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Secret Sharing and Secret Keeping: Lucy Steele's Triumph in Speculation

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LUCY STEELE HAS A SECRET, but she is surprisingly willing to share her secret with Elinor Dashwood. Lucy is pretty but illiterate, shrewd but rustic. She shares mercenary values, however, that resonate with women above her station, and she counts on the good character of Elinor to assist in her speculative plans. She is not interested in love or even marriage to a *good* man; her only aim is to move up in society. As Lucy shares her secret with Elinor, she also reveals her real worth to the reader. By analyzing Lucy's character as a commodity on the marriage market, we can better understand Jane Austen's take on value: what might be perceived as valuable in the marketplace might not have real or *intrinsic* value. Lucy knows that her value is based on mere perception; in a consumer economy the skill of speculation may be necessary.

Although Austen might be revealing that Lucy's unscrupulous speculation is necessary in the marriage market, she clearly does not celebrate its existence. Austen shows little sympathy for Lucy and emphasizes the speculator's *expressed* or market value—her beauty and her flattery—contrasting this with Elinor's superior *intrinsic* value or morality. The terms *expressed* value and *intrinsic* value are derived from Adam Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1775). Smith often uses the word *expressed* to mean value assigned to an object according to its use in the market whereas *intrinsic* often refers to the permanent or core value of an object. For instance, exchangeable coinage would have *intrinsic* value in its silver content but *expressed* value by the stamp of the government on the coin. Smith explains further that

value is based both on utility (*essential*) and beauty (*perceived*). Austen's characters can be understood in terms of this concept of value. Lucy and Elinor begin with similar *expressed* value since both are *essentially* women—their utility lies in their ability to bear potential heirs. They are separated, however, by their *perceived* value: Lucy, we know, is “monstrous pretty” (119) and has developed her ability to flatter and cajole whereas Elinor has a “strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counsellor of her mother” (6)—not necessarily marketable traits in the marriage market. Through her development of Lucy's story, Austen works to distinguish these two women, showing the *intrinsic* value of each and exposing the danger of placing too much emphasis on perception within the marriage market. She breaks down Lucy's value by exposing her faulty education and behavior, ultimately revealing Elinor's superior *intrinsic* value.

Austen's exposure of Lucy's faulty education is an indictment of a system that rewards mediocrity in women. We can observe Lucy's origins first through the behavior and speech of her sister. Anne Steele's antiquated vocabulary, uncouth grammar, and choice of subject matter all reveal her lack of gentility. She begins her conversation about “beaux” with the improper contraction “an't” (meaning *are not*) and continues, “[T]here's a vast many smart beaux in Exeter” (123), using the singular verb (*is*) to describe her *many* potential suitors. Her grammatical blunders continue as she drops her adverbial endings, hoping that her various *beaux* “dress smart and behave civil” (123). The most revealing ingredient of her speech, however, comes with her diction. She says, “But perhaps you young ladies may not care about the beaux, and had as *lief* be without them as with them” (123, my emphasis), an antiquated construction.¹ Within Austen's works, this language might be found as the speech of servants or other characters outside genteel circles.

Lucy's language also reveals her inadequate education and breeding. When she talks with Elinor about her engagement to Edward, her grammar slips; she confuses her verb conjugation, pronoun case, and verb agreement: “It was there our acquaintance *begun*, for my sister and *me was* often staying with my uncle” (130, my emphasis). Lucy uses her beauty and flattery to hide her ignorance, but Elinor sees through the façade, judging her as “ignorant and illiterate” (127). Since we know that Lucy met Edward at her uncle's school, books would have been available to her, and she might have made herself as well educated as Jane Austen herself was able to do. Therefore, Lucy's ignorance is at least partly her own fault, showing her propensity to resort to the easier path toward improvement and revealing her lower *intrinsic* value.

Lucy also exposes her low *intrinsic* value through her behavior. As Lucy shares her secret, she begins her manipulation of Elinor with her practiced flattery—"I am sure I should not have the smallest fear of trusting *you*; indeed I should be very glad of your advice" (128)—and continues by hinting that she might be engaged to one of the Ferrars sons. Jane Austen's contemporaries would know at this point what kind of character Lucy Steele represents. Conduct tracts of the late eighteenth century frequently warned against secret alliances, and Dr. Gregory, in his 1774 book of advice to his daughters, counsels against sharing secrets: "These secrets, however important in your own estimation, may appear very trifling to your friend, who possibly will not enter into your own feelings, but may rather consider them as subject of pleasantries" (31). So Lucy's impropriety is multi-layered: she has contracted a secret engagement, and she has shared her secret with a virtual stranger.

Claudia Johnson explains that society has taught Lucy that manners rather than understanding are to be rewarded in the marriage market: "Indeed, it is only because that larger world around them is so menacing in the first place that the manners of young ladies are of such consequence. Provided she appear proper and play the sycophant to wealth and power, a coldhearted heroine like Lucy Steele finds a place in the world" (50). Austen exposes a reality of the marketplace: a woman with little *expressed* value must work diligently to boost her *perceived* value. Lucy can flatter and emulate her economical "betters," and she finds it easy to establish herself, at least temporarily, in their world. But Elinor provides a lens through which the reader can view Lucy's *intrinsic* value. Although Elinor pities Lucy for her ignorance, she finds fault with the manipulative actions she observes in her new acquaintance, noting "the thorough want of delicacy, of rectitude, and integrity of mind, which her attentions, her assiduities, her flatteries at the Park betrayed" (127). Lucy is pretty and artful, but she can offer no intelligent, rational society. In other words, her *intrinsic* value has not been adequately developed. Ultimately, Lucy's defective education not only reflects a flawed system, it also indicates Lucy's moral faults.

Lucy's secret sharing also reveals Elinor's superior *intrinsic* value. Although Elinor's scruples prevent her from revealing Lucy's secret, the immediate effect of Lucy's news on Elinor is considerable:

What felt Elinor at that moment? Astonishment, that would have been as painful as it was strong, had not an immediate disbelief of the assertion attended it. She turned towards Lucy in silent amazement, unable to divine the reason or object of such a declaration,

and though her complexion varied, she stood firm in incredulity and felt in no danger of an hysterical fit, or a swoon. (129)

Elinor is clearly ruffled, but she controls her reaction with “silent amazement.” So Lucy continues to flaunt her power, telling Elinor that Edward “looks upon yourself and the other Miss Dashwoods, quite as his own sisters’” (130). And when Elinor questions the identity of Lucy’s Edward Ferrars, a miniature of him is produced, confirming the claim. Lucy asks her would-be rival for advice, gives Elinor a letter from Edward, clearly written in his hand, and then explains that the lock of hair in the ring Edward wears belonged to Lucy. Lucy thereby reveals herself as a skillful speculator.

With a limited society, little education, and no fortune, Lucy must have realized early that her personal wiles were the only assets on which she might bank in her marriage market speculation. Oliver MacDonagh considers the Steele sisters’ economic placement as “truly poor, if would-be genteel, young women. . . . [C]learly they were next door to penniless” (57–58). Their address in London, with their cousin Richard in Bartlett’s Buildings, reveals their low economic standing among the London elite. According to Deirdre Le Faye, Bartlett’s Buildings was in the seventeenth century “a handsome, spacious place,” but “[b]y the early nineteenth century it had become cramped, dark and dingy in comparison with the new developments in the West End, and its residents were lawyers or similar commercial people, who used the ground floor for offices and lived in the rooms above” (173). Despite their lower status, the Steele sisters are able to mix with their economic “betters” during the season, and Lucy is secretly engaged to one of them. But even though such a marriage was possible, such social climbing was not widely condoned. So Lucy still needs to curry favor and turns to excessive flattery to make herself indispensable within the Middleton and Dashwood households.

Lucy’s flattery and Lady Middleton’s willingness to succumb to Lucy’s manipulation reveal a similar superficiality in these women of dissimilar stations. Since Lady Middleton is a myopically doting mother, the Misses Steele ingratiate themselves by bringing “the whole coach full of playthings for the children” (119). Lady Middleton, once Miss Jennings, represents her mother’s biggest “success” in matchmaking, so she cannot recognize the mercenary tendencies of Lucy as anything other than natural. Lucy’s talents for flattery can also be seen in her relationship with Mrs. John Dashwood, whose character is established early in the novel as a greedy mother. It is Mrs. John Dashwood, however, who eventually discovers Lucy’s secret engagement to Edward, and her reaction to the news is reflective of her shallow focus on monetary worth.

Mrs. Jennings describes the scene to Elinor: “She fell into violent hysterics immediately, with such screams as reached your brother’s ears. . . . So up he flew directly, and a terrible scene took place” (259). Fanny, we are told, “scolded like any fury,” and Lucy was driven “into a fainting fit” (259), before she was expelled from the Dashwood home and Fanny fell once again into enough “hysterics” to warrant a call to Mr. Donovan, who arrived to find “the house in all this uproar” (259). Austen’s description of this expulsion of the once favorites from the Dashwood household suggests that while a temporary association between those with economic differences is tolerated, a permanent association and obvious social climbing are not. By developing the similarities between these speculating women of quite different means, Austen exposes their *intrinsic* value (or lack thereof). The only difference in value between Lady Middleton, Mrs. John Dashwood, and Lucy Steele can be found in their purses.

Lucy Steele’s story of manipulation, speculation, and social climbing illustrates flaws, not only with the social values, but also within the marriage market of her time—a system that rewards duplicitous and mercenary behavior. Edward Copeland argues that, as a reflection of the competitive consumer of her time, Lucy contrasts greatly with the “prudent way of the pseudo-gentry, that is to say, of the Dashwood women and Edward Ferrars (a parson-to-be)” (94). Within the competitive consumer economy of the middle class—one that contrasts with the “traditional economy of inherited estates” that has abandoned the Dashwood women—acquiring objects and competing for material wealth on the marriage market becomes “arbitrary and dangerous” (Copeland 94). Lucy’s secret keeping and double dealing are reflective of her consumerism—her “unceasing attention to self-interest” (SS 376). Lucy’s duplicity goes beyond confiding in Elinor, and her competitive consumerism is beyond Elinor’s comprehension. Elinor remains unaware until very late in the narrative how far Lucy’s self interest will take her. Lucy’s connection with Robert is one secret she does not share with anyone; she is a competitive speculator. She is ready to throw off one deal if she can make a better one in another part of the marketplace. To Lucy, value is a façade—one that is *perceived* but not *intrinsic*.

Lucy’s story reveals the difference between the *expressed* and *intrinsic* value of women within a consumer-driven society. Lucy is quite similar to her future mother-in-law: she reflects Mrs. Ferrars’s moral values, since she is just as able to swap fiancés as Mrs. Ferrars is able to swap eldest sons. By allowing her female characters to exchange men, Austen questions the foundation of the marriage market: if it is laughable to treat men as objects of exchange, why

is exchanging women on the marketplace not quite as funny? By ridiculing the behavior of Mrs. Ferrars and Lucy Steele, Austen reveals that the established façade of *expressed* value on the marriage market is ludicrous.

If Elinor Dashwood is meant to represent the “sense” from the title of the novel—the rational behavior necessary for survival in a market economy—Lucy Steele represents that “sense” taken to extremes. Lucy has “sacrifice[d] . . . time and conscience” (376), but she has been rewarded. “Unceasing attention to self-interest” is necessary for survival, and moral values might need to be sacrificed in the process. Through her characterization of this “monstrous pretty” speculator, Jane Austen reveals an unsavory truth: speculative behavior, however unscrupulous it might be, is rewarded in a consumer-driven society.

NOTES

A longer version of this paper was presented in September 2011 at the “200 Years of *Sense and Sensibility*” conference at University of St. Andrews in Scotland.

1. The *Oxford English Dictionary* explains that “had as lief” would be an archaic or dialectal misconstruction of the original “would as lief,” possibly derived from the oral contraction “I’d as lief.” Therefore, Anne’s choice of this phrase is not only antiquated, it also perpetuates an inaccurate and illiterate misunderstanding of the original contraction, substituting *had* for *would*.

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