**Extracted from “Daring Duos: “The Nice Guys” and “Love & Friendship.” ”**

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Another period piece, “Love & Friendship,” is directed by Whit Stillman and based on “Lady Susan,” a youthful work by Jane Austen. The lady in question is Susan Vernon (Kate Beckinsale), labelled “the most accomplished flirt in England” by one of her many detractors. She is not long widowed, though long enough for her to resume the adroit wielding of her charms—which, like swordplay, can be used both to dazzle and to wound. Even her mourning garb seems tailored to seduce, with a jaunty black feather on her hat. Beckinsale is forty-two, and it’s twenty years since she played Emma Woodhouse on TV, but her somewhat steely glamour has not dulled, and that gleam of agelessness merely adds to our suspicion that Lady Susan is a weapon to watch.

At the start, she is sent packing from a country house (“We don’t live; we visit,” she later claims), leaving—as usual—the women in furious tears and the hearts of the men in disarray. Unabashed, she finds sanctuary with her brother-in-law, the accommodating Charles Vernon (Justin Edwards), and his wife, Catherine (Emma Greenwell), who trembles at the reputation of her guest. Soon enough, Lady Susan lines up fresh targets, such as the marriageable—and, more important, malleable—Reginald DeCourcy (Xavier Samuel) and Sir James Martin (Tom Bennett), an idiot. But who should be paired with either paragon? Lady Susan herself, or her sixteen-year-old daughter, Frederica (Morfydd Clark), of whom she prays to be disburdened by any means?

“Lady Susan” is a short novel, written probably in the mid-seventeen-nineties, when Austen was in her late teens. (Just to confuse the issue, there was an even earlier effort, entitled—and misspelled—“Love and Freindship.”) It is an epistolary tale, as was the first version of “Sense and Sensibility,” and you can feel the author at once relishing and resisting the bounds of the form. Stillman, in his screenplay, bows to those origins, with a steady flow of letters being brought by servants, wax seals being broken, and scraps of printed text appearing onscreen. At one point, Reginald’s mother (Jemma Redgrave) asks her husband (James Fleet) to read aloud a missive from their son. In a few gentle minutes, as they talk, we get an unforgettable sketch of what a happy marriage—the state that so many Austen characters lunge at, muse upon, or swap for wealth—might actually look like. And Fleet has the most serious speech in the film, beautifully delivered, in which the father warns his son about a possible union with Lady Susan: “It would be the death”—he pauses—“of the honest pride with which we have always considered you.”

For the most part, though, “Love & Friendship” is a frolic: crisp and closeted rather than expansive, with curt exchanges in drawing rooms, carriages, and gardens. (I doubt if any movie, even Ang Lee’s “Sense and Sensibility,” from 1995, has wholly caught the tedium of the age—not the thrill of receiving a letter but the hours and days of waiting for it, with needlework on your lap, and listening to the rain.) Some of the most vinegary lines are taken straight from the page, or neatly distilled: one creaking husband is disdained as “too old to be governable, too young to die.” As far as additions go, Lady Susan’s main correspondent becomes an American, played by Chloë Sevigny (who starred in Stillman’s 1998 “The Last Days of Disco,” with Beckinsale), while Sir James, an offstage presence in Austen, is transfigured by Bennett, a fine farceur, into an oaf so all-conquering that he teeters on the brink of sublimity—cramming the time with jumbles of nonsense while everyone just stands there, awed by such a monument of folly. “Cowper the poet? He also writes verse? Most impressive!” he says—a loyal joke from Stillman, for Cowper was a favorite of Austen’s. At dinner, Sir James toys happily with the peas on his plate. “Tiny green balls,” he says, then adds, “What are they called?” How England escaped a revolution we shall never know. ♦