Jane Austen Vindicates the Rights of Women

Jane Austen's Lady Susan is a wrecking ball in petticoats.

The main character of the new film *Love and Friendship*, drawn from Jane Austen's novella *Lady Susan*, is a widowed mother of a marriageable daughter. She is also widely known as "the most accomplished Coquette in England." She has a married lover. She seduces wealthy young men who are courting eligible young women — including her own daughter. She tries to force her daughter into marriage with a young man who would take a blue ribbon in Monty Python's "Upper Class Twit of the Year" competition. She lies. She runs out on her debts. She is thoroughly reprehensible. And she is enormous fun to watch.

The Austen industry has, of late, presented us with a soft-focus image of Austen and her works — concentrating on the romance, the handsome young heroes, and the charming heroines — and given us (often excellent) film adaptations that provide Pinterest with scores of drool-worthy interiors, covetable gowns, and inspiration for themed weddings. But *Love and Friendship* and *Lady Susan*are antidotes to that limiting vision of Jane Austen as "quaint and darling, doe-eyed and demure, parochial if not pastoral, and dizzily, swooningly romantic," as novelist Robert Rodi put it.

But I'm not interested in Lady Susan just because she's one of the great antiheroines of English literature — up there with Thackeray's Becky Sharp and Trollope's Lizzie Eustace. I'm not interested just because she highlights Austen's often overlooked sharp intelligence and acerbic wit. I'm interested because I am persuaded that in her creation of Lady Susan, Austen was drawing heavily on the work of one of the great early classical liberal feminists — Mary Wollstonecraft.

Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* was published in 1792. Austen, it seems likely, composed *Lady Susan* around 1793 or 1794. Austen scholars agree that she must have read Wollstonecraft's work. But reading *A Vindication* and *Lady Susan* together makes me think that Austen wasn't just influenced by reading Wollstonecraft's book; she seems to have used it as a template for the main character's behavior. And that makes Lady Susan a lot more interesting.

Wollstonecraft argues that the women of her time – and Austen's time – were "weak, artificial beings, raised above the common wants and affections of their race, in a premature unnatural manner, [who] undermine the very foundation of virtue, and spread corruption through the whole mass of society."

Their corrupting influence, though, is not due to some sort of original sin handed down from Eve after the Garden of Eden. It is the result of the conscious and intentional educating of women out of natural virtue and into habituated weakness, dependence, and immorality.

She continues:

> *Women are, in fact, so much degraded by mistaken notions of female excellence, that I do not mean to add a paradox when I assert, that this artificial weakness produces a propensity to tyrannize, and gives birth to cunning, the natural opponent of strength, which leads them to play off those contemptible infantine airs that undermine esteem even whilst they excite desire.*

This is Lady Susan in a nutshell. Her tyrannical hold over her daughter's future, her constant deceptions in matters large and small, and her pretended helplessness and innocence, which her male acquaintances interpret as charm – these are all hallmarks of her character.

Even more a propos is Wollstonecraft's description of women who have been educated in this fashion and who are then left, as is Lady Susan, widowed and with a family to care for.

But supposing, no very improbable conjecture, that a being only taught to please must still find her happiness in pleasing; – what an example of folly, not to say vice, will she be to her innocent daughters! The mother will be lost in the coquette, and, instead of making friends of her daughters, view them with eyes askance, for they are rivals – rivals more cruel than any other, for they invite a comparison, and drive her from the throne of beauty, who has never thought of a seat on the bench of reason.

Wollstonecraft adds that it doesn't take a literary genius to imagine the "domestic miseries and petty vices" occasioned by such a mother.

> *But in Austen's imagining of Lady Susan, we have precisely that – a literary genius turning her considerable talents (though in early days) to delineating a portrait of a woman who has become precisely what she has been educated to be. In that way, Lady Susan becomes a powerful adjunct to Wollstonecraft's Vindication. A world without real education for women, a world without legal equality for women – this is a world that is rife with Lady Susans, grappling for power and money in the marriage market and in the gray market of sexual favors, because that is the only sphere open to women with ambition.*

While Austen's and Wollstonecraft's works are more than capable of standing on their own, taken together they provide a persuasive argument – philosophical and artistic – for the importance of women's liberty and for the crippling effects of denying that liberty.

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[Image Credit: www.facebook.com/LoveAndFriendshipMovie]