“Remarkably Unpolitical”: Really?
Contextualising a Political Reading of Jane Austen’s *Lady Susan*

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Abstract:

*Lady Susan* is not usually seen as a political text, nor indeed is Austen often seen as a political writer. But this paper contends that the internecine warring between *Lady Susan*’s antagonistic sisters-in-law is used by Austen precisely to reflect the broader political struggles in late eighteenth-century England, following the French Revolution. Lady Susan Vernon and Catherine Vernon battle for control of family, estate and moral terrain, replicating the wider discord that was occurring amongst the ‘siblings’ of the national family.

The generally accepted critical view has conventionally understood this text to be primarily ‘about’ Susan Vernon’s escapades, to the detriment of all other characters. My assessment of the novella challenges Susan’s exclusive centrality, positing instead that Austen’s concern actually lies with the constant conflict between the two Vernon women, whom I see as equally central. By locating their discord within a traditional, rural English family, threatened by the machinations of an urbane socialite, Austen delineates the Jacobin *destructiveness* facing conservative England at this critical juncture in history, and emphasises the need for the nation to respond, as one family, in order to heal itself and avoid calamity.

By considering the historical context in which the novella was written, this reading sees *Lady Susan* as a conservative call to arms that not only affirms its political character and that of its author, but that also highlights the intensity of Austen’s early ideological expression that would so thoroughly be submerged in her later work.

Lady Susan is (largely) an unfinished epistolary novella written by Austen in about 1794; it was given a somewhat cursory non-epistolary closure probably in c. 1805-09. The novella sets out a battle of minds between Lady Susan Vernon, the eponymous Machiavellian heroine, and her sister-in-law, Mrs Catherine Vernon, mistress of the house in which Lady Susan invites herself to stay. Their conflict concerns the emotional control of Reginald De Courcy, Mrs Vernon’s brother and heir to the De Courcy estate, and also encompasses the fate of Frederica, Lady Susan’s much-mistreated daughter.

Lady Susan, a viscerally alluring widow who ruthlessly manipulates and subordinates friends and family as a means of attaining her objectives, is repudiated by the ‘morally decent’ characters in the novella. And, as a literary creation, Susan Vernon was also similarly repudiated by the Austen family’s carefully constructed image of the novelist as ‘Gentle Jane’; indeed, after Austen’s death, the family alleged that she had been so appalled by this virago figure that, for this very reason, she had given up on the text and never again attempted to delineate so vile a character, a view that was then gladly taken up by the Janeites and that still today holds some currency in certain ambits.

In terms of narrative content, Lady Susan is obviously not historical fiction, nor indeed is it fictionalised history, understanding this as the exploits of “Big People and Big Events”. But, if I may put it this way, it is a fiction of history in the sense that—through a fictional encounter—it explores the parameters, values and consequences of a hugely significant historical moment that was, at the time of its writing, shaping the political and social character of Jane Austen’s England. Read this way, the novella engages directly with the question of Nation, in effect forwarding a critical discussion of England’s relationship with Europe (principally, France), and of how aspects of this relationship were testing the very fabric of national identity. Seen in this light, I suggest that Lady Susan forcefully conveys a highly specific political intent.

In forwarding the case for a political and historical reading of Lady Susan, I essentially base my argument on the following justifications: first and perhaps most obviously, the ability of the text itself—by submitting it to close reading and assessment—to sustain and support this interpretation. Second, the plausibility of such an interpretation within the framework of the novella’s particular historical moment and of Austen’s probable political sympathies with respect to this. Third, in light of studies on historiography such as (very centrally to my approach here) Mark Salber Phillips’ Society and Sentiment, which
facilitates reading literary fiction—as well as other forms of writing—as part of a multi-genre reconstruction of the past. Phillips himself (260) observes that we should understand history “not as an isolated literature, but as a family of genres occupying a key location—though a contested one—in a whole culture of letters”. Of particular interest to me at this point is Phillips’ reference to Helen Maria Williams’ *Letters Written in France in the Summer of 1790, to a Friend in England*, which is seen as significant notably for its formal properties, that is, its epistolarity, since this allows for the development of an affective potential that a more traditional narrative account would tend to constrain. Unlike Williams’ *Letters*, Austen’s epistolary text is not at all so politically transparent, but Phillip’s point remains equally valid: the text’s epistolarity is a central component in allowing its author to develop powerfully affective responses to the political forces that its narrative—as I will be suggesting—brings so dramatically into play. Fourth and finally—once more to quote from Phillips (12)—“the eighteenth century was a critical moment in the adaptation of classical understandings of history to the needs of a modern, commercial, and increasingly middle-class society”. To the detriment of wars and dynasties and popes, this “historical understanding” was recentred in favour of other accounts such as domestic economy, manners, customs, morals and the social life of consolidated middle classes, amongst other concerns, a shift that obviously runs in parallel with much eighteenth-century fiction and, evidently, with moral philosophy such as Adam Smith’s, rooting—as it does—social relations in the reciprocal interchange of human sympathies. In short, what we might call *Lady Susan*’s “limited domesticity” is not at all a restriction to seeing it as an account open to a political and historical reading, as it forwards concerns within this ambit that are legitimate points of focus in a broader historical understanding of the 1790s.

In all events, ‘Politics and Jane Austen’ is undoubtedly a difficult subject. On the one hand, there has been great reluctance to accept the idea that Austen’s writing not only mirrors any political concerns at all but also to accept that it has—in fact—its own very particular political content. A further problem comes from certain critical positions that decline to validate as ‘political’ those admittedly tangential and indirect aspects in her writing that others—in contrast—read as indicators of Austen’s ideas on the existing structure of her society and on the various elements from which it was assembled. It has been a commonplace to argue that Austen was ignorant of the political events of her world, or at least that she stubbornly refused to trouble herself about them. As long ago as 1917, the historian Frederic Harrison (in a letter to Thomas Hardy) 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”.

The notion of the non-political Austen can be traced back to James Edward Austen-Leigh’s *Memoir* (1870) and to the often mawkishly 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. Here, for example, is the dynastically connected Anne Thackeray in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1871: “Dear books! Bright, sparkling with wit and animation, in which homely heroines charm, the dull hours fly, and the very bores are enchanting”. It perhaps goes without saying that this image has also been supported by the ways in which Austen’s mature works effectively conceal direct political reference under an ostensibly apolitical narrative surface.

Naturally, we need to recognise the implicit and indirect nature of such references if we are ever to understand them. But certain critical quarters question whether such implicit content can actually be thought of as political at all. Roger Gard (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.

But as a number of studies on Austen’s political undertones have convincingly suggested, however, it is specifically by engaging with this ‘rather tiresome sense’ that we ascertain the nature of Austen’s politics, see how her writing is articulated within the framework of a particular society at a particular (and critical) moment in its history, and realise that Austen’s form of thought and expression through her work occurs in response to the transformations and difficulties of her times. Marilyn Butler (190-191), for example, says the following:

… [i]t 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… 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

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1 Cited in Kent, 59.
2 Cited in Southam, 238.
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.

I suggest that *Lady Susan* can be read as expressing a very specific political idea. It focuses directly on the social and political concerns of the mid 1790s in England, following the French Revolution, in the context of the fundamental debate between Jacobin and anti-Jacobin understanding of this conflict and of its outcome, and of how contemporary society should be developing, the perils facing it and the solutions being forwarded either to create the change that the one faction was promoting or else to uphold and reinforce the status quo that the other was defending.

To further challenge Gard’s view, by reviewing British reaction to the French Revolution, let us look briefly at how the act of writing itself seems to have been—though not without its perils—so central to the contemporary political debate, how it aimed to participate in that debate, and how an approved ‘strand’ of writing came to vigorously support hegemonic ideology.

Some initial reaction in Britain to the French Revolution seems to have been quite positive, if only because of wishful thinking about how France might develop, and perhaps also through the conviction that the Revolution was, in part, an effort to attain a ‘British model’ of political settlement. This limited acceptance of the Revolution never caught on; instead, what developed—as we know—was that strongly opposed body of opinion—the Jacobin and Anti-Jacobin factions—creating huge and potentially catastrophic pressure within late eighteenth-century British society. In terms of debate through printed works, this basic division was, of course, primarily articulated by Edmund Burke’s 1790 *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in opposition to the Revolution, and by Tom Paine’s *The Rights of Man*, from 1791-92, in support.

The historian John Dinwiddy (39) observes that “Burke discerned, or claimed to discern, in 1790, elements or tendencies within the Revolution, and especially within its ideology, that were leading ineluctably towards social breakdown and lawless tyranny. In 1792-4, much of what he predicted actually did occur”. What is perhaps now more to the point, Burke represented for many people in his society—and remains in our understanding of that society—the voice of apparent stability and tradition speaking against what he perceived to be the destructiveness of the Revolution.
In contrast, Paine’s reply (the first part published only two months after Burke’s *Reflections*) attempted to offset what he believed to be an inaccurate, biased account of the Revolution and of its aims and principles. Countering tales of French bloodletting with instances of the abuse of absolute power, Paine’s basic message was obvious. As Jennifer Mori (33) indicates: “man, born with universal natural rights of life and liberty, was entitled to claim and assert the sovereignty of the people in the pursuit of just and rational government”. At a popular level, this was a hugely effective argument.

Burke had the advantage of appealing directly to the sensibilities of the politically powerful and economically consolidated and, in that sense, was obviously assured of attention. For Paine, the enormous success of his arguments lay in his rhetorical style, in the abridged and popular versions of *Rights* that were produced, and in the support given to his writings in contemporary pamphlets. That is, from the outset of this social fraction, contrasting ideas were pitted against one another in a Habermasian public space through means of print. And, within this print-based war of ideas we find not only works of political analysis and discussion, but also a range of other genres supporting or undermining the Jacobin or anti-Jacobin positions.

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, as the conservative backlash that gradually gained impetus gave rise to an increasing sense of wariness against the openness of literary expression, deeming it to undermine public order and social stability.

With the growth of this distrust of literary freedom came the consequent drive to monitor and discipline literary production, seeking to ensure that it avoided expressing any content that was possibly subversive of the conservative values not only of government but also of other stakeholders in power. This was particularly aimed at controlling the role of women, and, most especially, that of women writers, who were discouraged from publishing anything that was—or might be read as—dissident. In contrast, works that offered unequivocal support and illustration of acceptable values were warmly promoted. Gary Kelly (21) observes that:

…women writers became important concerns in the British Revolution debate… 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 … rejected Revolutionary feminist ‘civic’
woman for a renewed model of ‘domestic woman’ as professionalized custodian of the ‘national’ conscience, culture and destiny.

Keeping this brief contextualisation in mind, I consequently propose—with all due respect to the views of critics such as Claudia Johnson—that Jane Austen, deeply sensitive to this political climate and in agreement with its presiding ideological direction, wrote a novella that aimed to be instructive, politically acceptable and, consequently, marketable. In short, I’m arguing that there is a distinctly political character to Lady Susan that, in a direct way, attempts to underlie the moral and social perils of Jacobin ‘irresponsibility’ in the figure of Susan Vernon (superficially attractive but profoundly disruptive) and to promote—in Gary Kelly’s terms—a conservative custodial figure in the guise of her sister-in-law, Catherine Vernon, whose duty is to defend her moral and domestic realm (of ‘conscience, culture and destiny’) against insidious assault from an outside world.

For, whilst the established critical view is that Lady Susan Vernon herself is the central subject of this novella, more accurately, Lady Susan is actually concerned with the moral conflict between Lady Susan and Catherine Vernon. The novella systematically attributes sympathy to Catherine, to the detriment of Susan, an attribution that is the more candid and successful because of the novella’s epistolarity, which allows us unbridled access to the women’s inner thoughts and not only to their public affirmations. These inner thoughts relentlessly present the image, on the one hand, of Catherine struggling to defend the moral integrity of her family, and—on the other—of Susan scheming endlessly to undermine this very family so as to impose her own hedonistic agenda onto events and circumstances.

In other words, Austen balances Lady Susan’s undeniably dynamic subversiveness with Catherine’s more attenuated ‘propriety’; they are, so to speak, ‘co-valent’. This ‘dichotomy of protagonists’ is—to express myself patently—an ideological presentation from a conservative stance of the Jacobin and Anti-Jacobin conflict.

Specifically, Lady Susan can be read as a defence of conservative ‘English’ communal values against the dangers of social discontinuity that were perceived in the Jacobin threat. Austen’s Burkean conservative principles in Lady Susan are, 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”.4

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3 See especially Women, Politics and the Novel.
4 Roberts, 42.
The foremost and reiterated characteristic features of Catherine Vernon point unambiguously to her role as defender of social cohesion and of morally positive values. This comprehends the exemplary fulfilment of her domestic role as wife, daughter, sister and mother (and even foster-mother); in each of these roles she is required to rigorously ensure a ‘wholesome’ alternative to the corrosive presence of Susan Vernon. It also requires her to shield the imperilled hegemony (for the moral vitality of the De Courcy line is at stake) by developing a strategy to re-establish the propriety of social order, through the marriage of Reginald and Frederica. Catherine Vernon’s defence of her ‘society’ is one that pertains to and acts in favour of collective values. Her plans are discussed overtly and in mutual confidence with her mother; they concern marital union—the incorporation of new and acceptable family members—and they promote an ordered, regulated but emphatically non-tyrannical society in which events should occur with due respect for decorum, yet which seeks benevolently to ensure the happiness of those who share its values, as Catherine’s rescue of Frederica discloses.

In contrast, we have the destructiveness of Susan Vernon’s “deep Art” (Letter 12), a term that exactly captures the unnaturalness of all that Lady Susan represents. It is not only that she opposes the values advocated by her sister-in-law, though this is true and of clear political significance. But beyond this is the artifice with which she prepares her (always dishonest) schemes, continually presenting herself as something she plainly is not.

Additionally, while Catherine Vernon upholds communal responsibility, Lady Susan stands for self-gratifying, self-centred pleasure, capable even of undermining her own daughter’s personal happiness and emotional stability. That is, her maternal—and thus social—obligations are secondary (at best) to her own wants. Indeed, Susan’s utter failure to maintain family and social stability in her relationship with Frederica (in contrast to Catherine)—yet another way in which Lady Susan characterises disruption and disunity—is a further element of obvious political import.

Finally, Lady Susan is the interloper. ‘Home’, in this novella, is where Catherine Vernon and her family live; the outlook and values we are systematically directed to identify with are theirs. The crisis in *Lady Susan* is the disturbance of this domestic order by a figure who embodies the mores and the values of a ‘foreign’ world (specifically, the ever-untrustworthy town as opposed to the country, a place that Susan Vernon loathes, and an unvarying feature of Tory ideology that locates the wholesomeness of traditional social order within the natural context of the rural world).
I argue, then, that this novella outlines constructive, unified and affirmative social values that Austen herself saw as politically desirable and beneficial, and compares these with the ‘values of disruption’ that forward self interest—in effect, the Jacobins’ ‘individual rights’—in lieu of communal responsibility. As far as this reading of the novella is concerned, these Jacobin values are seen 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.
Works Cited


