

Love & Friendship: An early Jane Austen work adapted

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Written and directed by Whit Stillman; based on an unpublished novel by Jane Austen

Whit Stillman's new film, *Love & Friendship*, is based on a novella by Jane Austen entitled *Lady Susan*, which the British author probably penned in the mid-1790s, when she was 19 or 20. Complicating matters, however, Stillman has actually borrowed the name of his film from another piece Austen wrote when she was merely 14. Neither work was published during Austen's lifetime.

In England in 1790, the widowed Lady Susan (Kate Beckinsale) is more or less fleeing the estate of the married Lord Manwaring (Lochlann O'Mearain), leaving that household and its relationships in some disarray.

Penniless and without prospects, Lady Susan takes up residence ("We don't live, we visit") at the home of her brother-in-law, Charles Vernon (Justin Edwards), and his wife, Catherine (Emma Greenwell). Catherine is not looking forward to her captivating but troublesome guest—"the most accomplished flirt in England." Susan's lady-in-waiting and unpacker of her clothes is unpaid, as the former feels "the paying of wages would be offensive to us both."

Men are nothing but prey to Susan and she sets her sights on the naïve younger brother of Catherine, Reginald DeCourcy (Xavier Samuel), heir to a considerable fortune. While Reginald is in the process of falling victim to Susan's duplicitous charms, Catherine and her parents (James Fleet and Jemma Redgrave) plot to break up the budding love affair.

Meanwhile, back in the land of feminine wiliness (and, of course, such wiliness was forced on women by their social vulnerability), Susan's co-conspirator is the American Mrs. Alicia Johnson (Chloë Sevigny), who is, if anything, a bigger schemer than her friend.

If Alicia continues her friendship with Susan, however, her husband (Stephen Fry) threatens "the severest punishment—sending me back to Connecticut." Susan

worries Alicia might get "scalped" in that "nation of ingrates"—this is in the wake of the American Revolution—and observes in regard to the Americans, "Only having children makes you understand such behavior." Susan also opines that "facts are horrid things" and laments that Alicia's husband is "too old to be governable and too young to die."

As Susan is tightening the net around Reginald, her daughter Frederica (Morfydd Clark) shows up at the estate, having left a school where, according to her mother, "the fees are too high to even think of paying." Frederica is horrified by her mother's proposal that she should be married off to Sir James Martin (Tom Bennett), a wealthy but hopelessly silly man: "Cowper the poet? He also writes verse? Most impressive!" (William Cowper 1731–1800, an English poet much admired by Austen). James has, according to Susan, "the one thing of value—his income."

"But marriage is for one's whole life!" Frederica protests. "Not in my experience," replies her mother, who in the end, creates the dynamic that she desires and deserves! (Lady Susan, in Austen's novella: "My understanding is at length restored, and teaches no less to abhor the artifices which had subdued me than to despise myself for the weakness on which their strength was founded.")

Whitman's version of Austen's *Lady Susan* is conscientious. He spent some years transforming an epistolary novel into a screenplay, and the results indicate the pains taken.

Stillman (born 1952), the son of Franklin D. Roosevelt's administrative aide, is best known for three brittle, articulate films he did in the 1990s, *Metropolitan* (1990), *Barcelona* (1994) and *The Last Days of Disco* (1998), which were fairly realistic depictions of life within a layer of the upper middle class, or, as the director termed it, the "urban haute bourgeoisie."

In regard to *The Last Days of Disco*, which also the film is based? In her best-known novels, *Sense and Beckinsale and Sevigny*, the WSWs commented: “Stillman’s films are intelligently written. His direction is discreet and well-paced. He has a feel for the dynamics and conviviality of people in social settings. Indeed his group scenes are invariably greater than the sum of the one-on-one encounters that go on. ...

However, “Stillman makes fun of his characters’ brainlessness ... and then asks us to take their emotional traumas seriously. He wants credit both for exposing their amusing prattle (which also serves the purpose of demonstrating that he is smarter than they are) and for demonstrating sensitivity about their dilemmas. ... Alternately sneering at, speaking through and seeking sympathy for his characters Stillman is incapable of providing a satisfying perspective on them. One doesn’t know which attitude to trust.”

In fact, Stillman wanted credit for making relatively sharp and incisive films about a certain milieu without ever having made up his mind about the overall society to which it belonged. Some of the same issues hold true for *Love & Friendship*.

A lot of obvious care went into the look of the film. The performances are all noteworthy. Beckinsale tackles her demanding role with finesse and intelligence. Sevigny is sufficiently conniving. The general artistic level of *Love & Friendship* is raised by the contributions of outstanding character actors who bring substance and verve to the project.

Our times cry out for savage satire. The endless wars justified on the basis of hypocrisy and lies, the ever more noxious politicians, the dreadfulness of the media and the celebrity culture, the gaping social inequalities—all this demands mockery, derision, ridicule, most especially in the US.

One only wishes this latest Austen project could be half of that, even in historical guise. But Whitman’s *Love & Friendship* is too polite, too blunted, too oblique. The fact that the writer-director can come up with a number of pointed, scathing lines makes it all the more unfortunate that he pulls his social punches.

Stillman wants to have his cake and eat it too. Why make this sort of social satire if one does not have present circumstances in mind? However, it is demanding too much of and is unfair to Jane Austen to make an unpublished novel of hers the medium for a serious critique of contemporary life. It doesn’t wash.

Furthermore, what would Austen have thought about the quality and maturity of the work, *Lady Susan*, on which

the film is based? In her best-known novels, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park* and *Emma* (all published between 1811 and 1816), she went considerably beyond her undeveloped adolescent writings. Those later novels presented considerably more of a broader and deeper picture, which helps explains their tremendous success. Whitman has chosen something earlier and narrower, although, unlike much of the fiction of the time, it does portray the female on equal footing with the male as predator.

Austen (1775-1817) lived through a period of vast upheaval (the American and French Revolutions, the Napoleonic Wars and the Industrial Revolution). She herself was known for her conservative, staid social outlook, but this does not mean she went unaffected by the tumultuous times. Of course, although it may never have occurred to her, the very fact that she, as a woman, was writing and publishing novels—and eventually making a name for herself by doing so—was itself a product of a transformative age. In fact, Austen belonged to that group of remarkable women writers who left such a mark on English literature, including Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Mary Shelley, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë, and George Eliot.

Austen, above all, was a great realist, who penetrated the everyday appearance of life and the official motivations of her characters to reveal what lay beneath. It fell to Sir Walter Scott, probably the most popular author on earth at the time and very much the opposite of Austen in terms of style and subject matter, to pay her one of the most heartfelt and accurate tributes.

Scott noted in his private journal in 1826: “Also read again, and for the third time at least, Miss Austen’s very finely written novel of *Pride and Prejudice*. That young lady had a talent for describing the involvements and feelings and characters of ordinary life, which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with. The Big Bow-wow strain [!] I can do myself like any now going; but the exquisite touch, which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting, from the truth of the description and the sentiment, is denied to me. What a pity such a gifted creature died so early!”



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