

Letters from Page to Screen and Back Again: Jane Austen's Lady Susan and Whit Stillman's two versions of Love and Friendship.

SPEIDEL, Suzanne

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Letters from Page to Screen and Back Again: Jane Austen's *Lady Susan* and Whit Stillman's two versions of *Love and Friendship*.

Calling this farrago of misrepresentation a "True Account" is the boldest of libels. The author meanwhile hides her identity under the mask of anonymity, a privilege not afforded her victim, whose actual name is announced in the very title... Most of these letters, in fact, never existed. The version which the printer, Mr. John Murray, has chosen to include is the last she prepared, in which she turned her account of this history (already decidedly false) into the "epistolary" form then fashionable... (Stillman 151)

The reader will perhaps appreciate the restraint I have exercised in removing myself from the narrative. Many, though, have urged me to recount my own part of this story, that I relate something of my connection to it and my own history from which I have hitherto refrained, with a few punctual exceptions. (Stillman 146)

The declarations cited above occur during the course of *Love & Friendship: In Which Jane Austen's Lady Susan Vernon is Entirely Vindicated*, Whit Stillman's novelisation of his 2016 film, *Love and Friendship*, itself an adaptation of Jane Austen's epistolary novella, *Lady Susan*. In his indignant refutation of the veracity of Jane Austen's *Lady Susan*, and his conspicuous assertion of both his own unobtrusiveness and significance as a story-teller, Stillman's narrator (Lady Susan's nephew, Rufus Martin-Colonna de Cesari-Rocca) establishes a complex, comical series of relationships between Austen's source narrative and the two adaptations that Stillman derives from it. Whilst the novelisation declares its

intention of turning Austen ‘upside down’ – since the scandalous protagonist of Austen’s narrative will be ‘entirely vindicated’ by this new account – what Stillman in fact achieves across his film and novel is a continuation of Austen’s own ambiguous condemnation of her seductively manipulative heroine, as well as a playful exploration, and act of ‘completion,’ when it comes to Austen’s chosen narrative form, namely the novel of letters. Thus, taken together, Stillman’s film and novelisation shed light on how the adaptation industry that has sprung up around Jane Austen, which comprises myriad forms of reworkings, sequels, new endings and updatings, can be at once highly inventive and original whilst also heavily reliant on Jane Austen’s work as literary source.

In this analysis I shall argue that Stillman’s adaptations are significant because they allow us to see beyond some of the traditional terms by which adaptation has been theorized, particularly when it comes to degrees of faithfulness to sources (which remains a highly cited and reproduced model within scholarship on adaptation). In three separate studies, Geoffrey Wagner (1974) Dudley Andrew (1984), and Michael Klein and Gillian Parker (1987) have all proposed (strikingly similar) tripartite categorisations of film adaptation, for example, “transposition, commentary, analogy” (Wagner 222) and “borrowing, intersecting and transforming” (Andrew 98). In these influential models a ‘faithful’ adaptation is one where the original is retold “with minimum apparent interference” (Wagner), whilst a middle-ground approach (Wagner’s “commentary,”) is one where a degree of re-interpretation is evident (where “there has been a different intention of the part of the filmmaker” [Wagner], or where “the cinema... records its confrontation with an ultimately intransigent text.” [Andrew]) At the other end of the scale, an unfaithful adaptation (an “analogy”) is one where there is “a fairly considerable departure for the sake of making another work of art.” (Wagner)

Whilst these categories have undoubtedly been useful in the context of fidelity criticism – not least because they make clear that adaptations, in common with other creative works, aim for, and do, many different things – they are problematic in their bold assumptions of a sliding scale in both authorial intentions and audience expectations. The field of Jane Austen adaptations constitutes particularly fertile terrain for adaptation scholarship, not because (as is often assumed) it offers us many faithful transpositions of much-loved, canonical literary sources (although it does indeed do this); rather it is because it provides a rich illustration of the contexts in which much twenty-first-century adaptation takes place, where the demand for retellings is high, where the field of play is abundantly populated with existing reworkings and where readership knowledge of adaptation sources is minutely expert and ardently relived. (Jane Austen, after all, has spawned the literary fan known as the ‘Janeite,’ as well as a prolific amount of amateur fanfiction and heritage re-enactment).

Whilst it is tempting to assume that to turn Jane Austen ‘upside down’ is to produce an unfaithful adaptation – Wager’s “analogy,” or “significant departure” – Stillman’s film and novelisation suggest an approach that is both an overturning and a preservation, particularly since it invites literate viewers to recall exactly what Austen’s work is like when it is the right way up. In other words, using the metaphor of the palimpsest so prevalent in adaptation theory (see Genette 1 and Hutcheon 6), such adaptations both overwrite previous inscriptions whilst also retracing them, so that their outlines are more visible within and against the new. This strategy responds to an adaptation marketplace which is at once crowded and characterised by strong brand loyalty, where an adaptation that belongs in only one of the traditional Andrew/ Wagner categories is often not doing enough to satisfy the demands of a highly-informed, voracious target audience.

Stillman's 2016 film and novelisation succeed in meeting these demands through their self-conscious scrutiny of both the narration and the story of Austen's fiction. As the narrator's declarations cited above make clear, what is explored in Stillman's adaptations are the epistolary form, the ambiguous suppression of a novelistic narrative voice within this form, as well as the nature and virtue of the Jane-Austen central protagonist as they are presented through the conventions of the novel-of-letters. Stillman's film and novelisation examine these properties in Austen's original, at once taking their cue from the narration and characterisation in Austen's *Lady Susan*, whilst also overwriting and overturning these same properties.

The sophisticated, often humorous relationships between the three narratives can be understood as follows. It is widely assumed that Austen began work on *Lady Susan* around 1793-1794. (1) Made up of forty-one letters and a conclusion narrated in the third person, the novella tells the story of widow Lady Susan Vernon, her flirtation with twenty-three-year-old Reginald De Courcy (the brother of Mrs. Catherine Vernon, who is married to Charles Vernon, the brother of Lady Susan's late husband), as well as her relationship with her young daughter, Frederica, who seeks to oppose Lady Susan's efforts in making her marry the wealthy Sir James Martin. Lady Susan is ostensibly a deceitful flirt, who is also engaged in an affair with the married Mr. Manwaring, and who eventually marries her daughter's would-be suitor herself. (Frederica, it is implied, marries Reginald, her mother's would-be suitor.)

On the surface the novella condemns the immorality of Lady Susan, exposing her hypocrisy, offering up judgements contained in correspondence by other characters, and eventually silencing Lady Susan altogether through the abandonment of the epistolary technique to a third-person, 'editor's' narration in the conclusion. Yet the predominant absence of any

intervening narrative voice, which is the result of the epistolary technique's direct address by character-correspondents, has also prompted critics to argue that *Lady Susan's* censure of its central character remains ambivalent, since we enjoy the witty ingenuity of her letters, feel ambiguous about those who criticise her, and even see benefits in Lady Susan's ruthless mothering techniques, with the eventual marriage of her penniless daughter to the eligible Reginald De Courcy.

The epistolary technique resembles drama in so far as it provides a series of character monologues, which address the reader directly. Ford argues that "epistolary fiction privileges the relationship of the confidante, where the outpourings of the individual voice, the secrets of the self, are exchanged," (Ford 7) whilst Nixon and Penner point out that in Austen's full-length novels, letters sometimes serve the "comic function of exposing the absurdities of the flawed men and women who send them." (Nixon and Penner 1) (Mr. Collins and Lucy Steele are both exposed in this way.) *Lady Susan* too uses its protagonist's correspondence against her, with her opening letters revealing a shameless hypocrisy in their blatantly contradictory tone and content. "I can no longer refuse myself the pleasure of profiting by your kind invitation when we last parted, of spending some weeks with you at Churchill... I long to be made known to your dear little children, in whose hearts I shall be very eager to secure an interest," (Austen 3) writes Lady Susan to her brother-in-law, Charles Vernon, only to follow this up with a frank, contemptuous account of her true feelings to her friend and confidante, Alicia Johnson: "...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." (5)

In demonstrating their writer's connivance, hedonism, disdain and deceptions, Lady Susan's letters are at once incriminating and delicious. Nixon and Penner posit that letters in the

nineteenth century afforded rare opportunities for female expression and agency, particularly since letter-writing “provided a woman a unique position from which to assert a limited power over her fate in courtship.” (Nixon and Penner 4) Seen in this light of habitual disempowerment, the act of precursory, unrestrained venting against rich in-laws on the part of an impoverished widow, obliged by reduced circumstances to stay with them, is perhaps not unreasonable (and may help to maintain good manners during the visit itself). Thus, Lady Susan’s correspondence provoke mixed reactions, inviting us at once to judge and to excuse her.

This ambiguity is all the greater given the tradition of English-literary, epistolary fiction to which Jane Austen is contributing, which is dominated by narratives of virtuous, wronged and/or disgraced women (most obviously in Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa, or, the History of a Young Lady* [1748] and *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* [1740]). Lenkos points out that the act of letter-writing contained an element of risk for nineteenth-century women, and that in epistolary novels such as *Clarissa*, the heroine’s correspondence sometimes becomes evidence against her, playing a part in her ruin. This literary tradition of sentimental tragedy influences our reactions to Lady Susan, whose position is perilous, and whose resilience is formidable.

William H. Galperin summarizes the equivocal position the novella takes up as regards its protagonist with the observation that

although it is virtually impossible to regard Lady Susan Vernon as a role model for a presumably female reader, it is just as impossible to perceive the cultural order, which seeks to contain and to thwart her, in a more positive

light. It is more the case that the various challenges that Lady Susan poses to the normative cultural order... go largely unmet in this text. (Galperin 121)

The epistolary form, with its absence of a mediating narrative voice, contributes to this indeterminacy: Lady Susan is never authoritatively condemned, whilst the married, respectable voices speaking out against her are never definitively endorsed as compassionate, just, and justifiable. Save for the brief conclusion, characters' thoughts, words and actions are not subject to an extradiegetic, narrating commentary, a voice of authority which positions them and us in clear, stable moral positions.

Written and directed by Whit Stillman, the film *Love and Friendship* builds on this ambivalence, particularly in the way it rewards Lady Susan with a fate different from the narrative hinterland usually accorded to women who sin (such as Lydia Bennet or Maria Bertram) in Jane Austen's fiction. Far from being absent from the story, or indeed silenced by the narration, Lady Susan is present at her daughter's wedding to Reginald De Courcy at the end of the film, married to Sir James Martin and pregnant by her lover, Manwaring (in a comical aside, Sir James proudly tells Mrs. Johnson that on the very day after their wedding, his wife broke the happy news to him that they were in fact already expecting a child.)

The process of film adaptation adds narrating presences not found in Austen's novella, and these both highlight their own addition as elements of Stillman's film, whilst also bringing Austen to mind. Cinema combines the narrative tracks of sound (in the form of speech, music and noise) with mise-en-scene and cinematography, and Stillman's film often contrives to be particularly conspicuous in the ways it narrates. Whilst we are reminded of Austen's *Lady*

Susan through the closeness of dialogue to the language of the novella's letters, and through the on-screen presence of many letters sent between the characters, the film also provides instances of narration which seem unashamedly clumsy, as if to offer rambunctious reminders of the extradiegetic narration it is adding to Austen's source. The film shows us letters on the screen, not just in the form of correspondence, but also through the inclusion of written words within the frame – in subtitles, and occasionally also intertitles. Thus characters are introduced using subtitled *dramatis personae*, for example, 'Lord Manwaring: A divinely handsome man,' or 'Sir James Martin: Wealthy young suitor of Frederica Vernon and Maria Manwaring; A bit of a 'Rattle.' Whilst these subtitles are reminiscent of a play, they also place within the cinematic frame the kinds of ironic, intervening commentaries we associate with novelistic, extradiegetic narration: they quite literally show us what is missing (what is not told) in epistolary fiction.

In so doing, they both add evidence of Stillman's authorship, whilst also bringing us back to Jane Austen, in that they ape the rewriting processes she herself undertook: Austen favoured the epistolary form early in her career (for example in 'Love and Freindship,' from which Stillman's film takes its title), but redrafted *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) from its original epistolary form, and perhaps *Pride and Prejudice* also. Thus both the film adaptation process of this short epistolary fiction, as well as the conspicuousness of the cinematic, narrating, subtitles suggest an act of completion, as well as reworking (as if Stillman is fulfilling Austen's potential and intentions, as when she turned her draft of *Elinor and Marianne* into *Sense and Sensibility*.)

In addition, the intertextual links provided by previous adaptations and by Stillman's filmography also have the combined effect of bringing Austen's authorship of *Lady Susan* to

mind, whilst imposing an awareness of a new authorial presence. *Love and Friendship* stars Kate Beckinsale as Lady Susan, casting which evokes the 1996 television adaptation of Jane Austen's *Emma* (in which Beckinsale plays Emma). Such extra-textual dialogues reinforce the textual ambiguity surrounding the novella's characterisation, since in Austen's *Emma* we have a famously flawed heroine who, like Lady Susan, tries to match-make for someone younger and potentially more vulnerable than herself, but whose behaviour in doing so seems much more innocent and well-meant (a contrast underscored in Beckinsale's two performances, given nearly twenty years apart). (2)

Perhaps the clearest intertextual link which both reinforces Stillman's new authorship and brings Austen's original authorship to mind comes through the association of *Love and Friendship* with Stillman's first feature film, *Metropolitan* (1990). Whilst the story of this film seems removed from Austen's world in its modern, New York setting, the narrative explicitly debates the phenomenon of the Jane-Austen virtuous heroine, through discussions between central characters, Tom and Audrey, of Lionel Trilling's essay on *Mansfield Park*, and on whether Fanny Price's virtue makes her inherently unlikeable to modern readers. *Metropolitan* offers story parallels with *Mansfield Park*, with Audrey, Tom and the glamorous Serena equating with Fanny, Edmund and Mary Crawford respectively, and Tom's eventual rejection of Serena is accompanied by his conversion to Audrey's favourite novelist, as he reads, and enjoys, the story of another virtuous heroine, *Persuasion*'s Anne Elliot. Stillman's early championing of the quiet, virtuous heroines of *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* provides further equivocation around the film's depiction of Lady Susan, since it sits alongside the pleasurable, celebratory mischief of the film's ending and Beckinsale's performance. In this we see again how the addition of authorial voices both inside and outside the text in fact heightens effects already present in Austen's fiction: the film offers

access to commentary which we might expect to fill the silence when it comes to judging the actions of Lady Susan; yet these new sources of authorial address only add to the indeterminacy over where we stand in relation to Austen's wickedly enjoyable heroine.

Laura Carroll proposes Stillman's *Metropolis* and Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* (1995) as examples of an adaptation approach along Proppian lines, whereby certain character functions, such as the virtuous heroine, have become so familiar to readers of Austen's work, that they are readily recognisable in narratives where the story and action are transplanted to new settings. If this film affirms Stillman's early engagement with the Austenian adaptation context, where demand for newness is matched by a simultaneous expectation of extreme familiarity with the source, then his novelisation of *Love and Friendship* demonstrates his understanding of this seeming paradox with a vengeance. Stillman's novelisation draws strident attention to two authorial presences in the narrative, namely the narrator, Mr. Martin-Colonna, who intends his work as a vindication of his aunt, and the "Spinster Authoress" of *Lady Susan*, whom Martin-Colonna presents as a "sycophant" or "hanger-on" of the influential De Courcys, "notorious for her poison-pen fictions hidden under the lambskin of Anonymity." (Stillman 3) The narration thereby outrageously dissociates itself from the figure of Jane Austen, and it does so by drawing attention to its own writing and publishing processes, and well as those of *Lady Susan*. (Thus Martin-Colonna condemns the decision of his publisher, John Murray, to include the entirety of Austen's *Lady Susan* within the volume of his own novel, and speculates on the financial ulterior motives involved, since "Mr. Murray is also the publisher of this Lady's final so-called 'novels.'" [196]) (3)

Yet the novelisation simultaneously succeeds in narrowing the gap between its own and Jane Austen's narration, not only because *Lady Susan* is published as part its text, but also because the narrator's desire to write a book that will clear the name of his late aunt (Martin-Colonna is the son of Sir James Martin's sister) resembles the posthumous publication of Austen's novella by J.E. Austen-Leigh, as part of his 1871 *Memoir* of his aunt. Moreover, Stillman's novelisation comically reverses and muddles the status of Stillman's film adaptation in relation to Jane Austen's work, since it presents *Lady Susan* as a revised version of a draft of an earlier, non-epistolary work by Austen, which previously included scenes that are in fact Stillman's own, cinematic inventions. (Thus Chapter Thirteen, entitled "The Very Unfair 'Green Peas' Incident," contains a defence of Sir James Martin's intelligence in a moment in the *film*'s story, where he exhibits perplexed enthusiasm over the "tiny, green balls" on his dinner plate.)

Although the narrator vehemently asserts Lady Susan's blamelessness, in the novelisation questions around the protagonist's morality remain just as unresolved as in the preceding novella and film. This is largely due to the tone and style of the extradiegetic narration intended to perform the vindication, since the narrator emerges as someone just as likely to be fooled by Lady Susan as was his gullible uncle. (Like Sir James, Martin-Colonna is blind to her extra-marital affair, commenting credulously that his cousin 'hero-worshipped Manwaring and even grew to resemble him physically – admiration and emulation sometimes having that effect.' [110]) Stillman credits the actor Tom Bennett for the way the character of Sir James becomes "fully realised" (Graham 10) on film, and the incongruous digressions of the novelisation's narrator often resemble the rambling eccentricity of the film's Sir James (Bennett frequently delivers his lines as if Sir James is unsure where his sentences will end when he begins them). Thus when Martin-Colonna espouses his own, and his uncle's,

optimistic ability to see the goblet of life as “half-filled” (“A so-called ‘half-filled’ goblet can... be moved about freely without spilling...even the half that is seen as ‘empty’ is not truly so; it is filled to the brim with healthful, life-giving ‘air’ . If one were trapped in an airless vault the ‘empty’ half of the goblet could prove the difference between life and death,” [75]) we are reminded of Sir James’s blundering philosophising in the film, (such as his speculation, after Frederica attempts to correct his belief that the Old Testament contains twelve commandments, over which two commandments one might be permitted to ‘take off.’)

The narration therefore emerges as entirely inadequate to the task of clearing up doubts left by Austen’s novella, when it comes to the characterisation and virtue of its central protagonist. Whilst the delightful silliness of Sir James and Martin-Colonna are the inventions of Stillman and Bennett, the novelisation’s comic, seemingly unintentional revelations of the narrator’s foibles are also reminiscent of Jane Austen’s satirical epistolarity (particularly Mr. Collins’s letters in *Pride and Prejudice*). Thus the novelisation revels in its new authorial voice whilst again returning us to Jane Austen. (Stillman affirms that this was his intention, with his observation that he sought to write an ‘Austenian’ book, but with a narrator belonging to a slightly later generation than both Austen and Lady Susan – a comic character from Thomas Love Peacock or early Dickens. [Graham 11])

Both the film and the novelisation contain instances of striking self-consciousness, a kind of aping of ‘bad narration’ which provides a commentary on the narrative techniques at stake in the three-part adaptation chain. In the film this occurs at the moment where we have both a letter (a correspondence) and letters (words) on screen at the same time, namely when Sir

Reginald (young Reginald's father) reads a letter intended for his wife, and thereby finds out that his son is in love with Lady Susan. The contrivance of a damning letter falling into the wrong hands is a recurring device of epistolary fiction (confirming the social risks of correspondence), and in Austen's novella Sir Reginald reads the letter from his daughter out loud to his wife because her eyesight has been affected by a cold. In the film Sir Reginald begins by glossing the letter's content and is asked by Lady De Courcy to read "the words" because "some of Catherine's voice will be in them." Her husband then reads out everything on the page, including every comma, full-stop and semi-colon, a superfluity the film mischievously imitates by placing the text of the letter in subtitles, a phrase at a time (with punctuation appearing separately, simultaneous with Sir Reginald's intonation of it).

In addition to imitating Sir Reginald's pedantry, the one-clause-at-a-time subtitling makes reference to the formal awkwardness of the epistolary tradition, in which the absence of an extradiegetic, retrospective narration obliges characters to tell their story immediately after each event occurs. Richardson referred to this as "writing to the moment," a technique famously mocked by Henry Fielding in his satire of Richardson's *Pamela, Shamela*: "Mrs. Jervis and I are just in Bed, and the Door unlocked; if my Master should come – Odsbobs! I hear him just coming in at the Door. You see I write in the present Tense." (Fielding 318) The parodying of the potential clumsiness of such storytelling through filmic subtitles is particularly apt if we recall that linguistic narration in cinema is sometimes denigrated as a failure in the film's visual art – a shortcut via 'telling,' instead of the cinema's 'true' purpose of 'showing.' (4)

In addition, this moment is suggestive of other drawbacks of the epistolary mode: whilst Lady De Courcy may wish to hear her daughter's letter verbatim because "some of (her)

voice will be in it,” Sir Reginald’s nit-picking performance-failure as he reads reminds us that correspondence is the corollary of absence: when we receive letters, those we wish to hear from are not actually with us, and in epistolary fiction the letter-writer’s supposed direct address to readers is not necessarily as distinctive as direct speech, or as intimate as extradiegetic narration when it slides into free indirect discourse (two narrative techniques which Austen’s third-person narration developed with ground-breaking brilliance). It is characteristic of Stillman’s technique of both exceeding and retaining Austen’s novella, that some of the disadvantages of the epistolary mode are at once homaged and overcome in his film: the subtitles and reading of correspondence imitate the formal awkwardness of the novel of letters, whilst the dialogue, lively performances and cinematic visuals provide the extradiegetic commentary and truly animated ‘liveness’ that epistolary narration necessarily struggles to accommodate.

Stillman’s novelisation uses Sir Reginald’s verbal inclusion of punctuation as an opportunity to hammer one final nail into the coffin of its own, comically-brilliant narrative failings. In the third-last chapter, Martin-Colonna applauds Sir Reginald’s careful attention to punctuation, and contrasts his own excellent punctuation with apparent deficiencies in Jane Austen’s *Lady Susan*. He then goes on to concede that his decision also to enunciate every mark of punctuation when giving evidence at his own criminal trial may not have resulted in the “full clarity” he intended, and was perhaps “held against (him) at the time of sentencing.” (130) At this point the ludicrousness of Martin-Colonna’s entire narrative project becomes apparent: whilst boasting of the “restraint” with which he has removed himself from the narrative, he finally reveals that he is endeavouring to restore the damaged reputation of his aunt whilst himself disgraced and imprisoned, having been found guilty of embezzlement. (Admittedly, Martin-Colonna’s naivety suggests that he was duped by his business partner in

the mahogany trade, particularly when he protests that he understood the term “co-mingling” as “referring to something quite different.” [148]) The narrative ends on a final, glorious note of hopeless optimism, as the narrator anticipates that his literary achievement in vindicating Lady Susan will also restore his own sunken reputation: “while the door to triumph in the rare woods trade has closed, the door to literature has opened.” (150) In this highly comical, frame narrative, the novelisation crowns its project of both changing and retaining the work of Jane Austen through adaptation: the narration is both a blatant addition (separated from the rest of the story through the narrator’s retrospection and incarceration), and the means by which Jane Austen’s status (as a by far the more reliable story-teller of the two) is preserved and promoted in this act of retelling.

The model of adaptation that Stillman adopts is one which responds to a demanding market, where creative reinvention and loyalty to sources are desired simultaneously. The choice of adapting *Lady Susan* in the first place goes some way towards meeting this requirement, in that it marks an expansion of Jane-Austen sources beyond the six novels, thereby offering both Austenian authenticity and a narrative whose brevity and canonical peripherality invites addition and change. This approach of mining source material outside the mainstream of Austen’s oeuvre (for example juvenilia, short or incomplete works, paratexts and work-in-progress) has been adopted with varying degrees of success elsewhere, most notably ITV’s 2019 television adaptation of *Sanditon* (written by Andrew Davies), as well as in numerous *Sanditon* novelistic completions (5). It is also evident in ITV’s 2007 reworking of *Persuasion*, which utilises Jane Austen’s discarded Chapter Ten, Volume Two, in which Captain Wentworth discovers that Anne is not engaged to Mr. Elliot after Admiral Croft charges him

to find out if the Admiral should give up his lease on Kellynch Hall so that Anne and her betrothed can occupy the Elliot ancestral home themselves.

In terms of satisfying audience expectations of inventiveness and novelty, the dangers of what is often understood as a ‘turning-upside-down’ approach to adaptation – Wagner’s “analogy” model – have been well documented in much fidelity criticism. They are also humorously signalled in Stillman’s own *Metropolitan*, in which the film’s very loose reworking of *Mansfield Park* is playfully acknowledged at the moment when Tom confidently dismisses the novel as “notoriously bad.” He then reveals to Audrey that this assessment is based on the authority of Lionel Trilling, that he himself has never read any works by Austen, and that he avoids reading fiction at all, preferring instead literary criticism, since “that way you get both the novelist’s ideas as well as the critic’s thinking.” We are invited to laugh at the futility and ignorance of Tom’s reading practices, particularly since they rest on a misreading of Trilling, as Stillman himself acknowledges (see Graham 3). Tom’s bypassing of literature itself in favour of scholarly criticism also brings to mind the fears that surely underlie fidelity critiques, namely that unfaithful adaptations are potentially guilty of usurpation, of supplanting the true ‘original’ with ‘inaccurate’ (or even bad) copies. (In this moment *Metropolitan* indirectly acknowledges that some of its own viewers may come to base their assessment of *Mansfield Park*, not on Jane Austen’s 1814 novel, but on its own story of young, late-1980s, ‘preppy’ New-Yorkers attending debutante balls.)

At the same time, the discussion (and misinterpretation) of Trilling’s essay within the film’s dialogue also signals that the narrative seeks to open up additional readings of Jane Austen’s work (and Jane-Austen adaptations) to those with an advanced level of literary knowledge. Thus the film makes clear that the act of turning upside down need not be a destructive one,

but can in fact reinvigorate adaptation sources through a particularly rigorous engagement of, and with, textual expertise (very much in the manner of the best literary criticism, in fact).

That Stillman's two versions of *Love and Friendship* accomplish this is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that they have the power to bring Austen in mind, even where they conspicuously establish their independence from Austen's *Lady Susan*. This is because Stillman's insertion of additional, self-conscious narration echoes instances of self-awareness in Austen's own narratives – which at times themselves assert both participation in, and a reinvention of, the novels' own, literary antecedents. Thus, the narrator of *Northanger Abbey* comically critiques Gothic and sentimental fiction with an opening explanation of how Catherine Morland could have reached the age of seventeen without ever having felt, or provoked, any romantic attachments:

There was not one lord in the neighbourhood; no -- not even a baronet. There was not one family among their acquaintance who had reared and supported a boy accidentally found at their door -- not one young man whose origin was unknown. Her father had no ward, and the squire of the parish no children.

Immediately afterwards, the narration makes clear its simultaneous engagement with these types of story tropes, as Catherine is whisked away by conveniently wealthy, benevolent neighbours, so that she can be thrown in the path of a two, rival suitors and subsequently experience romantic adventures and misunderstandings in an ancestral home that was once a medieval abbey. (As the narrator wryly comments, 'when a young lady is to be a heroine... something must and will happen to throw a hero in her way.')

In such moments the allusion to tropes common to other works of fiction signals a narrative awareness of the story's own fictional status. Austen's *Mansfield Park* concludes with a similar instance of narrative self-consciousness, in its dismissal of Henry and Mary Crawford from the story, and its summary of how Edmund comes to fall in love with Fanny:

Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore everybody not greatly in fault themselves to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest. (533)

Here the narration directly acknowledges both the editorial choices inherent in novel-writing, and the practice within Austen's own novels of evicting sinners (in this instance, both female and male) from the story, in order to accommodate the desired, conventional, matrimonial conclusion. In twice reworking Austen's *Lady Susan*, Stillman both adopts and adapts Austenian narrative strategies: Stillman's stories also end in apparent domestic happiness and they too avoid dwelling on guilt and misery, but unlike in Austen's novels, Stillman sometimes 'has done with' guilt by overlooking it, or even in fact rewarding and enjoying it. As with Austen, Stillman's narration is inventive and self-aware, and both the film and the novelisation offer satisfying familiarity for those who love Austen, as well as ingenious additions for those in search of fresh narrative experience. Jane Austen is at once preserved and overturned in Stillman's knowing versions of *Love and Friendship*, which offer particular pleasure to those who relish the expert's privilege of also being in the know.

NOTES

1. Austen author was nineteen years old at this point. The composition date has been the subject of some dispute, with watermarks on two leaves of the manuscript dating from 1805, whilst several critics have argued for a date as late as 1810-1812 (See Russell, Fernández Rodríguez, Barchas).
2. It is perhaps worth noting that Whit Stillman's 1998 film, *The Last Days of Disco* stars both Beckinsale and Chloë Sevigny, who plays Alicia Johnson in *Love and Friendship*. *The Last Days of Disco* gives us another youthful comparison to set alongside Beckinsale's later performance as Lady Susan, in a film where we at first feel that Beckinsale's Charlotte is cruel towards her naïve, virtuous friend, Alice (Sevigny), but later feel sorry for the unsuccessful Charlotte, as Alice overtakes her in both romantic conquests and New-York, 'yuppie' career progression.
3. Stillman's novelisation is published by Two Roads, which is in fact an imprint of John Murray Press, with whom Austen published from 1815 onwards.
4. See Kamilla Elliott's discussion of this in relation to subtitles and intertitles, and Sarah Kozloff's discussion of this in relation to voice-over.
5. See, for example, works by Juliette Shapiro and David Alan Williams, as well as Kate Riordan's novelisation of the ITV adaptation of *Sanditon*.

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