Watching Literature Happen: Anna Maria Porter’s Walsh Colville and Jane Austen’s Lady Susan

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Whatever its earlier influences and impulses may have been, the rise of the novel is located firmly in the eighteenth century (Watt, esp. 9-59), throughout which—from the early days of Defoe and Swift—the increasingly sophisticated English novel underwent considerable stylistic evolution; later, by about the final decade of the 1700s, the major change underway was the gradual decline of sentimental fiction (along with the apparent demise of the hugely successful Gothic) and the growth of a far more credible literary form of capturing human experience, expression and thought, which, to summarise and simplify enormously, would lead on to the realistic fiction of the following century. We are surely right to locate the foundations for this eventual transition in the works of novelists such as Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth, whose writing is now recognised, despite the relatively short-lived explosion in popularity of the novel of sentiment and gothic fiction, as the outstanding feature of a period previously glossed over—first by Watt, then by others in his wake—for its apparent barrenness. That period lies between Henry Fielding (whose work both reflects and typifies the picaresque, digressive quality of the mid-century novel) and Jane Austen (whose mature writings would build on and then substantially develop preceding English fiction). But such transitions can only usually be perceived over time and by reference to a very broad range of texts. Could this shift from a more sentimental mode of writing to a more realistic form be seen less protractedly? Are there any contemporaneous works that encapsulate this change, succinctly revealing the currents that shaped the development of the English novel? This essay argues that, indeed, there are; furthermore, the two works that I will propose as examples of this are both works of juvenilia.

By the mid-1790s, two very young and ambitious writers, Anna Maria Porter (?1780-1832) and Jane Austen (1775-1817), each produced a novella. Porter’s stylistically sentimental Walsh Colville was probably written in about 1795 (it was published anonymously in 1797), and Austen’s epistolary Lady Susan was written in about 1794-5. (It was then left incomplete for perhaps as much as a decade, after which she added to it a short third-person conclusion; it was never published in her lifetime.) Even accepting the acclaim that has been given to Lady Susan in recent times, it is unlikely that anyone would challenge the assertion that, at the close of the eighteenth century, neither of these works—in Austen’s case, for very obvious reasons—had brought the house down. In fact, again in Austen’s case, her novella hadn’t even left the house. My purpose in comparing these formally and stylistically discrepant literary productions, apart from the rather empowering fact (both for the writers themselves and for literary juvenilia) that both novellas were written in their authors’ adolescence, is that they encapsulate two distinct moments in the development of the English novel, and provide compellingly clear examples—from works written in similar places and at almost exactly the same time—of just how and why literary form can sometimes become so restrictive that it loses all vitality (as I will argue for Walsh Colville), or else attain such effective innovativeness that it leads to almost revolutionary change in its wake (as, I think, is what happens with Lady Susan). In short, they let us see how literature happens.

With this in mind, my essay sets itself a sort of schadenfreude task, attempting—on the one hand—to recover somewhat the validity of Walsh Colville from the darkness of its current disregard and to see it, instead, as a solidly competent authorial undertaking in the commercial context of the 1790s literary market in Great Britain (and as an admirably representative text from that artistic period). This much is clearly an agreeable enterprise. But, on the other hand, my discussion here will also claim that the deeper significance and, ultimately, the greater value of Anna Maria

1 The decline of the Gothic is one of those claims about the development of literary movements that appears somewhat over-stated, not least given the on-going interest in the genre that was evident throughout the 1800s, and that continues—if in other formats and modes—even today. Much the same might also be said for Romanticism, for example, all of which is a timely reminder that any discussion of literary history is, inevitably, replete with provisional statements.

2 Termed variously the novel of sentiment; the novel of sensibility or the sentimental novel.

3 Watt actually speaks of a “level of mediocrity and worse” in the literary output of the entire last half of the eighteenth century, excepting only the works of Smollett, Sterne and Burney. Rise of the Novel, 290. To the latter of these (in stark contrast to Sterne, especially) he dedicates a mere half dozen lines before moving on to assert “the technical genius” of Jane Austen (ibid., 296).
Porter’s novella lies in the ways in which it unwittingly reveals the shortcomings and limitations of the novel of sensibility. That is, to highlight what I see as the broader importance of Walsh Colville, I find myself in the unfortunate position of appearing to be dismissive of this earnest young author’s impressive endeavour, and to be drawing attention to those aspects of Porter’s writing that might, in an uncharitable light, be thought of as inadequate, most especially when placed in the company of the newer and infinitely more vital style of writing that Austen, her close contemporary and—in this period—fellow juvenilia author, was developing in Lady Susan.

Yet this is only partly true. Walsh Colville was, if not a runaway success, certainly not a failure. (In fact, after Porter’s death it was republished twice, and it is salutary to remind ourselves that, to the general reading public of the early 1800s, the name Anna Maria Porter was far more likely to ring the bell of familiarity than that of a certain Jane Austen.) But the stylistic “movement” to which Porter’s novella belongs was in decline at the time of its publication, and would largely be superseded only a short time thereafter. Paradoxically, however, I believe that it is the very success of Walsh Colville as a proficient and highly archetypal example of the novel of sentiment that allows us to see so clearly why that literary style was unable to keep pace with advancements in novelistic fiction that were taking place at the close of the eighteenth century and at the onset of the nineteenth, some of which are precisely the elements that Lady Susan succeeds so effectively at putting into place.

Indeed—to now spell out just what my essential purpose is in comparing these two writers and their corresponding novellas—in significant but distinct ways, both of the texts considered here are enormously important for revealing the crossroads at which English novelistic fiction had arrived by around 1795. As I have suggested, Walsh Colville is practically a case study of the debilitated, devitalised style that the novel of sensibility had led to; Lady Susan, on the other hand, is in my view a stylistic triumph foreshadowing not only its author’s subsequent attainments but also many of the features that would characterise the great English novels of the nineteenth century. But as is so often the case with response to juvenilia writing, how easy it has been to dismiss these early novellas as marginal to their authors’ mature work; just as easy, in fact, as it is to overlook how both texts are consequential signposts in the development of the English novel. One points backwards; the other forwards. Both provide rich evidence of their differing style and approach, of the weaknesses of the older model and of the strengths of the newer.

Anna Maria Porter wrote the third-person narrative Walsh Colville in London between the ages of 15 and 17, yet—quite astonishingly—this was not her first publication. The two volumes of Artless Tales had been issued in 1793 and 1795, respectively, and she had by this time gained something of a reputation as at the very least a sort of literary curiosity, a factor that, given the brevity of her novella and the market preference at the time for triple-decker novels, may well have played a part in facilitating its publication in London in 1797 by Lee & Hurst and T. C. Jones. Jane Porter, the author’s fellow-novelist sister, in a letter of 1805 summarised the work as “a good warning, to young men, who are plunged into the same sea of Dissipations and Dangers” as its eponymous hero. The narrative concerns a decent young man of noble birth who is led astray by his reckless companion, Charles Stanhope. Both have commissions in the Guards in London. But, just in time and through a series of rather implausible episodes, Walsh recovers his respectability, regains his father’s favour, and wins the hand of the beautiful and virtuous Lady Frances Surry. It is, in short, a very fair representative of the romance novels of its day, infused with generous sentiment, stylised dialogue, idealised heroes and heroines and a plot that is at times utterly predictable, at other times wildly improbable. Reviews were mixed, though generally not very enthusiastic. After Porter’s death in 1832, the novella was reprinted in 1833 and again in 1840, since when it has most emphatically fallen into what Cliff Siskin has memorably called “the great forgetting”, and is now talked about—if at all—in few ambits other than those of academic discussion.

The history of Lady Susan, on the other hand—though not without its own considerable vicissitudes—needs rather less re-telling. This essentially epistolary novella (I say “essentially”, because its closure is in direct narrative, a termination that was tacked on several years after the forty-one letters of the epistolary section were abandoned) was written in Steventon, Hampshire, in the middle of the 1790s; Jane Austen never published the work and indeed never appears to have even contemplated doing so. The novella sets out a battle of minds between Lady Susan Vernon, the eponymous Machiavellian heroine—though Austen actually never gave the work a title—and her sister-in-law, Mrs. Catherine Vernon, mistress of the house in which Lady Susan invites herself to stay. Their conflict (seen through the letters they write to distinct correspondents) 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. The text was first published in 1871 as part of the second edition of James Edward Austen-Leigh’s Memoir of Jane Austen, and for well over a century was thought of by the critics (with one or two enlightened exceptions) basically as a second-rate, apprentice-like experiment that Austen had done very well to leave alone. Thanks particularly to the stimulus provided through the groundbreakingly positive response to the novella by Marvin Mudrick, this view has now changed to no small degree, though an account of that change would lead me too far from my main purpose in this essay; suffice it to say that, in spite of the still-presiding notion that the epistolary is marginal to Austen’s major attainments and that her juvenilia works are simply intriguing insights into an intense artistic mind-in-training rather than entirely valid works in their own right, Lady Susan is today understood as pointing to a far more complex late-adolescent writer than conventional literary history would have had us believe.

4 See Owen, Walsh Colville.
6 Siskin, Literature and Social Change, 218.
7 See Irony as Defense, chap. 5.
**Walsh Colville and the Novel of Sentiment**

I begin this assessment of *Walsh Colville*—one that may appear to draw some rather negative conclusions—by reiterating my point that the weaknesses I see in this text are at the very least as much the consequence of Porter’s solid authorial competence as they are the result of her limitations. This may appear somewhat counter-intuitive, but by this I mean that Porter was such an able “producer” of the sort of literature that had hitherto shown itself to be commercially viable that she is, in this sense, a highly accurate reflection of the characteristics of that literature. Where she fails, it fails; where it fails, so does she. And I say this not least in order to distance myself from the patronising assessments that have dogged her reputation since the early nineteenth century and tainted almost all critical assessment until very recent times. At the beginning of the twentieth century, for instance, Professor George Saintsbury in *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature* said of Porter’s writing that “neither … chance contact nor deliberate research will discover much in any of her books but amiable incompetence”, just the type of condescending comment that has side-lined much of women’s fiction produced in the 1790s, and beyond, and which held currency in many critical ambitions until the final quarter of the twentieth century. Porter, very decidedly, was not an amiable incompetent. Even at the young age of seventeen she was a dexterous writer who perfectly understood and thus could ably recreate the sort of literature that both mirrored and appealed to contemporary popular taste.

Without wishing to suggest that these are the only areas of literary interest that this novella might represent, I would like to very briefly draw attention to three aspects of *Walsh Colville*: first, its highly conventional development of plot; second, its reliance upon the language of sentiment; and third, its typification of character.

The plot itself, as I have mentioned, veers erratically between the expected and the unimaginable, perhaps a reflection of readers’ needs, on the one hand, for reassuringly certain moral outcomes and, on the other, for narratives that exceed the bounds of their own personal parameters. But most likely this is simply in keeping with the storylines of much fiction contemporary to Porter (such as that produced by writers like Elizabeth Bonhôte, Regina Maria Roche or Anna Maria Bennet, all of whom enjoyed success during the 1790s) in which concern for credible narrative episodes, believable characters or realistic dialogue was not always a high priority. Indeed, in this regard, Porter very capably responds to what were—in all likelihood—the expectations of her potential readership. Through the many and weary trials of Walsh himself, she delineates the actions and consequences of moral repentance, penitence and salvation (sealed, of course, through marriage); she also appeals to a contemporary taste for the manageably risqué by providing her readers a fair share of drinking, gaming, manly oath-utterings and some pre-dawn duelling. To this heady mixture she even adds an exotic mistress of questionable provenance and still-more questionable morality. However easy it now appears to us to ridicule this almost pantomime-like checklist, it is clear that Porter’s concern was not that of constructing plausible narrative, and that such a criterion is therefore somewhat irrelevant; instead, the author focussed on dressing up a predictable tale of Fall and Redemption in the clothing of contemporary fashionable society, a strategy that seems calculated to heighten its market appeal.

For readers in the twenty-first century, however, perhaps the most striking component of the novella lies in its stylistics. To us now, the language of sentiment seems almost laughably formulaic and appears remote from any attempt to convey genuine thought and emotion, possibly even reflecting a certain lack either of innovative expression or of literary ability on the part of the author. And yet, for many late-eighteenth-century novelists with a half-decent sense of commercial nous, failure to produce this aspect of romance writing would most certainly have been in keeping with the storylines of much fiction produced in the 1790s, and beyond, and which held currency in many critical ambitions until the final quarter of the twentieth century. Porter, very decidedly, was not an amiable incompetent. Even at the young age of seventeen she was a dexterous writer who perfectly understood and thus could ably recreate the sort of literature that both mirrored and appealed to contemporary popular taste.

The letter dropt from the hand of Colville, his lips quivered, his eyes closed, and with a deep sigh he sunk breathless into the arms of Lord Cantyre. Frances sprang almost frantic from the neck of her cousin. The little group surrounded him in a moment; the lovely Surry hung over him while her tears as they fell washed the pallid features of the unhappy Walsh. Jessic on her knees was bathing his temples with lavender, but he did not yet betray any signs of life. The feelings of Frances were too strong to control. “O my God, I have killed him!” cried she in a voice of terror, and fell upon a seat, with the convulsive sob of extreme anguish. Her loud sobs, joined with the exertions of Cantyre and Jesse, (for Bunbury was supporting the fainting Frances, who was struggling with an hysteric fit) at length restored Colville to existence. He opened his languid eyes, and sighing heavily closed them again, while the tears of distracted friendship poured from beneath their soft brown lashes. Cantyre raised him up, and supporting his head on his bosom, conjured him to be comforted—offering him the entire possession of his heart, to compensate for the ingratitude of Stanhope. (ch. 7)

The fact that this passage owes a rather obvious debt to chapter 55 of Mackenzie’s *Man of Feeling* (1771)³ actually serves to reveal, I would say, that the language of sentiment in *Walsh Colville* is considerably more than an exaggerated intensity (or the reliance of an inexperienced writer on a more established author). To start with, such language belongs

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⁴ Late in Mackenzie’s novel, the protagonist Harley is lethally affected by his own overwhelming emotional response to Miss Walton’s awareness and acknowledgement of her feelings for him. Porter’s description of Walsh’s luxurious sufferings—though not lethal to her hero—appears otherwise to closely parallel this passage from *The Man of Feeling*. 
to an entire movement—however much, by the 1790s, this was now past its moment of greatest influence—reaching back to Locke. Philosophically, sensibility aimed at creating in its readers an empathy that was much more than simple “sensation”; it was also, and especially, a way of improving character, one that would lead to better forms of conduct at both personal and social levels. Seen in this light, it was decidedly didactic, which is precisely in keeping with Jane Porter’s own view of Walsh Colville. Beyond this, in a commercial sense, the language of the novella lies within the great sentimental tradition deriving from writers such as Laurence Sterne, Oliver Goldsmith or, as we have just seen, Henry Mackenzie. From our perspective, it might now seem clear that the stylistics of this novella were out-dated and excessive even for the late 1790s, at which point the novel of sentiment had largely given way to the Gothic (though this in turn was another movement with its own exaggeratedly intense manner of expression). But for a young writer of the time, professionally ambitious and eager to sell her product, writing so clearly within this literary tradition was not a poorly judged decision (though it might too easily appear to us as such in hindsight); rather, it was a commercially astute strategy aimed, first, at guaranteeing publication and, second, at acceptance by a broad-ranging reading public that had still by no means had its fill of such literature.

But having said as much, there can be little doubt that this style and form of language, this highly charged expression of acutely felt emotion, was also increasingly coming to be thought of by many a perceptive reader in the 1790s as, at the very least, ridiculous and unacceptable as a realistic and natural mode of expressing plausible thoughts and feelings. More seriously still, at the close of the 1700s, sensibility came under attack from conservative and progressive quarters alike, both of which took exception not only to its form of discourse but also to its underlying ideas, seeing them as “ludicrous and self-serving subjectivism on the one hand, or equally self-serving nostalgia and paternalism on the other.” Indeed, Austen’s own juvenilia (most notably, perhaps, Love and Friendship [sic, 1790]) contains ample and very precocious proof of awareness that such expressions of sensibility were, frankly, a laughing matter and something to be mistrusted as a mode of narrative. As I will argue for Lady Susan, the linguistically credible expression of even the most visceral of sentiments, by which I mean language that eschews the risibly formulaic expressions and melodramatic outbursts of sentimental literature in favour of a more authentic form of speech and narrative expression correspondent with its actual contexts of formality or intimacy, is both a significant step away from the stylistics of sensibility that had held considerable sway to this point, and also a significant step in the direction of the realistic discourse that would eventually come to dominate nineteenth-century fiction.

And finally in this rapid overview, we come to what I see as the single most cumbersome obstacle to the literary effectiveness of the late eighteenth-century Novel of Sentiment (though, in fairness, this might also be said of very many novels up to the time of Austen and beyond), which is that they tend to restrict themselves to type rather than to individual experience, and were therefore in danger, on the cusp of British Romanticism—connecting so powerfully with individual awareness—of becoming irrelevant to readers’ own non-transferable personal experience. Speaking of the fiction that was written after Jane Austen, Susan Morgan observes that “ unlike the work” of eighteenth-century novelists, such writing “does not define human nature as either fixed or universal”. That is, it had moved away from talking about experience in stylised and general terms to expressing the particular, the personal, the unique; and in doing so, it laid the foundations for the believable, highly idiosyncratic individuals of nineteenth-century fiction. In Walsh Colville, however ironic this may appear in the context of extravagantly expressed emotion, we do not find a single character who articulates, even in a limited way, what we might now call the psychological complexity of their circumstances. Their rhetorical outbursts are finely crafted, but they never penetrate the surface of true experience to communicate deeper thought. Nor is any plausible development in evidence in the novella: in general, decent and bad characters alike remain true to their original affiliations. The always-faultless Frances Surry and her always-lively cousin Jessie never ever remotely veer from the course of absolute decency, nor do their trusted male associates. The libertine characters never alter their decadent moral allegiances, nor ever enter into any sort of reflection that might nudge them towards such change. Whatever modification in character does take place (and this almost exclusively concerns Stanhope), it is wholly unbelievable in its extent and rapidity, and is brought about, in a deus ex machina fashion, by the heavy-handed contrivances of an implausibly dovetailing plot.

Walsh Colville therefore presents us, on balance, with an under-nourished narrative, ornate but superficial rhetoric and characters who are types rather than individuals. In doing so, however, it faithfully reflects a broader body of writing that had attained huge commercial success, though one that was now rapidly being displaced by other styles. But it is precisely this faithful reflection that lends Porter’s novella its particular value, historically speaking, as it acts as a veritable snapshot of the stylistic limitations of the Novel of Sentiment and shows exactly why—and in what respects—other novelists whom we now deem of particular importance (such as Maria Edgeworth, Frances Burney, Mary Hays, or Elizabeth Inchbald, for instance, to name only a few women writers broadly contemporary with Porter) had already largely rejected this stylistic approach, or had at least avoided its excesses, and why it would eventually give way to a very different form of writing fiction.

10 John Mullan observes that there were still novels published throughout the 1790s that referred to themselves as “sentimental”. “Sentimental Novels”, 236. For Mullan, the fact that Austen satirised such literature in Sanditon—her final work, left unfinished at her death in 1817—supports the idea that “in order to be worth discrediting, sentimentalism must still have been exerting its influence on the consumption of fiction in Regency England” (ibid.), that is, long after the conventional limits of its demise.
11 Johnson, Review of Todd, 112.
Lady Susan: Towards pastures new

Turning to Austen, what would a similar critical overview find in Lady Susan? The difficulty here lies in adequately synthesising what is the veritable catalogue of attainments that this work offers. To start with, I would argue—in contrast to the opinions forwarded by most critics over the decades—that this novella is not a stylistically limiting work against which Austen was struggling and which she needed to abandon in order to realise the enormous potential of her burgeoning talent, to paraphrase what has historically been the presiding take on this text. Though of course this is not the focus of my discussion and so I can give this little further space here, my own view is that Austen abandoned this work for commercial and political reasons and not at all for stylistic concerns. (For most writers in the late 1790s and beyond, the epistolary was no longer a worthwhile novelistic form, financially, and had become tainted by its association with Jacobin subversiveness.) But returning to an assessment of the novella itself rather than to the question of its incompleteness or the history of its critical reception, there are a number of characteristic features in this text that, when compared to Walsh Colville, highlight just how different was the road that Austen had started travelling down.

First, whilst it is evident that all epistolary texts have a certain dramatic advantage over other writing by offering unmediated access to the letter writers’ thoughts, I would suggest that, in Austen’s novella, this aspect is put to an extraordinarily effective, possibly even revolutionary, use. In my own reading of this novella, I feel that the balance of sympathy actually lies not with Lady Susan Vernon (which is the usual critical stance) but with her sister-in-law, Catherine. The manner in which such considerable unmediated access is accorded to Catherine’s thoughts establishes in effect an incipient narrative voice, one that partly assumes the ideas and even the consciousness of Catherine; this comes remarkably close to free indirect style and—I would suggest—is the forerunner to the overseeing narrators of Austen’s mature work, who not only deftly administer the attribution of sympathy and antipathy throughout their respective novels but also, and especially, intertwine their protagonists’ thoughts with the very fabric of the narrative itself. I have argued elsewhere that this is a consistent feature of the novella, and its consistency points to a certain fusing of implicit narrative consciousness to the thoughts and emotions of Catherine Vernon. In their respective letters:

Whereas Lady Susan stands for social disruption, Catherine Vernon emphatically underlines the importance of social union. And although our knowledge of this is derived basically from Catherine’s own letters, the rapidity with which Frederica [Susan’s daughter] appears to identify with and respond to the maternally wholesome environment at Churchill [Catherine’s residence] is another pointer to the manner in which Austen orchestrates our approval in favour of Catherine Vernon.

It is no easy task to illustrate this succinctly, as the effect I am arguing for is mostly cumulative. However, two brief extracts are particularly clear examples of how the epistolary arrangements of tone and content modulate readers’ sympathy, and appear to construct an implicit narrative voice. In Susan’s final missive (Letter 39), far from beating a retreat, she defiantly and most malevolently hints at still further mischief, now plotting the early death of her lover’s wife, if not entirely in earnest:

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

This stands in most dramatic contrast to Catherine, whose own motivations derive from the wish to protect and maintain her family, not from a desire to destroy the happiness of others. At the outset of the novella (Letter 8) Catherine writes to her mother:

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

Thus, through well-constructed episodes of parallel concern (in this case, tellingly clear attitudes towards the health and welfare of others), the novella sets up the central moral conflict within the text and orchestrates our broader responses to the two women’s undertakings, favouring at every turn the decisions and ideals of Catherine Vernon.

What I am suggesting, above all, is that Austen’s perception of the function and potential of the role of the narrator is substantially more developed than the rather rudimentary organiser of events we find in sentimental novels such as Walsh Colville; additionally, it abstains from the dramatic intrusiveness of a Fielding-like narrator. This voice,
intimately connected both to the events set out in the novella and to the consciousness of certain characters is, to my mind, an enormous step in the direction of a more sophisticated understanding of the possibilities of fiction. My second observation concerns dialogue. Unlike the stilted, unnatural and excessive language we find in Walsh Colville (or, indeed, throughout the Novel of Sensibility), Lady Susan is characterised by a remarkably credible fabric of discourse. Austen carefully and systematically sets out a use of language by her leading characters that is consistent and coherent with their various contexts and circumstances, modulating these according to the formality, informality, intimacy or publicness of their speech. Most especially as regards the utterances of Lady Susan or Catherine, there is a well-maintained distinction between the convincingly passionate outbursts of their private language and the stately decorum of their public exchanges. The result of this is a consolidation of plausibility, which creates a strong and compelling sense of realism wholly absent from Walsh Colville. Once again, we are moved in the direction of the narrative transparency and verisimilitude of Austen’s later novels and away from the stylised improbabilities of the fiction of sentiment. Of exactly this aspect, Alexander and I have argued that:

...when Lady Susan is on her most outrageous form, she is often also at her most humanly realistic: pride, jealousy and the wish for revenge are some of the aspects that her letters reveal; yet such revelation is always made in the context of strictest intimacy. Even Mrs Vernon is forced to accept that the public face and behaviour of Lady Susan are impeccable. To articulate these concerns openly would indeed be unrealistic, even histrionic, as well as revealing an improbably scant regard for socially expected comportment. But to do so privately, and to friends who “enter into all our feelings”—even given the vehemence that Lady Susan shows—is surely a none-too-uncommon reality, one with which we are readily able to identify, if not sympathise.17

This credibility of dialogue facilitates a far fuller narrative experience of events, and in addition affords us, through the epistolary of the novella, different linguistic experiences of the same event. That is, we often receive an indication of Lady Susan’s public response to a given situation, followed shortly by her visceral private outburst regarding the same instant. Such is the case with her reaction to the untimely arrival at Catherine’s house of the foppish Sir James Martin, a man with too many secrets for Susan’s comfort. To Catherine, Susan excuses the impropriety of James as not very distant, I had intended within a few days to acquaint yourself & Mr. Vernon with the whole business. I am sure, my dear Sister, you will excuse my remaining silent so long, & agree with me that such circumstances, while they continue from any cause in suspense, cannot be too cautiously concealed. When you have the happiness of bestowing your sweet little Catherine, some years hence, on a Man who in connection & character is alike unexceptionable, you will know what I feel now; tho' Thank Heaven! you cannot have all my reasons for rejoicing in such an Event. Catherine will be amply provided for, & not, like my Frederica, indebted to a fortunate Establishment for the comforts of Life. (Letter 20)

Wonderfully juxtaposed to this is Susan’s enraged outburst to her trusted confidante, Mrs Johnson, giving a rather different gloss on the same episode:

I was never more surprised in my life than by Sir James's arrival, & the suddenness of it requires some apology to You, my dear Sister; tho' to me, as a Mother, it is highly flattering. He is so extremely attached to my Daughter that he could not exist longer without seeing her. Sir James is a young man of an amiable disposition & excellent character; a little too much of the Rattle, perhaps, but a year or two will rectify that; & he is in other respects so very eligible a Match for Frederica, that I have always observed his attachment with the greatest pleasure, & am persuaded that you & my Brother will give the alliance your hearty approbation. I have never before mentioned the likelihood of its taking place to any one, because I thought that while Frederica continued at school it had better not be known to exist; but now, as I am convinced that Frederica is too old ever to submit to school confinement, & have therefore begun to consider her union with Sir James as not very distant, I had intended within a few days to acquaint yourself & Mr. Vernon with the whole business. I am sure, my dear Sister, you will excuse my remaining silent so long, & agree with me that such circumstances, while they continue from any cause in suspense, cannot be too cautiously concealed. When you have the happiness of bestowing your sweet little Catherine, some years hence, on a Man who in connection & character is alike unexceptionable, you will know what I feel now; tho' Thank Heaven! you cannot have all my reasons for rejoicing in such an Event. Catherine will be amply provided for, & not, like my Frederica, indebted to a fortunate Establishment for the comforts of Life. (Letter 20)

This is insufferable! My dearest friend, I was never so enraged before, and must relieve myself by writing to you, who I know will enter into all my feelings. Who should come on Tuesday but Sir James Martin! Guess my astonishment & vexation—for, as you well know, I never wished him to be seen at Churchill. What a pity that you should not have known his intentions! Not content with coming, he actually invited hims

Throughout the novella, a clear distinction is maintained between the—often splendidly ambiguous—public language of decorum, which attends to place and convention, and the unguarded, intimate effusions of anger that both protagonists give vent to. To be sure, these have some distance still to cover before Austen will be able to create the sustained realistic conversational exchanges of her later fiction; but, both in the plausibility and naturalness of their expression, these interchanges are a world apart from the stilted, set-piece dialogue that Porter’s characters never rise above.

My final observation, which is in effect a culmination of the first two points, concerns the literary creation of individuals rather than types. It is true that, in what we have of *Lady Susan*, several characters—most notably Reginald and Frederica—are rather under-developed and never appear to have engaged their creator’s attention sufficiently to take them beyond their sketch-like presence. But the two central characters, the warring sisters-in-law, are astonishingly persuasive creations (a fact often remarked about *Lady Susan Vernon*, but—I think mistakenly—far less frequently so of Catherine).

This is so because of the access we are given to their private thoughts, the linguistically credible manner in which they express these thoughts, and the socially plausible manner in which their interactions occur, creating in consequence complex yet cogent personalities who respond in their own particular manner to their own particular circumstances. They are credible inhabitants of credible environments (both physical and emotional) and have little connection with the artificiality of the contrived and wooden characters we find in *Walsh Colville*. In short, they impart a sense of uniqueness, of individualism, and move us much closer to the highly believable personalities of the nineteenth-century novel.

**Conclusion**

We often speak in a rather abstract manner of transformation in literary development; we observe that the novel “grows” and “changes” over time, and we would all recognise as distinct evolutionary points on some sort of approximate continuum works such as *Pamela* (1740), *Tristram Shandy* (1759); *The Man of Feeling* (1771); *Cecilia* (1782); *A Sicilian Romance* (1790); *Caleb Williams* (1794) or *Castle Rackrent* (1800). Yet we rarely have such clear and close textual examples from writers working in close proximity—less than 60 miles apart at the time of composition considered here—and at almost exactly the same point in history—the mid-1790s—of how literary evolution can be seen in action. The two texts discussed in this essay do just that—in the one case, pinpointing the fatal inertia of a popular but decadent form; in the other, highlighting the very elements of technical advancements that gave impetus to the astounding achievements of nineteenth-century English novelistic fiction.

Ultimately, however, what is most compelling to me in this comparison is that the two works encapsulating these distinct moments in the development of the English novel are both juvenilia productions, and are both highly competent writings whatever else we may think about their respective style. This, I would say, is a useful reminder that literary juvenilia—which simply never gets a look-in in the many and various accounts of the history of the novel—is not *ipso facto* marginal or subordinate to the currents of literary change, but may directly represent and actually even initiate aspects of such change, providing us—as in the case of the works discussed here—with clear, close and engaging examples of the evolutions that would then take place in the Bigger Picture.
Bibliography


