## THE MANUSCRIPT NOVELS

## PREFACE TO THE MANUSCRIPT NOVELS

AFTER FINISHING her teenage writings and before she began publishing her early novels Jane Austen wrote two extraordinary works. Both remained unpublished until the twentieth century. The first, 'Lady Susan', exists in a fair untitled copy and is set within the aristocracy. The second, 'The Watsons', a much-corrected fragment, describes characters from the lower middle class. Neither rank appears centrally in the six published novels.

A novella in letter form, 'Lady Susan' cannot be dated securely but family consensus places it close to an early version of *Sense and Sensibility*, about 1795, although it may have been altered later. Austen did not seek to publish it, but she made and kept a fair copy. 'The Watsons' most likely dates from around 1804; like the earlier realist fragment, 'Catharine, or the Bower', it was neither concluded nor destroyed and Jane Austen might have intended to return to it in later life. Her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh though this aunt abandoned 'The Watsons' when she realised she had placed her main characters too low down the social scale; a more likely factor was her father's sudden death in 1805, which must have brought the story of impoverished spinster daughters of a country vicar rather close to home.

Jane Austen died in July 1817 after a long illness. She used her last months to compose the beginning of a final novel, 'Sanditon', an exaggerated, comic work in some ways closer in style to her teenage skits than to the six novels. It is set not in the usual country house or village but in a developing seaside resort on the south coast of England. Austen's increasing weakness made it sometimes difficult for her to cope with a pen and she wrote a few passages first in pencil. There is however no sign of any falling-off in imagination. At the end of the fragment Austen entered the date on which she stopped composing: 18 March 1817.

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LADY SUSAN

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### PREFACE TO 'LADY SUSAN'

AFTER JANE AUSTEN'S death, her family were reluctant to publish 'Lady Susan' and it does indeed come as a shock to those who read it after the mature novels. Certainly the heroine, a handsome widow, is the most finished portrait of clever, charming malice that Austen ever penned. Lady Susan's brisk immorality emerges in her vivacious letters as she tunes her words to her duped recipients. She is a gambler in society, enjoying the process of the game as much as the winning, and she is prepared to risk everything for another chance at a prize.

The power that Lady Susan exerts over others is a function of her power over language. Aware that eloquence is the greatest asset a woman can have, she exploits it to control men's desire. In this novella Austen comes as close to presenting sex and sexual enjoyment as she could for the time. But Lady Susan's love of control usually outweighs her need to satisfy her physical desire. Under cover of feminine performance, she pursues the traditionally masculine aim of seducing to enjoy sexual and psychological mastery: 'There is exquisite pleasure in subduing an insolent spirit', she remarks. She wants men to respond completely and irrationally to her, and the closer she comes to imposing a vision of herself on them, the more energetic and excited she becomes.

In her mature novels Austen controls the reader's moral point of view with narrative irony, but in this epistolary novella she allows the energy of the character almost to defeat the reader's probable moral expectation. In the closing pages a narrator is introduced to point out Lady Susan's lack of 'conscience', a powerful word that leaps out of its cynical context. However, if we exclude the monstrous treatment of her meek daughter, Lady Susan has

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perhaps some defence for her selfishness. In a patriarchal world where 'Propriety & so forth' are stacked against women who have neither property nor status in themselves, such energy as hers has nothing to do but devour others and itself.

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> حکلات LADY SUSAN

> > LETTER I.

Lady Susan Vernon to M. Vernon.-

Langford, Dec:-

My dear Brother

I can no longer refuse myself the pleasure of profitting by your kind invitation when we last parted, of spending some weeks with you at Churchill, & therefore if quite convenient to you and M<sup>rs</sup>. Vernon to receive me at present, I shall hope within a few days to be introduced to a sister,\* whom I have so long desired to be acquainted with.---My kind friends here are most affectionately urgent with me to prolong my stay, but their hospitable & chearful 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. I long to be made known to your dear little Children, in whose hearts I shall be very eager to secure an interest.—I shall soon have occasion for all my fortitude, as I am on the point of separation from my own daughter.-The long illness of her dear Father prevented my paying her that attention which Duty & affection equally dictated, & I have but too much reason to fear that the Governess to whose care I consigned her, was unequal to the charge.---I have therefore resolved on placing her at one of the best Private Schools in Town, where I shall have an opportunity of leaving her myself, in my way to you. I am determined you see, not to be denied admittance at Churchill.-It would indeed give me most painful sensations to know that it were not in your power to receive me.-Yr most obliged & affec: Sister

S. Vernon.—

\* Sister: here means sister-in-law.

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#### LETTER $2^{\text{d}}$ .

Lady Susan to M<sup>rs</sup>. Johnson

Langford

You were mistaken my dear Alicia, in supposing me fixed at this place for the rest of the winter. It greives me to say how greatly you were mistaken, for I have seldom spent three months more agreably than those which have just flown away.-At present nothing goes smoothly.—The Females of the Family are united against me.—You foretold how it would be, when I first came to Langford; & Manwaring is so uncommonly pleasing that I was not without apprehensions myself. I remember saying to myself as I drove to the House, "I like this Man; pray Heaven no harm come of it!"-But I was determined to be discreet, to bear in mind my being only four months a widow, & to be as quiet as possible,-and I have been so;-my dear Creature, I have admitted no one's attentions but Manwaring's, I have avoided all general flirtation whatever, I have distinguished no Creature besides of all the Numbers resorting hither, except Sir James Martin, on whom I bestowed a little notice in order to detach him from Miss Manwaring. But if the World could know my motive there, they would honour me.—I have been called an unkind Mother, but it was the sacred impulse of maternal affection, it was the advantage of my Daughter that led me on; & if that Daughter were not the greatest simpleton on Earth, I might have been rewarded for my Exertions as I ought.—Sir James did make proposals to me for Frederica—but Frederica, who was born to be the torment of my life, chose to set herself so violently against the match, that I thought it better to lay aside the scheme for the present.-I have more than once repented that I did not marry him myself, & were he but one degree less contemptibly weak I certainly should, but I must own myself rather romantic in that respect, & that Riches only, will not satisfy me. The event of all this is very provoking .- Sir James is gone, Maria highly incensed, and Mrs. Manwaring insupportably jealous;-so jealous in short, & so enraged against me, that in the fury of her temper I should not be

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surprised at her appealing to her Guardian if she had the liberty of addressing him-but there your Husband stands my friend, & the kindest, most amiable action of his Life was his throwing her off\* forever on her Marriage.-Keep up his resentment therefore I charge you.-We are now in a sad state; no house was ever more altered; the whole family are at war, & Manwaring scarcely dares speak to me. It is time for me to be gone; I have therefore determined on leaving them, and shall spend I hope a comfortable day with you in Town within this week.-If I am as little in favour with M<sup>r</sup>. Johnson as ever, you must come to me at Nº 10 Wigmore St-but I hope this may not be the case, for as M<sup>r</sup>. Johnson with all his faults is a Man to whom that great word "Respectable" is always given, & I am known to be so intimate with his wife, his slighting me has an awkward Look.---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 there 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 till I have something better in veiw. My young Lady accompanies me to Town, where I shall deposit her under the care of Miss Summers in Wigmore Street, till she becomes a little more reasonable. She will make good connections there, as the Girls are all of the best Families.-The price is immense, & much beyond what I can ever attempt to pay.-Adeiu. I will send you a line, as soon as I arrive in Town.-Yours Ever,

S. Vernon.

### LETTER 3.

M<sup>rs</sup>. Vernon to Lady De Courcy.

Churchill

My dear Mother

I am very sorry to tell you that it will not be in our power to keep our promise of spending the Christmas with you; & we are prevented

\* Throwing her off: disowning her.

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that happiness by a circumstance which is not likely to make us any amends.-Lady Susan in a letter to her Brother, has declared her intention of visiting us almost immediately-& as such a visit is in all probability merely an affair of convenience, it is impossible to conjecture it's length. I was by no means prepared for such an event, nor can I now account for her Ladyship's conduct.-Langford appeared so exactly the place for her in every respect, as well from the elegant & expensive stile of Living there, as from her particular attachment to Mrs. Manwaring, that I was very far from expecting so speedy a distinction, tho' I always imagined from her increasing friendship for us since her Husband's death, that we should at some future period be obliged to receive her.—M<sup>r</sup>. Vernon I think was a great deal too kind to her, when he was in Staffordshire. Her behaviour to him, independant of her general Character, has been so inexcusably artful & ungenerous since our marriage was first in agitation, that no one less amiable & mild than himself could have overlooked it at all; & tho' as his Brother's widow & in narrow circumstances it was proper to render her pecuniary assistance, I cannot help thinking his pressing invitation to her to visit us at Churchill perfectly unnecessary.-Disposed however as he always is to think the best of every one, her display of Greif, & professions of regret, & general resolutions of prudence were sufficient to soften his heart, & make him really confide in her sincerity. But as for myself, I am still unconvinced; & plausibly as her Ladyship has now written, I cannot make up my mind, till I better understand her real meaning in coming to us.—You may guess therefore my dear Madam with what feelings I look forward to her arrival. She will have occasion for all those attractive Powers for which she is celebrated, to gain any share of my regard; & I shall certainly endeavour to guard myself against their influence, if not accompanied by something more substantial.—She expresses a most eager desire of being acquainted with me, & makes very gracious mention of my children, but 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. Miss Vernon is to be placed at a school in Town before her Mother comes to

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us, which I am glad of, for her sake & my own. It must be to her advantage to be separated from her Mother; & a girl of sixteen who has received so wretched an education would not be a very desirable companion here.—Reginald has long wished I know to see this captivating Lady Susan, & we shall depend on his joining our party soon.—I am glad to hear that my Father continues so well, & am, with best Love &c, Cath Vernon.—

#### LETTER 4.

M<sup>r</sup>. De Courcy to M<sup>rs</sup>. Vernon.

Parklands

My dear Sister

I congratulate you & M<sup>r</sup>. Vernon on being about to receive into your family, the most accomplished coquette in England.-As a very distinguished Flirt, I have been always taught to consider her; but it has lately fallen in my way to hear some particulars of her conduct at Langford, which prove that she does not confine herself to that sort of honest flirtation which satisfies most people, but aspires to the more delicious gratification of making a whole family miserable.-By her behaviour to M! Manwaring, she gave jealousy & wretchedness to his wife, & by her attentions to a young Man previously attached to M<sup>r</sup>. Manwaring's sister, deprived an amiable girl of her Lover.---I learnt all this from a M<sup>r</sup>. Smith now in this neighbourhood-(I have dined with him at Hurst and Wilford)-who is just come from Langford, where he was a fortnight in the house with her Ladyship, & who is therefore well qualified to make the communication.-What a Woman she must be!-I long to see her, & shall certainly accept your kind invitation, that I may form some idea of those bewitching powers which can do so much-engaging at the same time & in the same house the affections of two Men who were neither of them at liberty to bestow them-& all this, without the charm of youth.-I am glad to find that Miss Vernon does not come with her Mother to Churchill, as she has not even manners to recommend her, &

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