All lovers of Jane Austen, the most knowledgeable as well as those who have just discovered her, will have much to learn from these modest, searching, and wonderfully perceptive essays.

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This volume presents an exhilarating and insightful collection of essays on Jane Austen – distilling the author's deep understanding and appreciation of Austen's works across a lifetime. The volume is both intra- and inter-textual in focus, ranging from perceptive analysis of individual scenes to the exploration of motifs across Austen's fiction.

Full of astute connections, these lively discussions hinge on the study of human behaviour – from family relationships to sickness and hypochondria – highlighting Austen's artful literary techniques and her powers of human observation.

Jane Austen: Reflections of a Reader by (the late) Nora Bartlett is a brilliant contribution to the field of Jane Austen studies, both in its accessible style (which preserves the oral register of the original lectures), and in its foregrounding of the reader in a warm, compelling and incisive conversation about Austen's works. As such, it will appeal widely to all lovers of Jane Austen, whether first-time readers, students or scholars.

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Lady Susan is about the adventures of a wicked aristocrat. That, even more than its epistolary form, makes it unique among Jane Austen’s completed novels.¹ There are bad women in other novels—Lucy Steele in Sense and Sensibility is pretty bad, Mrs. Clay in Persuasion must be quite a schemer really, Mrs. Norris in Mansfield Park is one of the worst villains in fiction—but none of them are dastardly, in a James Bond villain way (‘Ha! Ha! Now you are in my power!’)—and no one else is an aristocrat. Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who, like Lady Susan, is the daughter of a nobleman, is a troublemaker rather than a villainess. As often noted, Jane Austen did not as a writer spend much time on, or give much attention to, the aristocracy.² She seems to share her heroine Anne Elliot’s reluctance to follow in the train of aristocrats, preferring the gentry and the middle classes. Lady Susan, a character created probably in Jane Austen’s late teens, looks back to the villainesses of eighteenth-century fiction, the wicked Lady Bellaston who tries to steal Tom Jones away from Sophia Western, Lady Booby who makes inappropriate advances to Joseph Andrews, and perhaps even to real-life scandalous aristocratic ladies like Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire. Lady Susan can be compared, too, to the trouble-making aristocratic ladies featured in the novels of Austen’s contemporaries such as Mrs. Radcliffe, Fanny


² For Jane Austen’s dismissive attitude to the aristocracy, see, for example, David Spring, ‘Interpreters of Jane Austen’s Social World’, in Jane Austen: New Perspectives, ed. by Janet Todd (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1983), pp. 53–72: ‘Her novels are […] not much populated with aristocratic figures. Moreover, when they appear, they are almost invariably silly’ (p. 59); for Austen as political radical, see Claudia L. Johnson, Jane Austen: Women Politics, and the Novel (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1988).
Burney and Maria Edgeworth. But these writers use their wicked ladies as a foil to their more virtuous heroines, none places a wicked aristocratic woman at the centre of their novel, as the main character, the figure whose experiences we know the most about. That is the distinctiveness, and the strangeness, of *Lady Susan*.

And, of course, *Lady Susan* is an epistolary heroine, so that like Samuel Richardson’s Pamela and Clarissa, her experiences are given to us in a steady stream of her own words. At the time that Jane Austen was writing *Lady Susan*, probably the mid-1790s, it is possible that the early forms of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* were still in epistolary form—there isn’t any way, I think, of being certain about this—but what is certain is that, within a few years of writing *Lady Susan*, Jane Austen would abandon the fully epistolary style. *The Watsons*, which was written in 1804–05 about the time she was making a fair copy of *Lady Susan* and putting it away, has an omniscient narrator, the witty, but compassionate third-person narrator typical of the Austen novel. This would show readers a new way of getting to know a character by working its way unobtrusively into the character’s thoughts, as well as by showing her speech and actions. I wonder whether in this process of changing methods *Lady Susan* may not have played a vital role.

Jane Austen learned for good how confining novels-in-letters are, and I think it was *Lady Susan* which taught her that, because she learned in this little novel that, however much fun it is to create wicked and hypocritical characters, it is difficult to remain for long inside the head of such a central figure. I think she came gradually to find *Lady Susan*’s machinations not amusing but repellent. And while this process gives us today’s novel which is, I think, much more repellent than it is amusing, my guess is that it also gave her a shortcut realization to the way in which she really wanted to write character, and the nuanced, unexaggerated, complex characters which she would present to us, in the freer form of

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third-person indirect speech. So we can thank Lady Susan, that bad, bad mother, for being a kind of midwife at the birth of such rich characters as Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, Elizabeth and Jane Bennet.

Not that Lady Susan is not a rich and complex character. I will come on to that. First, I will just sketch a brief plot summary: recently widowed, as we meet her in Letter I, Lady Susan has found it suddenly necessary to invite herself to Churchill, the country house of her brother- and sister-in-law, the Vernons, who have a large family of young children. This is awkward—she tried to prevent the Vernons’ marriage, and Mrs. Vernon knows it—but necessary, as she is in danger of being ejected from another country house nearer London, where she has flirted so openly with the gentleman of the house, Mr. Manwaring, that Mrs. Manwaring is after her blood. We learn this in her letters to her London friend, Mrs. Johnson, a woman of Lady Susan’s age (thirty-five)—married to a rich and elderly man. At the Vernons, we learn from Mrs. Vernon’s letters to her mother, that Lady Susan behaves with charm and decorum, and that quite unwillingly even resentful Mrs. Vernon is finding it difficult to dislike her quite as much as she wants to. Mr. Vernon is won over from the start, by Lady Susan’s beauty, her apparent warmth, and—this is crucial—her charm.

Lady Susan has no fortune. This isn’t said, but one imagines she was brought up among spendthrift aristocrats and that she encouraged her late husband to spend too freely, as they have had to sell their ancestral home, the Castle—perhaps, indeed, it was Lady Susan’s ancestral home? She seems to have no hereditary nest egg, and—and this is something we should reflect on later—no family of her own to fall back on, no parents, sisters, brothers, cousins. She has a daughter, Frederica, whom she has neglected terribly, and who she wants to marry off to the rich but catastrophically stupid Sir James Martin, a young man who is actually in love with her, with Lady Susan, but whom she can manipulate into almost any action at all. Frederica does not want to marry Sir James, but she is terrified of her mother. Running away from school in an attempt to get right away from both of them, Frederica is caught and eventually brought to Churchill, the home of the Vernons, much to her mother’s displeasure. For also there is Mrs. Vernon’s younger brother, Reginald De Courcy, a young man who had heard so much ill of Lady Susan that he had to come and see her for himself and then found himself
entrapped, as really in the novel every man must be—maybe every woman too—by Lady Susan’s beauty and her charm. The elder De Courcys, his parents, and Mrs. Vernon, his sister, are appalled at the prospect of his being in love with a woman ten years his senior and of such a scandalous reputation. Everyone seems to know she cared nothing for her husband and flirted with every man in sight throughout her marriage. And everyone knows that she has been a cold and neglectful mother. But Lady Susan’s marvellous talent for explaining things away keeps Reginald under her spell, even though sixteen-year-old Frederica falls in love with the handsome young man so quickly that she commits the unforgiveable sin—and we all know how terrible this is in the eighteenth century from our reading of the other novels—of writing a letter to a person of the opposite sex, and asking for his help in preventing her marriage to the booby Sir James.

That may be enough plot to be going on with, but, just to tie things up, Lady Susan’s schemes to marry this very rich young man, whom she despises, are overturned when he learns, rather melodramatically, the extent of her flirtations with a married man. It’s important that, once he learns the truth about Lady Susan, Reginald never sees her again; if he saw her, he would probably be bamboozled all over again. What is shown importantly throughout this little novel is that it is nigh on impossible to resist Lady Susan when you are in her company. This is one of the interests given to the novel by the epistolary form, as the letters which are not between Lady Susan and Mrs. Johnson (whether they are from Lady Susan’s fans or her enemies) tend to reflect, and comment on, her spellbinding effects. ‘I was certainly not disposed to admire her’, admits her sister-in-law, ‘but I cannot help feeling that she possesses an uncommon union of Symmetry, Brilliance & Grace’ (Letter VI 11). And Reginald De Courcy, who before he met her referred to her contemptuously as the ‘most accomplished coquette in England’ (Letter IV 8), is, a few weeks later, eating his words and telling his terrified parents, that ‘the World has most grossly injured’ Lady Susan, in supposing her motives to be anything but the purest and most disinterested (Letter XIV 25).

Jane Austen here must be exploring something like the effects she will work with in her early presentation of Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice:*
the total stunner, knocking them down like ninepins. We’ll remember that an early title of Pride and Prejudice was First Impressions. Even on those determined to dislike her, Lady Susan’s first impression is one of total enchantment. It is a rare moment anywhere in Jane Austen when we learn in detail what anyone looks like—Emma has ‘the true hazel eye’ (I v 39), Anne Elliot’s and Elizabeth Bennet’s eyes are dark, Marianne is tall, Mary Crawford tiny—but there is so much left to the imagination. However, in a letter to her brother, Mrs. Vernon has in all honesty to admit that her hated sister-in-law, an uninvited and unwelcome guest, whose star quality will obviously soak up all male attention wherever she goes, including at Mrs. Vernon’s dinner table, ‘is really excessively pretty [...] I have seldom seen so lovely a woman [...] She is delicately fair, with fine grey eyes & dark eyelashes [...] one would not suppose her more than five & twenty, tho’ she must in fact be ten years older’ (Letter VI 11). She may be ruefully thinking that, worn out as she must be by childbirth, no one would say that of her. And even more she confesses to Lady Susan’s charm: ‘her countenance is absolutely sweet, & her voice & manner winningly mild’ (Letter VI 11). This is the effect she has in person, even on Mrs. Vernon’s ‘resentful heart’ (Letter VI 12); her presence charms both men and women.

But by letter, she cannot charm anyone, unless, like her friend Mrs. Johnson, they are as unscrupulous as she is. And that is the fascination of the epistolary form as used here, where, in the letters about her, we see how she can dazzle, but in the main correspondence—of forty-one letters in all, seventeen are between Lady Susan and Mrs. Johnson, to whom she is wonderfully frank—there she shows us her heart. Although I hope to raise some sympathy for her later by talking about her situation, when she reveals her character in these letters we can only reel back in horror. My original exciting plan about this lecture was to give Lady Susan the famous ‘psychopath test’, which is always so worrying when you take it and turn out to be at least fifty percent psychopath, although you are given the reassuring coda that ‘if you are worried by your results on this test, then you can’t be a psychopath anyway, because a psychopath wouldn’t worry’. Then in my researches I learned that someone had thought of this back in the 1980s, when scholarship on the minor works really took off and a 1989 essay proved Lady Susan to be a complete
psychopath. She has ‘superficial charm, adequate intelligence, absence of anxiety, insincerity, lack of remorse or shame, antisocial behaviour, selfishness and egocentricity, lack of capacity for love, unemotional sexual behaviour, lack of long term life plans’. This is all true. But I have decided not to use the categories that come from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, but some older categories, one used by Mr. Darcy when he has already begun, only half-consciously, to compare Elizabeth Bennet to Miss Bingley, and to the other accomplished young women of his acquaintance: ‘Whatever bears affinity to cunning is despicable’ (I viii 44).

Here is a passage from Lady Susan’s first letter, to her brother-in-law, proposing a visit. The re-reader knows that she really, at this point, has nowhere else to go. Covering that up is just saving face, and is not a million miles away from Emma’s stratagems for finding a place to dispose of Harriet after Mr. Knightley’s proposal to her. We would never condemn a woman in the eighteenth century for trying to put the best possible gloss on her actions, or wanting to give a good ‘first impression’, would we? Here comes Lady Susan, that ‘dangerous woman’:

> My kind friends here are most affectionately urgent with me to prolong my stay, but their hospitable & cheerful dispositions lead them too much into society for my present situation & state of mind; & I impatiently look forward to the hour when I shall be admitted into your delightful retirement. (Letter I 3)

Here is the de-sentimentalized version of her situation, which she gives to her friend Mrs. Johnson:

> I take Town in my way to that insupportable spot, a Country Village, for I am really going to Churchill.—Forgive me, my dear friend, it is my last resource. Were another place in England open to me, I would prefer it.—Charles Vernon is my aversion, & I am afraid of his wife. At Churchill, however I must remain until I have something better in view. (Letter II 5–6)

The two letters were probably written the same day.

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Much could be said about Mrs. Johnson, Lady Susan’s friend and confidante. There are only a few letters from her, and I almost wish there were none, and we could intuit the other end of the correspondence from what Lady Susan deems it safe to say to her. From Mrs. Johnson’s letters we learn that this young married woman can hardly wait for her husband to die, looks forward to his absences, is rather afraid of him, and has nothing but enthusiasm for her friend Lady Susan’s plots and schemes. This must be the very young Jane Austen building up—out of books, as so many of her young writings did—a picture of the eighteenth-century beau monde, the “‘thoughtless, gay set’” whom Mrs. Smith in Persuasion will ruefully describe, the group among whom for Mr. Elliot “‘To do the best for himself passed as a duty’” (II ix 218).

Mrs. Johnson is thoughtless and perhaps heartless. Of a jilted young woman, she comments ‘we both laughed heartily at her disappointment’ (Letter IX 17–18), making the reader think of Mary Crawford’s conniving in her brother’s determination to make “‘a small hole in Fanny Price’s heart’” (II vi 267), and she encourages Lady Susan to marry Reginald for his money and to scandalize his stuffy relations. But whether because we see more of Lady Susan, with almost four times as many letters, her amorality has a hardened, polished, professional quality, while Mrs. Johnson is just a promising amateur. I want to look in detail at some of the later letters in the novel that convey this vitreous wickedness, but surely we are struck almost immediately by Lady Susan’s coldness about her daughter:

Frederica […] was born to be the torment of my life […] You are very good in taking notice of Frederica […] but […] I am far from exacting so heavy a sacrifice. She is a stupid girl, & has nothing to recommend her […] I hope to see her the wife of Sir James within a twelvemonth. (Letters II 5; VII 13)

There is a way of responding to Lady Susan’s character which marks quite a lot of critical discussion, including Margaret Drabble’s introduction to the Penguin edition which is where I read the novel first, in which Lady Susan’s ‘vitality’ is seen as rendering her attractive. As Drabble puts it, the ‘opposition’ to her badness, ‘is dull’; so, bad as she is, ‘she runs away with the novel’.6 A panel of experts who discussed

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the novel in the USA about twenty-five years ago took the line ‘Go for it, Lady Susan!’ largely because those characters who are ranged against her could be seen as being stuffy and insipid, merely embodying, as Lady Susan says witheringly, ‘that great word, “Respectable”’ (Letter II 5). Now, I don’t feel any sneaking sympathy for Lady Susan as a character, though I do sense along with these other readers that Lady Susan’s voice is a remarkable one, and that the novel as a whole is, like a lot of the very early juvenilia, such as Love and Freindship, created with a vitality and energy and a commitment to what Jane Austen is doing as a very young, hugely gifted author. But the book about Lady Susan closes with a decisive slamming shut of the whole proceedings, such as does not happen in any other work, I think? Even the surviving heroine of Love and Freindship, Laura, that whirlwind of self-indulgent sensibility whom the young author has mocked for thirty eventful pages, retires to a Highland village and has a final letter full of contentedly melancholy news. But Lady Susan is silenced, as if Jane Austen did not want anything more to do with her wayward heroine. And yet it cannot mean nothing that around the same time as she was writing The Watsons, which in my view is much more in harmony with her later novels, in 1805 in a household in which paper was not squandered, she made a fair copy of Lady Susan. So she was not ashamed of it, she thought it worth preserving.

Before I say more about Lady Susan herself, I’d like to talk about that question Margaret Drabble raises, about what else there is in the novel to counter this—let’s say ‘impressive’—female character? And to that end I would like to look at the De Courcy family. Recall that Lady Susan took ‘some pains’ to prevent the marriage between her brother-in-law Charles Vernon and the young Catherine De Courcy, daughter of Sir Reginald De Courcy, baronet (Letter V 9). The whole family knows this, though we don’t know (but can imagine!) what means Lady Susan must have employed. Catherine Vernon is probably around thirty, happily married, with an unstipulated, and, I would argue, a carefully unstipulated, number of children. To a degree we see them through Lady Susan’s

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7 Jane Austen’s Beginnings, ed. Grey, p. 228.
Lady Susan’s (perfunctory) attention: she knows all their names already, though does not repeat them, except for the youngest, who is named after her late husband, who ‘I take on my lap & sigh over, for his dear Uncle’s sake’ (Letter V 10). The indefiniteness of the number demonstrates both Lady Susan’s real indifference to them and, perhaps, the extent of Catherine Vernon’s maternal commitments: they must all be under five, as she has been married less than six years.

Mrs. Vernon is the second-most prolific letter-writer in the novel, and her letters, to her mother, apart from one to her brother, are much longer and fuller of incident than Lady Susan’s, and it is through her letters that we know most of what we know of the story, though after the action moves from Churchill, from the country village to London, there is only one more—one last, delighted—letter from her responding to the news that Lady Susan and her brother ‘are really separated—and for ever’ (Letter XLI 73).

Mrs. Vernon is clearly an affectionate wife, mother, daughter and sister, I don’t think the reader of the novel could have any doubt of that; nor of her intelligence, and even quickness of observation, as she swiftly notes both Lady Susan’s effect on her brother’s heart, and her brother’s effect on Frederica’s: ‘I so very often see her eyes fixed on his face with a remarkable expression of pensive admiration’ (Letter XVIII 34). And she sees through Lady Susan pretty fast, while never ceasing to acknowledge her skill as a dissimulator: ‘Here she pretended to cry.—I was out of patience with her’ (Letter XXIV 52). Of course, as Lady Susan recognizes, Mrs. Vernon’s ability to see through her flows out of her own jealousy: at this point in the novel the men at Churchill, Mrs. Vernon’s husband and her brother, are both unable to see Lady Susan as anything but beautiful, intelligent, fascinating (true), as a delicate, drooping flower (false), and this must be galling; this must make it easier to penetrate Lady Susan’s elegant veneer.

I cannot pretend that Catherine Vernon is a genuinely interesting character in her own right. I wonder if we might want to decide that the young Jane Austen has not yet learnt how to make characters both virtuous and interesting? Soon enough she will find this talent: Elinor Dashwood, Colonel Brandon, Jane Bennet—I could go on and on. However, in the juvenilia—and she was probably not yet twenty when she wrote Lady Susan—the morally upright characters are usually
relegated to a minor role: Miss Lesley’s confidante in *Lesley Castle*, whose letters are so exemplary and kind but not very memorable, or the mother in *Love and Freindship*, who is thoughtful and kind and wise, and quickly moved out of the limelight so that her daughter can learn from, and the reader can laugh at, the long, long tale of the absurd adventures of Laura and Philippa. What interests Jane Austen at this stage of her development is just that absurdity, hypocrisy, self-contradiction and self-seeking. Austen’s juvenilia abound with vain, silly, ridiculous people and especially ridiculous women, young and old. Ridiculous and obnoxious, like Lady Greville in ‘Letter From A young Lady in distress’d Circumstances to her freind’ who tells the impoverished heroine that ‘It is not my way to find fault with people because they are poor, for I always think that they are more to be despised and pitied than blamed for it, especially if they cannot help it’ (*Juvenilia* 198), or the second Lady Lesley (also called Susan!) who tells her correspondent while on a visit to Scotland that ‘I have been plagued ever since I came here with tiresome visits from a parcel of Scotch wretches […] I hate everything Scotch’ (*Juvenilia* 159). The few sensible, admirable people in these early works pale in comparison.

This could be what happens in *Lady Susan*, but I don’t think it is, quite. What we can’t help noticing about Catherine Vernon is that, while lacking vivacity, she possesses a quality which her charming sister-in-law Lady Susan utterly lacks: she is genuinely interested in other people. It is not only respectability and a horror of scandal that distances her from Lady Susan: it is her real fear for what trouble that lady might bring on Catherine Vernon’s brother, her parents and her whole family, whom she loves. And she has a very clear sense of the harm Susan already has done to her own daughter, to poor Frederica. Her mistrust of Susan’s power is not just jealousy or envy, but is a just sense of what kind of havoc such a manipulative person might—no, has already wreaked—on her environment: ‘I never saw any creature look so frightened in my life as Frederica when she entered the room […] I am more angry with her than ever since I have seen her daughter.—The poor girl looks so unhappy that my heart aches for her’ (Letter XVII 31–32). It won’t have escaped your notice, of course, that nice, kind, well behaved Mrs. Vernon is as observant of Lady Susan’s doings as if she were a policewoman staking out the house instead of its mistress, and I
want to end by talking a little about Lady Susan’s situation, as distinct from her character—her situation as the target of so much surveillance, as the main attraction.

But first let’s look at the rest of the De Courcy family, and the flurry of letters that follows Catherine Vernon’s warning to her mother that she thinks Reginald in danger from Lady Susan: ‘I really grow quite uneasy my dearest Mother about Reginald [...] They are now [...] frequently engaged in long conversations together’ (Letter XI 20). The contents of this letter are meant to be kept from the elderly and infirm Sir Reginald, the head of the family and young Reginald’s father, but in a sudden lively outburst of plot, a cold keeps Lady De Courcy from being the first reader of the letter, and so Catherine Vernon’s letter of guarded concern, Letter XI, is followed by Letter XII, from Sir Reginald to his son. This letter seems to me masterly on Jane Austen’s part. We might want to remember here that she had been reading Dr. Johnson since childhood, and here she invokes his great combination of eloquence and simplicity of expression. The letter wrings the reader’s heart, because it is sorrowful and not angry, hurt but not threatening: this is not a stuffy man worried about the world’s opinion of his son, this is a loving father fearful for his coming to harm:

My Ability of distressing you during my Life, would be a species of revenge to which I should hardly stoop [...] I honestly tell you my Sentiments & Intentions. I do not wish to work on your Fears, but on your Sense & Affection.—It would destroy every comfort of my Life, to know that you were married to Lady Susan Vernon. (Letter XII 22)

What could be more naked and more pleading than this letter? It is followed by the mildly comic lament from Lady De Courcy about the cold which kept her from pre-empting all this by snatching her daughter’s letter out of her husband’s hands, and finally we have the letter from young Reginald, one of three altogether (the other two are his two-pronged goodbye to Lady Susan at the novel’s end) from him which appear in the novel. All three letters mark him out as the sort of priggish young man whom a Lady Susan would really enjoy making

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mincemeat of; it is only in his kindness to Frederica that Reginald is appealing, I think, but he is very young, clever but inexperienced, and in love, though he doesn’t yet realize it: where the reader grasps it, despite his quite honest assurances to his father that he ‘can have no view in remaining with Lady Susan than to enjoy for a short time […] the conversation of a Woman of high mental powers’ (Letter XIV 25). What the reader notes before his short letter closes is the way in which he has picked up Lady Susan’s tricks of speech, one of the surest signs of infatuation, mocked by Jane Austen in the case of Miss Bingley echoing Mr. Darcy and Isabella Thorpe repeating Captain Tilney’s words. Lady Susan, he tells his father, against all the evidence, is a truly affectionate mother: ‘but because she has not the blind & weak partiality of most Mothers, she is accused of wanting Maternal Tenderness’ (Letter XIV 26). Lady Susan’s words exactly, and, what’s more, her views; Reginald concludes, unaware of the irony of his words, ‘Every person of Sense, however, will know how to value & commend her well directed affection’ (Letter XIV 26–27).

Luckily for his health, Sir Reginald, who has never heard Lady Susan’s voice and cannot recognize its rhythms in every phrase, is appeased by this: but the reader—a person of sense—knows her well by now, knows Lady Susan’s scarily unshakeable plans for her daughter’s marriage to Sir James Martin, despite the misery she knows this will plunge the poor child into. ‘I hope to see her the wife of Sir James within a twelvemonth’ (Letter VII 13), she writes her friend, and this does not change, except to be speeded up into a matter of weeks, or even days, even though the mother knows that her daughter, as her quick perceptions where her own interests are concerned soon reveal, is in love with Reginald De Courcy. Nor does this knowledge stop this affectionate mother from attempting to entrap Reginald into an engagement with herself.

Frederica’s wretched letter to Reginald (Letter XXI) is completely against the rules of conduct for young ladies. Widely-read courtesy books such as The Lady’s Preceptor held as their first rule for young ladies as letter writers, ‘Never unless upon some singular Emergency which may warrant it, to write to anyone but of your own Sex […] nor to anyone whatsoever without the Permission of those under whose Jurisdiction you may be’.10 This transgressive letter comes at the midpoint of the

novel, and is its turning point, for though Lady Susan’s machinations and her magic bewitch Reginald all over again, there is something heartfelt and sincere in the letter:

I am very miserable about Sir James Martin [...] if you do not take my part [...] I shall be half-distracted [...] I would rather work for my bread than marry him.—I do not know how to apologise enough for this Letter, I know it is taking so great a liberty, I am aware how dreadfully angry it will make Mama, but I must run the risk. (Letter XXI 41–42)

Its misery has stirred something more tender and more noble in Reginald than his erotically charged submission to Lady Susan.

Frederica’s heartrending cascade of commas—‘I do not know [...], I know [...], I know’—is followed in the novel by Lady Susan’s fury: she had ‘actually written to him’ (Letter XXII 44). We’ll return to this fury, and its exact cause, but let’s jump ahead to the next letter, in which Catherine Vernon whoops with joy at what seems an irreparable rift between her brother and Lady Susan: ‘The affair which has given us so much anxiety is drawing to a happy conclusion’ (Letter XXIII 45). What is important in the letter, though, is less the sister’s premature triumph than the brother’s suddenly unpriggish, unaffected kindness to the poor young girl, whom he has belatedly realized is the most vulnerable person in the house, and in the novel: ‘remember what I tell you of Frederica,’ he tells his sister; ‘you must make it your business to see justice done her’ (Letter XXIII 46). Suddenly here, among all these middle-aged jealousies and anxieties, are the young hearts crying who will become so central to Jane Austen’s later work.

But neither of these decent, moral, possibly a little unexciting, siblings reckons here on the powers which Lady Susan can still unleash. Once she has reeled Reginald back in with one of her explanations, in which her sexual magnetism must play a very large part, she sits writing to Mrs. Johnson, and plotting her revenge on them all:

I cannot forgive him [Reginald] such an instance of Pride; & am doubtful whether I ought not to punish him, by dismissing him at once [...] or by marrying & teizing him for ever [...] I have many things to compass. I must punish Frederica, & pretty severely too, for her application to Reginald;—I must punish him for receiving it so favourably, & for the rest of his conduct. I must torment my Sister-in-law for the insolent triumph of her Look & Manner. (Letter XXV 57)
What I think we want to notice here is the almost universal hatred by which Lady Susan lives: everyone is her rival or her enemy, actual or potential, unless they are her dupe. Where she does not hate, it is only because she feels too much contempt for hatred to come into play. This is terribly ugly to watch, and it is hard not to think that Jane Austen herself, clever and cool as she was, from, as E. M. Forster says, ‘a hard humorous family’, grew horrified at what she had made when she made Lady Susan.\footnote{E. M. Forster, \textit{Abinger Harvest and England’s Green and Pleasant Land} (London: Andre Deutsch, 1996), p. 156.} Why else would she race her, as she does, to her conclusion, the two and a half pages of omniscient narration in which she ties things up, and ties the knot between Lady Susan and that despised booby, her intended son-in-law, Sir James Martin? It is the kind of metafictional last hurdle which she also jumps in \textit{Northanger Abbey}, where she wittily notices that the reader will ‘see, in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity’ (II xvi 259)—well, not quite to ‘perfect felicity’, in this case. The reader of \textit{Lady Susan} is left to wonder ‘Whether Lady Susan was, or was not happy in her second Choice […] for who would take her assurance of it, on either side of the question?’ (Conclusion 77). This finally relegates her to the fate of all liars, not, finally, to be believed. Even by the reader.

I don’t want to leave her just there, though. As with many great novels—and this, too, though small and horrible, is touched with Jane Austen’s greatness—the character at the heart seems to have the kind of kicking life that will not allow her to be forgotten. Whatever the novel tells us at the end, I don’t think Lady Susan thinks of herself as a liar. No, she thinks of herself as eloquent. ‘If I am vain of any thing, it is of my eloquence’, she says to Mrs. Johnson (Letter XVI 30). There is a strange naivete in this self-belief. When, she thinks aloud to her friend that she ‘shall be able to make [her] story as good as [Frederica’s]’ (Letter XVI 30), it gives her not a moment’s anxiety that the difference in their ‘stories’ is that Frederica’s is \textit{true} and hers is not. So used is she to performing emotions that it does not occur to her that others’ displays of emotion might be based on real feeling, or, if it does occur, it is as a cause of contempt. Of Frederica’s feeling for Reginald, she writes, ‘Her feelings are tolerably lively, & she is so charmingly artless in their display, as to
afford the most reasonable hope of her being ridiculed & despised by every Man who sees her’ (Letter XIX 36).

This is what it is like inside Lady Susan’s head, where there is no place for trust, or truth, or tenderness. But what is in a way tragic is that this woman is far, far from stupid. Like Emma Woodhouse, who at ten could answer questions which puzzled her sister at sixteen, she runs rings round those she lives among, not only by her sex appeal but by her wit. It is her intelligence which is universally recognized: Reginald is spellbound by her talk as well as by her beauty; even Mrs. Vernon is frequently dazzled by her words. But what Lady Susan has is a raw, almost animal kind of intelligence, which is conspicuously unschooled. Over and over she laments her lack of a proper education, even of the vapid sort she wishes Frederica to attain:

I want her to play & sing with some portion of Taste […] I was so much indulged in my infant years that I was never obliged to attend to anything, & consequently am without those accomplishments which are necessary to finish a pretty Woman. (Letter VII 13)

That is what she thinks is missing in her: her education having been so lacking that she does not have the least sense of what it is she truly lacks, the affectionate disposition and strong feelings which Jane Austen would give to Elinor Dashwood, a heroine first imagined only a little while after Lady Susan. Elinor, we are told, knows how to control her feelings; Lady Susan knows how to manipulate the feelings of others, and how to trample over them.

But somewhere in those indulgent early years Lady Susan gained a terrifyingly acute sense of how dangerous the world is for unprotected women and how they must take care, whatever their real wishes and real actions, to maintain some semblance of outward respectability, some appearance of self-control. What enrages her about Frederica’s behaviour with Reginald is not that it is wrong in any serious way, but that it is unconventional. Behaving herself with no regard for the deeper connections of blood or family, Susan Vernon is horrified by her daughter’s really quite courageous flouting of convention. This indulged, spoiled, highborn child who has grown into a cold and unloving mother has missed not only the lessons in music and languages that ‘are necessary to finish a pretty Woman’, but the education of the heart that is always Jane Austen’s real subject. What has happened to
Lady Susan, alone among Jane Austen’s unprotected women struggling to make a place for themselves in a dangerous world, is that she herself has mutated into one of the dangers.