

**"A Dangerous Affair:
Lady Susan's Seductive Power
in *Love & Friendship*"**

Megan Laubach

In a Tortoiseshell: *In this Junior Paper about Love & Friendship, a film adaptation of Lady Susan by Jane Austen, Megan Laubach's motive is multi-faceted. Her introduction begins with in-text motive as Megan notices that Love & Friendship, despite being narrative in form, feels like an authentic adaptation of a novella written as a collection of letters. Then, Megan situates her in-text motive in a larger scholarly debate within film criticism about narration, leapfrogging from scholar to scholar in order to both disagree with them and insert her own voice into the conversation: this is scholarly motive. Taken together, Megan's introduction is an excellent example of how to motivate a larger research paper topic on the orders of both primary and secondary sources.*

Excerpt

Critics from *The New York Times*¹, Roger Ebert.com², and *The New Yorker*³ agree that *Love & Friendship*, a film directed by Whit Stillman and based on Jane Austen's novella *Lady Susan*, is not your run-of-the-mill Austen adaptation. They praise it for its irreverent humor, something they claim characterizes Austen's original works, but not all adaptations of them. Critic A. O. Scott attributes the film's success largely to its "rapidfire sallies of verbal wit,"⁴ and critic Mark Zoller Seitz claims *Love & Friendship's* charm is in "Austen-isms [that] walk shoulder to shoulder with Stillman-isms so gracefully that it takes a moment to realize which author is likely speaking through these characters."⁵ However, the dialogue that these critics so praise in the film does not exist in the novella; *Lady Susan* is a collection of letters. Even when Austen switches to a third-person narrator at the end, there is no dialogue. The "Austenian" feeling of *Love & Friendship* must be more complicated than it first appears. How, then, does Stillman represent and interpret Jane Austen's methods for revealing characters and controlling her reader's assessment of them in *Lady Susan*, and how does he represent the wit and energy

¹ A. O. Scott, "Review: In 'Love & Friendship,' Austen Meets Whit Stillman," *The New York Times*, May 12, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/13/movies/love-andfriendship-review.html>.

² Mark Zoller Seitz, "Love & Friendship," *RogerEbert.com*, May 13, 2016, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/love-and-friendship-2016>.

³ Richard Brody, "Whit Stillman's 'Love & Friendship': Subverting the Social Order with Style," *The New Yorker*, May 18, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/richardbrody/whit-stillmans-love-friendship-subverting-the-social-order-with-style>.

⁴ Scott, "Review: In 'Love & Friendship,' Austen Meets Whit Stillman." ⁵ Zoller Seitz, "Love & Friendship."

⁵ Zoller Seitz, "Love & Friendship."

of her narrative on screen? How do his choices in representation and rewriting some of the plot shape viewers' understanding of the novella's themes and characters?

The key to *Love & Friendship*, like *Lady Susan*, is in the narration. Austen creates such a seductive Lady Susan by displaying aspects of her character through her two narrative modes. The majority of her novella, because it is epistolary, allows characters to use the first person and lets their written wittiness shine until readers near the end, when Austen gets rid of the letters and assumes the voice of a third-person omniscient narrator who inserts jokes and commentary with the telling of the rest of the story, much like the narrator that characterizes her later novels. Stillman translates this narration to the screen through his use of film techniques such as subtitles, camera angle, editing, and costuming to create a sense of a narrator that comments on events as Austen's narrator does, and he also lets characters' voices shine through dialogue and monologue. However, Stillman departs from Austen's novella when he rewrites the plot toward the end of the movie, which makes his Lady Susan more powerful than Austen's, a Lady Susan that viewers like immensely but should be troubled by because she is deceptive, selfish, and scheming.

The concept of narration in film, more specifically the idea of filmic narrator, is a much debated one in film criticism. Many critics agree that films are narrated. Peter Verstraten argues that "the filmic space creates causal relations, a typical temporal phenomenon"⁶ and that "true narrativity can only be the product of the possibilities of editing."⁷ Johann Schmidt claims that films "abound in storytelling capacities and thus belong to a predominantly narrative medium."⁸ David Bordwell and Seymour Chatman agree that "film does belong in a general narratology" and that "films are narrated, and not necessarily by a human voice."⁹ However, they disagree about whether films have narrators. Bordwell argues that films have narration but no narrator and that audiences construct the narrative through their viewing of the film.¹⁰ Chatman disagrees, claiming that there must be an implied author in film, and that the filmic narrator, which is made up of elements as varied as editing, camera movement, actors' appearances, and soundtrack, presents what the implied author programs it to present. Schmidt offers a persuasive evaluation of this debate, asserting that Chatman's idea of a film narrator is "still

⁶ Peter Verstraten, *Film Narratology*, trans. Stefan van der Lecq (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 15.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Johann N. Schmidt, "Narration in Film," in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, ed. Peter Hühn et al. (Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, 2013), http://wikis.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Narration_in_Film.

⁹ Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 130.

¹⁰ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 53, 62.

anchored in literary theory”¹¹ and that literary theory cannot fully grasp film because the mediums are so different. Schmidt further argues that “with the exception of the character narrator and the cinematic device of the voice-over... the traces of a narrating agency are virtually invisible, so that the term “film narrator” is employed as hardly more than a metaphor.”¹² Schmidt is correct. This is true for most films, but is not necessarily the case with *Love & Friendship*. There are moments, such as scenes of dialogue, where any kind of film narrator disappears, but there are other moments in Stillman’s film when the editing seems to comment on what is happening, and the presence of a narrator seems clear. I will thus use the term “film narrator” in this paper not to refer to an actual narrator along the lines of Chatman’s definition, but to refer to the sense that viewers have at certain points in *Love & Friendship* that some force like a narrator is commenting on events or biasing their perceptions of them.

¹¹ Schmidt, “Narration in Film.”

¹² Ibid.

Author Commentary

Megan Laubach

As soon as I watched *Love and Friendship*, I knew I wanted to write my spring junior paper about it. Rarely have I watched a Jane Austen adaptation that conveyed Austen's wickedly funny and wry tone, and never had I watched one in which it felt like Austen because it seemed like someone was narrating and commenting on events through the cuts and the editing. I wanted to look more at how the movie pulled this off, and I knew I wanted to talk about it in relation to *Lady Susan*, the Jane Austen novella it is based on.

I look at motive as a question that you ask a text and a thesis as the answer to that question. As an English major at Princeton, I've learned which are good questions to ask a text, which is the most important part of a good paper. My original question was "How does Whit Stillman create a narrator that feels so much like Jane Austen's narrator from her novels?" but Claudia Johnson, my adviser, encouraged me to go deeper than just how. The final paper asked something closer to "How does Stillman create this narrator, and why diverge from an epistolary novella to create such a narrator?" This question was a more productive one to ask the film and to answer in my paper because, in addition to issues of narration, it brought in issues pertaining to adaptation that I wanted to cover as well.

Editor Commentary

Nicolette D'Angelo

Whenever our favorite books are adapted into film, there's always the same question to consider: how faithful was the film to the book)? Whether we realize it, the process of answering this question can result in a productive instance of what the Writing Center calls "motive." Motive often begins in identifying a problem, puzzle, or question worth writing about: in this case, it involves comparing two different media, literature and film, as they attempt to render the same story authentically.

One sort of book-to-film motive should be familiar to most: when booklovers are quick to say "the book was better!", they mean that there was some contradiction or omission which was frustrating to them as faithful fans of the original. This kind of motive, then, might entail teasing out the ramifications of what alterations were made, how, and perhaps even why.

In her spring junior paper, Megan Laubach, however, succinctly pursues a less familiar kind of book-to-film motivating question: how is it that a film can feel uncannily accurate, despite being a film and *not* a written document? After watching the 2016 drama *Love & Friendship*, she felt it was an authentic adaptation of Jane Austen's 1794 novella *Lady Susan*, which is surprising given that *Lady Susan* is an epistolary story, not a narrative one. As Megan puts it, "the dialogue that these critics so praise in the film does not exist in the novella; *Lady Susan* is a collection of letters. Even when Austen switches to a third-person narrator at the end, there is no dialogue. The 'Austenian' feeling of *Love & Friendship* must be more complicated than it first appears." This is an expert, point-blank execution of what the Writing Center considers "in-text motive" between primary sources.

But Megan is not done with motive just yet. Given that this is a second-semester Junior Paper, it is meant to evaluate several registers of scholarly research ability in a chosen home department's methodology. Therefore, in addition to in-text motive, Megan chooses to consider a "scholarly motive" to situate her in-text motive in secondary sources: she takes up a scholarly debate within film studies and criticism of "[t]he concept of narration in film, more specifically the idea of filmic narrator." After detailing various prominent positions in this debate, Megan intervenes with her own voice to say that what other critics have said about narrators may be valuable for analyzing other films, but don't neatly apply to her study:

Schmidt further argues, “with the exception of the character narrator and the cinematic device of the voice-over... the traces of a narrating agency are virtually invisible, so that the term “film narrator” is employed as hardly more than a metaphor.” Schmidt is correct. This is true for most films, but is not necessarily the case with *Love & Friendship*.

This articulation of motive, which we might call “leapfrogging,” first validates a certain scholarly consensus in the writer’s discipline, only to point out an oversight in the scholar’s work: here, the oversight is how established theories of film narration do not adequately help us to understand *Love & Friendship* as a narrative adaptation for which the original has no narration. This strategy is effective in that it raises the stakes of Megan’s contribution in a way that is intimately connected to the existing scholarly conversation. She is setting up a hole which the argument of her paper will go on to fill.

It is important (and perhaps intimidating) to note that all this motivation occurs before Megan’s thesis statement. Indeed, taken together, these first three pages scan seamlessly on first read. However, if we look closer, each instance of motive employed actually can be broken down into smaller parts which each build on one another in a specific order to make for a promising introduction to a longer, well-argued piece of independent research.

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Bios

Megan Laubach '18 is an English major from Phillipsburg, NJ. Outside of class, she was an associate chief copy editor for *The Daily Princetonian* and is involved in Princeton Christian Fellowship. She is also an intern for the Princeton Alumni Weekly Magazine. She wrote this in the spring of her junior year for independent work.

Nicolette D'Angelo '19 is a Classics major who studies gender and ancient medicine. As a Writing Center Fellow and Managing Editor of *Tortoise*, she is happy to explain the Greek roots of the word "pedagogy" on request. She wrote this as a junior.