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Lady Susan: Jane Austen's First Antiheroine

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There is no shortage of unpleasant personages in the novels of Jane Austen. Most often, the reader judges their lack of character by their behavior towards and effect on the protagonist; as in any book, we acquire our affection for the main characters by following their triumph against adversity, and this adversity, in Austen's works, generally takes the form of society and the people of which it is composed. In the same way, our dislike for villains comes from reading along as they descend into debauchery, oppose our heroes and heroines, and are banished from all respectable society. Not so with Lady Susan. Her largest curiosity is not that most of the letters comprising the novel are written by, to, or about her, making her, though a villain, the main character and narrator of the eponymous novel *Lady Susan*. It is not that she escapes the dismal fate of most of Austen's villains by achieving her goal of marrying Sir James Martin. The oddity of Lady Susan is the fact that the reader is not only allowed but encouraged to glory in her wretchedness, her consummate evil, and her success in cementing her status as "a very distinguished Flirt" (266). Austen, while disapproving of Lady Susan's morals and motivations, is asking her readers to join in her admiration of Lady Susan's intelligence, intuition, and determination.

While many of Austen's male villains share Lady Susan's cunning intellect, the majority of her female villains, while formidable to the heroine, find most of their evil in silliness, deceit, and—the ultimate sin—competition for male attention. They can be easily dispatched by the protection of the hero, and little of their influence lingers after their true character has been found out. But Lady Susan, equal to the powers of any Wickham, Willoughby, or Mr. Crawford, performs an office remarkable to anyone of her sex by inducing a man to elope with her, rather than the reverse, and eluding the consequences. The effects of her flirtation can only be called cataclysmic—"By her behavior to Mr. Manwaring," writes Mrs. Vernon, "She gave jealousy and wretchedness to his wife, and by her attentions to a young man previously attached to Mr. Manwaring's sister, deprived an amiable girl of her Lover." (266) Mrs. Vernon's implication is that Mrs. Manwaring's sister was more deserving of a man's affections, but the harm extends to the man himself. It is often the power of Austen's villainesses to influence and corrupt otherwise virtuous men; of Mr. John Dashwood, Austen writes in the opening chapter of *Sense and Sensibility*, "Had he married a more amiable woman, he might have been made still more respectable than he was..." (2), and goes on to detail the detriment of Mrs. John Dashwood's influence. When questioning the recent behavior of a prospective suitor, "Elinor placed all that was astonishing in this way of acting to his mother's account." (67) In the same spirit, Mrs. Vernon complains, "Lady Susan has certainly contrived in the space of a fortnight to make my Brother like her." (274) She is insensible of the idea that any share of the blame might fall to her brother, a man of no inconsiderable mental powers who has nonetheless placed his trust entirely in a recent acquaintance who, by her own admission, he was "prepared to dislike... and prejudiced against all [her] past actions" (277), against the repeated appeals of a sister who, it should be expected, would have a greater claim to his respect and fondness.

Motherhood in the works of Jane Austen has two extremes—neglectful or overbearing. Lady Susan combines both when she boasts that "Some Mothers would have insisted on their daughter's accepting such an offer on the first overture, but I could not answer it to myself to force Frederica into a marriage from which her heart revolted; and instead of adopting so harsh a measure, merely propose to make it her own choice by rendering her thoroughly uncomfortable till she does accept him." (273) Mrs. Vernon asserts, "I am not quite weak enough to suppose a woman who has behaved with inattention if not unkindness to her own child, should be attached to any of mine," (265) and she is not alone in her condemnation; a woman's worth has long been defined by her perceived skill as a mother, and this philosophy was at its height in the eighteenth century. But as long as this notion has existed, there have also existed women who perceived potential in themselves beyond the household. "I declare if I tho't I was to be thus occupied for the rest of my life, I would—I was going to say—lie down and die," wrote Laura Wirt Randall of motherhood in 1828, thirty-five years after Jane Austen wrote *Lady Susan* but forty-three years before it

would be published. Austen does not tell us Lady Susan's motivation in her treatment of Frederica, but it is telling that, though many of the mothers in her works enter the realm of the ridiculous, even those entirely motivated by mercenary gain never mention the benefit for themselves. It is possible that Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Dashwood, and many other universally ridiculed mothers, along with Lady Susan, had simply taken stock of their society and fixed upon the best advantage for their daughters—a rich husband. The true villain in the story of women is too often society, and Austen explains, but does not excuse, the sins of women forced to great lengths by the errors of society.

It has been speculated that the character of Lady Susan was based on Mrs. Craven, a neighbor of Jane's, who was "all tenderness to her children in public, in private beat and starved and locked them up." (Kronenberger 1969, 193) Writers of the time, who had no qualms in their descriptions of false imprisonment, concealed ex-wives, and strategic poisonings, shied away from allusions to domestic abuse. Austen, however, proved early in her career that she had no such reservations; *Henry and Eliza*, written when Austen was between twelve to fifteen years old, begins when Eliza is banished from the home of her previously affectionate foster parents on suspicion of thievery and promptly stumbles into a series of events that features the Duchess of F, perhaps the only villain in Austen's works to genuinely plan a murder, and ends when Eliza's foster mother admits to being her biological mother, abandoning her, and forgetting her existence, supposing that the baby she and her husband found in the same location where she hid her own baby was some other, unrelated baby. The trend continued with significantly more comprehensibility in *Mansfield Park*, where Mrs. Norris advises her niece, "Remember, wherever you are, you must be the lowest and last." (205) Lady Susan echoes the sentiment when she refers to her daughter as "the greatest simpleton on Earth" (262) and tells her friend, Mrs. Johnson, not to invite Frederica to visit her so that she will "find her situation as unpleasant as possible" (272) and submit to a proposal of marriage that she previously rejected.

The most pressing concern of the eighteenth-century woman was, of course, marriage. Women in the works of Jane Austen marry for either love or wealth—it is unthinkable to her heroines to marry solely for economic gain, but the right is reserved for the protagonist to disapprove of a love match with someone that she deems unsavory. It is clear that Lady Susan's first marriage has not been one motivated by love; only four months a widow, she publicly flirts with men both married and unmarried, and Sir Reginald De Courcy sheds light on her behavior while within the bounds of wedlock: "Her neglect of her husband, her encouragement of other Men, her extravagance and dissipation were so gross and notorious, that no one could be ignorant of them..."(280) But even Lady Susan asserts, "... I must own myself rather romantic in that respect, and that Riches only, will not satisfy me." (262) The impression is that she, while not by any means intending to sacrifice her comfort on the altar of love, does require some emotional attachment. Though her intentions are more direct than, for example, Elizabeth Bennet, who just so happened to form a legitimate affection for the wealthiest man of her acquaintance, the lesson is the same that is conveyed in *Sense and Sensibility*: the ideal marriage is formed by the combination of passion and prudence. But there is an additional aspect, unknown to most of Austen's characters. Mrs. Vernon writes, "Lady Susan's intentions are of course those of absolute coquetry, or a desire of universal admiration," (275) and Sir Reginald De Courcy argues, "It is possible that her behavior may arise only from Vanity, or a wish of gaining the admiration of a Man whom she must imagine to be particularly prejudiced against her; but it is more likely that she should aim at something farther—She is poor, and may naturally seek an alliance which may be advantageous to herself." (281) The reader knows, from Lady Susan's own profession that she is "not at present in want of money" (277), that Sir Reginald's latter hypothesis is incorrect, but when Lady Susan describes her "pleasure of triumphing over a Mind prepared to dislike me," (277) and her strategic adaption of her flirtation methods to the tastes of her target—"I have subdued him entirely by sentiment and serious conversation..."(277), we meet with a rare character trait in literature of the time—a female who views love, not as a sacred feeling, but a game in which all the chips are held by herself and the only prize she seeks is her own enjoyment.

In fact, the closest comparison for Lady Susan is Emma Woodhouse, a character about whom Jane Austen said, "I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like." For much of *Emma*, the title character vows against marriage, much like Lady Susan, who writes, "I cannot easily resolve on anything so serious as Marriage." (277) The journey of Emma is one of coming to terms with and resolving her faults, which are numerous: she dislikes Jane Fairfax for no reason other than jealousy, a feeling more commonly held by Austen's villains, and she is extremely self-absorbed and class-conscious. She exits the novel penitent, friends with Jane Fairfax and united in marriage to the very man that any perceptive reader would assign to her from the first chapter. Contrast this with Lady Susan's resentment of Mrs. Vernon's dislike of her, which she deems unreasonable though she attempted to prevent her marriage, and her first action towards a potential lover—to make him "sensible of [her] power" (277) by dividing him from his family and his mental faculties. Though *Emma* has the most moral end, it is impossible to stifle one's admiration of Lady Susan and her seemingly infinite powers.

Jane Austen has proved her insight to readers over hundreds of years, but her most poignant social commentary may be *Lady Susan*, the tale of an unrepentant manipulator. Were she twenty years younger and a hundred leagues less intelligent, she would be marked down as a simple flirt, but Austen has created a three-

dimensional character with no motivation beyond the selfish courting of her own desires. Too often have the women held up as models for readers been martyrs, living entirely for the benefit of her husband and children, but Lady Susan escapes this fate as thoroughly and with as much flair as she escapes the consequences of her actions. The novel closes, not with the marriage of the modest and retiring Frederica (though it does occur), but with the marriage of Lady Susan. She remains "in excellent spirits" (340), as if it could ever befall her to be otherwise, with "nothing against her, but her Husband, and her Conscience." (342) Her control over both is so great that neither can be thought to pose any considerable obstacle.