

From a Leader of the Fan Base

Love & Friendship: In Which Jane Austen's Lady Susan Vernon Is Entirely Vindicated

By Whit Stillman & Jane Austen.

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Review by Amanda Kale.

Did you know that Sir James Martin, the ostentatiously idiotic clown of Austen's juvenilia *Lady Susan*, had an equally foolish nephew? And that this nephew has resolutely set forth to expose Jane Austen as a fraudulent con artist and "vindicate" the pride and reputation of his aunt, Lady Susan Vernon, in the mock-trial *Love & Friendship: In Which Jane Austen's Lady Susan Vernon Is Entirely Vindicated*? His scathing tell-all begins with a pretentious display of royal devotion in a dedication to the Prince of Wales (that parallels Austen's infamous dedication in *Emma* to the Prince Regent), and is signed, "Your Royal Highness' most obedient, most obliged, and most dutiful servant, R. [Rufus] Martin-Colonna De Cesari-Rocca."

Don't be fooled by the title. This book is not simply Austen's *Lady Susan*, nor a novelization of Whit Stillman's recently successful film adaptation of said work (starring Kate Beckinsale, Chloë Sevigny, and Stephen Fry). Upon opening the novel, one becomes



Connecticut's Kandie Carle at one of the gardens at the Smith Farm and Gardens.

immersed in an over-zealous execration of Jane Austen, the likes of which resembles a graduate-level dissertation: a Royal dedication, theatrical list of "Principal Personages" and "Locales," a specified genealogical table, the author's own preface, a literary analysis of the 9th Commandment and the author's follow-up manifesto, entitled "A True Narrative of False Witness," which details his obligation to deliver Lady Susan from her "posthumous injustice." The reader is then led through a narrative from the nephew's heavily-biased perspective that accurately novelizes Stillman's recent screenplay (notwithstanding the narrator's thinly-veiled animosity, such as "those in the DeCourcy circle would recognize her insinuating tone" and a myriad of digressions to expertly defend his Aunt and Uncle's honor, copious research and references abound). Then, in a touching tribute, Stillman includes Austen's *Lady Susan* to bookend his flamboyant piece. Austen's juvenilia opens with an appendix "By a Lady" that is overruled by the nephew's biased intervention once again to smite the "Spinster Authoress." This is followed by *Lady Susan* in its original format: a series of letters between Lady Susan Vernon, her close American friend Mrs. Johnson, the DeCourcy family, and more. These letters are untouched by the author's hand, apart from a recurring note at the end of each letter to remind the audience of Jane Austen's "false" narration in a performance of cross-examination and contradictory evidence.

If a more entertaining novel can be found, I would be amazed.

Now, before you raise your pitchforks in protest, consider the ingenuity that enters a work of this much theatricality, and how it both mocks and flatters the effort of Jane Austen's own nephew, James Edward Austen, who dutifully entrusted himself with documenting his Aunt Jane's life in *A Memoir of Jane Austen*. Stillman brilliantly employs the most popular and absurd character from his recent screenplay, Sir James Martin, and lets him have the pen against his maker.

Whit Stillman is an American writer and director, best known for films of the '90's, such as *The Last Days of Disco* and *Metropolitan* (which is loose-

ly based on *Mansfield Park*). Stillman has a long history with Austen, initially disdaining her as a boy in keeping with the preferences of Mark Twain and Charlotte Bronte's notoriously scathing critiques. This altered with a more mature re-reading of *Northanger Abbey*, and it was then Stillman was introduced to *Lady Susan*, tucked away behind *Northanger Abbey*. He found *Lady Susan* refreshing and brazen. "I think it is a funny story," Stillman declares in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, discussing his own novel, "particularly for people who like reading completely ludicrous footnotes, because the greatest pleasure I had were very pompous and silly footnotes throughout." Stillman considers himself "the ayatollah of the Jane Austen fan base," declaring he wants "to lead the fan base, not be attacked and devoured by the fan base."

From the first page to the last, Stillman expertly and almost divinely illustrates a narrative that is truly felt, experienced, and digested in a manner that would make Austen proud. He employs parody and flattery in the same breath, and ultimately produces a very skilled execution of Austen's most beloved literary motif: Irony. *The London Times* said it best: "If, like me, you like your Jane Austen subversive, cruel, funny, and outrageous, then you will love Stillman's *Love & Friendship*."

Amanda Kale is a writer, editor, and avid Jane Austen scholar. She has been published in JASNA's Persuasions and the Eastern-Pennsylvanian newsletter, Bits & Scraps, and is currently working on a screenplay of Jane Austen's life. She lives in New England.

