The Critic Study Guide

The Critic by Richard Brinsley Sheridan

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Introduction

The Critic first premiered at London's Drury Lane Theatre on October 30, 1779. As its title suggests, the play follows a day in the life of a critic, Mr. Dangle, as he is entreated by members of the theatrical world for his patronage and support; the play's second and third acts feature Dangle (and another critic, Mr. Sneer) watching the rehearsal of *The Spanish Armada*, an historical tragedy written by their acquaintance, Mr. Puff. Although Puff's play is meant to arouse pity and fear—the two required tragic emotions according to classical standards—his play is a laughable hodgepodge of bombastic language and ludicrous events.

By the time of *The Critic*'s premiere, Richard Brinsley Sheridan had already enjoyed great success as a playwright: his first comedy, *The Rivals*, had opened at Drury Lane four years earlier and was followed by *The School for Scandal* (1777), widely regarded as his masterpiece. Sheridan had by this time also purchased an interest in Drury Lane and eventually became its manager; his experiences with actors, playwrights, directors, scenic designers and, of course, critics, all found their way into his play about Dangle, Sneer, and Puff. (Sheridan modeled some of the play's characters on people with whom he had worked.) The play is notable for its depiction of a playwright unable to withstand any criticism, an unscrupulous writer of advertisements, and its thorough parody of theatrical conventions. Though some may feel that mocking a bad play is easier than composing a good one, many readers and viewers find *The Critic* an hilarious examination of an aesthetically terrible tragedy.

Author Biography

Richard Brinsley Sheridan was born on October 30, 1751, in Dublin to a family known for its artistic members. His grandfather, the Reverend Dr. Thomas Sheridan (1687-1738), was an author, schoolmaster, and friend of Jonathan Swift. His father, Thomas Sheridan (1719-1788), was a renowned actor, theatrical manager, and elocutionist. His mother, Frances Sheridan (1724-1766), was a novelist and playwright. Sheridan began grammar school in 1758 in Dublin while his parents pursued their careers in London; in 1759, his father relocated the family to Windsor. In 1762, Sheridan entered Harrow School, where he was often teased by other boys for being the son of an actor and for his less-than-fashionable wardrobe.

After leaving Harrow in 1768, Sheridan lived with his widowed father in Chelsea before moving with him to Bath. While at Bath, Sheridan and a former schoolmate from Harrow wrote *Ixion*, a farce, and submitted it to David Garrick, one of the most popular actors and directors of the day. Garrick was unimpressed. During this period, Sheridan also experimented with verse, composing "The Ridotto of Bath" and "Clio's Protest; or, The Picture Varnished." The most important event in Bath, however, was Sheridan's meeting Elizabeth Linley, by all accounts a beautiful and talented young singer. Sheridan whisked her away to Calais, ostensibly to remove her from the pursuit of Captain Thomas Matthews, a suitor. In 1772, Sheridan and Linley were married by a village priest in Calais; upon their return, Sheridan fought two duels with Matthews in defense of his bride's honor. (Matthews was not killed during these duels.) In 1773, after a brief period of separation ordered by Sheridan's father, the two were officially married, this time in London.

London is where Sheridan's short career as a dramatist began and ended. His first play, *The Rivals* (1775), was an initial flop (partly due to bad acting) but a great success later that year after Sheridan revised it. (The play features Mrs. Malaprop, a woman whose linguistic faults have inspired the term "malapropism.") Other successes followed: his comic opera *The Duenna*, also in 1775, *The School for Scandal* in 1777, and *The Critic* in 1779. While composing these works, Sheridan became manager of the Drury Lane Theater when, ironically, David Garrick retired and sold Sheridan his interest.

Sheridan was now a celebrity, but he would soon become as famous for his political rhetoric as he was for his plays. In 1780, he was elected to Parliament as a Whig; he continued his political career until only a few years before his death. He served as an under-secretary of state for foreign affairs, secretary to the treasury, an advisor to the Prince of Wales during the Regency crisis of 1788, and treasurer of the navy. In 1812, he lost his seat in Parliament after a number of stunning performances in House of Commons debates. His famous oration against Warren Hastings, the former governor general of India, was praised as a masterpiece of political speech. While enjoying his political success, however, Sheridan was beset by sorrow: in 1777, his wife delivered a stillborn child and in 1792 delivered a daughter, Mary, thought by many to be the daughter of another man. Sheridan's wife died later that year and Sheridan married Esther Ogle (daughter of the dean of Winchester) in 1795.

The Drury Lane Theatre burnt down in 1809 and was reopened in 1812—but without Sheridan as manager. He was arrested for debt in 1813 and never regained his seat in Parliament. Although he died a man hounded by financial worries, his death (on July 7, 1816) was mourned by many admirers, and he was given an elaborate funeral. Sheridan was buried in Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey, near the grave of his friend, Dr. Samuel Johnson.

Plot Summary

Act I, Scene I

The play begins with Mr. Dangle, the critic, at breakfast with his wife. Dangle finds the morning newspapers too full of irritating news about politics; he therefore turns to the *Morning Chronicle* to find news of the theatrical world that interests him as a man with great passions for the stage. After Dangle remarks that his friend Puff's tragedy, *The Spanish Armada*, is being rehearsed at Drury Lane, Dangle's wife scolds him for taking no interest in affairs of state; Dangle counters her argument by pointing out that his various powers as "the head of a band of critics" make him an important man. Mrs. Dangle remains unimpressed.

Sneer, a fellow critic and friend of Dangle, arrives with two plays and asks Dangle to persuade one of the theatre managers to accept them for performance. The three discuss the faults of the modern theatre, specifically that it has lost its capacity to morally instruct the public and that the comedies have become too sanitized.

A servant enters and announces the arrival of Sir Fretful Plagiary, a talentless playwright who, as described by Dangle and Sneer, asks for honest criticism yet rejects any unflattering observations. As the two men discuss Sir Fretful's most recent "execrable" work, the playwright enters. Sir Fretful explains that he has sent his recent play to the manager of the Covent Garden Theatre, rather than Drury Lane, since Richard Brinsley Sheridan has *his* works performed there and might steal some of Sir Fretful's work out of envy. Sneer, true to his name, mocks Sir Fretful's worries and talents. Sir Fretful, slightly nonplussed, asks the men if there is anything they find that can be "mended" in his latest play—but, of course, he rejects all of their criticisms. Dangle and Sneer then invent a number of scathing complaints about Sir Fretful's work that they pretend to have read in the newspapers; despite Sir Fretful's claim that he disregards the opinions found there, he suffers "great agitation" from their words as he pretends to laugh at the imaginary critics' complaints. Sneer asks Dangle if he can accompany him to the rehearsal of Puff's tragedy; Dangle agrees but asks Sneer to help him judge the merits of a family of Italian singers who are seeking his patronage and who have just arrived in Dangle's drawing room.

Act I, Scene ii

In the Dangles' drawing room, Mrs. Dangle attempts to converse with Signor Pasticcio Ritornello, an opera singer, and his two daughters. The French interpreter who has accompanied Pasticcio explains, in a very awkward fashion, that Lady Rondeau and Mrs. Fuge, two patrons of the opera, have sent the singers. Dangle and Sneer arrive, and Dangle is beseeched—in French and Italian—to put in a good word for the singers with the theatre managers about town. When a servant announces that Puff has arrived,

however, Dangle asks his wife to escort the Italians and their interpreter into the next room.

Puff arrives and becomes the focus of the scene. Puff explains to Sneer that he is "a Professor of the Art of Puffing": an author who has taught newspapermen and advertisers how to inflate their diction so they may "enlay their phraseology with variegated chips of exotic metaphor" and "crowd their advertisements with panegyrical superlatives." Sneer asks if he can accompany Dangle to the rehearsal of Puff's play; Puff tells the two men that they may meet him in the green room later that day, since Puff first has to "scribble" a few paragraphs for the newspapers on a number of topics.

Act II, Scene i

Later that day, Dangle and Sneer meet Puff at the theatre, where the remainder of *The Critic* takes place. Puff explains that the threat of a Spanish invasion gave him the idea of writing an historical verse tragedy about the threat of the Spanish Armada faced by Queen Elizabeth in 1588. His play is set at Tilbury Fort, a stronghold at the mouth of the Thames where Elizabeth mustered her troops; the plot involves Tilburnia, the Governor of the fort's daughter, falling in love with Don Ferolo Whiskerandos, the son of the Spanish admiral. The theatre's under prompter enters and tells Puff that the actors are ready to rehearse; he also mentions that Puff will find the play "very short," since the actors have cut out the parts they found "heavy or unnecessary to the plot." For the remainder of *The Critic*, Dangle, Sneer, and Puff watch the rehearsal and comment on the action unfolding before them, the two critics often calling attention to Puff's deficiencies as a playwright.

Act II, Scene ii

The rehearsal begins with two of Tilbury Fort's sentinels asleep at their posts; when Dangle asks Puff how the sentinels could be asleep "at such an alarming crisis," Puff explains that they must be so in order to allow the two approaching commanders to speak freely, which they would not do if the sentinels were awake. (As the play progresses, Puff responds to Dangle and Sneer's criticisms in a similarly defensive vein.) The characters Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Christopher Hatton (the two approaching commanders) enter. Sir Walter explains that Philip, the king of Spain, has "struck at England's trade" with his armada. The two men also discuss the capture of Don Ferolo Whiskerandos, who has been taken prisoner and is being held at the fort. The Earl of Leicester, Commander in Chief, enters with his train and leads the other men in a prayer to the god of war, Mars. After they exit, the two sentinels rise and reveal that they were not, in fact, sleeping—they are spies of Lord Burleigh (Queen Elizabeth's chief minister) and will report to him what they have heard.

The morning cannons sound, the spies exit, and Tilburnia (the Governor's daughter) enters with Nora, her confidant. Tilburnia recites a ludicrous speech about the beauty of the morning and the sorrow of her heart. The Governor enters and tells Tilburnia that

she cannot be wasting her time with "Cupid's baby woes," for the Spanish Armada is arriving. Tilburnia then employs (as Sneer calls it) "a kind of poetical second-sight": she looks offstage and begins describing (in great detail) the sights and sounds of the approaching fleet. Tilburnia begs her father to accept Don Whiskerandos's "noble price" for liberty, and the two engage in quick repartee, intended (by Puff) to sound like "a fencing match." Despite his daughter's pleas, the Governor remains unmoved and exits.

Don Whiskerandos enters in chains, accusing Tilburnia of not trying to win his freedom from her father. However, Tilburnia persuades him of her devotion with a melodramatic speech. After Puff's interruptions concerning their acting, the two exit. When Nora asks how *she* is to exit, however, Puff pushes her aside, yelling, "Pshaw! What the devil signifies how *you* get off!" Dangle and Sneer ask if Queen Elizabeth will enter, but Puff explains that she is only "to be talked of for ever" to raise the audience's expectations. Puff then instructs the actors involved in the second (or "under") plot to prepare, only to be told by the under prompter that the actors have cut the next scene entirely from the script. Allowing the cut to stand but vowing to "print it every word," Puff exits to prepare the actors for the final phase of the rehearsal.

Act III, Scene i

Puff's play proceeds with its "discovery scene." A justice (i.e., a judge) and constable enter and discuss the recent impression of military "volunteers" —some drunks and some prisoners—including one young man whose "clear convicted crimes have stampt him soldier." The justice sends the constable to fetch this particular youth. Before the constable returns, the justice's lady enters and remarks to her husband that one "prisoner youth" she has seen reminds her of their deceased son. When the young prisoner enters, he reveals (through a series of questions put to him by the justice) that he is, in fact, the justice's supposedly dead son. After a number of ridiculous plot clarifications, the prisoner, justice, lady, constable, and a number of other "near relations" all "faint alternately in each other's arms." The characters all revive and then exit. Dangle calls the scene "one of the finest" he has ever seen and says that it "would have made a tragedy itself." ("Aye, or a comedy either," cracks Sneer.)

A lone beefeater (i.e., a yeoman of the guard) enters; after his laughably short, four-line soliloquy, he exits. Puff explains that the soliloquy would have been longer had the beefeater not been observed. Lord Burleigh enters (who presumably by now has heard the report of his spies), sits in a chair, and "thinks" without ever saying a word. He shakes his head and exits. Puff explains the significance of his shake of the head in such detail that Sneer and Dangle are astounded. Sir Christopher and Sir Walter return, lamenting the fact that both of their nieces are in love with Don Whiskerandos; when the two nieces enter, their uncles withdraw to eavesdrop. The nieces (instructed by Puff) reveal their thoughts in a series of asides before Don Whiskerandos himself enters, searching for Tilburnia. Both nieces level swords against Don Whiskerandos as vengeance for rebuffing them, but then their two uncles leap from their hiding place and state that *they* will avenge their nieces' unrequited love; Don Whiskerandos, however, draws two daggers and holds them to the nieces' bosoms, creating a dramatic

stalemate. Suddenly, the beefeater returns and orders the others to drop their weapons —which they inexplicably do. The nieces exit with their uncles, leaving Don Whiskerandos with the beefeater, who removes his costume and reveals himself as the Captain of the ship that had taken the Spaniard prisoner. Naturally, the beefeater "was himself an old lover of Tilburnia," and the two use the swords dropped by the uncles for a duel. The Captain kills Don Whiskerandos, whose dying word, cut off in mid-syllable, is completed by his killer.

The Governor enters in a panic, exclaiming that his daughter has grown "Distract" (i.e., mad) from the death of her lover. He exits, and Tilburnia and Nora enter, both mad and dressed in white satin. Tilburnia babbles in her "madness" for a moment before exiting to throw herself into the sea. Puff explains that her suicide will lead the play to its climax: the sea fight between the Spanish and English. An actor playing the Thames enters, accompanied by two actors in green, representing his banks. The battle includes a number of effects: cannon-fire, a procession of "all the English rivers and their tributaries," and the music of Handel. After its conclusion, Puff applauds his cast before remarking, "Well, pretty well—but not quite perfect—so ladies and gentlemen, if you please, we'll rehearse this piece again to-morrow."

Act 1, Scene 1, Part 1

Act 1, Scene 1, Part 1 Summary

The foibles and pretensions of people who think they know more than they do are the driving forces of both the comedy and dramatic action of this short play. Its simple plot, built around the desire of one theater critic to view the latest attempt at playwriting by another, is less important to the play's thematic point than its tart and perceptive commentary on the foolishness of affectation, self-importance and hypocrisy.

The play's prologue refers to how the purity of the Muses (ancient Greek goddesses of the arts and sciences) has been corrupted by the desire and need to please artistic critics. It also says the author created the play to chide the Muses for giving in to the critics, wondering whether even he, as experienced as he is, can withstand critical influence. The speaker of the prologue begs for the audience's support, and the play begins.

Mr. and Mrs. Dangle sit at breakfast, reading newspapers. Conversation reveals that Dangle is only interested in the theater and doesn't have any desire to look at any other news articles. A new play by the well known Mr. Puff is about to be produced. Before Dangle can get very far in his excited reaction to the news, Mrs. Dangle complains at length about how ridiculous he makes himself with his passion for the theater. Dangle defends himself, quoting Shakespeare and saying the theater is important because it reveals the values of the time and its people. Mrs. Dangle says theater people and non-theater people alike laugh at him behind his back, adding that for those working in the theater the public is the only critic that really matters.

A Servant announces the arrival of Sneer. Dangle starts talking about how he dislikes Sneer's company, but he suddenly has to stop when Sneer comes in. Dangle greets him as though they were great friends and suggests they go together to see the first performance of Puff's play. Sneer turns the conversation to himself, saying he's brought two plays he wants Dangle to give to his producer friends. Dangle complains he's always being taken advantage of, but Sneer reminds him how much Dangle enjoys being in the middle of things. Dangle glances at one of the scripts and comments that it's a tragedy, but Sneer tells him it's really a sentimental romance. He and Mrs. Dangle complain about how the theater has deteriorated from a venue suitable for moral messages to a place where people go to simply be entertained. Dangle says the real deterioration has been in the audience, referring to how the public responds negatively to a play that has any kind of sexual references and to how two well-known playwrights of the time have had to change their styles as a result. Sneer comments that the modesty of audiences is similar to the false modesty of a prostitute. Dangle looks at the second script, and Sneer describes it as a clever, moralistic comedy about a reformed housebreaker. He explains that the writer is determined to use theater to challenge and change the law.

The Servant returns and announces the arrival of Sir Fretful Plagiary. Mrs. Dangle says he's a favorite of hers, simply because everybody else abuses him. Dangle complains that Plagiary insists that no playwright but him is any good. Sneer comments that Plagiary's humility is false. He is unable to accept true criticism but is so desperate to be popular that he'd "rather be abused than not mentioned at all." Sneer and Dangle have read one of Plagiary's plays, and Sneer says how awful it is.

Act 1, Scene 1, Part 1 Analysis

Prologues such as the one that begins this play were, like thematically relevant names, a common element in plays of this period (the Restoration Period). Such prologues almost always followed the pattern set in the prologue here, invoking the influences of classical Greek gods like the muses, explaining briefly what the playwright was attempting to accomplish with the play and why and begging for the audience's indulgence and/or generosity of spirit.

This play is a satire, a style of comedy in which the ideas and practices of an individual or group are exaggerated to show how ridiculous they are. The targets of the satire in this play are critics - not just critics of the theater or even of art, but people who believe they know enough about a particular subject to be able to have either an informed opinion or influence, or both. In other words, the examination of a specific subject in this play illuminates a more general perspective. The key to the satire is the belief that the self-importance of those who call themselves critics, or experts, is both foolish and vain. Dangle, Sneer, Plagiary and particularly Puff (when he appears later in the play) all think they're important, but as the action of the play reveals, they are much less so than they believe themselves to be and want to be. Herein lies the play's central thematic point.
-The point is made in two ways. The overtly negative comments of Mrs. Dangle in this scene illuminate the ridiculousness of the critic. Later in the play, the action further illuminates the same thing, particularly in the scene where Puff's actions and comments during the rehearsal of his play show how little he truly knows and how little influence he truly has.

At this point, the audience might question, if the targets of the play's satire are critics in general, why the play is set in the world of the theater. The main explanation is that at the time the play was written, theater critics had an enormous amount of power and influence. They could enhance or destroy the careers of actors, writers or singers quickly and easily. There are several references throughout the play to critics who did exactly that and to playwrights and performers who suffered as the result. It's possible, and even likely, that the author of *The Critic* had himself at one point or another been the victim of critical attack. The play may be an act of revenge, suggesting that the critics who attack him and others in his life of creative work are as empty-headed as Dangle, Puff and the others. In other words, the playwright is making his point about society by writing about what he knows. Again, a point about society in general is made by a specific situation.

A second common element to plays of this period is the way names are used to define character and relationship. In this play, "Dangle" is an illustration of the way the character embodies the "dangling" of possible connections in front of his friends. An example can be found in the next section of the scene when Dangle offers to present Plagiary's play to his friends. Meanwhile, Sneer's name represents his attitudes to other playwrights and quite possibly his concealed attitude towards Dangle. Plagiary's name represents both the way he worries (or frets) that his ideas will be stolen by other writers and the way he himself does exactly that. Puff's name indicates how he, and his work, are "puffed" full of nothing but air.

Act 1, Scene 1, Part 2

Act 1, Scene 1, Part 2 Summary

As Plagiary arrives, Sneer and Dangle both comment on how much they like his play. As Plagiary thanks them, Mrs. Dangle begins to tell him they were both just saying how much they hated it, but Dangle interrupts her, saying she she's wrong. In an aside, Plagiary comments on how much he dislikes Sneer, but then he speaks pleasantly to him. Dangle asks Plagiary whether he's sent his play to any producers, or whether Dangle can help him make that happen. Plagiary thanks him, but he says he's already sent it out. They argue over which theater in London would produce the play better and whether it's wise to send plays to producers who write plays themselves. Plagiary says he's desperately afraid of other people stealing his ideas and ruining his name as a writer. Sneer sneeringly suggests that if someone did that they'd be doing Plagiary a favor.

Before Plagiary and Sneer can get into an argument, Dangle tells Plagiary that Sneer never means what he says. Plagiary then asks whether he and Sneer like the play, and Sneer says he loves it. Plagiary asks whether anything needs improvement, saying that he's always glad when a wise critic points out his play's flaws. Sneer makes a comment that the play seems to lack incident. Plagiary says he believes there's too much incident and asks Dangle for his opinion. Dangle says that the first four acts have plenty of incidents but that in the fifth more are needed. Plagiary says there are actually more in the fifth act, and he and Dangle argue. Mrs. Dangle says she found the play perfect, and Plagiary agrees with her. Mrs. Dangle then admits she found it a little long, and Plagiary says it's actually short. Dangle comments that he hopes Plagiary will be able to dismiss the criticisms of the newspapers as quickly as he dismissed theirs. Sneer refers to a nasty notice about Plagiary's work that appeared in a paper earlier, and at first Plagiary laughs it off. Then, he anxiously asks whether either Sneer or Dangle can remember what was said. In asides, Dangle and Sneer agree to make something up, and then Sneer tells Plagiary that the critic said Plagiary was completely uninventive and a great thief of the work of other authors. Plagiary treats the comments as a joke, laughing more and more as Sneer continues with more and more extravagant inventions of the critic's negativity. Sneer and Dangle join in the laughter as Plagiary comments that believing praise is mere vanity and that abuse is always going to appear from somewhere.

The Servant comes in, announcing that a group of Italian musicians and an Interpreter have come. Mrs. Dangle goes out to greet them. The Servant also says that Puff has invited Dangle to the last rehearsal of his play and will come by shortly to take him to the theater. As the Servant goes, Dangle tells Plagiary that if he wants good criticism, Puff will give it to him. Plagiary says he's perfectly happy with what Sneer said, saying that what makes him angry is the belief that negative criticism upsets him. He then goes out. After he goes, Sneer jokes that Plagiary is going off to write a complaint about critics and then asks Dangle to take him into Puff's rehearsal. Dangle says he'll make

the arrangements and then invites Sneer to join him as he listens to and criticizes the music of the Italians. He also worries that they've been too hard on Plagiary, but Sneer suggests that Plagiary deserved everything he got. They go out.

Act 1, Scene 1, Part 2 Analysis

The key element of this scene is the appearance of Plagiary, whose interactions with Sneer in particular make satirical points about the hypocrisy of both critics and artists. Sneer's increasingly extravagant negativity, which we know from his exchange of asides with Dangle to be lies, illustrates the play's thematic opinion that criticism is made up for its own sake and has little bearing on what the artist is actually creating. In other words, through the character of Sneer and his actions, the play is suggesting that all critics behave the same way, being negative and destructive just because they can. The hypocrisy of this is that critics claim to be, and are held up as, completely objective. This scene suggests that they are not.

In terms of Plagiary's reaction, there are several levels of hypocrisy. The first is his claim that he's completely uninterested in what the critics say, when in fact his reactions suggest that's all he's interested in. The second is that in spite of his clear interest, he only wants to hear critical comments that agree with his own opinions. This is why he argues with every critical point made by the other characters. They don't agree with him, and therefore they're wrong. This satirizes the habits of artists who refuse to believe that anyone other than themselves can have a valid opinion about their work. A third level of hypocrisy can be found when Dangle says Sneer never means anything he says. Plagiary says he understands, but then he believes Sneer when he says he likes the play. Again, the audience sees how Plagiary only hears what he wants to hear, while giving lip service to his determination to hear the truth.

A third common element in plays of this period is the aside, a device used to allow a character to reveal his true, inner thoughts and reactions in response to a situation by speaking them directly to the audience. The difference between an aside and a soliloquy, another device by which a character speaks to the audience and reveals his feelings, is that in an aside, there are other characters on stage who don't hear what the character is saying. In a soliloquy, the character revealing his thoughts is alone onstage. The device of asides is generally used to illustrate hypocrisy and to show how characters say one thing but in truth mean another. In the case of this play, the device illustrates the thematic point about the foolishness of critics by showing how they're unable to say what they truly think but are instead influenced by the opinions of others.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

Mrs. Dangle struggles to understand the Italian musicians and the Interpreter. Sneer and Dangle come in, and Mrs. Dangle asks for their help. Sneer suggests that the musicians should just do what they came for and play their music. The musicians play, and when they're done, the Servant comes in with news that Puff has arrived. Dangle tells Mrs. Dangle to take the musicians into another room and offer them refreshments.

Once Mrs. Dangle and the musicians are gone, Puff comes in, greets Dangle and in extravagant language expresses his joy at finally being able to meet Sneer. Conversation reveals that Puff is a professional at improving the words and writings of others (or puffing), and Puff hints that most of what is read in the papers, in public advertisements and in other publications is written, or at least influenced, by him. He talks at great length about how he taught auctioneers to speak better and get better response from the buyers and then about how he made his living by inventing a series of personal setbacks and writing about them, pleading for charity and thereby making a lot of money. He says that after a while, he began to feel guilty about making his living this way and decided to turn his talents for word usage and manipulation to more legitimate use. Finally, he talks again at length and again in great detail about the different ways in which "puffing" is used, listing examples of each.

When Puff has reached the end of his list, Sneer tells him he now recognizes the importance of his profession and the cleverness necessary in making a living at it. He adds that the only thing that would make him respect Puff more is to be allowed to attend the rehearsal of his new play. At first Puff says he doesn't want to be known as the author, but when Dangle tells him his identity has already been published, Puff agrees to let Sneer attend. Dangle suggests they all walk to the theater together, but Puff tells them he's got matters to attend to and agrees to meet them there. After talking about the puffing he needs to do, he goes out, while Dangle and Sneer go out in another direction.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

Language is defined as a powerful obscurer of truth in this scene. Specifically, in the same way as the language used by the Italian musicians obscures what they truly want to communicate, the language used by Puff obscures who he truly is (i.e. in his stories about how he made his living). The audience also hears how Puff's use of language obscures the true intent and nature of those who employ his skills at "puffing." They want to appear to be more than they are, so they use Puff to embroider their identities in the same way as he embroiders his own. The satirical point made by this particular scene, and the character of Puff throughout the play, is that words without genuine meaning are empty, in the same way as the words of critics who lack genuine

knowledge. This point is further dramatized throughout the rest of the play. Puff's ideas are as empty as his words, and his pretensions are completely foolish in the way of anyone who claims to know a great deal but in fact knows very little. Again, the audience sees how the specific is used to satirize the general as the particular pretensions of those who exaggerate themselves to be successful in the theater serve as examples of the pretensions of anyone who exaggerates himself or herself to be successful in any field.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

Dangle, Puff and Sneer come in as Puff is arguing that Shakespeare's point about actors being "the abstract and brief chronicles of the times" should in fact be applied to plays. He uses this as an explanation for writing a play about the Spanish Armada set at Tilbury Fort. Dangle asks whether he has introduced a love story into his plot, and Puff says there was nothing easier to do, adding that it's the story of the daughter of the fort's governor and the son of a Spanish admiral. Dangle suggests the romance is improbable, but Puff says the purpose of plays isn't to show things that happen every day, but things that might happen.

The Prompter comes in, announces that everything is ready for the rehearsal to begin and tells Puff he'll find the play quite short, saying the actors have taken advantage of his offer to let them cut and/or change anything they need to. Puff says actors are always good judges, asks for the music to begin and joins Dangle and Sneer in their seats.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

This brief scene serves to establish the context of the rest of the act, in which the audience watches a rehearsal of Puff's play. Dangle's comments about a love story and Sneer's hopes for a lack of scandal about Queen Elizabeth satirize the views of critics of the day that all plays, no matter what their stories, should contain certain standard elements. The views of both characters, interestingly, contain echoes of the popular art of today's society. Today's popular media continues to express a need for love stories and the belief that art/entertainment must be free of scandal and/or controversy in order to be successful or popular.

The comments about the Spanish Armada and Tilbury refer to an incident in British history. During the time of Elizabeth I, a small English fleet under the command of Sir Francis Drake defeated a massive fleet of warships from Spain, called the Spanish Armada. Tilbury was the site of a famous speech by Elizabeth in which she wore a suit of armor (extremely unusual for a woman, let alone a queen) and inspired her sailors to victory. As the rest of the act unfolds, the banality and superficiality of Puff's treatment of such a grand and historically celebrated subject becomes increasingly clear, again making the satirical point about the emptiness of the words and ideas of self-important people like critics.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

As Puff, Dangle and Sneer watch, the actors in Puff's play rehearse. The dialogue consists of bad poetry, undisguised and badly handled exposition, or explanations of the play's context, and over-wrought and melodramatic emotion. As the rehearsal continues, every few lines Puff offers explanations of what's going on, exclaims over what's been cut and what's been changed, clarifies what's meant and what isn't and comments on how wonderful his original piece of writing was. He responds to questions and/or comments from Dangle and/or Sneer with almost arrogant confidence that his own ways of interpreting what's going on are absolutely right, and in doing so, he convinces the always persuadable Dangle and Sneer to at least appear to alter their opinions. At one point, Puff refers to a character who refuses to give an opinion unless he's absolutely sure of his facts. At several points, he gives directions to actors about where to move and how to speak, and he repeatedly has to be reassured by actors that the cuts and changes they made were for the good of the play. Also at several points, he comments to Dangle and Sneer about how clever his use of words has been.

At the climax of the love scene between the Governor's Daughter (Tilburina) and the Spanish Soldier, Puff becomes so upset at a cut made by the actors that the actress playing Tilburina tells him he's interrupting her feelings. Puff asks what about his feelings, but Sneer tells him to stop interrupting. Puff becomes more and more upset, at one point actually pushing a secondary character out of the scene.

After the love scene finishes, Puff congratulates himself on not trying to invent anything new but instead improving on traditions that have long been established. Dangle and Sneer express their hopes for both the appearance of Queen Elizabeth and a battle. Puff says Elizabeth doesn't appear, but because she's frequently spoken about, it's as good as if she did appear. He also says there will be a battle, a depiction of a fiery battle at sea. He then says it's time for the introduction of the under-plot, adding that every tragedy has to have a secondary plot with as little connection to the main plot as possible. He calls to the Prompter to begin the next scene, but the Prompter tells him the set isn't ready. Puff asks for the scene in which characters talk at length about Elizabeth, but the Prompter tells him it's been cut. Puff complains about how many cuts there have been. No matter what appears on the stage, he plans to publish every word of his original text, saying a great deal of it was very fine writing. He then goes out to make sure the set for the next scene is ready.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

The fact that Puff's play is so obviously empty of genuine knowledge of theater, history or human emotion represents the thematically relevant point that the words of critics, like Puff's in general, are empty of anything genuine, logical or truly felt. The audience

gets the sense that the playwright is saying that Puff and his play are like critics and their commentary - pretentious, foolish and pointless. This sense arises from, among other elements, the complete misinterpretation Puff gives to the use of the under-plot, what we today might call a sub-plot. Rather than the standard use for such a device (to illuminate or define the main plot by either contrasting it or paralleling it), Puff says the under-plot must have nothing whatsoever to do with the main plot. In short, he comes across here as really knowing nothing about what he's doing.

At the same time, those who want to be thought of as clever and successful (Dangle and Sneer) can be easily manipulated by those who appear to be clever and successful (Puff). The way that Puff maneuvers Dangle and Sneer into agreeing with him illustrates the way the work and attitudes of playwrights and artists are manipulated by those who, for whatever reason, desire to have control over them and think they know the way things should be done. The reference to the character in the play who doesn't give an opinion unless he's absolutely sure of the facts is therefore ironic, pointing out that Dangle, Sneer and Puff do exactly the opposite. They formulate opinions and attitudes without any facts whatsoever.

In Puff's increasing resentment of changes made in his script and in his determination to publish every word of his original manuscript, the audience sees what happens when the critic becomes the critiqued. Puff, who has spent his life and career changing the words and intent of others, finds that his own words and intent are changed and doesn't like it a bit. Once again, the play is pointing at and satirizing the hypocrisy of those who think their opinions are the only valid ones. Meanwhile, Puff's proud claim that he hasn't invented anything new again raises the thematically relevant point about how critics tend to have rigid ideas of what plays and performances should be. This point is reiterated even further in the following scene, which contains several elements that Puff himself describes as being in his play only because they're in most other plays.

Act 3, Scene 1

Act 3, Scene 1 Summary

Puff, Sneer and Dangle reappear and take their seats. The curtain rises on a courtroom scene, and Dangle asks whether this is the setting for the under-plot. Puff says it is, adding that the actors have shockingly altered the play. As Dangle comments that it's a pity, Puff demands that the action begin.

The scene that follows contains echoes and references to several such scenes in plays of the period. A young man, at first believed to be an orphan and of low, even criminal, birth and background, is discovered to actually be the child of a well-born family. He's reunited with his parents, and they all embrace and go out. As the scene is played out, Puff comments again on how many of his original words have been cut. Once the scene is finished, Dangle comments that the under-plot is so well formed that it could have made a tragedy all by itself. Sneer ironically suggests it could also have been a comedy. Puff comments on how completely it had nothing to do with the main plot.

The play moves on to the next scene, which begins with a line taken from Shakespeare's *Othello*. When Dangle comments on where the line came from, Puff tells him that the appearance of the line is a coincidence. Two people can have the same idea, but sometimes one of them just has it first. An old man then appears, becomes still, considers, shakes his head and then goes out again - all in silence. Puff explains the complicated meaning of this to Dangle, who can't believe that everything Puff suggests was contained in the mere shaking of a head.

The play continues as romantic complications between Tilburina and the Spanish Sailor play out, and Puff prides himself on the cleverness of his plot twists. Dangle comments on how contrived and artificial everything seems, and Puff insists that everything is brilliant. After the Spanish Sailor dies unconvincingly, Puff orders him to die again and again. The actor playing the Sailor says he can't die all night and goes out. Puff orders the play to continue, and the action proceeds with a mad scene for Tilburina, which Puff narrates, explaining all the clues to her madness that he included. He states that the play has to have a mad scene because all plays do. He explains that Tilburina throws herself into the sea, leading to the promised sea battle. An actor portraying the River Thames appears, accompanied by two men who Puff explains are the river's banks. He sees that the actors playing the banks are both on the same side of the actor playing the Thames, rearranges them and then becomes frustrated. He tells them all to go off. There is music, a depiction of a battle at sea and a procession of all the English rivers (presented in the same way as the Thames and its banks), all of which is directed by Puff. When it's all finished, Puff tells the actors that it's good but not quite perfect, and he calls another rehearsal for the following day.

Act 3, Scene 1 Analysis

As previously discussed, the way Puff includes elements in his play simply because plays always have scenes like recognitions, romantic complications and mad scenes satirizes the way critics tend to have rigid ideas of what plays should be. What's interesting is that he clearly does attempt to be clever and symbolic. This is illustrated by the appearances of the Thames and its banks and the silent old man. On one level, he is a hypocrite, saying anything he thinks will please or appease critical people like Dangle and Sneer that he wants to impress. On another level, however, because his "innovations" seem just as ridiculous as his attempts to follow the traditions he thinks he should follow, the audience sees how even when he's trying to be original, his ideas are empty and foolish. This suggests that no matter what a critic tries to say, in support of either tradition or innovation, he's always going to be just as foolish.

Another interesting aspect to this scene is the way Dangle and Sneer continue to buy into everything Puff is doing, even as his attitudes and creations become more and more bizarre. The play illustrates again how desperate people can become for the approval and acceptance of those they think are more popular, intelligent or successful, or who can at least help them become more popular or successful. In other words, Dangle and Sneer see Puff as successful. They do what they do and say what they say to be part of his success; in short, they suck up.

The play's final moments, the battle at sea and the procession, are developed very sketchily in the text. There are no indications of how it's all to be done - how the ships are presented or how big the explosions are. Because of Puff's ideas for presenting the Thames and its banks, however, it becomes possible to imagine that the warships are portrayed by actors in boat costumes, that explosions are created by firecrackers or even by actors saying "bang!" and that the rivers in the procession are all presented in the same way as the Thames. The ultimate point, however the battle and procession are portrayed, is that Puff isn't satisfied. It may be, in fact, that his dissatisfaction is intended to represent the general dissatisfaction of all critics of any sort - of art, of behavior, of ideas or of anything. The suggestion is that there is no pleasing a critic, ever, and that repeated attempts to do so are all in vain. The play's thematic point is that the emptiness of the critic and his words, in spite of his "puffed up" sense of self, is boundless.

Bibliography

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Characters

Lord Burleigh

Lord Burleigh, the Lord Treasurer and chief minister under Queen Elizabeth I, appears in Puff's *The Spanish Armada* as a completely silent man. His simple shaking of the head communicates the need for the English to show a greater spirit if they are to defeat their Spanish enemies.

Mr. Dangle

Mr. Dangle is the critic of the play's title. Dangle's great love is the stage; the opening scene of the play shows him disregarding newspaper articles about important current events in favor of one that tells him about the theatre. "I hate all politics but theatrical politics," he explains to his wife as he hurriedly reads of a new play in production. Dangle finds great satisfaction in his position as "the head of a band of criticks," as his judgment of a play is so widely sought and revered. All members of the theatrical world seek his patronage because his word is enough to spark their careers; as he explains, there are "applications from all quarters" for his "interest." In act 1, scene ii, for example, Dangle receives some Italian singers in his drawing room and behaves like a king at court, despite the fact that he can barely understand them (or their translator). As his name suggests, there is something silly about a man who "dangles" around theaters and greenrooms, mingling with those who often hold a less-than-respectable position in London society. His self-importance makes him, therefore, an object of gentle ridicule: a man completely caught up in the work of others and determined to tell the public what it should think about its own tastes. Even his wife finds his devotion to theatrical matters laughable and unworthy of the effort with which he peruses them.

Nothing in the play suggests that Dangle is a harsh or brutal judge, as the term "critic" sometimes connotes. Indeed, each complaint he voices against Sir Fretful is followed by "tho' he's my friend" to suggest that Dangle takes no joy in trouncing someone's creative labors. When Sir Fretful arrives at Dangle's home, Dangle takes pains to spare his feelings when pointing out what he thinks of his latest tragedy: he prefaces his criticism by telling Sir Fretful that his first four acts are the best he "ever read or saw" before stating, "If I might venture to suggest any thing, it is that the interest rather falls off in the fifth." He furthermore calls the newspapers' attacks on Sir Fretful's work "illnatured to be sure," despite the fact that Sir Fretful's work seems to warrant such censure.

Dangle's desire to criticize without offending is even more apparent when he watches the rehearsal of Puff's *The Spanish Armada* and asks polite questions about its flaws instead of jeering at them outright (as both Sneer and the audience do). Unlike many critics who make names for themselves by tearing down those of their contemporaries', Dangle enjoys his happy life as a man who reads plays in advance of their production and obtains the finest seats at the theatre.

Mrs. Dangle

Unlike her husband, Mrs. Dangle finds his devotion to the theatre childish and confounding. One of her first lines is, "Now that the plays are begun I shall have no peace"; it is this "lack of peace" caused by the constant influx of actors, managers, and playwrights into her home that Mrs. Dangle finds irritating. She scolds Dangle for taking no interest in contemporary politics and bemoans the fact that Dangle could, if he showed "the least spirit," have "been at the head of one of the Westminster associations." While amusing to the audience, Dangle's complete lack of interest in anything but the theater irritates his wife: "I believe," she tells him, "if the French were landed tomorrow, your first inquiry would be, whether they had brought a theatrical troop with them." Although Dangle tries to involve his wife in his theatrical pursuits, her attitude toward him is unchanging.

Early in the play, Mrs. Dangle complains that her house has become "the motley rendezvous of all the lackeys of literature" and "an absolute register-office for candidate actors, and poets without character." While Dangle enjoys having his patronage solicited by these "lackeys," Mrs. Dangle finds their presence unnerving. In act 1, scene ii, Sheridan offers the viewer an example of how Mrs. Dangle deals with these intrusions: after trying to understand both the Italian singer and his interpreter, she tells Dangle, "Here are two very civil gentlemen trying to make themselves understood, and I don't know which is the interpreter." Her frustration, however, does not deter Dangle from mingling with performers or abandoning his critical duties.

The Earl of Leicester

A favorite of Queen Elizabeth I, he appears in Puff's *The Spanish Armada* as the Commander-in-Chief of the military. In one of the tragedy's many unintentionally comic scenes, he leads the other characters in a prayer to Mars.

The Governor of Tilbury Fort

In Puff's *The Spanish Armada*, the Governor is the officer in command of Tilbury Fort, where the British troops are being mustered. His daughter, Tilburnia, falls in love with Don Ferolo Whiskerandos, who is being held prisoner at Tilbury Fort. When asked by his daughter to accept a "noble price" to free her lover, the Governor refuses.

Sir Christopher Hatton

Lord Chancellor at the time of the actual Spanish Armada crisis, he appears in Puff's tragedy based on the same. His niece eventually falls in love with Don Ferolo Whiskerandos.

Sir Fretful Plagiary

Sir Fretful is Dangle's friend and a playwright whose work is universally dismissed by all who read it as uninspired and whose personality is marked by tremendous insecurity. Many of the names in *The Critic* are comically indicative of the characters, and Sir Fretful Plagiary's fits him on two counts: he is immensely "fretful" when faced with criticism and often plagiarizes others' works (making his work a collection of "stray jokes" and "pilfered witticisms"). Before he arrives at Dangle's home, Dangle and Sneer discuss Sir Fretful's faults: he "allows no merit to any author but himself," he is "as envious as an old maid verging on the desperation of six-and-thirty," and he "is so covetous of popularity" that he would "rather be abused" in the press "than not mentioned at all." Of course, Sir Fretful finds none of these faults in himself, convinced as he is of his own genius. (He is so convinced, in fact, that he does not send his latest work to the Drury Lane Theatre for fear that Sheridan himself will steal his work!)

Sir Fretful's greatest fault, however, is his tendency to solicit others to give "free" and honest opinions of his work, only to reject any negative criticism with "petulant arrogance." Sir Fretful's conversation with Dangle and Sneer demonstrates this habit. When Sneer, for example, tells him that his play "wants incident," Sir Fretful remarks that "the incidents are too crowded"; when Dangle says that the "interest rather falls off" in the fifth act, Sir Fretful counters with, "Rises; I believe you mean, Sir." Sir Fretful further shows his inability to take any criticism when he asks Dangle and Sneer to recall what a newspaper said of him; despite Sir Fretful's laughter, he is obviously upset at having his work compared to "a bad tavern's worst wine."

Mr. Puff

A playwright and composer of advertisements, Puff is a friend of Dangle. His historical tragedy, *The Spanish Armada*, is rehearsed in acts 2 and 3. Puff calls himself a "Practitioner in Pangeyric" or "a Professor of the Art of Puffing": a man whose ability to "puff up" ordinary language earns him a living. Puff composes false reviews for plays in order to boost ticket sales, teaches auctioneers how to use inflated language to make their wares more alluring to bidders, and even pretends to be a widow (or other charity case) in the newspaper to solicit assistance from kind (yet gullible) readers. ("I supported myself two years entirely by my misfortunes," he explains.) Puff has various methods of "puffing," such as "The Puff Direct" (in which he invents a positive review for a play the day before its premiere) or "The Puff Collusive" (in which he writes a piece denouncing a book or poem as too licentious or scandal mongering, thereby inciting the public to buy it immediately). At present, Puff has turned to the theatre, where he can indulge his "talent for fiction and embellishment."

During the rehearsal of his play, Puff exhibits all the nervous intensity one would expect from a director. Part of the humor of the rehearsal scenes lies in the way that Puff (like Sir Fretful in act 1, scene i) defends himself against every possible negative criticism of his play made by Dangle and Sneer. For example, after Sneer recognizes a line of

Shakespeare's *Othello* in Puff's play, Puff explains, "That's of no consequnce—all that can be said is, that two people happened to hit on the same thought. His shameless brand of self-defense is demonstrated throughout the play.

Sir Walter Raleigh

A soldier, explorer, poet and sometime favorite of Queen Elizabeth I, he appears in Puff's tragedy as a companion of Sir Christopher Hatton. Like Hatton's niece, Raleigh's niece also falls in love with Don Ferolo Whiskerandos.

Signor Pasticcio Ritornello

Signor Ritornello possesses one of the many "outlandish throats" found in the opera. He visits Dangle's home with his two nieces in order to secure Dangle's patronage. Unfortunately, he only speaks Italian and brings a French translator with him; when he tries to converse with Mr. and Mrs. Dangle, the result is comic cross-communication.

Mr. Sneer

One of Dangle's friends and fellow-critics, Sneer (as his name blatantly suggests) is a man always finding fault in those around him. His first conversation with Dangle reveals Sneer's assumptions about the theatre: feeling that the stage could be a "school of morality," Sneer complains that "people seem to go there principally for their entertainment!" When Dangle complains of how comedies have been purged of all "double entendre" and "smart innuendo," Sneer responds with a metaphor that reflects his judgmental mind and style of speech:

Our prudery in this respect is just on a par with the artificial bashfulness of a courtezan, who encreases the blush upon her cheek in an exact proportion to the diminution of her modesty.

Throughout the play, Sneer makes a number of similar remarks, taking swipes at authors, actors, and newspapers. While Dangle is genial and indulgent, Sneer is bitter and unforgiving.

Sneer's chief role in *The Critic* is to offer a running commentary on Puff's *The Spanish Armada* when it is rehearsed in acts 2 and 3. His sarcastic heckling adds to the humor of Puff's unintentionally hilarious play and invites the audience to laugh at Puff's awful tragedy. For example, after Dangle praises Tilburnia's awful-sounding verse with, "O!—'tis too much," Sneer remarks, "Oh!—it is indeed"; similarly, when Puff explains that his characters must be allowed "to hear and see a number of things" not presented on stage, Sneer mockingly pretends to agree with him and states, "Yes—a kind of poetical second-sight!" Sneer makes comments like these throughout Puff's rehearsal; as Puff is wholly "inflated" with the false ideas of his own talents, Sneer serves as a means by which Sheridan mocks all writers of Puff's ilk, who find their own work beyond reproach.

Tilburnia

In Puff's *The Spanish Armada*, the daughter of the Governor of Tilbury Fort, who falls in love with Don Ferolo Whiskerandos. Never without Nora, her confidant, Tilburnia is a parody of the tragic heroine, torn between love and duty. She eventually goes mad after Don Whiskerandos's death and throws herself into the sea.

Don Ferolo Whiskerandos

In Puff's *The Spanish Armada*, the son of the Spanish admiral who is being held prisoner at Tilbury Fort. He is killed in a duel over Tilburnia. He is meant by Sheridan to be viewed as a parody of the exotic, alluring, and dashing foreign lover.

Themes

Criticism

Naturally, *The Critic* explores the issue of criticism, specifically the different ways that playwrights respond to critiques of their work. Sir Fretful Plagiary is the epitome of one who attempts to seem gracious and able to withstand any critical judgment of his plays; when faced with even the smallest quibble, however, his "fretful" nature becomes apparent. For example, Sir Fretful tells Dangle and Sneer that he is "never so well pleased as when a judicious critic points out any defect" in his work to him and that Sneer "can't oblige [him] more" than he would by offering his opinions. However, when Sneer tells him that the "events" in his latest play are "too few," Sir Fretful responds that the events are "too crowded"; when told by Dangle that the play's "interest rather falls off" at the end, Sir Fretful counters with, "Rises; I believe you mean, Sir." When Dangle's wife (who only defends Sir Fretful because "everybody else abuses him") states that she "did not see a fault in any part of the play from beginning to end," Sir Fretful exclaims, "Upon my soul the women are the best judges after all!" Of course, "best" in this context means "most flattering."

Unlike Sir Fretful, Puff does not become upset when faced with complaints about his play, *The Spanish Armada*. Instead, he offers what he finds to be logical explanations for every incident and line, however contrived or ridiculous. For example, when Sneer asks Puff how Hatton could never before have asked Raleigh about their preparations for war, Puff responds, "What, before the Play began? how the plague could he?" Similarly, when Dangle observes that the Beefeater's soliloquy of four lines is "very short," Puff explains, "Yes—but it would have been a great deal longer if he had not been observed."

Convinced of his own skill as a playwright, Puff becomes irritated when he learns of the cuts in the script made by the actors: although he initially calls them "very good judges" of what should be deleted, he later complains that they have cut "one of the finest and most laboured" scenes of his play. Although he lets the cuts remain, he vows to "print it every word," assured that his readers (if not his audience) will appreciate his talents.

Publicity and Advertising

While Puff is the play's primary playwright, Sheridan also uses him to satirize the means by which the skills of a playwright are found in the world outside of the theater, specifically in the world of advertising. Puff explains that he "does as much business in that way as any six of the fraternity in town" and that it is his talent for "puffing" up language to extraordinary heights that helps Puff make a living from the press. For example, Puff has taught advertisers to employ "panegyrical superlatives" to create appealing images of their products and capture consumers' interest; he has also used his talent for "puffing" to create false newspaper advertisements in which he pretended

to be bankrupt, an invalid, and a widower in ordere to live upon the charity of credulous readers.

Puff's swindles are strikingly in tune with some modern advertising practices. For example, Puff uses the press to create false (and, of course, glowing) reviews of the work of his friends. A similar device was seen in 2001 when Sony Pictures came under fire for inventing positive critical reviews for its film *The Animal*; that same year, the company was criticized again for having employees pose, in television commercials, as theatergoers offering great reviews of *The Patriot*. Puff also composes stories wherein he sneaks in advertisements that seem glaringly out of place: for example, he recites a story he wrote about George Bon-Mot "sauntering down St. James's-street," where he met Lady Mary Myrtle and said:

I just saw a picture of you, in a new publication called THE CAMP MAGAZINE, which, bye the bye, is a devilish clever thing,—and is sold at No. 3, on the right-hand of the way, two doors from the printing office, the corner of Ivy-lane, Paternoster-row, price only one shilling!

This is remarkably reminiscent of the advertising practice known as "product placement," in which corporations pay to have characters in films use their clearly marked products. Many corporations selling things such as cars, food, and clothing use product placement as a means of exposing their products to a captive audience.

Finally, Puff also reflects a twentieth-century trend among advertisers when he describes his technique "The Puff Collusive," in which he acts "in the guise of determined hostility" to presumably warn the public about the moral dangers of a new work of art (in the case of his example, a poem): "Here you see the two strongest inducements are held forth;—First, that nobody ought to read it;— and secondly, that everybody buys it." When one considers the furor over certain books (such as *The Catcher in the Rye or The Satanic Verses*), television shows (such as *N. Y. P. D. Blue* or *South Park*), or albums by artists as different as Elvis Presley and Eminem, one sees just how prescient Sheridan was in his creation of Puff and all his "various sorts" of "Puffing."

Style

Setting

The Critic takes place in two locations: Dangle's house and the theater where Puff's play is rehearsed; each setting reflects the values and assumptions of its principal character.

Dangle's house is a place where actors, singers, writers, and other "lackeys of literature" gather to solicit his approval and patronage. Dangle is a self-professed lover of the theater and his home reflects this; for while there, he does not engage in any conversation that is not about the theater. When reading the newspapers, for example, he dismisses the threat of a possible war in order to read about "theatrical politics." In fact, Dangle's love of theater is so great and so ingrained in him that he often "performs" in his drawing room as if he were on stage. He finds Sir Fretful's latest play atrocious yet calls it "finished and most admirable" once he hears Fretful entering the room. Similarly, when Mrs. Dangle attempts to tell Sir Fretful that her husband and Sneer were just laughing at Sir Fretful's play, Dangle hides the truth from Fretful with the excuse, "My friend Sneer was rallying just now . . . Sneer will jest." Dangle and Sneer's greatest performance occurs when they invent a series of negative reviews for Sir Fretful's work and pretend that they have read them in the newspapers. Because Sir Fretful is Dangle's friend, Dangle tries not to offend him; it is only through Dangle's elaborate and comic performance with Sneer that he can reveal what he really thinks about the author. As a man devoted to the theater, Dangle knows a great deal about acting on and off the stage.

Puff is, as he boldly asserts, a "Professor of the Art of Puffing," and the theater where he rehearses his tragedy contains a multitude of "puffed up" actors and effects that revolve around Puff's preposterous script. At the theatre, Puff is invincible: he dismisses any remark about his play, however sugarcoated, and is always confident of his authorial and directorial powers. Puff's theatrical triumph occurs at the end of the play when his cast reenacts the defeat of the Spanish Armada: this hodgepodge of special effects, music, and actors portraying "The procession of all the English rivers and their tributaries" is laughable, rather than spellbinding, due to its highly "puffed" staging. Sheridan's point is that these "puffy" plays are a staple of British theater; by setting most of *The Critic* in a theater, Sheridan calls attention to his audience's taste—or the lack of it.

The Prologue

Almost all eighteenth-century plays featured prologues, recited on their opening nights by notable celebrities or writers and later reprinted in newspapers. As Mary E. Knapp points out in her 1961 study, *Prologues and Epilogues of the Eighteenth Century*, one purpose of the prologue was to "cajole the audience into a pleasant frame of mind so

that they would be in a friendly mood before the curtain was drawn up." Another important function a prologue served was to point out the upcoming play's themes so that the audience could more readily identify them as the drama unfolded. The prologue to *The Critic* (written by Richard Fitzpatrick, a member of Parliament and lover of the theatre) is a history in miniature of the contemporary London stage and the degree to which it has decayed. Fitzpatrick begins by noting that "The Sister Muses"—tragedy and comedy—have, like earthly rulers, been misled by "evil counselors." Tragedy has fallen, since the time of John Dryden (1631-1700), into a series of plays featuring only ranting and raving characters who "bellow" so loudly that they no longer resemble real people. Comedy likewise has suffered by a preponderance of salacious jokes that cause "female modesty" to become "abash'd."

Fitzgerald, however, surprises the audience by explaining that the cures of these theatrical illnesses are sometimes worse than the diseases. Tragedy is no longer so histrionic, but "Now insipidy succeeds bombast." Comedy has been cleansed of inappropriate jokes, but now "the purest morals" are "undefil'd by wit." Fitzgerald's goal here is to communicate to his audience what he sees as the faults of his own era's theater—faults that will be exposed and exaggerated throughout *The Critic*. Fitzgerald also assists Sheridan's cause by enlisting the audience as the playwright's partners in satire, telling them that *The Critic* will "brave the critick's rage," enrage "brother bards," and even "Newspapers themselves defy." If *The Critic* is to succeed as a comedy, its "chief dependence" must be the "alliance" of the audience, whose support will help Sheridan deflect the outcry he is sure will come his way as a result of his satire.

Historical Context

The Enlightenment and The Age of Reason are alternate names used by historians and critics to identify the eighteenth century. While the eighteenth century technically, of course, began in 1700, the term "eighteenth century" when used by literary critics has come to mean the years falling between the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 and the publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* (the book that sparked English romanticism) in 1798. In short, the eighteenth century was a period marked by incredible enthusiasm for science, history, and literature that the English had not enjoyed since the end of the Renaissance a century earlier.

The reasons for this sudden renewal of interest in the arts and sciences are complex but can be roughly understood by considering the terrible chaos that the nation had just endured and barely survived. The seventeenth century was marked by a civil war in which King Charles I and his army of loyalist "Cavaliers" fought with an army raised by the Puritan members of Parliament, who felt that Charles had grown too corrupt, too powerful, and too belligerent. Eventually, the Puritans defeated their Royalist opponents; after a trial by his enemies in which he could never have prevailed, Charles I was beheaded in 1649. The monarchy was—so the Puritans believed—abolished, and Oliver Cromwell, the military genius and commander of the Puritan forces, became the nation's ruler. (He was called "Lord Protector.") After Cromwell's death in 1658, his son, Richard, assumed the Lord Protectorship, continuing this historical period, known as the Interregnum, without a king. The citizens of England, however, found their new rulers worse than the monarch they had replaced; after a number of secret missions, negotiations, and meetings, the son of Charles I was brought out of hiding (from Scotland) to a tremendously warm welcome in London. Charles II was crowned in 1660, when the monarchy was restored.

This terrible war, coupled with a visitation of bubonic plague in 1665 and the Great Fire of London in 1666, stood in the English mind as horrible examples of the fury wrought both by man and nature. Enlightenment thinkers, therefore, sought to better understand both politics and science in an effort to ensure that similar events would never again occur. In 1662, the Royal Society (a government-funded organization of scientists working together and sharing information) was created; important books from this period include the first edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1768), Goldsmith's *History of the Earth and Animated Nature* (1774), Burke's *Reflections of the Revolution in France* (1760), Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1775), and Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776).

The first great dramatist of the age was John Dryden (1631-1700), whose comedy *Marriage á la Mode* (1673) and tragedy *All for Love* (1677) were immensely popular and reveal what would become the public's taste in both modes. Many eighteenthcentury plays are "comedies of manners": plays that feature domestic plots, quick dialogue, and an ironic examination of the behaviors (or "manners") of the upper class. Examples of this genre include Sir George Etherege's *She Wou'd if She Cou'd* (1688), William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675), William Congreve's *The Way of the World*

(1700), and Sheridan's own *The School for Scandal* (1777), which cemented his fame as a comic playwright. Another popular comic form was the dramatic burlesque, in which theatrical conventions and means of productions became the subjects of satire: the Duke of Buckingham's *The Rehearsal* (1671), John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), Fielding's *The Tragedy of Tragedies* (1731), and the famed actor David Garrick's *A Peep Behind the Curtain* (1767) are examples of this form. *The Critic* is another example of dramatic burlesque, in which the audience laughs at actors playing the roles of actors struggling with their work. By the end of the century, however, drama fell into disfavor while the novel simultaneously exploded on the literary scene.

Critical Overview

While modern critics generally applaud Sheridan's work and a modern reader may find *The Critic* a very amusing yet tame burlesque, its first production in 1779 caused a minor controversy in the London press. The play's unnamed first reviewer (in a review collected in *Sheridan: Comedies* (1986) edited by Peter Davison) admired the first act's wit and satire but complained that the second and third were "heavy and tiresome." He also scolded Sheridan for not attempting the "least originality" and called the play "an act of angry retaliation" rather than "a dramatic satire, founded on general principles." This same reviewer even wrote that Sheridan's satire on false advertisements for charity "may deprive some worthy objects of that relief which their distresses might otherwise receive from the benevolent." (He further complained that Puff and Sneer both mention the word "God" onstage "without censure.") Other eighteenth-century reviews were equally dismissive: in 1783, another unnamed reviewer (also collected in *Sheridan: Comedies*) called *The Critic* "the offspring of a pen that had in vain attempted to write a tragedy" and said that Sheridan "felt a malicious pleasure in decrying a species of composition which has been deemed superior" to Sheridan's own. Finally, the playwright Charles Dibdin, writing in his 1788 collection, *The Musical Tour of Mr. Dibdin*, challenged Sheridan to "write a tragedy so as to steer clear of his own lash"—something he felt Sheridan would find an impossible task.

Audiences, however, loved the play, which has become a favorite of actors, producers, and even critics since its premiere. Many twentieth-century readers echo the sentiments of Lord Byron as quoted in James Morwood's *The Life and Works of Richard Brinsley Sheridan*, who called it the "best farce" he had ever seen. In his 1970 study "Sheridan: The Last of the Great Theatrical Satirists," Samuel L. Macey discusses the twilight of dramatic burlesque in the eighteenth century: while the "restrictions imposed by the temper of the times" stifled some writers' will to satire, Macey praises Sheridan for allowing theatrical satire to exit the Enlightenment stage "with a bang rather than a whimper." In Philip K. Jason's 1974 essay, "A Twentieth Century Response to *The Critic*," he compares Sheridan's play to what he sees as its modern counterpart: Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Like Macey, he praises how Sheridan balances the "multiple perspectives" that accompany any play while consciously calling attention to the actors within it performing their roles.

Some modern critics, however, praise Sheridan's craft while discounting his talents as a true artist. In his introductory essay to the Modern Library's *Eighteenth Century Plays* (1952), Ricardo Quintana argues that the work of Sheridan and his three chief contemporaries (Goldsmith, Fielding, and Gay) have "a depth generally lacking elsewhere" in Restoration drama. However, Quintana further remarks that Sheridan's "spectacular career" can "blind us to the fact that his wit and his remarkable sense of theater are not balanced by the insight and intuition of drama at its greatest." Similarly, in his book *Sheridan's Comedies: Their Contexts and Achievements* (1977), Mark S. Auburn calls *The Critic* "the most complete satiric play about the theater yet created" yet not up to the artistic level of Sheridan's previous (and more widely known) play, *The School for Scandal:*

Beside the greater comedy, *The Critic* seems a remnant of his youth, a brilliant utilization of his experiences as a practical dramatist perhaps, but more nearly the product of an exuberance and an adolescent cynicism which the perfection of *The School for Scandal* seems to deny.

Of course, critical evaluations are often as varied as the opinions of Puff and Sneer. In his 1997 work *A Traitor's Kiss: The Life of Richard Brinsley Sheridan*, Sheridan's most recent biographer and critic, Fintan O'Toole, writes that *The Critic* allowed Sheridan to vent all the anxieties and frustrations he had amassed during his time as the manager of the Drury Lane Theatre: "Into it he poured all the vexations of the previous season, alchemically transformed into pure hilarity." O'Toole notes that of the twelve most often staged plays in England between 1776 and 1800, four were by Shakespeare and two (*The Duenna* and *The School for Scandal*) were by Sheridan. "With *The Critic* holding its place as one of the most frequently performed afterpieces," O'Toole concludes, "Sheridan the playwright continued to occupy a central place in British cultural life." The fact that *The Critic* is still performed across North America and Europe attests to the fact that Sheridan still occupies, if not a central, at least a prominent place in twentiethcentury theater.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Moran is a secondary school teacher of English and American literature. In this essay, he examines the ways in which Sheridan's play parodies a number of tragic conventions.

In 1763, sixteen years before the premiere of *The Critic*, James Boswell co-authored a pamphlet in which he jeered at David Mallet's *Elvira*, a tragedy acted at the Drury Lane Theatre. Confessing to his friend Samuel Johnson that he felt somewhat guilty about the pamphlet, since he himself could not write a tragedy "near so good," Boswell received another impromptu lesson from his mentor that found its way into *The Life of Samuel Johnson.*

Why no, Sir; this is not just reasoning. You *may* abuse a tragedy, though you cannot write one. You may scold a carpenter who has made you a bad table, though you cannot make a table. It is not your trade to make tables.

Boswell's conscience may have been bothering him because of a trend of thought sometimes found among those faced with the critical evaluation of tragedy: the genre is so revered and taken so seriously that mocking it is sometimes regarded as aesthetically sacrilegious, like finding fault with Michelangelo's *Pieta*. Comedy never tries to elicit the "pity or terror" (in Aristotelian terms) of tragedy, and its faults are therefore regarded as less damaging to the work as a whole. Along these same lines, the benchmark for a quality tragedy is often a higher one than comedy, since laughter is supposedly easier to elicit than catharsis. This is why the most improbable plot devices in comedies are accepted as part of the game, whereas the same improbabilities in tragedies are either glossed over or dismissed as unimportant in terms of the work's total effect on a viewer. In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, for example, Viola disguises herself as a man and in doing so becomes *completely indistinguishable* from her twin brother—so much so that she excites the mourning Olivia into thunderous passion and never once causes her new master, Orsino, to question her gender. No viewer of this play would rail against this seemingly impossible device, yet if the same kind of incident occurred in *King Lear*, for example, audiences would have a much more difficult time "believing" it (to the extent that they suspend their disbelief and accept the action of any play as "real"). Yet even the greatest tragedies have a number of events in them that are wholly implausible yet infrequently questioned by awestruck viewers and readers. As Puff explains to Dangle and Sneer, "a play is not to show occurrences that happen every day, but things just so strange, that tho' they never *did*, they might happen." That "might" is where plots become farcical (in the case of comedy) or awkward (in the case of tragedy).

Sheridan, of course, knew all of this from his years spent reading, attending, writing, and managing plays, and it is this central idea—that tragedies belong to a genre so exulted that anyone criticizing their creators (like Boswell) can actually feel guilty— that fuels *The Critic*. Sheridan made Puff's *The Spanish Armada* a tragedy instead of a comedy because he knew that the humor would arise in direct proportion to the

earnestness and seriousness of its performance. Had he made Puff's play a comedy, everyone in the audience would be laughing *with* the characters rather than *at* them, and making his audience laugh at writers like Puff is crucial to Sheridan's vision. Once the members of Sheridan's audience start laughing at the portentousness of *Puff's* tragedy, however, they can begin to consider just how silly (and worthy of any number of pamphlets) the plots and conventions of even the greatest tragedies can be. As a viewer watches *The Critic*, therefore, he or she is invited to share in Sheridan's laughter at tragic conventions and, ultimately, better appreciate those playwrights who are able to deal with these conventions in a way less laughable than Puff. "I improve upon established modes," Puff boasts, and a careful reading of *The Spanish Armada* reveals Sheridan's joy in parodying the established mode of tragedy and its conventions. Unlike Boswell, Sheridan never feels the slightest compunctions about mocking the genre or its less-than-talented disciples.

The Spanish Armada can be read as a catalogue of theatrical conventions, each of which is hilariously presented but each of which also provokes a reader into recalling where similar devices occur in other, "real" tragedies. The differences are merely ones of degree. For example, the opening scene of Puff's play features two sentinels asleep at their post. When Sneer remarks that this is odd, considering the "alarming crisis" of a possible Spanish attack, Puff explains that the guards must be asleep, for Raleigh and Hatton would not speak if they knew the guards were watching them. This is a joke for the audience, but consider the death of Juliet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet:* after she awakens from her drugged sleep in the Capulet tomb and learns that Romeo is dead, Friar Lawrence advises her to "Come, come away" and live among "a sisterhood of holy nuns." When Juliet refuses, Friar Lawrence leaves the tomb, ostensibly because "the watch is coming" but really because had he stayed, Juliet would have been denied her opportunity to commit suicide. Moments later, the conveniently absent Friar returns with the lovers' parents and confesses his role in their attempted elopement. Like Puff's sleeping sentinels, Shakespeare's Friar had to engage in an inexplicable action for the sake of dramatic expediency. This is similar to Hamlet's dragging the body of Polonius into "the neighbor room" after he kills him; Hamlet may be doing so to spare his mother the horrible sight, but Shakespeare also knew that the actor playing Polonius had to get off the stage and having the actor jump up and exit after such an intense scene might break the spell of the moment.

Another theatrical convention skewered by Sheridan is the manner in which many playwrights struggle with the problem of exposition. After Hatton asks Raleigh why there is a "general muster" and "throng of chiefs" at Tilbury (although he plainly knows the answer), Dangle rightly asks Puff why, if Hatton "*knows* all this," Raleigh continues telling it to him; Puff explains that Hatton and Raleigh speak for the audience's sake. Information necessary to the plot is therefore presented but in such a way that its very presentation is laughably awkward. Jane Austen recognized the same problem and similarly parodied it in a play she wrote as a young girl, collected in her book *Love and Friendship:*

Pistoletta: Pray papa how far is it to London?

Popgun: My Girl, my Darling, my favourite of all my children, who art the picture of thy poor mother who died two months ago, with whom I am going to town to marry to Strephon, and to whom I mean to bequeath my whole Estate, it wants seven miles.

All playwrights face this challenge and meet it with varying degrees of success: to return to Shakespeare, consider the opening of *King Lear*, in which Shakespeare masterfully opens the play with the meeting where Lear divides his kingdom while simultaneously revealing his attitudes toward his daughters. Conversely, consider the opening of *Hamlet*, where Marcellus asks Horatio, who has returned to Denmark only two months ago, why Denmark is preparing "implements of war" in "sweaty haste." Why Marcellus, a royal guard, would not know anything about this and need to ask a civilian student is not explained, or even considered by many viewers. Even Shakespeare nods.

Once the exposition is out of the way, a playwright still faces the problem of information: a character needs to learn some fact or secret but must learn it in such a way that seems dramatically plausible. Eavesdropping, therefore, is the dramatist's friend; consider the number of plays in which a character learns something he or she is not supposed to by virtue of a good hiding place. In *Othello*, for example, the title character conceals himself so well that he can overhear Iago speak to Cassio of Bianca yet remain wholly unnoticed by Cassio, who speaks as freely as if he and Iago were on a deserted island. Similarly, *Hamlet* abounds in overheard conversations: Polonius and Claudius listen to Hamlet's "Get thee to a nunnery" tirade against Ophelia, and Polonius is killed while hiding behind a tapestry in Gertrude's room. As Puff proclaims, "If people who want to listen, or overhear, were not always conniv'd at in a Tragedy, there would be no carrying on any plot in the world." Sheridan knew this to be true: his own *The School for Scandal* relies heavily on eavesdropping to propel its plot. Here, however, he takes great delight in laying bare the clumsy machinations of those who attempt to (in Hamlet's words) "hold a mirror up to nature" but fail.

The list of conventions thus parodied continues. Tilburnia's first speech mocks overdone pseudo-poetic language: she takes twenty lines to say, "It is morning and I am unhappy." The tendency for playwrights to imbue their characters with (in Puff's words) the ability "to hear and see a number of things that are not" is mocked by Tilburnia's description of the approaching armada; again, this is a ludicrous moment in Puff's play, but anyone who rereads Gertrude's description of Ophelia's death in *Hamlet* is faced with the same problem: from where did Gertrude get this information, and why did the person telling it not attempt to *rescue* Ophelia as she drowned? The playwright's necessary manipulation of props is mocked when Don Whiskerandos and the Beefeater happen to discover two swords dropped by Hatton and Raleigh; while humorous here, the same kind of manipulation occurs at the end of *Hamlet* when Hamlet and Laertes unknowingly switch swords during their final duel, thus allowing Shakespeare to kill them both with the same poisoned tip. Another tragic convention—madness—is often used by playwrights to solicit the pathos of the audience; such "mad scenes," however, often feature a character speaking in a way that cleverly reveals significant aspects of their personalities in a way that seems unlike "real" madness. (Lady Macbeth, for example, manifests her madness in sleepwalking while attempting to symbolically wash

her hands of the guilt that plagues her.) This convention is ridiculed by Sheridan when he makes the mad Tilburnia babble such nonsense as:

Is this a grasshopper!—Ha! no, it is my Whiskerandos—you shall not keep him—I know you have him in your pocket—An oyster may be cross'd in love!—Who says A whale's a bird?—

The more tragedies one has seen, the funnier Puff's play becomes. It is important to remember, however, that Sheridan does not do all this in an effort to mock the genre of tragedy as a whole; rather, he expresses his amusement with those writers who struggle with these conventions when composing their work and can only meet these challenges in the most dramatically clumsy ways. As a playwright himself, Sheridan knew of these struggles firsthand, and it is by presenting *The Spanish Armada*, a play where all of these struggles prove too great for Puff, that Sheridan invites his audience both to laugh at those who cannot meet the challenges of composition and to applaud those (like himself) who do. Puff's play, therefore, is a guide to Sheridan's aesthetics, albeit a guide that shows its user what *not* to do rather than what he or she should do. Great skill is needed to depict the work of an unskillful playwright, and, by examining the tragic conventions parodied in *The Spanish Armada*, a viewer can better appreciate the skills of tragedians who handle these conventions more adroitly than Puff.

Source: Daniel Moran, Critical Essay on *The Critic*, in *Drama for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, the author discusses the history of Sheridan's The Critic *and evaluates its status as "perhaps the most complete play about the theatre ever written."*

The Critic, which was first presented on 30 October 1779, is perhaps the most complete play about the theater ever written. It was both occasional entertainment and burlesque, topically oriented and aimed at posterity, a local development and an echo of an eternal form. From Aristophanes's *The Acharnians* to Shakespeare's "Pyramus and Thisbe," to Fletcher's *Knight of the Burning Pestle*, to Buckingham's *Rehearsal*, to Fielding's *Tragedy of Tragedies* or *Pasquin*, the comic dramatic urge at self-reflection has surfaced brilliantly. But the examples from the 1770s which influenced Sheridan failed to achieve lasting fame largely because they are too local, too tied to contemporary situations and personalities; only Garrick's *A Peep behind the Curtain* approaches the proper balance between timeliness and timelessness, yet it lacks the wit, satire, and brilliance to endure. What is surprising about *The Critic*, a greater play which adopted a similar form, is that it too is very local.

Consider the raw materials of *The Critic*: an absurd, thin-skinned playwright, a silly romantic tragedy on the subject of the Spanish Armada, a theatrical entrepreneur entranced not with literary worth but dramatic stage effects, newspapers filled with gossip and concealed advertisements, critical debates about the uses and meaning of dramatic entertainment, a theatrical world populated by actors who are selfish and managers who themselves are playwrights. Stripped of contemporary associations, these subjects will be of interest as long as artistic impulses are channeled through the medium of the stage; but in Sheridan's play, each has purely local satiric applications which to a great extent determined the original success of *The Critic*, but which, it seems, would also prevent lasting fame. Both playwrights were recognized as specific individuals; the subject of Puff's tragedy held immense contemporary concern; and the critical themes were the stuff of the day.

Parsons, who portrayed Sir Fretful Plagiary, openly imitated the dress and mannerisms of Richard Cumberland, author of *The West Indian* and more recently *The Battle of Hastings*, a historical tragedy produced by Sheridan at Drury Lane 24 January 1778. On 20 March 1779 Cumberland had given a prelude to his musical piece, *Calypso*, for its Covent Garden production: that prelude was commonly known as *The Critic*. No one failed to recognize Parson's impersonation, and the *Lady's Magazine* for October 1779 went so far as to say that Sir Fretful Plagiary "exhibits one of the most harsh and severe caricatures that have been attempted since the days of Aristophanes, of which a celebrated sentimental writer is evidently the object: a great part of what is said by his representative being literally taken from his usual conversation, but with pointed and keen additions." Cumberland so felt the imputation that in his *Memoirs* (1807) he avoids mentioning the character's name completely, but casts oblique aspersions on Sheridan by citing a conversation between himself and Garrick following the introduction of *The West Indian* in which Garrick supposedly counterfeited the reading of a bad review of

the comedy, then revealed his joke. The implication is clear: in staging Sneer's attack on Sir Fretful, Sheridan was merely retelling a wornout story, Cumberland would have us believe, plagiarizing it in fact from life.

The other playwright of *The Critic*, Puff, was also from real life. Consider his thoughts on the subjects of drama:

What Shakespeare says of Actors may be better applied to the purpose of Plays; *they* ought to be "the abstract and brief Chronicles of the times." Therefore when history, and particularly the history of our own country, furnishes any thing like a case in point, to the time in which an author writes, if he knows his own interest, he will take advantage of it; so, Sir, I call my tragedy The Spanish Armada; and have laid the scene before Tilbury Fort.

On 18 June 1779, Spain declared war on England; on 16 August 1779 the war came home to London in the form of reports that the French and Spanish fleets had evaded a British squadron and were in the Channel. Volunteer companies were formed, the militia mobilized, and not until mid-September did invasion fever die down. In the *Public Advertiser* and the *Lady's Magazine*, Queen Elizabeth's speech to the army at Tilbury before the arrival of the Spanish Armada was reprinted; theatrical entertainments were given on the subject; poems were printed in the newspapers; correspondents employing Roman pseudonyms offered copious advice; and Covent Garden produced a topical musical farce on the war preparations titled *Plymouth in an Uproar.*

One of the theatrical entertainments on the subject is particularly interesting. During the summer of 1779 there was produced at the theater at Sadler's Wells a pantomime-pastiche, advertised as

A new favourite Musical Piece consisting of Airs serious and comic, Recitatives, Choruses, &c., called *The Prophecy: or, Queen Elizabeth at Tilbury*. In the course of which will be introduced a variety of Machinery and Decorations, particularly an emblematical Frontispiece, at the top of which, in a small Transparency, will be represented the Destruction of the famous Spanish Armada, and the view through the said Frontispiece will be closed by a Moving Perspective, representing the present Grand Fleet. The Recitatives and Choruses by Mr. Olive, the Airs selected from the best Masters, and the Paintings by Mr. Greenwood. Rope-dancing by Signora Mariana and Mr. Ferzi.

Pastiches of this sort almost always were mainly the creations of theatrical managers (Sheridan, of course, was behind *The Camp*, a similar topical exploitation piece), so we may assume that the author-director of *The Prophecy* was the manager of Sadler's Wells, who happened to be Thomas King, the great Drury Lane actor. King, veteran of Bayes in *The Rehearsal* and *The Meeting of the Company*, creator of Glib in *A Peep behind the Curtain*, created Puff, author of *The Spanish Armada.*

These local references seem by themselves enough to doom *The Critic* to mere topicality. But there is more in the way of local and domestic jokes. The manager who

writes was Sheridan himself, and Mrs. Dangle is bothered by foreign singers because that same manager had recently assumed ownership of the opera house, as Sheridan had done in real life. Dangle was recognized by many as Thomas Vaughan, author of a farce produced under Sheridan's direction called *The Hotel* (DL, 20 Nov. 1776) and a theatrical amateur and "dangler" about the Green Room. Miss Pope's portrayal of Tilburina was a take-off of Mrs. Crawford's tragic acting, while the younger Bannister's acting of Don Ferolo Whiskerandos mimicked William Smith's portrayal of Richard III. Sheridan was known for writing "puffs" for Drury Lane, and the "puff direct" of which Puff gives an example was most likely a "puff preliminary" for Elizabeth Griffith's *The Times*, a comedy to be produced little more than a month after the introduction of Sheridan's afterpiece.

Such topicality might assure a successful, financially rewarding run. In the previous season, Sheridan's slight pastiche, *The Camp* (15 Oct. 1778), had run for fifty-seven performances as an afterpiece and brought in an average of £228 a night for its first ten performances, an amazing achievement in a season for which non-benefit performances averaged only £183. The literary features of *The Camp* are hardly significant: a little characteristic and a little witty dialogue, a pair of national characters (Irish and French), some avaricious countrymen and their self-interested exciseman, some fine ladies, a briefly presented fop, and two minor, subordinated lines of action (one of a clever wit duped, the other the familiar boy-gets-girl sort) coexist merely to provide a theatrical visit to the military camp at Coxheath, then actually populated with soldiers and the focus of a great deal of contemporary interest. There were a few songs, some marching and dancing, and most important, splendid perspective views executed by De Loutherbourgh "which exceeds every Thing in Scenery we have ever seen." It should not be surprising that when audiences would pay to see such drivel, Sheridan would give them more—and he did, in another pastiche, *The Wonders of Derbyshire*, later the same season. *The Critic*, in a similar fashion, has topical subjects, local and domestic jokes, songs which were popular enough to warrant separate publication, and De Loutherbourgh scenery which "seems to bring nature to our view, instead of painting views after nature."

And yet, *The Critic* is obviously a great deal more than just a topical burlesque. "Whoever, delighting in its gaiety and wit, remembers that *The Critic* was written in one of the darkest hours of English history" when invasion seemed imminent? We may no longer view Sir Fretful Plagiary as a caricature of Cumberland, or know that Puff is Thomas King, veteran actor and theater manager; but who fails to be delighted by timelessness encased in timeliness? The very brilliance of *The Critic* arises because its informing design is not topical, because its ridicule is not specific satire but general comic criticism. *The Critic* is clearly burlesque in its widest sense, rarely parody, the most topical form of burlesque.

Parody is a subspecies of satire, the direct mockery by imitation of a given, specific, external object. In one of the precursors of *The Critic, The Rehearsal*, numerous speeches, lines, and situations echo and ridicule speeches and situations from contemporary Restoration heroic plays. The viewer of that play today, or even the mid-eighteenth-century auditor, is unlikely to derive the pleasure contemporary audiences

felt; even the reader of a good annotated edition will probably fail to enjoy all the literary satire Buckingham intended. *The Rehearsal* lasted on stage because its timeless frame permitted massive changes in its parodied content. Cibber and Garrick injected contemporary commentary, mimicked the behavior of contemporary actors, in essence made the play of their time in spite of its origins. They, and modern producers, must do so because true parody—specific satire of a specific object—is lost when the object it mocks is lost: *Shamela* without *Pamela* is not very amusing and even the early chapters of *Joseph Andrews* seem misleading to many who do not know Richardson's novel. Burlesque, however, is not parody—not speci fic satire—but general ridicule of classes of objects. Parody takes the characteristics of specific objects, redefines them to expose their absurdity, and moves toward damnation of the whole class through damnation of the objects; burlesque creates the characteristics of the whole class by granting characteristics to an absurd imaginary individual example which in and by itself has no direct resemblance to any individual member of the whole class. Parody is particular, burlesque is general; parody is almost always highly topical; burlesque may have some topical features, but as a whole, is barely topical in itself.

The burlesque of *The Critic* has lasted longer than that of *The Rehearsal* or *The Tragedy of Tragedies* because *The Critic* chose as its objects those of a larger, less definable, less topical class. Buckingham's play mocks a rather local group of objects, heroic plays; Fielding's play attacks nearly the same set of rather local phenomena. But Sheridan's play mocks a large, amorphous class: *The Spanish Armada* is absurd not just as heroic drama, historical drama, domestic tragedy, or romantic tragedy, but as poorly conducted serious drama of any time. Unprepared discoveries, clumsy exposition, wild coincidences, pretentious dialogue, excessive spectacle are faults not of any single genre but of any kind of wretched play. Obviously, both *The Rehearsal* and *The Tragedy of Tragedies* burlesque the general as well as parody the particular; but insofar as they ridicule the particular they remain local. *The Critic*, even encased in topical references, has more endurance precisely because it ridicules the general more consistently.

This is one reason why, for instance, searching for passages from other eighteenth-century plays parodied in *The Critic* is such a fruitless business: there are very few if any because Sheridan was not attacking specific plays. This is one reason why Puff, and not Sir Fretful Plagiary, is the author of *The Spanish Armada:* Sir Fretful's association with Cumberland was too strong, and to ridicule Cumberland's *Battle of Hastings* was to tie *The Critic* to a merely local event; the association of Puff as the author of the tragedy with King as the author of an entertainment on a similar topic is convenient, but not necessary to make the satire against bad drama effective.

Moreover, *The Critic* is not just an attack on bad drama, but a comic castigation of sloppy theatrical practices in general. Literature is not Sheridan's target, as it was largely for Buckingham and Fielding; instead, his aim is to ridicule the excesses of professional, practical theater, and not just theater in production but theater in all its aspects. Dangle is every theatrical hanger-on—the amateur of dubious influence, the critic of unsure tastes, the hypocrite of uncertain loyalties. Sneer is every dramatic critic — self-interested for the two plays he brings to Dangle, but cynical concerning anyone

else's efforts. Sir Fretful is every thin-skinned author, and he became Cumberland not so much because Sheridan's text called for it as because Parsons chose to emphasize it: later actors have played the role successfully without reference to the sentimental playwright. Puff is beyond correction, a hackneyed playwright and a spectacle-monger. The Italian visitors come unprepared, ignorant of language, naïvely trusting in their own talents—a perfect reflection of many theatrical hopefuls. The self-interested managers, the upstaging actors and actresses, the practical designers and prompters are theatrical characters of all time. The aim of *The Critic* is clear, and the barb hits and sticks to the theatrical target.

Yet, as in *The Rivals* or *The School for Scandal* where sentimentality seems approved of as well as damned, many have doubted the aesthetic integrity of *The Critic*. The tacking together of the manners scenes of the first act with the more highly artificial burlesque rehearsal of the second and third acts seems a cynical attempt to utilize materials on hand, not to create a unified work capable of achieving the aesthetic integrity Sheridan sought (and failed) to give *The Relapse* or successfully lent to his other comic masterpieces. Early reviews remarked that Sheridan would have done better to play the first act as a prelude, or to integrate it with the second and third. It is, of course, a kind of prelude already. Yet its duration is such that it overshadows much of the rehearsal: it might have been integrated, but only at the possible expense of vitiating the effects of the rehearsal. Moreover, the attacks on newspaper puffery, on the selection of plays, on the influence of amateurs, and on the vanity and hypocrisy of authors and critics that constitute the satire of act one seem in many ways irrelevant to the attack on theater in production that constitutes the satire of acts two and three. Of course, Sheridan was attacking theater in all its aspects; his failure, if there was one, was to separate the various aspects of his target so completely that in acts two and three we lose sight of theater as a whole while we focus only on theater in production.

The serious use of spectacle might be considered a flaw; De Loutherbourgh's scenes and effects were lavishly praised for their verisimilitude, not their mockery of theatrical effect: *The Critic* was in part successful for many of the same reasons *The Camp* was—for its magnificence, battle, noise, and procession. Clearly, the representation of the defeat of the Spanish Armada by the English fleet, chorused with the popular and rousing song, "Britons Strike Home," evoked surprise, delight, and patriotic sentiment; and the procession that followed of "*all the English rivers and their tributaries*" was a theatrical extravaganza matching Garrick's *Jubilee*. Puff's final "Well, pretty well—but not quite perfect—so ladies and gentlemen, if you please, we'll rehearse this piece again to-morrow" would be hard pressed to bring things into burlesque perspective. But I suspect Sheridan was laughing at his audience and their desires, that he was saying in effect "Here you have it, and you have nobody to blame but yourselves if you fail to see the selfsatis fied stupidity of your tastes." In his time the line was his joke; in our time the joke is ours, for no modern production of *The Critic* fails to burlesque the final flourish with scenery and props falling and colliding. Moreover, Sheridan's ridicule of the theater in all its aspects would be complete only if the audience, the most important constituent, received its corrective lash, too. They did, and that is yet another reason why *The Critic* is the most complete satiric play about the theater yet created.

The informing principle of *The Critic*, then, is broad burlesque of theater in all its aspects. Such a work should not be judged by standards of unity induced from works not designed according to the same principle. Students of the play would be wrongheaded to attack *The Critic* because some characters are drawn inconsistently or because some characters disappear from the representation or because the "plot" lacks unity of tone, just as readers would be wrong to criticize *The Dunciad* for ridiculing nonliterary targets like education or to fault *Tristram Shandy* for its failure to bring all aspects of its narrative to a probable conclusion. Pope's work, designed to ridicule intellectual dullness in all its aspects, had neither to fulfill the demands of an allegorical satire on learning like *The Battle of the Books* by focusing specifically on literary matters nor to satisfy the principles of narrative coherence and characterization of an allegorical and personal satire like *MacFlecknoe*. Sterne's work, designed as a uniquely personal expression employing a fictive "I" narrator burlesquing a wide variety of literary forms including the periodic essay, the novel, and the confession while telling a "story," had neither to achieve a principle of narrative coherence similar to that of *Clarissa* or *Tom Jones* nor to create a sense of closure arising from the resolution of the instabilities in the relationships among characters similar to the sense of closure created in Richardson's or Fielding's novels. Just as we value *Tristam Shandy* though it is not a novel, or *The Dunciad* though it is not strictly a satire on literature, so we should value *The Critic* though it is not just a burlesque of theatrical literature, as are *The Rehearsal* or *The Tragedy of Tragedies.*

For what should we praise *The Critic*? How can we explain the unique pleasures derived from its reading or representation? The answers lie largely, I think, in the succession of comic "moments," into which Sheridan packed all the comic techniques he had developed in his earlier works. In a manner characteristic of his indolent genius, he chose only the loosest of informing principles—that of burlesque of all aspects of theater—to bring them together.

As we have seen elsewhere in this study, Sheridan's greatest skills lay in the creation of comic moments. He could unify them around and through action and character as in *The Rivals, The Duenna, A Trip to Scarborough*, or *The School for Scandal*, but even in those works problems remain. The two most unified by plot—*The Duenna* and *A Trip to Scarborough*—fail to reach the heights of great comic literature; *The Rivals*, though a great work of comic art, nevertheless has aesthetic problems, largely of unity; *The School for Scandal* is great unified comic art, but fails as "morally serious comedy." The maker of moments could only barely bring his moments together. In a sense, Sheridan was always making parts—sketching scenes but not plots, writing dialogues to ideas, not to characters in conflict; and the sheer mass of short uncompleted fragments he left, if not the works into which he molded some of these moments, confirm that this was his method of creation. The moments of *The Critic* show particularly his great skill as a maker of comic dialogue. Sheridan's comic dialogue, indeed the dialogue of all great creators of dramatic comedy, is amusing for one of four principal approaches used either separately or in combination: character, situation, manifest absurdity, or wit.

In amusing dialogue based on character, the faults or foibles of the character are displayed in a comic way, so that we smile not at *what* the character says but at the fact

that *he* says it. Verbal tics, dialect oddities, and comically repetitive or predictable assertions of belief all fall into this category. To utilize a stage Jew or Irishman, to display an irascible father, a disappointed old bachelor, or a ridiculous fop is to employ dialogue based on character.

Nearly as frequently encountered among comic kinds is dialogue based on situation. We laugh through our superior knowledge of the circumstances and enjoy the dramatic irony of the concealed facts which we, and perhaps some of the other characters, share. The reiteration of belief in an adulterer *manqué* while the partner in his sin is to our knowledge concealed on the scene, or the imposition by means of disguise of a clever person on a stupid one, are good situational techniques which may lead to the development of amusing, ironic dialogue.

Manifest verbal absurdity is the basis for a third kind of comic dialogue. Puns, intentional or otherwise, mistakes of grammar, excessive, inappropriate or badly designed comparisons are the most commonly encountered comic verbal absurdities. Here the character need not himself be amusing— though most frequently he is—for he can be so briefly displayed as not to develop any character, he can report the words of others, or he can make mistakes which are not truly an aspect of his character as we perceive it.

Historically the most valued of amusing comic dialogue is that based on wit. Wit, that intellectual excellence which we can admire apart from character (hence our admiration for the witty speech of even those characters by whom we are not amused), employs unusual or apt comparisons and irony in obvious or subtle manners. Like manifest absurdity, wit can be an aspect of characterization; and like amusing dialogue based on character, wit can be made an aspect of situation, as when a speaker who is witty ironically comments to a butt who fails to recognize the irony. (Note that manifest absurdity is not the same thing as false wit; false wit amuses largely as an aspect of character, for it is intentional, i.e., intended as wit.)

Of these four kinds of comic dialogue, those based on character and situation are the most commonly employed, that based on manifest absurdity the least attempted, and that founded on wit the least frequently achieved. As a general principle we can say that the great and memorable scenes of comic dramatic literature employ at least three and often all four kinds of comic dialogue in concert. Indeed, the failed attempts of a good many third-rate dramatists of Sheridan's day as well as the successes of many comic dramatists of genius in all times suggest a corollary, quantitative principle: the more aspects or different representatives of amusing character, the more ironic levels of comic situation, the more manifest absurdity, and the more striking and original wit all used in concert, the more probable the creation of memorable, amusing comic dialogue. Two scenes I have touched on frequently in this study—Jack's imposition on Mrs. Malaprop, and the screen scene of *The School for Scandal*— demonstrate both the concert and the quantitative principles admirably, for both scenes depend upon widely different and striking characters, several levels of situational irony, manifest absurdity (to a lesser extent), and wit all used together. Both principles underlie the success of the dialogue in the moments of *The Critic*.

Take the famous roasting scene of Sir Fretful Plagiary. The scene begins with an immediate situational irony, prepared for by witty characterization, so that we await with pleasure the arrival of "the sorest man alive . . . [who] shrinks like scorch'd parchment from the fiery ordeal of true criticism." Dangle's attempt to second Sneer's remarks on Sir Fretful are stopped by the playwright's entrance.

Dangle. Ah, my dear friend!—Egad, we were just speaking of your Tragedy—Admirable, Sir Fretful, admirable!

Sneer. You never did anything beyond it, Sir Fretful— never in your life.

Sir Fretful. You make me extremely happy;—for without a compliment, my dear Sneer, there isn't a man in the world whose judgment I value as I do yours.

Sneer's cynical double entendre is answered by Sir Fretful's so that we are led to expect a battle of wits. Mrs. Dangle's immediate complication of the scene's irony—"They are only laughing at you, Sir Fretful"—sparks the first of a series of amusing asides in which Sir Fretful reveals his character by revealing his irritation—"A damn'd double-faced fellow!"—and we quickly see that Sir Fretful is not capable of matching Sneer's wit by insinuation, innuendo, and double entendre. As the scene continues, Dangle's lack of wit contrasts with Sneer's witty remarks. Both men are willing to discomfit Sir Fretful, and increasingly situation becomes less important than character and wit. At first Sneer's wit is chiefly in subtle ironic one-liners or occasionally, in neatly prepared jokes. Despite the fact that the subject matter of the conversation is directed outside the immediate situation, Sneer is able to turn it back on Sir Fretful, as in this exchange: Sir Fretful fears that the manager (i.e., Sheridan) might steal something from his tragedy were he allowed to read it.

Sir Fretful. And then, if such a person gives you the least hint or assistance, he is devilish apt to take the merit of the whole.—

Dangle. If it succeeds.

Sir Fretful. Aye,—but with regard to this piece, I think I can hit that gentleman, for I can safely swear he never read it.

Sneer. I'll tell you how you may hurt him more—

Sir Fretful. How?—

Sneer. Swear he wrote it.

Situational irony is added to wit and character as the basis for the amusing dialogue which develops as Sneer quotes the imaginary review to an increasingly discomfited Sir Fretful:

Sneer. Why, [the critic] roundly asserts that you have not the slightest invention, or original genius whatever; tho' you are the greatest traducer of all other authors living.

Sir Fretful. Ha! ha! ha!—very good!

Sneer. That as to Comedy, you have not one idea of your own, he believes, even in your common place-book—where stray jokes, and pilfered witticisms are kept with as much method as the ledger of the Lost-and-Stolen-office.

Sir Fretful.—Ha! ha! ha!—very pleasant!

Sneer. Nay, that you are so unlucky as not to have the skill even to *steal* with taste.—But that you gleen from the refuse of obscure volumes, where more judicious plagiarists have been before you; so that the body of your work is a composition of dregs and sediments—like a bad tavern's worst wine.

Sir Fretful. Ha! ha!

Sneer. In your more serious efforts, he says, your bombast would be less intolerable, if the thoughts were ever suited to the expression; but the homeliness of the sentiment stares thro' the fantastic encumbrance of its fine language, like a clown in one of the new uniforms!

Sir Fretful. Ha! ha!

Sneer. That your occasional tropes and flowers suit the general coarseness of your stile, as tambour sprigs would a ground of linsey-wolsey; while your imitations of Shakespeare resemble the mimicry of Falstaff's Page, and are about as near the standard of the original.

Sir Fretful. Ha!—

Sneer.—In short, that even the finest passages you steal are of no service to you; for the poverty of your own language prevents their assimilating; so that they lie on the surface like lumps of marl on a barren moor, encumbering what it is not in their power to fertilize!—

Sir Fretful. [*after great agitation.*]—Now another person would be vex'd at this.

Of course, we value this scene most for the wit; but the dialogue, amusing by virtue of situational irony and character as well as wit, explains why we find the scene more pleasureable than the subsequent witty exchange among Sneer, Dangle, and Puff on the art of puffery. Pleasant as this later scene is, witty and absurd as Puff's explanations of his art are, scathing as the continued indictment of newspapers and the theater becomes, the scene does not achieve the levels of comic enjoyment possible in the roasting of Sir Fretful. It is too much like those virtuoso recitations continually attempted by the characters of Samuel Foote. Sheridan could outdo Foote in this regard, but as the juxtaposition of these two scenes shows, he could also do more in blending character, situation, and wit.

The moments of the first act of *The Critic*—Mr. and Mrs. Dangle's daily jangle, Sir Fretful's roasting, the Italian singers, and Puff's art of puffery—are all bound together by their burlesque of the theater in all its aspects. Character largely informs the first scene between the Dangles; character, situation, and wit melds in the dialogue of the second; character to a very small extent, manifest absurdity, and situation make amusing the display of the Italian singers and their French-speaking interpreter; wit, and to a lesser extent, characterization make effective the satiric dialogue of the fourth scene. Any of these scenes could be removed from the burlesque; any could be exchanged with another and not disturb seriously the connections among them, for there is no significant development of character or action. Each is amusing basically for itself; each could have been, and I suspect was, written at a different time; and they were brought together here only by means of the loosest of informing devices.

The two rehearsal acts are moments in that the particular sections of the satirical target under attack at any given time could have been attacked earlier or later in the presentation; there is no principle of development underlying the satire. But the continuity of the unfolding play within the play provides a unity not to be found in the first act, and this, together with Sheridan's employment of amusing dialogue constantly based on a rich interaction of character, situation, absurdity, and wit gives to acts two and three of *The Critic* a sustained power not to be found in act one. Puff is oblivious to the quality of his play and speaks of its absurdities as if they were excellencies; his character is further revealed by his comically unjustifiable pique at the actors' cuts. We are amused too by the irony of the situation. Our own critical standards and the efforts of raisonneur Sneer reveal the concealed truth of the intellectual and creative aesthetic poverty of *The Spanish Armada* which Puff cannot recognize, Dangle only occasionally seems to notice, and Sneer sarcastically exposes. The manifest absurdities of the dialogue of the play within the play—metaphors piled upon one another with no regard to their aesthetic appropriateness, bathos where there should be pathos—are joined by the manifest absurdities of Puff's explanations. Sneer's ironic commentary adds a dimension of wit—wit of an obvious but nonetheless pleasurable sort.

Demonstration of this interaction in any of the various moments of acts two and three threatens to overwhelm even the heavy-handed irony of this section of *The Critic*. So rather than explicate a scene or two, let me point to Sheridan's use of three other comic devices of dialogue—repetition, diminution, and what I will call accidental wit. All reinforce the complex interplay of the dialogue. In act one Sheridan had used repetition to good effect with Dangle's tag lines, "tho' he's my friend!" In act two it becomes the principle upon which we find the agreement of all those present on stage in *The Spanish Armada* to pray to Mars amusing: "And me!" "And me!" "And me!" "And me!" Diminution —a kind of repetition for the specific effect of reduction—adds to character in act one as Sir Fretful's responses to the imagined criticism gradually change from "Ha! ha! ha!—very good!" to a half-hearted "Ha!—"; it serves both purposes of characterization and absurdity in this stichomythic exchange between two characters of *The Spanish Armada:*

"Tilburina.

"A retreat in Spain!

"Governor.

"Outlawry here!

"Tilburina.

"Your daughter's prayer!

"Governor.

"Your father's oath!

"Tilburina.

"My lover!

"Governor.

"My country!

"Tilburina.

"Tilburnia!

"Governor.

"England!

"Tilburina.

"A title!

"Governor.

"Honor!

"Tilburina.

"A pension!

"Governor.

"Conscience!

The crescendo of economic concerns completely deflates the repetition:

"Tilburina.

"A thousand pounds!

"Governor.

"Hah! thou hast touch'd me nearly!

But perhaps the funniest lines are built on accidental wit—a combination of character, situation, manifest absurdity, and the approximation of wit. Consider just two examples, both of them Puff's explanations for problems in his play. Sneer criticizes the decorum of the dialogue:

Sneer. But, Mr. Puff, I think not only the Justice, but the clown seems to talk in as high a style as the first hero among them.

Puff. Heaven forbid they should not in a free country! —Sir, I am not for making slavish distinctions, and giving all the fine language to the upper sort of people.

Or perhaps the funniest lines of the play:

Enter A Beefeater.

"Beefeater.

"Perdition catch my soul but *I* do love thee.

Sneer. Haven't I heard that line before?

Puff. No, I fancy not—Where pray?

Dangle. Yes, I think there is something like it in Othello.

Puff. Gad! now you put me in mind on't, I believe there is—but that's of no consequence —all that can be said is, that two people happened to hit on the same thought—And Shakespeare made use of it first, that's all.

Sneer. Very true.

Such effects make the moments of the rehearsal scenes particularly amusing. And even if the informing principle—to burlesque the theater in all its aspects—seems loose, we can be happy that Sheridan was able to cast upon it here and sorry that never again would he bring his "moments" together.

With *The Critic* we come to the end of Sheridan's achievement as comic dramatist. There would be another year or two of active work in the theater, but no more literary achievement. On 12 September 1780 Sheridan was elected Member of Parliament for Stafford, and though he remained associated with Drury Lane for more than thirty years, only one major theatrical effort was to come, the pompous and absurd *Pizzaro*. He kept his hand in, however, and not just in the till; he participated in correcting and revising other dramatists' work, in coaching and advising actors, and in organizing a few

spectacular entertainments; he continually promised definitive editions of his own works and continually projected another play, especially when money was short. But never again would he produce a comedy. Perhaps Sheridan knew his powers were going or had gone; perhaps he felt he never would be able to focus the energy necessary to create another masterpiece.

Why have so many great English comic dramatists stopped writing for the stage at relatively young ages? Congreve had produced all his comedies by the time he was thirty; Etherege saw his last play on stage when he was barely forty, Wycherley when he was in his mid-thirties; Wilde's best play comes from his fortieth year, Synge's from his thirty-sixth, Jonson's four or five best from his late thirties and early forties, Coward's three or four from his early thirties, Vanbrugh's from his early thirties, Sheridan's and Farquhar's from their late twenties. Of course, one cannot give a single answer, unless one wants to invoke so vague a term as "comic spirit" or attribute to youth an exuberance many have displayed in maturer years. Congreve was disgusted with developments in popular taste; Farquhar and Synge died young; Wilde was forbidden a public forum for his wit; and Sheridan entered Parliament to embark on a new and brilliant career. Beyond these few reasons, we can only speculate. In Sheridan's case, particularly when a new comedy would have meant so much to his always precarious financial position, why did he fail to employ his obvious talents as a comic dramatist? Michael Kelly, a talented musician and performer, relates an anecdote that reveals much:

One evening (probably in the late 1780's or early 1790's) that their late Majesties honoured Drury Lane Theatre with their presence, the play, by royal command, was the "School for Scandal." When Mr. Sheridan was in attendance to light their Majesties to their carriage, the King said to him, "I am much pleased with your comedy of the 'School for Scandal;' but I am still more so, with your play of the 'Rivals;'—that is my favourite, and I will never give it up."

Her Majesty, at the same time said, "When, Mr. Sheridan, shall we have another play from your masterly pen?" He replied, that "he was writing a comedy, which he expected very shortly to finish."

I was told of this; and the next day, walking with him along Piccadilly, I asked him if he had told the Queen, that he was writing a play? He said he had, and that he actually was about one.

"Not you," said I to him; "you will never write again; you are afraid to write."

He fixed his penetrating eye on me, and said, "Of whom am I afraid?"

I said, "You are afraid of the author of the 'School for Scandal.'"

I believe, at the time I made the remark, he thought my conjecture right.

However contrived his anecdote sounds, Kelly was correct, of course: Sheridan did not finish another dramatic comedy, though he lived on for thirty-seven years after *The*

Critic. And Kelly was correct in another way, for though today we may value all of Sheridan's dramatic works, he is still largely remembered as the author of *The School for Scandal*. Beside the greater comedy, *The Critic* seems a remnant of his youth, a brilliant utilization of his experiences as a practical dramatist perhaps, but more nearly the product of an exuberance and an adolescent cynicism which the perfection of *The School for Scandal* seems to deny. Still, *The Critic* is a more stageworthy work than either of its major competitors in its time and in ours, *The Rehearsal* and *The Tragedy of Tragedies*; for even Sheridan's burlesque achieves, however artificially, a fusion of wit which only Wilde and Coward have since reached. What a pity that the greatest Georgian playwright would henceforth produce only *Pizarro.*

Source: Mark S. Auburn, "*The Critic*," in *Sheridan's Comedies*, University of Nebraska Press, 1977, pp. 157-75.

Topics for Further Study

Review the ideas set forth in Aristotle's *Poetics* about the necessary components of a tragedy and apply these ideas to a tragic work, such as *Oedipus the King* or Puff's *The Spanish Armada.*

In 1776, Sheridan purchased an interest in the Drury Lane Theatre from David Garrick, one of the most highly praised actors of his day. Research the history of the Drury Lane Theatre and how it contributed to eighteenth-century drama as a whole.

Puff's *The Spanish Armada* is set during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I but had echoes for Sheridan's audience of a possible contemporary crisis. To what degree did Sheridan's audiences feel the threat of a foreign invasion?

At the end of Puff's play, Sheridan offers a number of stage directions that broadly outline what the audience sees during the climactic battle scene. How would you stage this battle and the "procession of rivers?" How would you make the scene as silly as the rest of *The Spanish Armada?*

Compose a short script in which you parody the conventions of a cinematic form, like Sheridan does with tragedy. Consider science fiction, western, or detective films as possible subjects.

Compose three different reviews of *The Spanish Armada:* one by Dangle, one by Sneer, and one by Puff himself. Be sure that each review accounts for its author's personality and aesthetics.

Compare and Contrast

1700s: Adam Smith's groundbreaking treatise on economics, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, is published in 1776. The book outlines the *laissez-faire* notion of economics that holds that the government should not interfere in business or trade.

Today: Great Britain and the United States have, to some extent, adopted Smith's ideas, although attempts by the U.S. government to break up the Microsoft corporation sparked many debates about the role of the government in commercial affairs.

1700s: Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson's lengthy poems and essays (such as Pope's 1711 work *An Essay on Criticism* and Johnson's 1765 *Preface to Shakespeare*) are widely read; in their work, each writer offers his notions of what constitutes quality drama and poetry.

Today: Literary criticism has somewhat given way to literary theory, a discipline that examines not only the workings of literary pieces but the ways in which these pieces are the products of economic struggles and gender identity.

1700s: Satire dominates literary taste: by the time of *The Critic's* premiere in 1779, works such as John Wilmot Rochester's "A Satyr against Mankind" (1679), Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), Alexander Pope's *The Dunciad* (1729), and Laurence Sterne's *Tristam Shandy* (1767) prove themselves popular with the reading public.

Today: Satire still flourishes in all genres: works such as Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* (1937), Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969), and David Rabe's *Hurlyburly* (1984) are known for their satire and dark humor, much like that found in the work of Swift and Gay.

What Do I Read Next?

Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1600) features a band of actors who rehearse their tragedy, *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisby*, with hilarious results. Act 5 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* features the play's performance.

Like *The Critic*, Michael Frayn's farce *Noises Off* (1982) consists of rehearsals for a play where nothing happens as it should. Like *A Midsummer Night's Dream, Noises Off* ends with the audience watching the play they just saw being rehearsed.

The Rivals (1775), Sheridan's first play, is a comedy concerning the thwarted (but eventually reconciled) love between Captain Absolute and Lydia Languish. The play is famous for the character of Mrs. Malaprop, Lydia's aunt who makes a number of "malapropisms," humorous linguistic errors ("As headstrong as an allegory on the banks of the Nile").

Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* (1777), considered by many to be his masterpiece, follows the drawing room adventures of Lady Sneerwell and her group of gossips. Critics routinely praise the play as the perfect "comedy of manners."

The American playwright David Mamet's *A Life in the Theater* (1977) concerns two actors—one young, one old—who discuss, in a series of vignettes, their work as actors and their struggles with their craft.

The Renaissance team of Francis Beaumont and John Fetcher's *The Night of the Burning Pestle* (1613), like Puff's *The Spanish Armada*, features a number of dramatic conventions exploited for their comic potential.

Henry Fielding's *The Tragedy of Tragedies* (1731), like *The Critic*, offers a mock tragedy through which Fielding parodies and satirizes specific authors and writers of his age. The printed edition of the play contains extensive footnotes by Fielding that identify his allusions and satirical targets.

John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) broke a number of theatrical conventions, both in its subject matter and political overtones. It was one of the most popular plays of the eighteenth century and inspired Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *The Threepenny Opera* in 1928.

Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967) offers its reader a glimpse of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* through the eyes of two of its minor characters. Like Sheridan, Stoppard delights in exploring the nature of theater and its conventions.

Further Study

Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus, *Classical Literary Criticism*, translated by T. S. Dorsch, Penguin Books, 1975.

This collection features Aristotle's *Poetics*, his treatise on tragedy that stands as the supreme piece of criticism for tragedies of any age.

Eighteenth Century English Literature, edited by Geoffrey Tillotson, Paul Fussell, and Marshall Waingrow, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969.

In addition to *The Critic*, this comprehensive anthology features selections from all the famous Enlightenment writers, such as Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, Samuel Johnson, James Boswell, John Gay, Henry Fielding, and Edward Gibbon. This is an indispensable book for any student of Enlightenment literature or thought.

Eighteenth Century Plays, edited by Ricardo Quintana, Modern Library, 1952.

This collection of eight plays features Sheridan's first play, *The Rivals*; the volume also contains John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* and Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, two other popular Enlightenment comedies. Quintana's introduction surveys the eighteenth-century theater.

O'Toole, Fintan, *A Traitor's Kiss: The Life of Richard Brinsley Sheridan*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.

This recent (and critically praised) biography examines Sheridan's plays and political career in detail, often discussing the significance of Sheridan's Irish roots.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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