

Shamelessness in Jane Austen: The Case of Lady Susan

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The phenomenology of shame, as well as its adaptive character, is explored from a modern biological point of view. Against this backdrop, an analysis of shamelessness is outlined. Jane Austen's interest in shamelessness is one instance of her general concern with psychological issues, and pervades her mature novels. Here the focus is on her early exploration in the short epistolary novella *Lady Susan*. Lady Susan Vernon turns out to be a paradigmatic case of a Machiavellian personality and thus provides an explanatory matrix for shamelessness. Austen also occasions exploration of societal inability to cope well with such personalities. An informational view of culture is provided to help explain the convergence of Austen's analysis with contemporary empirical psychology.

Keywords: Austen, shamelessness, *Lady Susan*, Machiavellian personality

Gilbert Ryle once said of Jane Austen that she "... was a moralist in a thick sense, that she wrote what and as she wrote partly from a deep interest in some perfectly general, even theoretical questions about human nature and human conduct" (2009, p. 286). This interest focuses often in her mature novels on the dynamics of shame and their interplay with self-discovery and self-reform. Austen is also deeply interested in the issue of shamelessness, and often draws detailed portraits of at least apparently genuinely shameless characters. These interests took shape early in her writing career. Here I focus on her early novella *Lady Susan* (Austen, 1988b). I am especially concerned to delineate what I take to be Austen's profound understanding of shamelessness. This includes at least four significant hypotheses: (a) that shameless behavior springs from an underlying (more or less durable) structure of personality; (b) a view about what that structure is; (c) a view about how these dynamics generate a powerful strategy for survival in a highly competitive social setting; and (d) that the social milieu in which Lady Susan moves has a very limited capacity to cope with her shamelessness. I contend that these

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four hypotheses constitute a substantive contribution to our understanding of human psychology. It is convenient to start with the matter of shame itself and its underlying biology.

Shame in Biological Perspective

Shame is an emotion that involves a pattern of behavior especially evident in young children. When ashamed, children will typically avert their eyes from any surrounding other people, even hide their face in their hands (if I can't see you, then you can't see me), both typical avoidance behaviors. They may blush, an unequivocal signal to others of their ashamed status (Drummond, 2013; Nikolic, Colonnese, De Vente, Drummond, and Boegels, 2015; Rot, Moskowitz, and De Jong, 2015). The large muscles in their necks and shoulders will relax, and they slump forward into the posture sometimes called "hang-dog." Their levels of arousal and activity will plunge to virtually zero, and they generally withdraw from their social surround. The net effect is to conserve energy and attentional resources until such time as they can be redeployed to greater advantage (Dickerson, Gruenewald, and Kemeny, 2004, 2009; Sheikh and Janoff-Bulman, 2010; Tracy and Matsumoto, 2008). In adults, if shame lasts too long or becomes too intense, the shamed person almost invariably responds with violence (Elison, Garofalo, and Velotti, 2014; Thomason, 2015). One function of caretakers, both for children and adults, is to insure that shame does not last too long, that it only arises in appropriate circumstances, that it is felt in an appropriate degree, and that it does not fasten on inappropriate objects.

Shame has an especially early ontogeny in humans. It emerges towards the end of the first year of life (in the course of normal development), and is normally quite secure by 24 months. Both early emergence and early development precede the appearance of guilt at around 36 months (Drummond, Hammond, Satloff-Bedrick, Waugh, and Brownell, 2017; Eisenberg, 2000). The early emergence of shame is consistent with a similarly early appearance of sensitivity to and capability with social norms. Children give evidence for such capability and sensitivity by around two years of age (Rakoczy, 2008; Rakoczy and Schmidt, 2013; Rakoczy, Warneken, and Tomasello, 2008). Three-year-olds already have a capacity to understand that social norms may be "contextual," i.e., that a rule may apply in one social setting, but not in another setting (Jensen, Vaish, and Schmidt, 2014). In the absence of adult supervision, five-year-olds can create and transmit social norms of their own (Goeckeritz, Schmidt, and Tomasello, 2014). Children also learn very easily and quickly to enforce social norms and to punish violators (Hardecker and Tomasello, 2017; Schmidt, Rakoczy, and Tomasello, 2012). All of this, of course, supports the young child's capacity for socialization, for effective social play, and for acquiring skill in the use of normative concepts and language. It is thus an important nexus for the early acquisition in human children of at least

a rudimentary form of morality (Drummond et al., 2017; Kanngiesser, Schmidt, and Rossano, 2016).

It seems likely that some *precursor* of social normativity is to be found in our close primate relatives (Anderson, Kuroshima, Takimoto, and Fujita, 2013; Warneken and Tomasello, 2006, 2009). Submission behavior in primates may be due to a form of “proto-shame” (Fessler, 2004, 2007; Fessler and Gervais, 2010; Keltner, 1995, and 2009, pp. 74–96). All of this, in turn, suggests very strongly that shame dynamics in humans are adaptive functions arising from our long evolutionary history (Tracy and Matsumoto, 2008).

A great deal of recent work has been done on brain structures that underpin shame and its dynamics. Shame is a function of a widely distributed network, including the medial prefrontal cortex, the orbital-frontal cortex, some parts of the limbic system (notably the amygdala and the hippocampal complex), the posterior cingulate cortex, the sensory–motor cortex, and elements of the reward systems (both neo-cortically based and in the brain stem/basal ganglia: see Bastin, Harrison, Davey, Moll, and Whittle, 2016; Michl, Meindl, Meister, Born, Engel, Reiser et al., 2014; Roth, Kaffenberger, Herwig, and Bruehl, 2014). To the previous aspects of early ontogeny and primate-wide phylogeny, then, may be added a fairly strong claim to a distinctive neural underpinning for virtually every aspect of shame and its regulation. This brings us to the issue of shame’s functions.

We belong to one of the most aggressive species. But we also belong to one of the most cooperative species on the planet. Indeed, it is our capacity for cooperation and reciprocity with large numbers of non-kin that most clearly demarcates us from our fellow primates and other mammals (see McClelland, 2011, 2013 for further discussion). Humans form alliances with non-kin that are among the most effective and durable ways known in the animal world at large for generating, conserving, and transmitting cultural knowledge from one generation to another. Such cumulative cultural knowledge is, in turn, the primary secret of our success as a species (Henrich, 2016; Sterelny, 2012).

Given the importance to we humans of our social alliances, it makes sense from an evolutionary point of view that we should also possess a system that alerts us to threats to the cohesiveness and well-functioning of those alliances. This is the primary function of shame: “...shame evolved to protect individuals’ social bonds and social status, specifically by alerting individuals to when their social belongingness is threatened” (Cibich, Woodyatt, and Wenzel, 2016, p. 471). We may expect shame, then, to motivate behavior to protect those social bonds, or to repair them when ruptured. And this is just what we do find: shame motivates both withdrawal/avoidance behavior (which can protect social bonds) and approach behavior aimed at restoring broken or damaged social bonds (De Hooge, Zeelenberg, and Breugelmans, 2010, 2011; De Waal, 2015 for primate parallels). This helps to explain also why blushing has such powerful remedial effects when it occurs as a result of shame (Dijk, De Jong, and Peters, 2009).

Shame, then, functions as a general “sociometer,” measuring by its valence and degree threats to the social well-being of the individual and to the cohesiveness of social networks (De Hooge, 2014; Jaffe, 2008; Lazarus, 1991, pp. 240–247; Sznycer, Xygalatas, Agey, Alami, An, Ananyeva et al., 2018).

Shame also has effects on the self-image of the shamed person. As one of the “self-conscious” emotions, it construes or presents the self to the self as defective or deficient, i.e., as having failed to satisfy some significant social norm or other (Mason, 2010, pp. 418–419). It thus can motivate behavior that promises to repair that self-image (Eisenberg and Spinrad, 2014; Ferguson, 2005). Here withdrawal or avoidance behavior serves to protect the damaged self while repairs are undertaken. It is crucial to this function that the defect in the self actually be *capable* of being repaired (Gausel and Leach, 2011; Gausel, Leach, Vignoles, and Brown, 2012). Shame thus has the power to generate important self-knowledge by presenting the self to itself as damaged or defective in a very specific regard and as deserving of effortful repair. Where such knowledge is available and is acted upon, shame can result in self-reformation, a form of biological and social/psychological redemption.

By contrast, persons in whom shame fails to appear as it ought (developmentally), or in whom shame is otherwise poorly regulated, are unlikely to benefit from such self-discoveries (if, indeed, they make them at all) or to make the repairs to self and social networks that can ensue from those discoveries. These are among the characteristic failings of the shameless person (Mason, 2010, pp. 419, 422). We may also predict that shameless persons are likely to be causes of irreparable social breaches and the degradation of well-functioning social alliances or networks.

Shamelessness

Since shame is an emotion, it is subject to the usual vicissitudes of regulation. Human emotions tend to set in under predictable conditions, to endure for predictable durations, to be provoked or elicited by predictable objects or states of affairs, and to pass away (be metabolized) in predictable fashions. The patterns of emotional regulation are acquired early in human development, and are often remarkably durable, though never cast in concrete (Gross, 2007; Schore, 1994; Tronick, 2007, pp. 155–245, 397–515). We also know that emotional regulation is inherently and essentially inter-subjective: that is, it is acquired by means of two-way social and affective interaction between the developing child and that child’s primary care-takers. The regulatory system that develops is thus an internalization of the general pattern of those interactions. All patterns of emotional regulation are fundamentally inter-subjective in their origins (Hasson and Frith, 2016; Seligman, 2017; Trevarthen, 1998, 2011). But we can go further, and should do so for the sake of our ultimate target.

Emotional regulation, including that of shame, is allostatic in character. For a simple analogy, consider the operation of just about any heating and cooling

system. The system operates by raising or lowering the ambient temperature to maintain it roughly within the target range (the set-points). So long as the set-points are relatively fixed, the system operates homeostatically: using feed-back reporting, coupled with compensatory mechanisms, to constantly return the ambient temperature to the same value. But the set-points and the target value themselves can be changed (McEwen and Gianaros, 2011; Romero, Dickens, and Cyr, 2009; Schulkin, 2004). Allostatic biological systems also have feed-forward features, in addition to the more usual feed-back features, that make it possible for them to anticipate future conditions and to regulate with a view to such anticipated conditions (Ramsay and Woods, 2014; Sterling, 2012). Many basic physiological systems (essential for physical well-being) in the human body operate allostatically. Emotional regulation (essential for social well-being) is also allostatic, although the set-points of the system can be especially hard to change.

It is thus possible for a given person, placed in a given set of social circumstances (and its associated norms), to experience too much or too little of shame, or indeed the Goldilocks solution that is “just right.” There is thus a sense in which a person so placed might prove to be deficient in shame: i.e., either not experiencing shame at all (when she ought to) or experiencing too little shame to affect motivations and actions. We may speak of such persons as “shameless.” I am inclined to think that it is not possible to be strictly, absolutely shameless. I will therefore consider as “shameless” anyone whose typical pattern of shame regulation regularly results in too low a degree of shame or too little motivation to protect or repair the social bonds that may be threatened by the individual’s actions. We may include here also people who defensibly ward off any conscious experience of shame. It follows that such persons rarely, if ever, experience the typical self-image degradation that commonly accompanies shame (as noted earlier).

Shameless persons thus engage in “an evasion of moral self-censure,” as also evasion of ensuing social obligations to redress the conditions of such self-censure (Mason, 2010, p. 403). The point for us will be that such evasions have themselves become a dispositional attitude in the shameless individual. “To be shameless ... is, in large part, to regard oneself as beyond the reach of *any* ideals of character appraisal” (Mason, p. 417, emphasis added). But the evasions of the shameless are not limited to affective and practical or moral evasions.

Shameless persons engage also in *epistemic* evasions, for these persons avoid and steer clear of the self-discovery and self-knowledge that is warranted by their social situation and actions (Ferguson, Brugman, White, and Eyre, 2007). Shameless persons avoid experiencing themselves as defective or deficient with regard to legitimate social norms, and thus also avoid the repairs that such deficiency motivates as well as the legitimate costs of making them (and, of course, they also avoid the other costs of shame, such as loss of contact with their social surround). In order that such repairs to the self (or self-image) can be undertaken, they must also be genuinely in the power of the agent in question to perform

(Gausel and Leach, 2011). This also is part of the “warrant” for shame. A large part of what makes “false shame” false is precisely that the changes suggested by such shame experiences do not lie within the power of the agent (e.g., to change one’s parentage, one’s ethnic origin, one’s basic body-plan). Shameless persons, by contrast, evade and avoid this whole complex of self-discovery, self-knowledge, and self-repair, as also the correlatives of these activities in the social sphere, such as public acknowledgement of wrong-doing, making visible and effective reparations, and the like. We may expect that the damage they do to their social networks will be substantial and durable. Shamelessness is thus essentially corrosive of social order. Such is the narcissism of the truly shameless person, a profoundly pathological form of anti-social life. It sponsors a radical rejection of the right of society to expect from us normal occurrences of shame and reparative actions consequent upon those occurrences. It also represents a signal failure of the shameless individual to adapt well to some of the key constraints and affordances of their social environment. To go further we must turn to Austen herself.

Shamelessness in Jane Austen: The Case of Lady Susan

Just over half way through Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Elizabeth Bennet receives an important letter from her would-be lover, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy (Austen, 1988a, pp. 195–203). The consequences of her reading that letter make it the crucial event in the novel, the point on which her whole view of Mr. Darcy, George Wickham and, most importantly of all, herself, turns. Several features of this turning point deserve notice. It is the result of a severe case of cognitive dissonance, as Darcy’s letter conflicts deeply with what Elizabeth thought she knew previously about both Darcy and Wickham. She resolves this dissonance by a concerted act of careful reasoning. And the outcome is one of intense shame. It is also the cause of a profound self-discovery. Eventually, she metabolizes her shame and engages in reform of herself and her behavior towards relevant other persons. We also see how important it is that the fault Elizabeth discovers in herself be a *reparable* one, else reform can come to nothing. In the setting of the wider novel, we also get a sharp contrast between Elizabeth’s shame and ensuing self-discovery, and the shamelessness of other characters in the novel.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, we find several characters who are shameless (or at least in whom shame, if it appears at all, is clearly deficient): Mrs. Bennet (Elizabeth’s mother), Lydia Bennet (one of her sisters), Mr. Collins (her cousin), and to some extent Mr. Bennet, Elizabeth’s hapless father. And, of course, George Wickham, who is capable of feeling shame (in an early encounter with Darcy, one or other of them is clearly ashamed, judging from his blushing, on which see Halsey, 2006), but whose shame has little effect on his behavior. The issues surrounding shame and its importance for self-knowledge pervade all of Austen’s other mature novels as well (Bochman, 2014, pp. 6–7; Fergus, 1981, p. 74; Lewis, 1954). What has not

been so widely discussed is the opposing pole of this whole complex, namely, the contrasting shamelessness of some other Austenian characters, and the tensions that shamelessness generates with characters like Elizabeth Bennet. But the paradigmatic example of shamelessness is to be found in a much earlier work.

Austen wrote *Lady Susan* when she was still in her teens, probably in 1793–1794 (Southam, 2001, pp. 45–62). It seems to me to have two fundamental purposes. The first is to try out an extended exchange of letters as a narrative strategy (Epstein, 1985, p. 409). The second is to sketch a clear example of a shameless character and her underlying personality. In both respects, it is a technical exercise. Letters and letter-writing play prominent roles in her mature novels, often as vehicles of key revelations of character, or vital movement in the plot (Jack, 1961; Knoepfelmacher, 1967). Letters, however, also often function ironically, and irony is Austen's primary comedic device (Bochman, 2014; Kestner, 1978). *Lady Susan Vernon*, in Austen's novella, often reveals her true character in the very act of trying to conceal it, whether in overt actions or in the letters that report them. And what a character she is! We can approach that character and its associated shamelessness by first considering her predicament in life.

Lady Susan Vernon's Problem

Lady Susan Vernon is the recent widow of Charles Vernon's older brother Frederic, and sister-in-law to Catherine Vernon, Charles's wife. Catherine Vernon, in turn, is a daughter of Sir Reginald and Lady de Courcy, members of a very prominent English family. Given her social class, the principal basis of wealth would have been land or the income produced from land. A study of actual wills made in East Anglia from 1540 to 1790 shows that 64% of inter-generationally transmissible wealth comprised either land or its products (Shenk, Mulder, Beise, Clark, Irons, Leonetti et al., 2010). But the elder Vernons had to sell their estate, very likely because of debts incurred by Mr. Vernon (hence the necessity for the sale: Austen 1988b, p. 249), and the result is that *Lady Susan* is impoverished. Sir Reginald reminds his son of this in a letter to him (Austen, p. 261). And though *Lady Susan* says that she is "not at present in want of money" (Austen, p. 257), this is very likely due to gifts to her from Charles Vernon himself (Austen, p. 250). *Lady Susan* is getting by mainly on this basis and on the generosity of her friends the Manwarings, at whose estate she had been staying for several months before wearing out her welcome there and repairing to the Vernon's estate at Churchill. We also have evidence that she owes a certain Miss Summers money for schooling her daughter Frederica in London (Austen, p. 274). It is thus clear that *Lady Susan* is in some financial straits. The visit to the Vernons is, she allows, "my last resort" (Austen, p. 246). She thus has a substantial problem: how to maintain her social status and insure her financial security into the foreseeable future. Almost her only option was to marry a man with a substantial fortune (her ultimate objective,

which rules out, in my view, Mulvihill's contention in his 2011 article, p. 632, that Lady Susan "lives wholly in the moment").

In the real social world of Jane Austen, a woman could engage in commerce, it is true, and both borrow and lend money at interest (Copeland, 1995; Shepherd, 2015). But these latter choices were not attractive to a woman of the gentry, and Lady Susan has no capital to get started, nor any marketable skills. Marriage remains her best option. As Austen shows us, she eventually has at least three possible future mates: Lord Manwaring is one (whose marriage Lady Susan is busy undermining). The others are Reginald de Courcy, the eldest son and heir of Sir Reginald de Courcy and brother to Catherine Vernon; and finally Sir James Martin, a singularly foolish but very rich young man who is attempting to woo Lady Susan's daughter Frederica when the novella opens.

As we will see, Lady Susan solves her problem effectively, though in an expected fashion. She does so by exercising her distinctive capacities for deception and manipulation.

Her Deceptive and Manipulative Ways

Lady Susan is very proud of her verbal skills: "If I am vain of anything it is my eloquence" (Austen, 1988b, p. 268). Catherine Vernon notes of her that "she talks vastly well" (Austen, p. 267). Her verbal skills are her primary instrument for exercising her seductive charm over others. Such charm is foundational for her manipulation of Reginald de Courcy, both according to Lady Susan herself (Austen, pp. 268–269) and his sister Catherine Vernon (p. 267). She binds Reginald to her by means of extended conversations during their walks about the grounds of Churchill, playing especially on his emotions (which she elsewhere is contemptuous of). Such manipulation is one of Lady Susan's most essential techniques for social control (it is eloquence in the service of manipulation that matters to her, and not merely creating "a world of rhetorical appearances" as Mulvihill, 2011, p. 630 would have it).

She also manipulates Catherine Vernon, this time working through a feigned attachment to her children, as she acknowledges to her friend Alicia Johnson in one of her many letters to her: "I mean to win my sister in law's heart through her children: I know all their names already, and am going to attach myself with the greatest sensibility to one in particular, a young Frederic, whom I take on my lap and sigh over for his dear Uncle's sake" (Austen, 1988b, p. 250). Later, Lady Susan will pre-empt a hostile response from Catherine Vernon by pretending that there is a rich friendship between them: "...your friendship towards me is more particularly gratifying, because I have reason to believe that some attempts were made to prejudice you against me" (Austen, pp. 277–278). She thus skillfully disarms any hostile response from Catherine Vernon over her protracted manipulation of Reginald de Courcy (which eventuates in his secret engagement to marry Lady

Susan). She also manipulates her own daughter Frederica by a particularly mean, but effective, strategy to persuade her to marry Sir James Martin:

Some mothers would have insisted on their daughter's accepting so great 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. (Austen, pp. 253–254)

The mother will thus effectively coerce her daughter to do her will, while explicitly eschewing any effort to exert such force at all. It is doubtful that Lady Susan herself is even aware of the implicit contradiction.

Lady Susan twice uses a very specific form of manipulation, sometimes called “the self-harm strategy.” That is, she offers to incur a cost to herself in order to prevent harm to another, knowing full well that the other will refuse to allow this to happen, and thereby works her will over the other(s). Thus, she offers to leave Churchill herself when Reginald de Courcy threatens to do so, so that he might not endure a rupture in his own family (a response to his recent insight into Lady Susan's true character). He refuses to allow this and thereby strengthens her influence over him (Austen, 1988b, pp. 292–293). In Letter 30, Lady Susan argues that she and young de Courcy must postpone public announcement of their engagement for the sake of public opinion and their reputations (Austen, p. 301). She pretends that this is a great wound to her own feelings, but nonetheless necessary. She is really just stringing him along, as her immediately subsequent letter to Alicia Johnson shows. In fact, we have ample evidence that Lady Susan actually holds both Frederica and Reginald de Courcy in complete and total contempt (Austen, pp. 280–282), an attitude to which I will return below. The strategy of self-harm (as a form of manipulation), and associated deceptions, are common manifestations of a certain structure of personality widely investigated in contemporary psychology and highly pertinent to Austen's portrait of Lady Susan.

Machiavellianism (after Niccolò Machiavelli's famous 1532 essay *The Prince*) is one of several personality traits bundled together by contemporary psychologists under the rubric of the Dark Triad (together with narcissism and psychopathy) or the Dark Tetrad (with the addition of sadism: Book, Visser, Blais, Hosker-Field, Methot-Jones, Gauthier et al., 2016; Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus, 2013; Jones and Paulhus, 2009; Paulhus, Curtis, and Jones, 2018). Such personalities are given to deception, manipulation, a cynical view of other people combined with a relentlessly positive view of the self, an externally oriented mode of thinking, a distinctive style of adult attachment relationships, marked coolness under conditions of social stress, and great skill in maneuvering complex social relationships to their advantage. My contention here is that Jane Austen has anticipated the Machiavellian personality and embodied it specifically in Lady Susan Vernon (Anderson, 1989, pp. 202–203 takes Lady Susan to be a psychopath, but I think

the Machiavellian profile fits her far better). Her deceptive manipulations of others are evidence indicative of this personality structure. Her seductive charm and high verbal ability also go together with these traits, and these are well known among Machiavellian personalities (see Austin, Farrelly, Black, and Moore, 2007; Jonason and Webster, 2012; Jones and Figueredo, 2013). Machiavellians are especially given to so-called “high stakes” deceptions, that is, lying when they stand to lose something of substantial value to them (Azizli, Atkinson, Baughman, Chin, Vernon, Harris, and Veselka, 2016; Baughman, Jonason, Lyons, and Vernon, 2014). And, of course, this is also true of Lady Susan, who stands to lose her social standing by virtue of her manipulative schemes and who is already known to Reginald de Courcy as “the most accomplished coquette in England” before he even meets her (Austen, p. 248; compare Sir Reginald de Courcy’s very low opinion of her: Austen, p. 261). She is playing a dangerous game: if she goes too far she may lose her social standing altogether (for reputation as a valuable social good, see Fehr, 2004; Milinski, 2016). She also exhibits her deceitful ways in the service of revenge, another key feature of Machiavellianism.

Spite and Malice: Her Vengeful Ways

Several times in Austen’s novella, Lady Susan vows revenge on this person or that. She takes the entire de Courcy/Vernon family as one target: “... it shall be my endeavor to humble the pride of these self-important De Courcy’s still lower, and to convince Mrs. Vernon that her sisterly cautions have been bestowed in vain, and to persuade Reginald that she has scandalously belied me” (Austen, 1988b, p. 254). Catherine Vernon especially excites her rage for having bad-mouthed Lady Susan: “Mrs. Vernon’s consciousness of deserving every sort of revenge that it can be in my power to inflict, for her ill-offices, could alone enable her to perceive that I am actuated by any design in behaviour so gentle and unpretending” (Austen, p. 258). Similarly, she pours out scorn, contempt and intentions to punish on both Frederica and Reginald de Courcy in equal measures (Austen, pp. 268, 282, 293). Especially notable here is Lady Susan’s sense of entitlement to hand out vengeance to anyone who stands in her way or expresses negative opinions about her. Together with the self-harm strategy of manipulation, we have here the pattern of “spite” noted in many studies of Machiavellian personalities (e.g., Laemmlle, Oedl, and Ziegler, 2014; Marcus, Zeigler–Hill, Mercer, and Norris, 2014; Southard, Noser, Pollock, Mercer, and Zeigler–Hill, 2015). Here, as in very many other respects, the portrayal of Lady Susan in Austen accords closely with what we know about Machiavellian personalities (and as opposed to the emphasis on Machiavelli’s study of the dynamics of political power, as argued by Mulvihill, 2011, where such dynamics could only be very distantly related to the “small society” examined by Austen). We also have here some explanation for why such personalities can be so destructive in social life. To understand this

further, we will need to look more closely at Lady Susan's relationship with her daughter.

Lady Susan's Attachment Style: Dismissing Frederica

Mammals come equipped by their biology with a psycho-social system for establishing and maintaining close relationships of support with other members of their species, notably primary caretakers. The system motivates seeking and maintaining physical and emotional closeness to attachment figures, especially in times of need. The main aim is to achieve safety and security, thus insuring survival, especially under conditions of high stress or danger. Most human children develop a marked pattern of attachment behavior, one they have internalized and which endures into adulthood (though its fundamental parameters are subject to change, given enough effort, a common goal of many forms of psycho-therapy). It is customary to characterize these patterns (or "styles") along two dimensions: avoidance and anxiety, the two axes defining a two-dimensional space within which various attachment "styles" can be described (for basics on attachment see Cozolino, 2014; Crittenden and Claussen, 2003; Feldman, 2017). Among those alternatives is "avoidant" attachment, one form of which typically entails a high view of the self, coupled with a low view of other people and distrust in them, resting on a conviction that they are unlikely to be available for emotional support when needed. This is "dismissing attachment" and it commonly involves high degrees of self-reliance, avoidance of emotionally close relationships, and indifference to the opinions of others (Caravallo and Gabriel, 2006; Spielmann, Maxwell, MacDonald, and Baratta, 2013). It is especially commonly found in Machiavellian personalities (Inansci, Lang, and Bereczkei, 2015; Jonason, Lyons, and Bethell, 2014; Lang and Birkas, 2014). Moreover, we now know something about its deeper psychological roots.

Machiavellians appear to be especially sensitive to anything they perceive to be a threat to themselves in the surrounding environment. They will act quickly and automatically to ward off such threats and the anxiety that threats cause (Bereczkei, Deak, Papp, Perlaki, and Orsi, 2013; Neria, Vizcaino, and Jones, 2016). Such automaticity has a neural basis in very fast responses to relevant stimuli (i.e., within 25–50 ms. of stimulus) in a subcortical visual pathway and the amygdala (Deak, Bodrogi, Biro, Perlaki, Orsi, and Bereczkei, 2017; Luo, Holroyd, Jones, Hendler, and Blair, 2007; Luo, Holroyd, Majestic, Cheng, Schechter, and Blair, 2010; Mendez-Bertolo, Moratti, Toledano, Lopez-Sosa, Martinez-Alvarez, Mah et al., 2016; Sato, Kochiyama, Uono, Matsuda, Usui, Inoue et al., 2011; Soares, Maior, Isbell, Tomaz, and Nishijo, 2017; Sweeny, Suzuki, Grabowecy, and Paller, 2013). The net effect is a form of hyper-vigilance coupled with intense emotionality but poor ability to express those emotions or to identify them correctly. These are the earmarks of "alexithymia" (literally: feeling without words), a psychological trait

common among Machiavellians (Bagozzi, Verbeke, Dietvorst, Belschak, Van den Berg, and Rietdijk, 2013; Wai and Tiliopoulos, 2012; Wastell and Booth, 2003). This is not a strategy that has been thought out in any conscious or deliberate fashion. It is an automatic and non-consciously mediated device for coping with certain kinds of anxiety in certain kinds of social settings. The result is a severe dysfunction of emotional regulation, one that especially affects how Machiavellian personalities handle self-conscious emotions like guilt and shame. But what has all this to do with Lady Susan? A great deal, as we see in her treatment of her daughter Frederica, for here she displays all the signs of a dismissing attachment style.

In the first place, she often denigrates her daughter to others: she is “the greatest simpleton on Earth . . . born to be the torment of my life.” And again, later we read: “She is a stupid girl, and has nothing to recommend her.” When Frederica attempts to run away from her London school, Lady Susan says: “I had not a notion of her being such a little devil before.” That attempt to run away is further derogated in a later letter to Alicia Johnson: “Such was the first distinguished exploit of Miss Frederica Susanna Vernon, and if we consider that it was achieved at the tender age of sixteen we shall have room for the most flattering prognostics of her future renown.” The sarcasm is thick, indeed, and continues with a snippy comparison of the daughter to Catherine Vernon: “Frederica will never eclipse her” (Austen, 1988b, pp. 245, 252, 268, 274). Lady Susan denies to Frederica any right to independent thought or action: i.e., no right to oppose her mother’s designs for her, and no right to form an independent attachment to Reginald de Courcy (Austen, pp. 294, 308). Lady Susan manipulates Frederica with respect to Sir James Martin’s wooing of her, as we saw above, and seeks to punish her for failing to fall in with these designs. In all these areas, Frederica is blamed by her mother for putting obstacles in her way. Frederica has never truly loved her mother, Lady Susan claims (Austen, p. 288). And perhaps most damning of all, Lady Susan actively undermines Frederica’s education so that she (Frederica) will not go beyond what her mother achieved in her own very poor education (Austen, p. 253). It is all the more ironic, then, when Lady Susan calls her daughter “... a chit, a child, without talent *or education*” (Austen, p. 280, emphasis added). Throughout it is evident that Lady Susan sees this primary relationship as a zero-sum game: if Lady Susan is to win, then Frederica must lose, and vice versa. And, of course, as we read in Austen’s “Conclusion,” Lady Susan soon runs down her communications with Frederica, once she is firmly established in the home of the Vernons, and eventually terminates all communication whatsoever (Austen, p. 313). She has, in sum, abandoned her own child, though it is doubtful that she herself sees it that way. A more detailed and thorough-going portrait of dismissing attachment is hard to imagine. (However, Frederica is not without resources. She navigates her way to people who can support her and negotiates successfully for their support. Such navigation and negotiation is the core of real psychological resilience: see Rutter, 2012; Ungar, 2005.) This is one very large respect in which

Lady Susan Vernon is portrayed as a genuinely Machiavellian personality, though Jane Austen has none of our contemporary scientific armamentarium for explicating that structure of personality and its underlying dynamics. A further such feature is Lady Susan's externally oriented style of thinking.

Her Externally Oriented Thinking

Lady Susan's externalizing is especially revealed in her pattern of blaming other people or external circumstances for her difficulties. It begins in her opening letter to Charles Vernon, in which she blames her late husband's illness for her failure to pay due attention to Frederica. Here, also, she blames a governess who was "unequal" to caring for Frederica. Resolved to leave her friends the Manwarings at Langford, she goes on in a letter to her friend Alicia Johnson to blame "the females of the family" for being united against her and forcing her to leave (as well they might). The same letter blames Mr. Johnson if she is prevented from meeting Alicia Johnson in London; and further blames Frederica for failing to accept Sir James Martin's proposal of marriage (Austen, 1988b, pp. 244, 245). Catherine Vernon soon comes in for blame for having "an illiberal and vindictive spirit" aroused by Lady Susan's attempt, six years previous, to prevent her marriage to Charles, an effort for which Lady Susan accepts neither blame nor censure. That same letter tells us that the sale of Frederic Vernon's estate (Castle Vernon) was the fault of "necessity." The failure to maintain Frederica at her school in London is blamed on the school's owner, Miss Summers, with a side swipe at Miss Summers for fearing that she will not get paid, despite the sterling reputation of the Vernon family. Reginald de Courcy comes in for his share of blame, also: for example, failing to elevate Lady Susan's opinions and wishes above those of Frederica herself regarding her marriage to Sir James (Austen, pp. 249, 274, 282). Pretending not to know just how miserable Sir James' attentions are making Frederica, Lady Susan blames Frederica for her own ignorance (Austen, p. 288). Late in the novella, Lady Susan blames her decision to delay her engagement to Reginald on the opinion "of the world," the opinions of his friends and family. To Reginald himself, Lady Susan writes blaming his sudden turning against her on the jealousy of Lucy Manwaring and "the ill nature of the world" (Austen, pp. 299–301, 304–305). In this same category of blaming her ills on others and on external circumstances might be placed Lady Susan's cruel joke at Frederica's expense in Letter 19, and the final swipe at Reginald for separating from her as "this act of filial obedience" (Austen, p. 306). Spiteful people (including many Machiavellians) tend to degrade, belittle, and harm others by means of "injurious humor" (Vrabel, Zeigler-Hill, and Shango, 2017). Together this style of humor and Lady Susan's pattern of blaming strongly suggest an externally oriented style of thinking. Such thinking, we now know, is a signal characteristic of Machiavellian personalities (Jonason and Krause, 2013; Monaghan, Bizumic, and Sellbom, 2016).

Further indications that such externalizing arises from the structure of her personality come from the affective associations common to externalizing personalities. Machiavellians commonly use externalizing to regulate self-conscious emotions like guilt and shame (Bear, Uribe-Zarain, Manning, and Shiomi, 2009; Bennett, Sullivan, and Lewis, 2005; Muris and Meesters, 2014; Tangney, Wagner, Hill-Barlow, Marschall, and Gramzow, 1996). The purpose of such a defensive organization is to defend the self: "...by directing blame to others, shame and guilt are avoided and the self is protected" (Bear et al. 2009, p. 231). Protected from what? Perhaps from a catastrophic narcissistic wound and associated depression, and perhaps also from an anger (her own) that she dimly anticipates to be so intense, were it to be unleashed, as to threaten her self-integrity. The question of Lady Susan's guilt and shame will concern us further, but here it is perhaps enough to note that she has a great deal to feel both for, including her wrecking the marriage of the Manwarings, her insufferable treatment of her own daughter, and her toying with Reginald de Courcy. Further, several of her interpersonal plots crash to the ground in the course of the novella (though such failures do not portend her final defeat). In spite of this, her positive self-esteem is unremitting throughout. I submit that it is largely due to her externalizing that Lady Susan Vernon is able to maintain her positive presentation of herself to herself. (Externally oriented thinking is also characteristic of alexithymia, which as noted earlier, has deep connections with Machiavellian personalities: see Donges and Suslow, 2017; Scarpazza, Ladavas, and Cattaneo, 2018; Zeigler-Hill and Vonk, 2015.) Her externalizing brings a further benefit by enabling her to withstand the self-negating powers of shame and guilt.

Her Shamelessness: An Hypothesis

There is no doubt in the minds of Austen's readers that Lady Susan Vernon has much to feel guilty about and much to be ashamed of in her own actions. This reaches back to her attempts to block the marriage of Charles Vernon to (then) Catherine de Courcy. Sir Reginald, writing to his son, sums up also his own feelings in the matter of Lady Susan's reputation: "It would destroy every comfort of my life, to know that you were married to Lady Susan Vernon. It would be the death of that honest pride with which I have hitherto considered my son, I should blush to see him, to hear of him, to think of him" (Austen, 1988b, p. 261; see also Catherine Vernon's opinion at Austen, p. 247, confirmed by Lady Susan herself at p. 249). We see in the course of the novella her all-out assault on the de Courcy family, and her motives for doing so. Nevertheless, late in the proceedings, she returns to Churchill, after her split with Reginald, and Catherine Vernon takes full note of her "cheerfulness and good humour" and her complete lack of guilt or embarrassment (Austen, pp. 309-310). It is as if there had been no parting between her and Reginald, and no offense to the family. Later still, Catherine

Vernon waits on Lady Susan in London (intent on separating Frederica from her) and is horrified at her aplomb: "... she was met with such an easy and cheerful affection as made her almost turn from her with horror. No remembrance of Reginald, no consciousness of guilt, gave one look of embarrassment" (Austen, p. 311). Lady Susan thus appears before us as the very paradigm of an apparently shameless individual. By juxtaposing her shamelessness with the lengthy detailing of her externalizing thought patterns, I suggest, Jane Austen is putting before us a powerful psychological hypothesis: that shamelessness may not be due so much to a failure to feel shame at all, as to a defensive organization of the personality that prevents that shame from having any effects on motivations, intentions, or actions, especially in interpersonal relationships. This brings us to two final issues: Lady Susan's success and the response to it of the small social circle around her that Austen is examining.

Her Success and Society's Response

In Austen's novella, Lady Susan resolves her predicament by abruptly marrying Sir James Martin. Austen tells us very little about this, and the event is more than somewhat inexplicable in her narrative, especially given Lady Susan's early comment: "I have more than once repented that I did not marry him [Sir JM] myself, and were he but one degree less contemptibly weak I certainly should, but I own myself rather romantic in that respect, and that riches only will not satisfy me" (Austen, 1988b, p. 245). Perhaps time and the pressure of her straightened circumstances have connived to reduce Sir James' apparent weakness sufficiently. But the match remains, in my opinion, more than a little unmotivated in Austen. She has almost certainly married the greatest fool in England, she who otherwise will not suffer such fools gladly. Nevertheless, she is successful in solving her problem: she has married money and married within her social class, preserving at once her social status and her financial security (other failures of her ploys noted earlier are exaggerated by Mulvihill, 2011, p. 633 to suggest a more comprehensive defeat of Lady Susan than Austen's text warrants).

Empirical evidence suggests strongly that many actual Machiavellian personalities are similarly successful in their life-histories (Furnham, Richards, and Paulhus, 2013; Hawley, 2003; Jones, 2014). Recent investigations have gone so far as to conclude that Machiavellianism should not be considered a pathological formation at all, but rather only a "pseudo-pathology" having adaptive value for the individual (Holden, Roof, McCabe, and Zeigler-Hill, 2015; Jonason, Duineveld, and Middleton, 2015; Lang, Birkas, Martin, Nagy, and Kallai, 2017). It even seems likely that social groups containing a certain proportion of Machiavellian personalities are more successful in evolutionary terms than groups possessing fewer (Ein-Dor, 2014; Ein-Dor, Mikulincer, Doron, and Shaver, 2010). Machiavellians, it seems, bring to group life special qualities that may enhance the fitness of the

group. In our case, we must not forget that Lady Susan faces a dire predicament at the outset of Austen's little study in shamelessness, and exits that study having solved her problem successfully. But Austen has one further vital point to make regarding this success.

Of the Vernons and the de Courcys only Reginald ever confronts Lady Susan about her sins and holds her accountable for them, especially for her interference in the marriage of the Manwarings. (Clues in Austen's novella to a divorce are sparse and ambiguous: see 1988b, pp. 256, 307, and 308. For the realities of divorce in England in this period Wolfram, 1985, is definitive. Only divorce by means of a private member's bill in Parliament conferred a right to remarry in the real world.) This is the basis for Reginald ending their engagement, not least because Lady Susan has continued to carry on with Lord Manwaring while also stringing Reginald along (Austen, pp. 305–306). His earlier comments apply here: "The spell is removed. I see you as you are.... I have received from indisputable authority, such an history of you as must bring the most mortifying conviction of the imposition I have been under, and the absolute necessity of an immediate and eternal separation from you" (Austen, p. 304). But no one else in Lady Susan's orbit ever confronts her. And no one punishes her for her misdeeds. She is not expelled from the wider family nor made to carry any other burdens. This is not surprising as such genteel persons in 1790's England (as also today) would be loathe to undertake such encounters or to express such enmity: confrontation was not their long suit. There is thus an important sense, in Austen's novella, in which more normally functioning adults are helpless in the face of a shameless operator like Lady Susan. Austen thereby punctures many pretensions of her own social class, and displays Lady Susan as the mistress of the small society comprised by the De Courcy and Vernon families (for more on her small societies see Hardy, 2000, pp. 108–110; Tanner, 2007, pp. 190–191; and Wilkes, 2013, pp. 81–138). This poses a challenge for us: What are we to make of shameless persons? We could, of course, retreat into mere moralizing condemnations of them and of their nefarious ways. But we have been given an alternative to this by virtue of Austen's careful exploration of Lady Susan's Machiavellian tendencies and personality. We are invited instead to understand her, in the spirit of scientists who seek to understand a strange phenomenon, and who understand that persons differ in degrees and not in kind. We may also have the bare suggestion of a strategy for how to deal with Machiavellians in our own environments: *detect* them (early if you can), *avoid* entanglements with them, and *monitor* them (as closely as you can while still avoiding them). By such means we may still reap gains to fitness from well-functioning social networks while avoiding a great deal of grief due to the depredations of the shameless persons who may be expected to arise within them.

Finally, I must address at least briefly a key aspect of criticism. I have sought in this essay to thoroughly intermingle the fictive realities of Jane Austen's splendid little exercise, *Lady Susan*, and those revealed by contemporary empirical

psychological science. Of course, Jane Austen had no knowledge of such scientific results. Nevertheless, I hope to have shown that she powerfully anticipates many of them. The exercise of her fictive imagination portrays vividly for us what the dryer and more analytic science anatomizes wonderfully but cannot clothe in the flesh of drama, with its deep grip on our emotional and motivational life (Carroll, 2006). In an earlier essay in this Journal, I have presented a view of culture and cultural evolution that can account for such convergences (McClelland, 2016, pp. 87–90). In that view I hold that culture is composed of certain kinds of information and is subject to selection pressures that determine, in part, which streams of that information are most likely to be passed on to individuals and/or groups in the future (see Alvard, 2003; Ehn and Laland, 2012; Henrich, 2004; Ramsey, 2013; Ramsey and De Block, 2017). Indeed, in my view, for streams of culture to utterly fail to converge in this way would be truly astonishing. I hope to have given reasons in this essay for not only finding convergence between two widely disparate streams of human culture: Austen’s novella and contemporary empirical psychological science regarding Machiavellian personalities, in part both aim at explicating an underlying cause of shamelessness (though not, perhaps, the only such cause). We thereby make good on Ryle’s claim to find Jane Austen to be a serious student of “...some perfectly general, even theoretical, questions about human nature and human conduct” (2009, p. 286). I hope also to have given reasons for finding it fruitful to get these two streams of culture into dialogue with each other, for each illuminates the other and both together deepen our understanding of the phenomena that are in view. Success in this critical task might also count as a certain kind of Bayesian confirmation of the “informational” view of human culture that motivates it.

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