. And it is inadequate because it fails to recognise that Austen's use of the letter form in the juvenilia is, almost entirely, of a significantly different character to its use in *Lady Susan*. In this sense, we see the critical views of particularly (though not exclusively) Southam and Litz as considerably misleading. These views argue for the regressive quality of *Lady Susan*, deeming it to be a retreat to a form with which she felt more secure through having used it frequently in her early writings.<sup>1</sup> However, apart from the obviousness of the letter device, the epistolarity of *Lady Susan* has almost nothing in common with the earlier burlesque forms of the epistolary in the juvenilia, the purposes of which, in clear contrast to the sustained seriousness of the form in *Lady Susan*, are entirely distinct from the objectives of the later novella (as thesis, Chapter Two outlines). Austen did *not* retreat to the epistolarity of her juvenilia; on the contrary, she developed and adapted the form for more complex purposes, making a fuller and more intricate use of it in *Lady Susan*, thereby enabling herself to overcome the stylistic problems—even those of direct-narrative fiction—that had hitherto prevented her either from moving fully beyond the generally less ambitious literary objectives of her earlier writing or from realising her stylistic objectives in *Catharine*.

Third, we conclude that—of the issues we have put forward as being plausible factors in Austen's eventual abandonment of the epistolary—the question of formal inadequacy is, though the most commonly accepted critical proposal, by far the least convincing. Indeed, with the single important exception of *Lady Susan*'s excessive

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<sup>1</sup> See Litz's 'cautious retreat' (preface to the facsimile edition of *Jane Austen's 'Lady Susan'*, 1989) and Southam's "less demanding form of the correspondence novel" (*Literary Manuscripts* 46).

centrality (an aspect formally compensated for by an equally powerful Catherine Vernon but of which the ‘political’ consequences were undoubtedly undesirable for Austen),<sup>2</sup> our analysis of *Lady Susan*’s form otherwise highlights the very considerable stylistic advantages that the epistolary mode contributes to Austen’s growing technical competence, a view in marked opposition to much conventional criticism. Therefore and most specifically, we conclude that the traditional critical assumption of Austen’s termination of the epistolary in *Lady Susan* on the grounds of its purported stylistic inadequacy is unsustainable. Furthermore, in focussing exclusively (and we would add, erroneously and tendentiously) on questions of form, such opinion fails to account for other factors influencing the production of Austen’s writing, which we see principally as her awareness of contemporary prose fiction, the political context in which she was living and her interest in and awareness of the commercial dimension to her profession (considered below).

There are, however, a number of other conclusions to this thesis beyond the three hypotheses that we have maintained. Our assessment of the stylistic gains attained in *Lady Susan* points to the need for rethinking both the *sui generis* character frequently attributed to this novella and the marginality with which its epistolarity is conventionally viewed, since we conclude that this work is most evidently not simply a parenthetical stylistic venture with a form that was already in decline or an experiment of little relevance to the achievements of Austen’s mature fiction except in the manner that it might be claimed to emphasise—through rejecting the letter form—the superiority of third-person narrative.

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<sup>2</sup> See thesis, section 3.3.

Rather, both the novella itself and the narrative form in which its 41 letters are written are vital components in Austen's development of precisely those factors that contribute to the effectiveness of her later writing, and therefore establish a highly productive link between her juvenilia (c. 1788-1793) and the phase marking the onset of the composition of her major novels (1796-1797).<sup>3</sup> This in turn shows that *Lady Susan* does not represent a literary hiatus in which Austen takes a stylistic step backwards, but is instead a critical moment in her stylistic advancement. As Section 2.2.1 assesses in detail, the epistolarity of *Lady Susan* is central to creating an effective (though at this stage still embryonic) narrative voice by careful configuration of reader sympathy in favour of Catherine Vernon, by the establishment of a moral framework—through the counterposition of Catherine and Susan—made more effective by the intimacy of access to their thoughts and motivations gained through their letters, and by a broadening of narrative perspective afforded by the polyphonic contribution made through the characters' correspondence, an aspect that foreshadows the omniscience of Austen's later third-person narrators.<sup>4</sup> The accumulative effect of these factors, as we have argued in our assessment of *Lady Susan* (thesis, Chapter Two) is that of highlighting the plausible realism—both of character and event—that underpins the narrative and that, as with the novella's narrative voice, also presages the quality of Austen's later writing.

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<sup>3</sup> See Litz, "Chronology" 47. The onset of the 'major' novels might either be taken to mean *First Impressions* (1796-1797) or the draft form of *Northanger Abbey* (originally entitled *Susan*, then *Catherine*) in 1797.

<sup>4</sup> See thesis, p.288 for further discussion.

However, *Lady Susan* points us backwards as well as forwards. Our assessment of the novella leads us to conclude that it represents Austen's active engagement with and relation to her earlier writing, not only and obviously with *Catharine* (a comparison that has been central to the hypotheses forwarded in this thesis) but also to the earlier juvenilia. Conventional criticism tends to limit itself to the observation—perfectly plausible and in part even demonstrable—that Austen's relation to her earlier work, in the form of revision, tends on the one hand to have taken place during the unproductive 'central' years of her career (the Bath and Southampton years)<sup>5</sup> and on the other hand to have been limited to a series of relatively *cosmetic* updatings, yielding interesting but rather slight textual details by which the literary historian is able to piece together a chronology of selective modification.<sup>6</sup> Yet this would appear to overlook the fact that the advances represented by *Lady Susan* are made specifically with respect to her earlier writings and do not occur in a stylistic vacuum. We conclude, as a result, that the literary developments attained in this epistolary novel, and which we have outlined most particularly in sections 2.2.1, 2.2.2 and 2.2.3, indicate Austen's active critical reassessment of her earlier work, through a weighing up and comprehending of its stylistic limitations and by making the determined and very largely successful attempt in *Lady Susan* to overcome these drawbacks. Even the serious application of the epistolary mode in this novella, in contrast to the essentially burlesque manner in which the form is used in the juvenilia, can be interpreted as Austen's

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<sup>5</sup> See Litz, "Chronology" 47.

<sup>6</sup> Evidence that Austen revised her early works at a later date "may be found in the circumstance that a letter in *Evelyn (Volume the Third)* is dated "Aug 19<sup>th</sup> 1809", while in a revision in "Catharine", Hannah More's *Cælebs* (first published in 1809) was submitted for a reference to Bishop Secker on the catechism. Presumably, these late retouchings were connected with the general revival of Jane Austen's literary activity in 1809" (Litz, *ibid* 49). See also n.72, thesis Chapter Two.

reassessment of her earlier work in the sense that it breaks with an essentially derivative manner of applying this narrative form and, instead, begins to use it in a more fully creative, controlled and sustained way, for purposes that far exceed the purely risible. That is, *Lady Susan* represents Austen's careful revision both of the general form of her earlier epistolary texts and of the specific component characteristics of her writing in general, both epistolary and direct narrative (see especially thesis, Chapter Two). As we will consider more fully in our presentation of the implications to these conclusions, this personal reassessment of her own work points to Austen's growing artistic maturity and technical competence and is linked to her developing sense of commercial astuteness and sensitivity.

Our political reading of *Lady Susan*, beyond supporting the notion of epistolary abandonment in part as a result of the social repression of the 1790s (considered more fully below) also brings us to conclude that Austen in c. 1795, seen as what Butler has termed a "social animal",<sup>7</sup> is a more fully political subject, and is so in a more mature, directed and committed way, than is usually assumed—sustained critical discussion of the political ramifications of her work being more generally focussed on the later novels.<sup>8</sup> As our assessment of the political interpretation of *Lady Susan* shows (see section 3.3), Austen's serious attempt to articulate a narrative supportive of Tory values, delineating what is perceived to be both the moral and social corrosiveness of the Jacobin threat (in the figure of Susan Vernon) and the strategies of communal reinforcement by which this threat is to

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<sup>7</sup> Butler, "History, Politics and Religion" 191.

<sup>8</sup> This is not to overlook reference to *Lady Susan* in the work of major critics such as Marilyn Butler, simply to reiterate that critical attention of a political kind tends not to concern itself to the same degree with Austen's earlier writings (as the focus by, for example, Kelly and Johnson on Austen's later work reveals).

be met, goes far beyond the burlesque political ‘provocations’ of her juvenilia. However forceful these may be, they do not—in our view and in contrast to *Lady Susan*—have the sustained intention of contributing to the ongoing debate in print on the social issues that preoccupied society in England in the mid 1790s.<sup>9</sup> This conclusion, that Austen’s political character manifests itself in a determined and structured manner well before the writing of her major fiction, and the specific political interpretation that we give to *Lady Susan*, locating it within the framework of the Jacobin/anti-Jacobin question, are, as we will consider in our discussion of implications, an innovative contribution to the critical reassessment of Austen’s writing in her earlier years and, most particularly, to the re-evaluation of *Lady Susan* itself.

Similarly, we conclude that the commercial concerns reflected in Austen’s abandonment of the epistolary section of *Lady Susan* (see section 3.4), beyond countering the supposition of a purely formal rejection, indicate a far earlier sense of commercial awareness and preoccupation for Austen than is conventionally assumed. For, whilst Litz implies that Austen’s ‘market sensitivity’ was perceptible even at the time of writing *Love and Freindship*,<sup>10</sup> it has been more usual to focus on Austen’s general interest in publication (or, more precisely, her growing sense of concern at *not* being published) from around 1805 onwards, that is, as she turned thirty and was still, as yet, making no headway with public acceptance of her writings—what Doody has termed “the recognition, as the

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<sup>9</sup> However, see Doody (*Catharine and Other Writings* xxvi) for comments on the obvious political import of an early work such as *The History of England*.

<sup>10</sup> See *Artistic Development* 19 and p.139 of this thesis.



new century wore on, that apparently nobody wanted her fiction".<sup>11</sup> Given our assessment that Austen's termination after Letter 41 of *Lady Susan's* correspondence format is due, in considerable measure, to her sensitivity towards the component stylistic features of contemporary prose fiction and to the consequent understanding that these features had a direct bearing on successful publication, our conclusion underlines the fact that what we have called the 'commercial Austen' (thesis, p.270) should be re-situated in the mid 1790s, fully a decade before the period in which much critical attention has defined such preoccupation and at least two years before George Austen's correspondence with Cadell points to Austen's literary ambitions being more than merely private.<sup>12</sup> The evident implication of this, discussed below, is the need to assert more fully the notion of Austen as a professional writer, shaping—even at this early stage in her career—the nature and content of her literary production to suit the tastes and requirements of her market.

We also conclude from our assessment of Austen's specific stylistic achievements in *Lady Susan* that the incipient narrative voice we have argued for in the figure of Catherine Vernon, a voice whose moral authority is established and supported by the careful configuration of reader sympathy in favour of this character and in detriment of Lady Susan, and by the particular narrative perspective provided throughout the novella that points to the validity and *positiveness* of Catherine's ambit in stark contrast to the destructiveness of Lady Susan's ambit, is a direct source for the omniscient, omnipresent

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<sup>11</sup> *Catharine and Other Writings* xxx. These comments also refer to Cadell's rejection of *First Impressions* (thesis, p.275). For publication-related discussion from other critics, see Lascelles, Chapman (*Facts and Problems*) and Southam (*Literary Manuscripts*).

<sup>12</sup> See thesis, p.275.

narrators of Austen's later fiction. What we emphasise here is a continuity of artistic gain in Austen's work shared between the epistolary and direct-narrative modes of expression, a view that counters the conventional notion of two independent genres whose achievements and merits are essentially exclusive of one another. Most particularly, the intimacy of access that the epistolary facilitates with respect to Catherine Vernon's thoughts, fears and motivations, coupled with the polyphony of perspectives that contextualise, confirm or contrast the narrative information we receive, is a clear move in the direction of free indirect style and thought, the narrative component widely seen as one of Austen's major contributions to the English novel.<sup>13</sup> Our conclusion, in this sense, fully supports the argument put forward by Joe Bray that, in accounts of novelistic development, "one vital and immediate source for free indirect thought in particular has been overlooked: the epistolary novel",<sup>14</sup> an issue that we will return to in considering the implications to our conclusions. Beyond this, however, our conclusion within this ambit would also emphasise two further points: first, in light of the above observations, that the epistolary mode in *Lady Susan* therefore gives rise to the configuring of a range of stylistic features (deemed characteristic of Austen's writing) well in advance of their more recognised use in her mature fiction. That is, we can trace the origin and development of these features, in large part, to the epistolarity of *Lady Susan*. Second, that the frequency with which we encounter embedded letters in the later fiction<sup>15</sup> strongly suggests that these are much more than mere vestiges of a discarded form or a writer's sympathetic attachment to a once-popular mode;

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, our initial remarks on this in the Introduction, n.4.

<sup>14</sup> *The Epistolary Novel* 22 (also cited in the Introduction to this thesis, n.4).

<sup>15</sup> See for example, the comparative study made by Harding of their presence in the six major novels (*Regulated Hatred* 214-215). For additional comment, see also thesis, Chapter Two n.85.

rather, it argues for their consciously selected use through Austen's awareness of the considerable stylistic and narrative value offered by the intimacy and directness of the letter within the fabric of the more detached style of a third-person narrator. Once again, this highlights the fruitful application of one genre's advantages to another genre's requirements.

In our view, one of the most significant conclusions to be drawn from our study of the critical assessment of *Lady Susan* (sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.2) is that the almost universally held view of the novella's direct-narrative termination as textual proof of Austen's rejection on formal grounds of the epistolary mode simply cannot be logically sustained, independently of the dating attributed to the Conclusion (see thesis, pp.183-196). Our opinion, in clear contrast to the consensus on this question, is that there is no connection of stylistic cause and effect between the two sections of the novella—that is, Austen's reasons for leaving off the epistolary mode in c.1795 and for subsequently concluding the work in third-person narrative in c.1805-1809 were distinct and unrelated—and that the Conclusion therefore cannot be taken as a mark of dissatisfaction with epistolary form, nor even as implicit rejection of this form,<sup>16</sup> as our third hypothesis predicts. The significance of this lies not only with the fact that it directly challenges the belief in the Conclusion's function as a textual indicator of rejection, which has become, in effect, critical dogma, but also that it points to the imposition of a determined view of novelistic development—one that foregrounds direct-narrative over what is seen as a more

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<sup>16</sup> See thesis Chapter Two, n.173.

elementary phase of literary evolution—even in contexts where a close textual analysis of the evidence shows such a view to be unsustainable. This in turn, as we will consider below, reiterates the need for a reassessment of such opinion and indicates an apparent critical reticence to consider the broader, non-literary factors that influenced Austen's creative decisions—factors, as we have posited throughout, that were more central in determining the fate of *Lady Susan* than were her purported stylistic views on epistolary form.

In short, from this study of *Lady Susan*, we would emphasise that our principal conclusion is that Austen's abandonment of the epistolary was not due to her posited dissatisfaction with its formal characteristics. That is, the novella's epistolary mode was not a hindrance to be overcome before Austen could get down to the task of writing freer and more creative prose fiction. On the contrary: the sophisticated use of the letter form after *Catharine* brought Austen considerable stylistic gain, moving her closer to the attainments of her later fiction, and did so specifically with respect to a novella written in the purportedly more advanced form of direct narrative, a fact that undermines the tidy notion of stylistic progression away from the epistolary and towards the widely accepted greater effectiveness of this direct-narrative form. Austen's abandonment of the epistolary was not the consequence, primarily, of its stylistic inadequacy or of her perception of its limitations. Instead, the termination of the epistolary section of the novella was due to the realisation that popular contemporary fiction was starting to eschew epistolary form, and that the content of such fiction was increasingly concerned with themes other than the sentimental

plots favoured by the correspondence novel. It is also due to Austen's realisation that, within the specific political climate of the 1790s, the epistolary novel was, *per se*, tainted as a Jacobin genre. Furthermore, though *Lady Susan* thematically supports Tory political values in opposition to pro-Jacobin ideas, the force and vitality of its co-central character, Lady Susan Vernon, could well mislead readers into the belief that this novella actually provides encouragement for ideas of what might be deemed a subversive and anti-social character, seen from the specific context of the 1790s. Finally, and in consequence, Austen's acute perception of the concerns underpinning contemporary literary taste made it clear to her that, in its current form, *Lady Susan* had no chance whatever of achieving commercial success, that it "was simply not going to be acceptable to the press and the arbiters of taste".<sup>17</sup> Austen therefore shut down the epistolary section of *Lady Susan*, not because the form had frustrated and constrained her growing stylistic capacity, but because the factors shaping and defining the context in which the novella would have been received, were it ever to have been published, were too adverse for her to have deemed it reasonable to continue this work other than for strictly private purposes. Not formal inadequacy, then, but the wish for public and commercial literary success lies behind Austen's decision to abandon the epistolary in *Lady Susan* and, eventually, to opt definitively for a mode of narrative expression that would accord with contemporary taste and avoid the censure of adverse political opinion.

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<sup>17</sup> Doody, "The Short Fiction" 86.

The implications of the conclusions that we have set out here point—we would say inexorably so—to three main issues, namely, the need to reassess the marginality accorded to *Lady Susan* within Austen's work as a whole and in her early stylistic development in particular; the consequent need to reassess the epistolary mode both in Austen's writing and in literary-historical accounts of novelistic development; finally, the need to reassess the figure of Austen the writer, remarking far more emphatically her political and commercially oriented character even at an early age.

The most obvious implication of our critical assessment of *Lady Susan* is that its considerable stylistic attainments merit greater centrality being critically accorded to its significance within Austen's work. For not only does the novella successfully revise the artistic imbalances of *Catharine* and counter the primarily burlesque use of the epistolary in the earlier juvenilia with a serious and sustained application of the letter form, but it also foreshadows and contributes to the achievements of Austen's mature fiction. Part of this reassessment is the need to see the manner in which *Lady Susan* connects in a direct and vital manner with the contemporary political context of the 1790s and therefore to recognise that the work is not a 'throwback'—an isolated experiment with a dying form. Rather, it is a novella that highlights the vigour of Austen's connectedness to and contribution towards the broader society in which she was living. Furthermore, it reaches back to her early work, and in doing so, revises it; and it foreshadows her later fiction, making specific and valuable contributions towards the literary quality of Austen's mature writing. It is not, in short, a marginal novella of curiosity but of no great significance in

Austen's work; rather, it is a pivotal text that resolves the stylistic problems faced in her early phase of writing, thereby facilitating the achievements of her major novels.

In our introduction, we remarked that this thesis was not centrally concerned with the history of the epistolary within the development of the English novel (thesis, p.9), and indeed to comment on this question other than in a general manner would be to go beyond the bounds of our particular enquiry. Nevertheless, in the sense that the conventional marginality associated with the mode necessarily attaches to *Lady Susan*, and in the sense, too, that *Lady Susan* represents clear stylistic progress and a significant contribution towards Austen's later fiction, we assert that accounts of the epistolary are in need of critical recalibration. It seems transparent to us, following our detailed assessment of *Lady Susan*, and in comparison with *Catharine*, that the notion of stylistic inferiority<sup>18</sup> is wholly misplaced, most particularly given the advances over *Catharine* that *Lady Susan* attains. Additionally, critical accounts that deem the epistolary to be an evolutionarily less advanced form and that cite Austen's frustration with epistolarity to have been the main—indeed the only—cause for her termination of the correspondence section of the novella emphasise purported formal difficulties over and above other equally or more plausible factors of an extra-compositional kind such as the nature of contemporary fiction or the political climate. This calls for a revision not just of epistolary assessment but also of the criteria brought to bear on that assessment, providing greater centrality to contexts other than the strictly authorial (such as reading, politics and commercial interests) that prevailed

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<sup>18</sup> See n.1 to this chapter.

in Austen's abandonment of *Lady Susan* in c.1795 and, more generally, to those which shaped the growth and decline of the epistolary form itself, as a means of challenging the conventional critical view that accords technical inferiority to the letter form largely on the simple basis that it happened to fall out of popular use.

Finally, the implications of our conclusions very clearly indicate—within the context of *Lady Susan*—the need to reassess the figure of Austen as a professional writer, with a professional writer's concerns for the careful revision of earlier texts so as to ensure further artistic growth, preoccupied with the social and commercial factors that may adversely affect her possibilities of publishing. This is not simply to counterbalance the notion of 'gentle Jane' (which originated with J.E. Austen-Leigh's *Memoir* of 1871) and which has taken considerable hold on popular opinion of Austen as a writer, but also, and more importantly, to emphasise on the one hand, Austen's developing artistic maturity and technical skill perceptible through her attainments in *Lady Susan* and, on the other, to recognise more fully that she is far more political, far more commercially minded and at a far earlier age than is conventionally assumed. In turn, this implies the need to appreciate that Austen's attitude to her writing is connected to the concerns of her world—we see her reviewing and revising her own earlier work, and also observe her modification of this in accordance with her perceptions of the requirements and tendencies prevalent in the contemporary literary market. In other words, through our assessment of this novella, we see Austen concerned not only with the nature of her text and with the stylistic and literary components that will assist in advancing the artistic quality of her writing, but, beyond this,



there is Austen the professional writer, alive to the works of her contemporaries, quick to sense how the market is changing and vitally aware of the broader social climate of which she most certainly formed a part. Her decision to shelve the epistolary section of *Lady Susan*, in light of this, reveals that in doing so Austen not only comprehends the unsuitability of her work for the then-current market, but also acts in defence of her own professional standing, ensuring that the work she is finally able to produce for publication will at least not be rejected for reasons of commercial outdatedness or, more serious still for a young writer hoping to obtain public acceptance in the 1790s, turned down on the grounds of political subversion.

## 5. Further Research

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“We are never tired of talking about her; should we ever grow weary of reading or writing about her?”  
(Walter Stafford, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Iddlesleigh. *A Chat about Jane Austen’s Novels*)<sup>1</sup>

Water Stafford’s enthusiastic call for writings “devoted entirely to Miss Austen”<sup>2</sup> has been so fully responded to that it often appears an impossible task to delineate ambits of critical study yet to be considered in assessing Austen’s works. That said, however, and in light of the issues raised throughout this thesis, we outline the following areas—related principally to the study of *Lady Susan* and the epistolary mode—as issues that would in our view contribute to a still fuller understanding of Austen’s work and, more broadly, of this early phase in her career.

Whilst Austen’s use of the letter in her major fiction has been well documented, and from several perspectives of enquiry,<sup>3</sup> such enquiry tends to be based around the question of whether letters-within-novels point to possibly epistolary proto-forms and focuses rather less on the stylistic contribution actually made by the letter itself (although there are clear exceptions to this, as for example Bray’s work admirably indicates). Taking all Austen’s extant fiction as a coherent body of writing, it would be of interest to trace her use of the letter, from its direct presence in the burlesque epistolary of the early juvenilia, through the

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Stovel, 227. The quotation is from 1900.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Bray (*The Epistolary Novel* 124-131) for reference to related comment by Jack, Epstein and Harding, as well as for a general discussion of epistolary influence on Austen’s mature fiction.

serious application of the form in *Lady Susan* and on to its embedded incorporation in her mature fiction, including the unfinished *The Watsons* and *Sanditon*. The purpose of this would be to produce, in effect, a history of Austen's work in relation to the letter-in-fiction, and thereby to ascertain a fuller understanding of her handling of the form, of the advantages and drawbacks that it provided her stylistic development at different stages in her career and of the manner in which she opted to overcome those drawbacks and to gain from its advantages. This approach would thus emphasise the continued presence of the letter throughout her entire literary production. The assessment should be complemented by reference to the broader social contexts prevalent at each phase of composition, in order to determine the effects and influences that these may have had on Austen's stylistic decisions, in line with our analysis of *Lady Susan* in this thesis.

We have concluded (thesis p.288) that the particular stylistic gains of the epistolary in *Lady Susan* (for example, intimacy of access to a character's thought; the polyphonic multiplicity of perspective on action that facilitates a sense of more subtly created moral conflict and more plausible reality; narrative tension and irony deriving from discrepancy between appearance and reality as regards certain characters and their actions) facilitate Austen's subsequent development most particularly of narrative voice in the later fiction. In this sense, *Lady Susan* not only resolves certain particular limitations that were patent in *Catharine*, but also foreshadows the stylistic attainments of the major novels. However, whilst this thesis provides a close and comparative analysis of the two early novellas, the *specific* manner in which the stylistic achievements of *Lady Susan* prefigure narrative voice

in the later fiction is a study yet to be undertaken. Such a study would require deeper analysis of this aspect in *Lady Susan*, and would also call for a close and comparative assessment of narrative voice in the major novels in order to ascertain the manner in which Austen's epistolary work can be more closely linked to the characteristics of her later fiction. It would also provide additional understanding of how Austen progresses artistically through careful revision and assessment of her earlier work (another conclusion to our study: thesis, p.285), and would therefore give further support to the notion of Austen as a fully professional writer.

Looking beyond the fictional application of letters, and focussing on critical approaches that seek to integrate all forms of Austen's writing,<sup>4</sup> further research is still required in determining more fully the possible stylistic influence of the personal correspondence on Austen's fiction. Most particularly, there is scope for an assessment of the ways in which the use of irony, paradox, understatement and stylistically charged expressions aimed at creating (usually) comic effect in the personal letters might function as a testing ground for broadly similar pragmatic effects in Austen's fiction. This research would need to overcome a range of methodological problems such as the degree to which the remaining letters can be said to represent a coherent body of source texts, and the correspondence in time between composition dates for the letters and their posited influence on Austen's fiction. The work would also require exhaustive stylistic analysis both of the extant letters and of the fiction as a whole, and would, in the sense suggested

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<sup>4</sup> See thesis pp.78-85 for fuller discussion.

here, represent an entirely innovative approach to the issue of literary and other textual sources for Austen's fictional writing.

Within the ambit of personal correspondence, it would also be of interest to determine whether Austen's 'narrative voice' (most especially in the particular quality it frequently assumes in her correspondence with Cassandra) might be the literary origin of her free indirect style, a suggestion that appears, initially, to be unreasonable, given that such style generally depends upon a third-person narrative scheme, one that obviously does not apply to personal correspondence. However, this thesis has argued that incipient free indirect style can indeed derive from an epistolary narrative format, and Bray *et al* have persuasively argued for its appearance in first-person narrative.<sup>5</sup> Such research, complementing the proposed work on the correspondence outlined immediately above, would support a holistic approach to Austen's writing, both fiction and personal, and would attempt to establish fuller insight into the means by which the narrative attainments most particularly of the later fiction were, throughout Austen's life, built upon highly specific experimentation in stylistic form and pragmatic effect from within a letter-based context. An obvious starting point for such an undertaking would be a monographic study of incipient free indirect style in *Lady Susan*.

Finally, going beyond the strictly epistolary and adding both to the political reading that we have given of *Lady Susan* (section 3.3), and most especially to Claudia Johnson's

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<sup>5</sup> See *The Epistolary Novel* 24.

work on politics and the juvenilia,<sup>6</sup> there is scope for further and far more detailed study of political influence on Austen's early work that is more exhaustive than the conventional focus of such enquiry mainly on, for example, *The History of England* or the figure of the aunt in *Catharine*. Assessment should include the specific political circumstances pertaining during the early period of Austen's work (i.e., up to c. 1795), of the effects of this context on the Austen family—Jane's cousin Eliza being an evident centre of interest for this<sup>7</sup>—and of the possible echoes of these events in the correspondence (which began after 1795: see section 3.2) to provide, in consequence, a closer reading of the early texts with a view to ascertaining the growing influence of politics on the literary expression of Austen's opinions and values. Not only would this be of importance, as we established in section 3.3 and in our conclusions, in countering the deliberately attenuated and domesticated image—which, although generated many decades ago, still exercises considerable control over the popular perception of Jane Austen—but it would also provide a fresh perspective on the manner and purposes for which she writes and would therefore be a valuable complementary view on the possible sources, both literary and social, of Austen's early creative production.

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<sup>6</sup> "The Kingdom at Sixes and Sevens".

<sup>7</sup> See thesis, Chapter One n.114 for further reference.

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