The Rivals Study Guide

The Rivals by Richard Brinsley Sheridan

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Introduction

The Rivals, a comedy in five acts, established Richard Brinsley Sheridan's reputation in the London theatre in 1775. When the first performance was not well received, Sheridan cut it by an hour, strengthened the idiosyncratic characters, and produced the new version in a highly successful second performance that proved his merit as a great comic playwright. *The Rivals* is one of a small handful of eighteenth-century plays that continues to be produced to this day. While the plot is complex, the characters are stock comic caricatures of human folly, aptly named.

A Comedy of Manners, the play satirizes sentimentalism and sophisticated pretensions, without the typical eighteenth-century moralizing. The dialogue crackles with wit even today, over two hundred years after it was first penned. This play is the source of the term "malapropism," named for Mrs. Malaprop, whose delightful "derangement of epitaphs" consists of using sophisticated-sounding words incorrectly. *The Rivals* is an example of what Oliver Goldsmith called in his 1773 "An Essay on the Theatre," "laughing comedy," in contrast with the "weeping sentimental comedy" that dished out heavy handed moralizing in every act. Sheridan wrote his most theatrical works, including the more well-known *The School for Scandal* during the five-year period at the beginning of his career. He went on to manage the Drury Lane Theatre for nearly thirty years and to pursue a successful career in politics, becoming famous for his oratorical abilities.

Author Biography

Richard Brinsley Sheridan was born in Dublin, Ireland, on January 25, 1751. His father was an actor and teacher of elocution, while his mother was a writer with several novels published. Richard studied at Harrow, an elite private school in Dublin, where he was initially looked down upon as a "player's son" (at the time, actors, or players, were generally held in low esteem). When Richard was twenty-one, his father took the family to the resort town of Bath, where the would-be playwright fell in love. He fought two duels over the young and beautiful Elizabeth Linley, "the siren of Bath," a singer and daughter of a composer who organized concerts. The couple eloped and moved to London so that Richard could pursue a career in playwriting. He would remain in London the rest of his life, but his marriage would suffer from many infidelities.

The Rivals, his first work of any note, was first produced on January 17, 1775, at the London Theatre in Covent Garden. The story contains stock characters, and is based roughly on his elopement with and duels over Miss Linley. After a major revision to correct serious flaws, the second performance, on January 28, of *The Rivals* proved a hit, establishing Sheridan's career. Riding on this success, he, his father-in-law, and two other investors, purchased a half-ownership in the Drury Lane Theatre in 1776, which they turned into a full ownership in 1778. Sheridan produced *The School for Scandal* and became manager of the Drury in 1777, a position he held until the theater burned down in 1809. Drury Lane thrived under Sheridan's direction, despite his dissolute habits and inability to manage the financial side of the business. Sheridan preferred spending time with members of the Literary Club (established 1764), including Samuel Johnson who was the author of the 1755 English dictionary, theatre actor/director David Garrick, and statesman Edmund Burke, as well as fellow playwright Oliver Goldsmith.

In 1780, Sheridan decided to enter into politics, establishing a career in Parliament that would span thirty years until 1812 and earn him immense respect. However, his beginning was inauspicious; he essentially bought his way into a position as a Whig M. P., and then had to defend himself of the charge of bribery as his first order of business. His skills in oratory acquitted him of dishonor, and over the years, he earned a reputation as the finest orator of his time. His political interests lay in defending the French Revolution and the cause of American Colonists, trying in vain to prevent the Revolutionary War in America. A grateful American Congress awarded him 20,000 pounds for his support, but he refused it, even though he was deeply in debt.

In 1792, Elizabeth died of tuberculosis. Three years later, Sheridan married Esther Hecca, whose spendthrift ways along with his own feckless habits put him further into debt. The burning of the Drury Lane Theatre pushed him beyond the point of recovery. He was imprisoned for debt in 1813 and died destitute in 1816, although his wealthy friends gave him an extravagant funeral.

Plot Summary

Act 1

The Rivals opens with two old friends happening upon each other in Bath. Fag, servant to Captain Jack Absolute (who is masquerading as Ensign Beverley for the sake of a love affair) catches up with David, coachman to Sir Anthony Absolute, Jack's father, thus introducing some of the characters to come. In the next scene, Lucy returns from a trip to the local circulating libraries laden with romantic novels for her mistress, Lydia Languish. It is because Lydia wants a love affair like those in her romance stories that Jack Absolute has adopted a reduced title and new name.

Lydia reveals to her friend Julia Melville that her aunt, Mrs. Malaprop, has confined her to her rooms after discovering Lydia's secret passion for Beverley. Julia is in love with Faulkland, whom Lydia calls jealous, for his possessiveness of Julia. Mrs. Malaprop and Sir Anthony Absolute enter and chide Lydia to forget Beverley. When she refuses, Mrs. Malaprop sends her to her room, whereupon the pair agree that severity is the best method of childrearing. Sir Anthony wants his son to marry Lydia, and he suggests locking Lydia in her room and withholding her dinner for a few days to obtain her compliance. Mrs. Malaprop, her speeches thick with misused, pretentious words, agrees to an initial visit, for she would like to be freed of her niece so she can pursue her own affair with Sir Lucius O'Trigger. Act 1 ends with Lucy, Julia's maid, tallying up the many trifles she has earned by acting as a go-between and informer for all of the lovers.

Act 2

In parallel to Lydia and Julia, now Jack Absolute and Faulkland discuss their love affairs. Jack accuses Faulkland of being a "teasing, captious, incorrigible lover" for constantly doubting Julia's loyalty and love. Bob Acres, spurned suitor to Lydia, enters and pitches Faulkland into yet another fit of jealous despair by relating how Julia has entertained the Bath social circle with her singing of "My heart's my own, my will is free" and with her carefree country dancing. Acres, a provincial country bumpkin, brags to Jack and Faulkland that he shall win Lydia back from Ensign Beverley with his improved dress and hairstyle. He also takes pride in a "genteel" style of "sentimental swearing" that marks him as an oaf. Servant Fag announces the arrival of Jack's preemptory father, Sir Anthony, who informs Jack that he intends to confer a sizeable estate upon him, conditional to accepting an arranged marriage. Jack demurs politely, saying that his "heart is engaged to an angel." Sir Anthony leaves fuming. In a brief scene, Lucy delivers a love letter to Sir Lucius O'Trigger. She does not inform him that its real author is Mrs. Malaprop, not her niece Lydia. Before going, Sir Lucius makes a pass at Lucy. Moments later, she tells Fag of Sir Anthony's choice of a wife for Jack: Lydia Languish. Fag goes off gleefully to inform his master of the good news.

Act 3

Now that Jack knows he is being forced to marry the girl he loves, he plays repentance and wins his father's shocked approval. Faulkland confronts Julia with his paranoid fears and after several attempts at reassurance, she exits in tears. Too late, Faulkland recognizes his folly. Captain Absolute presents himself to Mrs. Malaprop, who does not guess his dual identity with Ensign Beverley. In a comic scene, she shows him his own letter to Lydia, and he feigns disgust at Beverley's rude remarks about the vigilant aunt. When she then spies on his supposed first meeting with Lydia, she fails to recognize Lydia's delight at seeing her lover in the "disguise" of his true identity. Lydia infuriates her aunt by continuing to profess her love for Beverley, in plain hearing of Jack Absolute, who calmly pretends not to be jealous of his other self.

In another scene, Sir Lucius interrupts Acres capering about in new clothes, practicing his dance lessons. Sir Lucius manages to convince Acres to challenge Absolute to a duel, to defend his honor and vaguely, to "prevent any misunderstanding." Sir Lucius has to help Acres write the challenge, but claims to have another duel to fight and so cannot attend Acres's battle.

Act 4

Bob's servant David tries to deflate his master's enthusiasm for the fight with a healthy dose of reality, but Acres remains steadfast. Absolute offers his support but pleads out of acting as Bob's second, which, of course, would be impossible since he is also Bob's opponent, Beverley. Jack promises to warn Beverley that "Fighting Bob" is in a "devouring rage." In another short scene, Lydia assures Mrs. Malaprop that she will give no encouragement to Captain Absolute, hoping to prolong the charade of Beverley's "true" identity. Now the recognition scene takes place, as suddenly, Sir Anthony arrives with Jack Absolute in tow. His arrival is a volatile situation since Lydia still does not know that Absolute *is* Beverley. Jack approaches Lydia, who luckily sits with her face averted in an attempt to rebuff him. At first he cannot speak, then he modifies his voice to an awkward croak, which infuriates his father. Finally, he reveals himself to a shocked Lydia. At first, Mrs. Malaprop and Sir Anthony consider Lydia mad for insisting that this is Beverley, then in a hilarious moment, Sir Anthony accuses Jack of not being his son. Lydia sulks in realization that the two are one man, and that means—no elopement; her romantic bubble has burst. Jack's bubble has burst as well, since Mrs. Malaprop realizes that it was Jack who called her an "old weather-beaten she dragon" and Sir Anthony marvels at his son's roguish ingenuity. He sings and dances in delight, promoting forgiveness.

Jack realizes that Lydia has not joined in the general celebration, still brooding over the death of her romantic dream. When she lashes out at him for his role in the ruse, he praises her spirit, and she begins to sob. Mrs. Malaprop thinks the couple is "billing and cooing" and Sir Anthony mistakes Lydia's tears as evidence of his son's impatient blood, a trait, he proudly says, runs in his family. Sir Lucius provokes a quarrel with Jack and

they arrange to duel at the same location that Acres plans to meet with Jack. Faulkland receives a letter from Julia asking to meet right away, and Jack upbraids his friend for failing to understand he's been given a second chance. Jack is correct: Faulkland decides to test her sincerity yet again, using the duel as a ruse.

Act 5

In the first scene of the final act, Julia is confronted by Faulkland claiming the necessity to leave the country for his life. True to her nature, Julia commits to accompany him, not even knowing the nature of the threat. Overwhelmed by her response, Faulkland forgets to depart, admits the ruse, and enrages Julia for trifling with her sincerity. She now sees that he will never be capable of confidence in love, so she leaves him, professing never to love again. Now, Faulkland truly understands the error of his constant doubts, and he sinks in remorse. In the meantime, Lydia's heart has softened, and when Julia tells her sad story, Lydia seems ready to accept the new, less romantic, terms of her love affair with Absolute. Suddenly, Mrs. Malaprop and the two servants David and Fag arrive, hoping to interrupt the duel in time, although Mrs. Malaprop's circuitous style of speaking delays their message being understood by the two young ladies. Eventually, all is clear, and they exit to find the field of battle.

In the meantime, Jack bumps into Sir Anthony, the last person he wants to see when he is on his way to a duel. His nervousness nearly gives him away, but when his sword falls from under his coat, Jack manages to convince his father that he intends to scare Lydia with a romantic threat of suicide if she will not accept him. Jack escapes, just as the others arrive and tell his father his real objective with the sword. Everyone is now on the way to King's Mead-Fields. After a comic scene between Acres and Sir Lucius about the best shooting distances and stance, Faulkland and Absolute arrive, and Sir Lucius assumes that Faulkland is Beverley, since, of course, he already knows Jack as Absolute. Acres, in great relief, promises to bear [his] "disappointment like a Christian," while Sir Lucius and Absolute nearly come to blows before the group of concerned ladies and parents appear. The mystery of Beverley's true identity now disclosed, the couples all patch up their differences: Jack with Lydia, Faulkland with Julia, and Sir Lucius with Mrs. Malaprop.

Epilogue

A woman recites a poetic epilogue in the rhyming couplets common in the eighteenth century, reminding the audience that despite man's presumptions to the contrary, women are the true arbiters of love, and that even the strongest soldier "droops on a sigh" because love commands him. Even knowledge, she adds, is nothing without the "Torch of Love."

Prologue Part 1

Prologue Part 1 Summary

The prologue to Richard Sheridan's first play begins with an attorney bribing a sergeant at law. The attorney hands the sergeant at law a piece of paper and the sergeant replies that he has forgotten his glasses and cannot read the handwriting. As the attorney continues to hand the sergeant money, the writing suddenly becomes more legible.

After the attorney exits the stage, the sergeant at law presents Sheridan's play to the court of public opinion. In the last lines of his brief statement, the sergeant welcomes all critics and reporters to judge the play for themselves. The worst crime the author could be guilty of, the sergeant at arms claims, is a bad attempt to please.

Prologue Part 1 Analysis

Sheridan immediately sets the humorous tone for his Comedy of Manners with the light-hearted bribery scene in the first prologue. At the time of the play, the English audience would have recognized a sergeant at law as a court official, much like a modern bailiff or sergeant at arms. It was the sergeant's duty to arrest any traitors or offenders of the court.

Sheridan shows he is willing to laugh at himself and is not above bribing the audience to enjoy his play. This self-deprecating humor served him well because "The Rivals" got off to a rocky start. The version presented on opening night proved too long and cumbersome. Sheridan quickly re-worked the script and eleven days later presented the version of the play that has remained a popular and critical success for more than 200 years.

Prologue Part 2

Prologue Part 2 Summary

In this short prologue, the actress who played Julia in the original production discusses the differences between comedy and tragedy. Tragedy, or the Sentimental Muse, would snatch the dagger from the hand of comedy and have all plays end in blood and tears. Can a comedy, she asks, "Charm the fancy and yet reach the heart?"

Prologue Part 2 Analysis

This prologue was added after the show re-opened and had reached its tenth night. For a play to run that long in the English theatre of the day was quite an accomplishment. This is why Sheridan says, "Our suit and trial are over."

Through this prologue, Sheridan defends the Comedy of Manners in general and his play in particular against the idea that a play ought to have some moral weight. When Sheridan wrote "The Rivals," there was great debate about what type of drama should fill the English stage. Should it be the heavier Sentimental Comedy or the superficial Comedy of Manners? Sheridan was part of movement among English playwrights to re-establish the Comedy of Manners as an acceptable and welcomed form of entertainment for entertainment's sake. There are no deep morals or hidden meanings in his play. Rather, he shines a well-directed light on the behaviors of the heart and invites his audience to laugh at the shared human condition.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

Two servants, the Coachman and Fag, meet unexpectedly on the street in the resort town of Bath, England. Thomas, the Coachman, has just arrived in Bath, with his master Sir Anthony Absolute and his Sir Anthony's ward, Madam Julia. Fag is the servant of Sir Absolute's son, Captain Jack Absolute. Neither expects to see the other party in Bath. Thomas explains that Sir Anthony has come to Bath to head of a case of gout. Fag confides in Thomas that Captain Absolute is in Bath pursuing the love of a rather wealthy young woman.

Fag reveals that Captain Absolute is courting Lydia Languish under the disguise of a poor enlisted soldier, Ensign Beverly. Thomas is confused about why Captain Absolute would not pretend to be a general rather than a lowly ensign. Fag explains that Lydia likes him better as a poor officer than she would in his true condition as the heir of a wealthy baronet.

Only a contentious aunt stands in the way of the lovebirds. As the scene ends, we see Captain Absolute giving money to Lucy, a maid who serves Lydia and her aunt.

We also learn that a third party known to the servants is also in Bath. Mr. Faulkland, who is courting Julia, is in the city and Fag has spent some time with his gentleman servant. Fag and Thomas part ways after discussing the fashion of men of London no longer to wear powdered wigs.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

Sheridan wastes no time in revealing one of the main story lines in his play. Captain Absolute is in love with Lydia Languish, but he has courted her under a false identity. The audience understands from the beginning that this false identity and the fact that neither father nor son knows the other is in Bath will set up much of the play's comedic action.

We learn in the opening scene that Lydia is quite wealthy. Her lapdog eats out of a gold dish and she could easily pay off the national debt, according to Fag. She prefers a romance with a penniless ensign rather than a wealthy young man, which Ensign Beverly actually is in his real life as Captain Absolute. Future scenes will reveal more about what lies behind Lydia's romantic notions.

The exchange of money between Captain Absolute and Lucy reveals another important piece of the plot. Sheridan is laying the groundwork for the mistaken identities that will provide the play's humor.

Sheridan has deftly chosen the names of his characters. Captain Absolute's name is ironic because he is not absolutely who he presents himself to be. Lydia Languish plays the part of a woman pining for romance. Both will live up to or out of their names.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

Scene 2 takes place in a dressing room in the home of Lydia's aunt, Mrs. Malaprop. Lucy has just returned from making the rounds of lending libraries to get Lydia a fresh supply of romance novels. Lucy was unable to find many of the titles her mistress requested such as "The Fatal Connexion" or "The Mistakes of the Heart." Lucy has returned, however, with several volumes including "The Tears of Sensibility."

Lydia is surprised by the arrival of her cousin Julia who has come to Bath with her guardian, Sir Anthony Absolute. Lydia and Julia have been corresponding about their love interests and now Lydia tells Julia that she has lost her Beverly. Mrs. Malaprop intercepted a note being passed between the two lovers and has forbidden Lydia from seeing Ensign Beverly again.

To make matters worse, right before Mrs. Malaprop discovered the relationship, Lydia had teased Beverly by fabricating a quarrel. In their last communications, Lydia had accused Beverly of cheating and vowed never to see him again. Lydia had made up the letter about Beverly paying attentions to another woman. She only meant to tease him for three and one-half days, but now she cannot communicate with him and fears he believes she has banished him forever. In the meantime, her aunt is encouraging another suitor named Mr. Acres, whom Lydia deplores.

Lydia was hoping Mrs. Malaprop might extend her some sympathy in the matter of Ensign Beverly because she herself has been corresponding with a suitor. Under the pen name of Delia, Mrs. Malaprop has been writing to an Irish baronet, Lucius O'Trigger.

Julia asks Lydia why she loves a poor soldier. Lydia confesses that she is determined to marry without her aunt's consent and lose most of her fortune. She wants nothing to do with any man who would ask her to wait until she is of age and thus preserve her inheritance. Julia gently chastises Lydia for her compulsive actions, or caprice.

Lydia then questions Julia about her relationship with Faulkland. Lydia describes Faulkland as jealous, ungrateful and dragging his feet when it comes to marrying Julia. Julia defends her lover. Lydia asks if Julia would rise to Faulkland's defense if he had not once saved her life in a sailing mishap. Julia claims that she loved Faulkland before he rescued her.

Lucy interrupts the women to announce the arrival of Sir Anthony Absolute and Mrs. Malaprop. Julia does not wish to be detained and exits by a back stairway. Lucy quickly helps Lydia hide her inappropriate reading material. Mrs. Malaprop has barely entered the sitting room before she takes up her argument with Lydia. She refers to Lydia as,

"the deliberate simpleton who wants to disgrace her family and lavish herself on a fellow not worth a shilling."

After Lydia exits, Sir Anthony blames the young woman's obstinate attitude on her reading. He tells Mrs. Malaprop that he saw Lucy coming from a circulating library earlier that day. He says he would never allow his daughters to learn to read. Mrs. Malaprop responds that while women do not need to know Greek, Hebrew or algebra, they should be schooled in geometry so they might know, "something of the contagious countries." Mrs. Malaprop is most adamant that women learn to use words correctly.

Sir Absolute and Mrs. Malaprop then discuss proposing a match between his son, Captain Absolute, and her niece, Lydia. After Sir Absolute exits, Mrs. Malaprop calls Lucy to ask if she has seen Sir Lucius O'Trigger. She chastises Lucy about keeping her identity a secret from Sir Lucius. She calls Lucy a simpleton and threatens to withhold her "malevolence" if Lucy ever betrays her secret.

After Mrs. Malaprop leaves the room, Lucy laughs to herself about the success of her simplicity. She recounts that she is currently receiving bribes for the following services:

Helping Lydia plot her elopement with Ensign Beverly

Delivering messages from Beverly to Lydia

Betraying Lydia and Beverly to Mrs. Malaprop

Carrying letters from Mr. Acres to Lydia but never delivering them

Delivering letters from Sir Lucius O'Trigger to Mrs. Malaprop and convincing Sir Lucius that he is corresponding with Lydia.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

In Scene 2, we learn that Lydia has developed her romantic ideals from her avid reading of books that are the equivalent of modern romance novels. Her maid, Lucy, secures these books from circulating libraries. Sir Absolute and Mrs. Malaprop discuss the value or harm of educating women. Sheridan has entered into a debate that would be very familiar to his audience. As would be expected in a Comedy of Manners, the author refrains for stating a position. Instead, he preserves humor by presenting both sides of the argument in the extreme. Sir Anthony says if had a thousand daughters he would rather they learn the black arts than the alphabet.

Mrs. Malaprop believes that she herself is a shining example of why a woman should learn to read. In Mrs. Malaprop's own words, "But above all, Sir Anthony, she should be mistress of orthodoxy, that she might not misspell and mispronounce words so shamefully as girls usually do; and likewise, that she might reprehend the true meaning of what she is saying."

Of course, the irony of these sentiments is that Mrs. Malaprop consistently misuses words. She says "reprehend" when she means "comprehend" and "malevolence" when she means "benevolence." Her consistently inappropriate use of language has not only made her one of dramatic history's most well known characters, but also given life to the literary term "malapropism." It also provides much of the play's levity. When Mrs. Malaprop speaks, the audience listens intently to hear what she might mis-say.

Lydia's desire to create a quarrel with Beverly shows that she takes his affections somewhat lightly. She is, in one sense, using him as a romantic toy. They have not quarreled so she creates a dispute just to tease him. Lydia spends a great deal of time in reading romance and in scripting the way she believes her own love story should play out.

In this scene, the audience learns a little about a second major story line: the relationship between Faulkland and Julia. Faulkland saved Julia's life after a boating accident and she admits feeling some obligation to him but also claims to love him deeply. Faulkland is a troubled soul who finds it difficult to accept the love Julia so freely offers. We will learn more of Faulkland's insecurities in upcoming scenes.

We also see how heavily Sheridan's plot relies on the shrewd character of Lucy. She is the go between. She is the keeper and revealer of secrets and identities, both real and fabricated. Without Lucy, there would be no plot to thicken as the play moves on.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

Act 2 opens in Captain Absolute's lodgings. Captain Jack Absolute is engaged in a discourse with his servant Fag. Fag has just spoken to Jack's father, Sir Absolute, who was startled to learn his son was in Bath. He thought the young captain was deployed on army business. Fag made up a story to satisfy Sir Absolute's curiosity. He said the Captain was in Bath to recruit. He even embellished the story by saying that Captain Absolute had already recruited "five disbanded chairmen, seven minority waiters and thirteen billiard-markers."

Mr. Faulkland, a good friend of Jack's, enters the room. He does not know that Sir Absolute and Julia are in Bath and Jack decides to tease him some before revealing the news. The conversation first turns to Jack's relationship with Lydia in the guise of Ensign Beverly. Faulkland wants to know why Jack has not yet revealed his true identity and married Lydia. Jack confesses that while Lydia is in love with Beverly, he is not sure Lydia would consent to a humdrum wedding to a regular man of means like Captain Absolute.

Now the conversation turns to Faulkland and Julia. Faulkland is almost sick with worry and jealousy over Julia. He cannot stop fretting even long enough to dine with his friends. Faulkland really has nothing in particular to worry about, but he imagines that the wind or the rain might cause Julia some distress. Jack says he can offer assurance that Julia is doing just fine. He then tells Faulkland that Julia has arrived in Bath. This news momentarily lifts Faulkland's morose mood.

Fag announces the arrival of Bob Acres. Jack invites Faulkland to stay and visit with Acres who lives near Julia in Devonshire. He will be able to give Faulkland more information on how Julia has been doing in his absence. Before Acres enters the room, Jack explains to Faulkland that Acres is a rival of sorts. He is courting Lydia and often comes to his friend Jack to complain about a mysterious rival named Beverly.

Acres tells Faulkland that while he has been away Julia has not only been well but even gay. He reports that she has been full of wit and humor, singing happy songs and dancing country jigs. Rather than rejoice in Julia's good spirits, this news sends Faulkland into a tailspin. Acres is utterly confused by this man who asks if his lover has been well then is upset to discover that she has been.

After Faulkland exits, Acres tells Jack that he has been improving himself to impress Lydia. Acres has worked on his wardrobe, his hair and even his speech. He has even taken to swearing in a more genteel manner. Fag announces the arrival of Sir Absolute and Acres takes his leave.

Sir Anthony has a proposition for Jack. He tells him about his arrangement to marry Jack to a wealthy heiress. In presenting the proposal, Sir Anthony never mentions the names Lydia Languish or Mrs. Malaprop. Jack says he must decline the offer because his affections belong to another woman. Sir Anthony is quit upset by what Jack's insolence and gives Jack six hours to decide to accept the proposal without condition. If Jack refuses, he threatens to disinherit him.

As Sir Anthony exits, he takes out his bad temper by thumping Fag on the head with his cane and kicking the cook's dog. Jack also takes his anger out on Fag by pushing him out of the way as he exits the stage. Just when the audience is feeling extremely sympathetic toward Fag, he begins to kick and hit a young messenger boy as they exit the stage together.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

At last, we meet the tortured Faulkland. Like Lydia, Faulkland has grand illusions about love. He constantly tortures himself with imagined doubts of Julia's well being and her loyalty to him. The fact that he can invent a reason to worry when none exists is evident in these lines:

"What grounds for apprehension did you say? Heavens! Are there not a thousand…O Jack, when delicate and feeling souls are separated, there is not a feature in the sky, not a movement of the elements, not an aspiration of the breeze, but hints some cause for a lover's apprehension."

Underneath Faulkland's apparent concern for Julia is his own selfishness. He is a jealous, fearful character who, as Julia said in Act 1, "expects every thought and emotion of his mistress to move in unison with his."

This scene is rich with comedy at Faulkland's expense. He has racked himself with worry over Julia's health. When Jack reveals that Julia is in Bath and apparently in good health and fine spirits, Faulkland says that knowing that, "nothing can give him a moment's uneasiness." In just a short time, however, he has worked himself beyond uneasiness into frenzy because Julia has apparently been too happy in Devonshire.

Sheridan adds another layer of mistaken identity to the plot when Sir Anthony presents his proposal to Jack. He never mentions the name of the woman he would have Jack marry. Jack is convinced his father is trying to engage him to some hideous old woman when in truth, Sir Absolute has chosen Lydia Languish for his son.

Though Jack is not nearly as romantically inclined as either Lydia or Faulkland, he does not have the pragmatic view of marriage that his father does. Sir Anthony compares a wife to the livestock that comes with an estate and refers to the proposal as, "a little matter of business." Jack, meanwhile, talks of his heart being engaged to an angel and his longing to marry for love.

Sir Absolute does not have the firm control over Jack he bragged to Mrs. Malaprop about in Act 1. When Jack remains resolute in his refusal to accept the proposal, Sir Anthony threatens to disown him. The action of the play heightens as Sir Anthony gives Jack just six hours to change his mind.

In a touch of irony, Sir Absolute accuses Jack of being worked into a passion over the matter while he himself remains cool and mild tempered. The audience observes that just the opposite is true.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

Lucy stands alone on the North Parade, an open area in Bath often used for military ceremonies. While she waits for Sir Lucius O'Trigger, she contemplates weather Lydia's newest suitor, Captain Absolute, will also pay her bribes.

When Sir Lucius arrives, Lucy gives him a note supposedly written by Lydia. As he reads the note aloud, it is clear that Mrs. Malaprop has written it. She confuses "induction" with "seduction" and "superfluous" with "superficial" making the note quite humorous. Sir Lucius wonders at how one so young (he believes that 17-year-old Lydia has penned the note) can be such a "mistress of language." Lucy says it is a result of Lydia's extensive reading.

Lucius pays Lucy for delivering the note and gives her a kiss as he leaves. When Lucy says her lady would not like Lucius to be so fresh he replies, "Modesty is a quality in a lover more praised by the women than liked." He instructs Lucy to tell her lady that he has kissed her not once, but fifty times.

Lucius exits the scene and Fag approaches Lucy. He scolds her for passing letters from Sir Lucius to Lydia. Lucy claims that Sir Lucius is interested in Mrs. Malaprop, not Lydia. She then tells Fag that Beverly has a new rival for Lydia's hand. She overheard Sir Anthony Absolute propose his son. Rather than be concerned by this news, Fag laughs and heads off to tell his master immediately.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

This short scene is the first appearance of Sir Lucius O'Trigger. Lucy is feeling somewhat guilty about her duplicity in leading Sir Lucius to believe he is corresponding with Lydia. Nonetheless, she keeps up the charade.

The brief interaction between Fag and Lucy will provide Jack Absolute some very valuable information. Fag learns that Jack's father has proposed him to the woman he already loves. A sense of anticipation grows as the audience wonders what fun the young captain will have with this information.

Act 3, Scene 1

Act 3, Scene 1 Summary

After Fag informs Jack that Lydia is the woman his father's proposes, Jack decides to go along with the arrangement and to convince his father his actions are prompted by duty and obedience. Sir Absolute is suspicious of his son's motives but nonetheless reveals the name of Jack's intended. Jack pretends not to know Lydia Languish or Mrs. Malaprop. Sir Absolute describes Lydia's beauty in detail, but Jack shows little interest. He claims his only desire is to please his father and says he would even marry the aunt, if that were his father's wish.

At one point in the scene, Sir Absolute says that when he was Jack's age, he ran away with Jack's mother and he would not have touched anything old or ugly to gain an empire. Jack asks with feigned innocence, "Not to please your father, sir?"

Act 3, Scene 1 Analysis

In Act 2, Sir Anthony was ready to disinherit Jack for refusing to agree to a marriage with an unknown woman. Ironically, we learn in Act III that Sir Anthony himself married for love and he would not have consented to an arranged proposal with a woman he disliked to gain an empire or even to please his father.

Jack plays the part of the contrite son who has seen the error of his ways. He tries to convince Sir Anthony that he is willing to go along with whatever his father believes is best. Sir Anthony's suspicions of Jack's sudden turn around foreshadow the later unraveling of the tangled web that Sheridan is weaving.

Act 3, Scene 2

Act 3, Scene 2 Summary

Faulkland waits for Julia in her dressing room. When Julia arrives, he apologizes that he may have appeared cold toward her when he saw her briefly with Sir Absolute. (This meeting took place outside the action of the play.) When Julia asks if he has not been feeling well, he confesses he has been distraught since learning how happy she had been while he was away. He begs her to say that she did not sing with mirth and that she thought of Faulkland as she danced. Julia says that her happiness shows her trust and security in Faulkland's love.

The longer the couple talks, the more doubts Faulkland raises. Every time Julia assures him of her love, he finds something to question. He asks Julia if she would love him if he were deformed or if her father had not promised her hand to Faulkland. His hounding eventually reduces Julia to tears and she leaves the room.

Faulkland regrets his words but admits that he cannot help himself. He promises himself never to distress Julia again.

Act 3, Scene 2 Analysis

Faulkland is convinced he loves Julia more than his own life and shares these very sentiments at the opening of Scene II. Yet his love is self-serving. He shows no interest in Julia's happiness. His sole concern is to find in her the meaning of love and life. He has completely unrealistic romantic ideals. At one point he says, "The mutual tear that steals down the cheek of parting lovers is a compact that no smile shall live there till they meet again."

Julia, of course, falls short of his tragic romantic fantasies. Though she loves him sincerely and patiently abides his romantic suffering, this reality is not enough for Faulkland. He eventually pushes even the gentle Julia too far and she leaves the room in tears. He vows never to be so cruel to her again, yet the audience suspects this promise will be broken. He is not ready to give up the idealistic love he longs for the true love that Julia offers.

Act 3, Scene 3

Act 3, Scene 3 Summary

Captain Jack Absolute is visiting Mrs. Malaprop in her lodgings. Jack flatters and impresses Mrs. Malaprop. She is so pleased with Jack (she calls him the "pineapple of politeness") that she confides in him about his rival, Ensign Beverly. She pulls a letter written by Beverly to Lydia from her pocket. Jack realizes that Lucy has betrayed him.

Mrs. Malaprop asks Jack to read the letter. As he begins to read, he expresses shock at Ensign Beverly's words, particularly his description of Mrs. Malaprop. In the letter, Beverly outlines a plot to fool Mrs. Malaprop into letting him see Lydia again. Beverly boasts that this scheme will even use Mrs. Malaprop the go-between in their meetings. Mrs. Malaprop finds the thought that she would ever be an accessory to a meeting between Beverly and Lydia ludicrous. Jack plays along with her and they both laugh at Beverly's impudence.

Jack then proposes an idea. He suggests that Mrs. Malaprop allow Beverly and Lydia to correspond and even to arrange an elopement. At the last moment, he, Captain Absolute, will defeat his rival and steal Lydia away. Mrs. Malaprop is delighted with the plan.

Captain Absolute asks to see Lydia. When Lydia finally agrees to meet her new suitor, she is stunned to find Beverly waiting for her dressed as an officer. Jack convinces her he has fooled Mrs. Malaprop by pretending to be Captain Absolute. Beverly/Jack tells Lydia to determine a time they can run away together. She asks him again if he is ready to forfeit her inheritance for love. He replies, "Oh, come to me rich only thus in loveliness. Bring no portion to me but thy love."

Mrs. Malaprop is listening through the door and hears Lydia confess her love for Beverly. She bursts into the room to apologize to Jack for Lydia's rudeness. Lydia continues to praise the virtues of Beverly even after her aunt enters the room. Captain Absolute tells Mrs. Malaprop that the words do not offend him. Nevertheless, Mrs. Malaprop escorts Lydia from the room with a hand over her mouth as Jack/Beverly blows a kiss in Lydia's direction.

Act 3, Scene 3 Analysis

Scene 3 is one of the most comical of the entire play. Jack is playing both Mrs. Malaprop and her niece. First, he presents himself to Mrs. Malaprop in his identity as Jack Absolute. He is the pinnacle (or pineapple, in Mrs. Malaprop's words) of politeness and completely wins her over.

When Mrs. Malaprop shows Jack a letter from Ensign Beverly, Jack learns for the first time that Mrs. Malaprop knows about the secret relationship. He also realizes that Lucy has betrayed the trust of Beverly and Lydia.

The audience enjoys the humor as Jack reads aloud his own description of Mrs. Malaprop with great umbrage. Jack cleverly gets Mrs. Malaprop to go along with the scheme he has outlined in the letter from Beverly. Before the scene ends, she is doing exactly what Beverly said she would. She is arranging a meeting between Beverly and Lydia.

Jack is not ready to reveal his identity to Lydia. Instead, he tells her he has duped her aunt. He shows astute understanding of Lydia's romantic ideals and tells her just what she wants to hear. He assures her he is ready to deny fortune and live only on love.

Mrs. Malaprop overhears Lydia speaking kindly about Beverly and assumes that her niece is offending Captain Absolute. She interrupts the scene to prevent Lydia from doing further perceived harm.

The audience senses the heightening action of the play. How will all these identities and schemes be worked out? It is not so much the meeting of the rivals that the audience anticipates (Sheridan has not yet built much tension between them), but the meeting of Lydia and the real Captain Jack Absolute.

Act 3, Scene 4

Act 3, Scene 4 Summary

Scene 4 takes place in Acres' lodgings. Acres is discussing his dapper new clothing with his servant, David. David says that he doubts anyone at home would recognize Acres in his finery. Acres sends David to the post office and, once alone, begins to practice his dancing.

Sir Lucius O'Trigger comes to visit Mr. Acres. Acres tell his friend he has come to Bath in pursuit of a woman, but he does not mention the woman's name. He has received notice that the woman has been promised to another man and now he must decide what to do.

Sir Lucius encourages Acres to fight his rival. At first Acres resists the idea. He has never even met the man called Beverly and Beverly has given him no provocation. Sir Lucius convinces Acres that Beverly has done him a grievous harm by falling in love with the same woman. With the encouragement of Sir Lucius, Acres grows increasingly angry and agrees to challenge Beverly to a duel.

Sir Lucius writes Beverly to challenge on his friend's behalf. Acres is so riled up he protests that Sir Lucius' note is too civil. He wants red ink and course language, but Sir Lucius prevails upon his friend to approach the matter "decently like a Christian." The duel is planned for that evening.

As Sir Lucius leaves, he mentions that he may have a duel of his own with a young captain.

Act 3, Scene 4 Analysis

If only names were mentioned, Acres and Sir Lucius would discover they are both competing for the affections of Lydia Languish. The gentlemen do not realize they might as well fight each other as Ensign Beverly and Captain Absolute.

Once again, Sheridan has chosen an appropriate name for his character. Sir Lucius O'Trigger is quick to encourage a duel. He is, so to speak, trigger-happy.

The humor in this scene arises from the irony of Sir Lucius' persuasive powers. He convinces the civil and reluctant Acres to challenge his rival to a duel. Once he has stirred up Acres' anger, he asks him to tone it down and approach the matter in a Christian manner. Acres begs to be allowed to approach the duel with passion and rage. Sir Lucius cautions that such things must always be done civilly. The irony and humor is captured in the last line of the scene:

"But remember now, when you meet your antagonist, do everything in a mild and agreeable manner. Let your courage be as keen, but at the same time as polished, as your sword."

Sheridan now begins to build tension between the rivals of Lydia Languish. As the action builds, the audience begins to wonder how the three rivals (Acres, O'Trigger, Beverly/Absolute) might fare against each other and how the romantic Lydia would respond if she knew that men were prepared to die for her love.

Act 4, Scene 1

Act 4, Scene 1 Summary

David is trying to talk his master, Mr. Acres, out of the duel. Acres says he must fight to preserve his honor. David notes that honor is no good in the grave. When Acres asks David if he thinks he is in great danger, David says the odds are ten to one against Acres. Acres calls David a coward and vows that his servant's whimpering will not make him afraid.

Acres has summoned his friend, Jack Absolute, to deliver the challenge to Ensign Beverly. Jack arrives and assures his friend he knows where to find the elusive Beverly. Acres then asks Jack to be his second for the duel, but Jack declines saying, "Not in *this* affair—it would not be proper."

Before Jack departs with the message, Acres asks him to tell Beverly how angry and determined he is. Acres wants him to say that Acres generally kills a man a week. Jack agrees to relay the message and to tell Beverly that in the country Acres is known as Fighting Bob.

Act 4, Scene 1 Analysis

"O what a tangled web we weave.

When first we practice to deceive."

These words from Sir Walter Scott certainly describe Jack's increasingly sticky situation. His friend has asked him to hand deliver a challenge to Beverly, who is Jack himself. He agrees to carry the note and to intimidate Beverly with news of Mr. Acres' inflated reputation as a fighter.

All of the scenes now foreshadow the duel and the play's resolution. We wonder what Jack must be thinking, but this short scene gives us little clue. He has yet to reveal his identities to anyone other than his servant Fag and his friend Faulkland.

It is not unexpected that Sheridan should choose to write a play about rivals. He was well acquainted with the procedures of English courtship and competition. In 1773, he had two duels with his own rival. He was successful in defeating a Major Matthews and winning the hand of Elisabeth Linley.

Act 4, Scene 2

Act 4, Scene 2 Summary

Back in Mrs. Malaprop's lodgings, Mrs. Malaprop is trying to sell her niece on the attributes of Captain Absolute. Lydia continues to vow her love to Beverly only. When Sir Absolute and his son arrive, Lydia says she will neither speak to nor look at them. She throws herself in a chair with her face toward the wall.

When the men enter, Jack refuses to speak. He tells his uncle he is overcome with passion and he cannot find his voice. Mrs. Malaprop and Sir Absolute are left trying to figure out what to do when Lydia will not look at Jack, and Jack seems unable to speak to Lydia. They threaten and cajole the young people to little avail.

Through many aside comments, Jack and Lydia reveal their thoughts to the audience as the tension in the room grows. Lydia stares at the wall and wonders why her Aunt has not cried out that this is not the Captain Absolute who earlier called on her. Jack confesses to the audience that as soon as he speaks, Lydia will know his identity. At last, he attempts to disguise his voice, but his father immediately asks why he does not speak out directly.

Jack realizes the game is over. He announces in his own voice, "So all will out I see!" Lydia recognizes Beverly's voice, turns to look at him and says, "Is this possible? My Beverly? How can this be?"

Jack must now explain the situation to the three astonished people in the room. He confesses that he has courted Lydia as Beverly to win her affections. Sir Anthony finds the situation amusing and laughs as he realizes how Jack has played him in the ruse. Mrs. Malaprop is not of such good humor, especially when she recalls the letters Jack wrote about her under the guise of Beverly. Sir Absolute is able to prevail upon Mrs. Malaprop to forgive and forget. They exit the room and leave Jack and Lydia to "bill and coo."

There will be no billing and cooing however. Lydia's heart is cold toward Jack. Though Jack claims that a little wealth and comfort will not hurt their romance, Lydia disagrees. She feels duped and claims that Jack has treated her like a child as he humored her romantic fantasies. Lydia flings the picture of Beverly she has worn over her heart at Jack. Jack is not willing to part with his picture of Lydia. When he asks her if she intends to break all the promises she made to Beverly, Lydia bursts into tears.

Mrs. Malaprop and Sir Anthony re-enter the room. They are astonished to find the lovers quarreling. Neither Jack nor Lydia will explain the reason for the distress. Sir Absolute guesses that Jack must have been too forward in his actions toward Lydia. Jack tries to deny his father's assumptions, but his father laughs it off as something that runs in the Absolute blood and that must be forgiven. He pushes Jack out the door with a laugh.

Act 4, Scene 2 Analysis

One of the play's main plot lines reaches its climax as Jack reveals his identity to Lydia. She is not amused to discover that Jack has defrauded her. She accuses him of humoring her romance, which is exactly what he has done. Not only have her romantic notions of a midnight elopement and life of poverty been thwarted, she also feels like a fool for having been played by Jack.

In her anger and disappointment, Lydia cannot see that Beverly and Jack are the same man. The gestures and sentiments that captured her heart were sincere. She is not willing to see beyond her romantic illusions as she rejects Captain Absolute.

Lydia and Jack's relationship is the opposite of most disguised loves. Usually people pretend to have more wealth or be of a higher station to win over a love. Jack has done just the opposite, but his ruse has apparently failed.

Act 4, Scene 3

Act 4, Scene 3 Summary

Sir Lucius O'Trigger is walking on the North Parade looking for Captain Absolute. He is lamenting to himself that military officers often get in his way. He recalls that another woman he was interested in ran off with a major. He sees Captain Absolute approaching. Sir Lucius steps aside and listens to what Jack is saying to himself.

Jack has never been in worse humor in his life. He is ready to cut his own throat. Sir Lucius approaches, walks in step with Jack and engages him a quarrel. Jack is confused by Sir Lucius' desire to confront him. Sir Lucius speaks of an insult that happened earlier in the week. He would like to settle the matter through a duel.

Jack agrees and invites Sir Lucius to duel that night by the Spring Gardens. Sir Lucius asks if they might meet instead in the more private location of King's Mead Fields. The time is set for 6:00 p.m.

Sir Lucius exits the stage and Faulkland enters. Jack tells his friend about Lydia's rejection and says he intends to give Sir Lucius the pleasure of cutting his (Jack's) throat. Jack asks Faulkland to be his second in the duel. Faulkland at first refuses because he is in such a state about his last quarrel with Julia.

As the friends talk, a servant delivers a letter from Julia. Faulkland fears it may be his final dismissal and is too afraid to read it. Jack reads it aloud for him. Julia has already forgiven Faulkland and asks to see him as soon as possible. Rather than rejoicing in this news, Faulkland finds Julia's quick forgiveness too forward.

Jack cannot believe his friend. He calls Faulkland a "slave to fretfulness and whim" who does not deserve Julia. The thought of Jack's duel has given Faulkland an idea. He hatches a scheme to test Julia's sincerity one final time.

Act 4, Scene 3 Analysis

The trigger-happy Sir Lucius now proposes his own duel. He wishes to settle the matter of some insult with Jack. The audience and Jack himself have no idea exactly what this insult was. The two agree to meet that night at King Mead's Field. Jack now has two duels on his hands at the same location.

At this point Jack is more than willing to engage in a duel. He is upset over losing Lydia and looks forward to a fight. The thought of getting his throat slashed is not such a bad idea now.

Sheridan contrasts Jack's looming troubles with the imagined problems of Faulkland. Julia sends for Faulkland saying she has already forgiven him for his latest insult.

Faulkland's own insecurities and idealistic notions of love cause him to question Julia's motives. At the end of the scene, he plans one final test of her love. The irony is that it is his heart, not Julia's, which needs to be tried.

Act 5, Scene 1

Act 5, Scene 1 Summary

Julia has just received an alarming message from Faulkland and she awaits his arrival in her dressing room. He enters and tells her a most unfortunate thing has happened. He leads her to believe he has been in a quarrel and killed a man. Faulkland says he must flee the country and has come to say good-bye.

Julia vows to go with him into exile. He presses her by asking if she wants more time to consider her decision. She says, "I ask not a moment." He tests her again by saying that they will lose his fortune. Julia says that alone can never make them unhappy.

Finally, he says that the unfortunate incident may lead him to become even more ill tempered. Julia says, "If your thoughts should assume so unhappy a bent, you will the more want some mild and affectionate spirit to watch over and console you."

Julia's sincerity has proven true and now Faulkland confesses that he created the whole disaster to assuage his doubts. Julia is relieved to learn that he has not committed a crime but says she cannot abide his constant testing and discontentment. She breaks their engagement and leaves the room in tears.

Faulkland regrets his actions and realizes he has lost Julia forever. As he leaves to meet Jack for the duel, he wishes that he were the principal and not the second.

Lydia enters Julia's chambers to tell her cousin of the heartbreak Jack has caused. Julia confesses that Faulkland had told her of Beverly's identity. Lydia rues her lost elopement and says she will not endure being bartered and licensed like a common wife. She recalls how sweet the clandestine love she shared with Beverly had been.

Julia tells Lydia that if she were in a better mood, she would laugh at her romantic notions. She implores Lydia not to reject a man who loves her sincerely. Julia says nothing of her recent rejection of Faulkland.

Mrs. Malaprop arrives with Fag and David. The three tell Julia and Lydia of the impending duels. At first, Mrs. Malaprop says it would be inelegant of the ladies to try to stop the fight. "We should only participate things," she says in true Malaprop fashion. When David reveals that Sir Lucius is also involved, Mrs. Malaprop changes her mind and asks Fag to take them to the appointed site. David leaves to look for Sir Anthony and Fag leads the ladies out of the room with these reassuring words: "One good thing is we shall hear the report of the pistols as we draw near, so we can't well miss them; never fear, ma'am, never fear."

Act 5, Scene 1 Analysis

Julia's love passes every test that Faulkland devises. She is ready to flee with a criminal and live in poverty and even to endure his ill temper. Faulkland rejoices in her faithfulness and reveals his trick to her. In his unrealistic quest for true love, Faulkland failed to foresee the one thing Julia would not abide. She is no longer willing to live with his doubts and cruel tests. When Julia breaks their engagement, Faulkland suddenly begins to realize what he has lost.

Julia does not have much time to ponder her own heartbreak because Lydia arrives to seek comfort for lost romantic hopes with Beverly. Julia lays aside her own heartache to listen to her cousin. She finds Lydia's decision to give up a man who loves her sincerely, but conventionally, laughable. Julia probably recognizes the similarities between Faulkland and Lydia. Both are self-centered and unable to empathize with those around them. Both are also willing to sacrifice the love they have for a love they imagine.

Fag and David have joined forces to stop the duel. They have gone to Mrs. Malaprop and are now looking for Sir Absolute. The scene is humorous, as the women cannot get Fag to reveal quickly what trouble is afoot. When he finally gives the details of the duel and the parties involved, the women resolve to intervene. In an ironic twist, Mrs. Malaprop cannot believe that her genteel Lucius O'Trigger has been drawn into the fight, which he actually instigated.

Sheridan displays a keen since of dramatic timing with the rise and fall of action in these last scenes. Following the revelation of Beverly's identity, he gives the audience no time to loose interest. He quickly brings the secondary plot of Julia and Faulkland to a crisis and now builds the action toward the duels

Act 5, Scene 2

Act 5, Scene 2 Summary

Jack Absolute waits on the South Parade for Faulkland, who is late. Jack puts his sword under his coat. He sees Sir Anthony approaching, covers his face with his coat, and attempts to hide from his father. He pretends to be a Mr. Saunderson but Sir Anthony is not fooled. Jack claims he was just playing a trick.

Sir Anthony wants to know where Jack is going. Jack lies that he is going to try to make up with Lydia. When Sir Anthony discovers that he is carrying a sword, Jack explains that he intends to appeal to Lydia's romantic ideals. If she refuses to forgive him, Jack will threaten to fall upon his sword and kill himself. This explanation seems good enough for Sir Anthony who lets Jack go on his way.

Just as Jack exits, David runs into the scene. He tells Sir Anthony about the duel. Sir Anthony and David set off for King's Mead Field and vow to gather more help along the way.

Act 5, Scene 2 Analysis

In this short scene, Jack once again fools his father. For such an accomplished man, Sir Anthony is often easily duped by his son. When David enters the scene and tells Sir Anthony about the duel, he realizes he has been tricked again. The two characters set off toward the duel. Sheridan now has all characters and the audience en route to a final show down.

Act 5, Scene 3

Act 5, Scene 3 Summary

The action now moves to King's Mead Fields. Acres and Lucius are the first to arrive. As they discuss a good distance for the duel (Acres prefers a long shot), Sir Lucius asks what arrangements he should make for Acres if he dies. Acres has apparently not thought about this possibility. He does not like to think about either being pickled or lying in the Abbey.

Sir Lucius coaches Acres on how to stand to take his rival's shots. He recommends facing the opponent full on so the bullet has less chance of hitting a vital organ. All of this talk of final arrangements and vital organs makes Acres increasingly nervous. As Faulkland and Absolute approach, Acres feels his valor sneaking off.

Acres is surprised to see his friends Jack and Faulkland and wonders where Beverly is. Sir Lucius assumes that Faulkland is Beverly. Jack clears up the matter of mistaken identity and reveals to Acres that he is Beverly. Much to Sir Lucius' disgust, Acres refuses to duel his friend Jack.

The action now switches to the conflict between Jack and Sir Lucius. As both men draw their swords, Sir Anthony, David and the women enter the scene. Sir Anthony steps in and tries to sort out what is happening. Before Sir Lucius can give an explanation, Mrs. Malaprop interrupts and says that Lydia would like to speak. Sir Lucius claims that he can speak on behalf of Lydia and says, "Come, come, Delia, we must be serious now—this is now time for trifling."

The confused Lydia agrees that this is no time for trifling immediately offers Jack her hand. Jack gratefully accepts and apologizes to Sir Lucius for any perceived insult. He makes it clear, however, that if the matter involves Lydia he is ready to fight. Acres immediately steps forward and denies his claim to Lydia. He says, "If I can't get a wife without fighting for her, by my valor, I'll live a bachelor."

Sir Lucius does not know how to take the unfolding events. He still believes that Lydia is the Delia with whom he has been corresponding. He produces the letters and asks Lydia to identify her own handwriting. Mrs. Malaprop tries to interrupt, but Sir Lucius prevents her. He asks Lydia directly if she is his Delia. She says she is not. Mrs. Malaprop then confesses that she is Delia.

A surprised Sir Lucius tells Jack that since he has taken Lydia from him he may have Mrs. Malaprop as well. Jack offers Mrs. Malaprop to Acres who declines. Sir Anthony then tries to encourage Mrs. Malaprop by saying, she is still in bloom.

At this point, the focus shifts to Julia and Faulkland who have been standing by quietly. Julia notes that Faulkland seems dejected but not sullen. She finds it in her heart to take him back once again. Sir Anthony steps forward to speak on Faulkland's behalf. All of

Faulkland's faults, he says, come from his deep affection for Julia. He believes that once Julia marries Faulkland, his faults will mend.

Sir Lucius and Acres congratulate the two couples. Acres invites all of the characters to a party. Faulkland then expresses gratefulness that he and Jack have both at last won their loves.

The play ends with Julia reciting a verse about the unseen thorns of passion.

Act 5, Scene 3 Analysis

Sheridan deftly wraps up his play with humor and just a touch of sentimentality. As the duel scene unfolds, Acres realizes how little he wishes to fight. Though Sir Lucius accuses him of being a coward, Acres actually makes a bold move when he chooses to honor his friendships with Faulkland and Jack.

Though Sir Lucius seems anxious for a duel, he backs down quickly when he realizes that he had been fooled into thinking that Lydia was Delia. Both Acres and Sir Lucius show that they are gentlemen in the end as they congratulate their former rival.

Sheridan wraps up all the loose ends by bringing Jack and Lydia, in their true identities, together at last. Julia is willing to reconcile one more time with Faulkland after she realizes the darkness in her own resentment.

While a Comedy of Manners that does not intend to explore the deep motives of the soul, the play does end with an insightful bit of dialogue:

"Our partners are stolen from us, Jack—I hope to be congratulated by each other—yours for having checked in time the errors of an ill-directed imagination, which might have betrayed an innocent heart; and mine, for having, by her gentleness and candor, reformed the unhappy temper of one, who by it made wretched whom he loved most, and tortured the heart he ought to have adored.

Sheridan has accomplished his purpose. He has entertained the audience with a light but not frivolous treatment of the sentimental matters of the heart.

Epilogue

Epilogue Summary

The epilogue addresses the place of love in life. No matter what the stage, the verse says, "love gilds the scene and women guide the plot." The final line of the epilogue says that it is love, not knowledge that improves life.

Epilogue Analysis

Sheridan uses verse for his short epilogue. He again emphasizes that the point of the play was not to teach or inform, but to entertain. "Man's social happiness all rest on us," is his answer to the play's moral. He expresses that on the dramatic stage or the stage of life, love dictates the action.

Characters

Sir Anthony Absolute

This spluttering, domineering baronet rules his son (Jack Absolute), and anyone else who gets in his way, with an iron fist. As Fag describes him at the very beginning of the play, Sir Anthony is "hasty in everything." His method of raising Jack has consisted of issuing commands to the boy—"Jack do this"—and if Jack demurred, Anthony "knocked him down." Now that Jack is a grown man, Sir Anthony announces his intention to bestow his £3,000 annual income on his son, *only* on the condition that Jack accept the bride of Anthony's choice, prior to meeting her. His ultimatum is a test of his son's obedience to his will. Sir Anthony gives the young man a mere six and one-half hours to decide. When Jack balks, Sir Anthony insists that his son not only must marry the woman, who is hideously ugly, but also that Jack will be forced to "ogle her all day" and "write sonnets to her beauty." If Jack disobeys, Sir Anthony will strip him of his commission. Confident in his methods and oblivious to their actual effect, Sir Anthony advises Mrs. Malaprop to lock Lydia in her room and withhold her supper until she accepts the arranged marriage. Of course, things were different when Sir Anthony courted—he eloped with his beloved. Sir Absolute is a comic figure in the play. His blustering anger is offset by the ridiculousness of some of his commands and assertions, the irony of which he fails to see; he assures Jack, "I am compliance itself, when I am not thwarted." At the end of the play, however, he has mellowed, becoming a more considerate father.

Captain Jack Absolute

Jack is Sir Anthony's son, and a captain in the army. His father had prepared him for this career by enlisting him into a marching regiment at age twelve. Jack resents his father's manner with him, but dares not resist the forceful old man. Instead, he vents his frustration on his servant, Fag. The rank of captain carries with it a reasonable commission (pay) and a great deal of prestige. It is precisely this prestige that gets in the way of his amorous intentions with Lydia, whose romantic dream is to fall in love with someone beneath her class. Therefore, Jack, a practical man at heart, woos her as Ensign Beverley, masquerading as someone with half the pay and prestige he actually has. When Lydia falls for his ruse, Jack is delighted. But he is calculating, too. He realizes that he will have to let her in on the trick gradually, so that he will win both the girl and the fortune she seems so intent on giving up for love. Jack is sophisticated in the ways of love, as compared to his friend Faulkland. Jack assures him that although he is a romantic, he does not fall victim to the "doubts, fears, hopes, wishes, and all the flimsy furniture of a country miss's brains." His friend Faulkland accuses Jack of treating love as a game, of having no particular stake in whether he wins Lydia or loses her. Just as he might recover from losing at dice, Faulkland suggests, Jack would merely, "throw again" and find another lover. However, once faced with the real prospect of losing

Lydia, who becomes incensed when his charade is exposed, Jack falls properly in love with her.

Bob Acres

Bob Acres is a country squire who has been wooing Lydia without success. At the beginning of the play, Acres has just been rebuffed, told by Mrs. Malaprop to discontinue his attentions to Lydia. Acres is an oddball and simpleton who has invented his own form of swearing oaths that are "an echo to the sense," an idea he seems to have picked up from the Shakespeare line in *Hamlet,* to "suit the action to the word, the word to the action." To make himself more attractive to women, Acres takes dancing lessons from a Mr. DeLaGrace, and foolishly prances around the stage practicing his moves. Innocent and easily influenced, he is persuaded, against his fears and better judgment, to challenge Beverley to a duel over Lydia. Sir Lucius rouses his "valor" and courage to the point where he relishes the battle. However, with the duel close at hand, he feels his valor "oozing out." Wavering between false hopes and dismal fear, he hopes to be able to prove his "honor" before a shot is fired, so that he will not be hurt. When he realizes that his opponent is in actuality his good friend Jack Absolute, he declines to fight and says he will "bear his disappointment like a Christian."

Ensign Beverley

See Captain Jack Absolute

David

Servant to Acres, David values life over honor and tries to dissuade his master from going forward with the duel. David's homespun language is atrocious, indicating his lack of education; however, he has far more common sense than his master. David refuses even to touch the challenge letter, and he whimpers at the thought of Acres dying at the hand of his opponent.

Fag

Fag is Captain Jack Absolute's servant. Lucy, Julia's maid, knows him as Ensign Beverley's servant. Fag boasts about his master to his friend and fellow servant, David, Sir Anthony's coachman. Jack treats Fag nearly as an equal, confiding in him about his double identity and allowing Fag to make up the lies explaining his presence in Bath. Fag is like a member of the Absolute family; when Jack vents his anger at his father upon Fag, Fag in turn vents his upon an errand-boy. As a trusted manservant, Fag has a secure spot in the elaborate social caste system of the British upper class.

Faulkland

Faulkland, with his overanxious heart, is a foil for Jack Absolute. Faulkland is in love with Julia, but his worries about her constancy nearly ruin their relationship. First he fears for her life and health, then when told that she is well, he grows petulant at the fact that he has worried in vain. He resents her "robust health" and calls her "unkind" and "unfeeling" as though she should have made herself ill with missing him. When in fact he learns that she has been happy enough to sing at a party, he grows jealous. And when he hears she has also participated in country dances, where he insists she must have "run the gauntlet through a string of amorous palming puppies," he is beside himself. However, his fears are completely unfounded; he is projecting his own fickleness onto her. Jack Absolute calls him a "teasing, captious, incorrigible lover" and a "slave to fretfulness and whim" because Faulkland cannot accept that he has found a true love. Only when Julia gives up trying to reassure him, and in frustration leaves him, does Faulkland realize his grave error of judgment. Given one last chance, he is ready to embrace a trusting love.

Lydia Languish

Lydia is a provincial young lady who lives in the fantasy world of romance novels. The titles that she lists out for Lucy to procure for her at the lending library are actual titles of popular romances of the period. While enamored of the works of fancy, however, Lydia realizes that society disapproves of them, so she ferrets away the novels when she has visitors, and poses with Lady Chesterfield's Letters. Having fallen under the influence of fic-tional love stories, she has taken a fancy to marrying beneath her station, a deliciously forbidden act that her aunt will not approve. She does not care that without Mrs. Malaprop's approval she will lose her inheritance of 30,000 pounds. In fact, she enjoys going against her aunt's wishes, and she disdains money as "that burden on the wings of love." Lydia wants love in the most romantic terms, passionate scenes like the ones in her novels. To that end, she hopes to intensify her romance with Beverley, which has seen no quarrels, with a bit of subterfuge.

She sends a false letter to herself exposing Beverley's involvement with another woman. Lydia confronts Beverley with his supposed falsehood to start a fight, just so that they can make up, and thereby keep their love at the fever pitch portrayed by romance novels. Her ruse fails, since Beverley does not rush to her side for forgiveness, but waits to be recalled by her. Beverley/Jack probably would have run away with her, but his father intervenes with a plot to force him to marry the wealthy young lady. Lydia is the last to know that Jack and Beverley are one and the same man. When his masquerade is exposed, and she learns that their affair is not only accepted but promoted by both Sir Anthony and Mrs. Malaprop, her ardor diminishes. She grows as sullen as a spoiled child and rebuffs Jack's avowals of love. Finally, though, Lydia comes to her senses when she sees Jack in danger of being killed in the duel. Her romantic notions are stripped away in the face of losing her lover, and she finds true love with him, presumably dropping her infatuation with sentimental love.

Lucy

Lucy is Julia's maid, and her opposite in every respect. Lucy serves as the go-between for Mrs. Malaprop (posing as Delia) and Sir Lucius O'Trig-ger, between Acres and Lydia, and between Beverley and Lydia. In every case, she plays upon the sweetheart's anxieties to increase the number of letters she can deliver—into the wrong hands. In her very first scene, she cites a long list of tangible rewards she has earned for her duplicity: money, hats, ruf-fles, caps, buckles, snuff boxes, and so on. Lucy represents the worst of the stereotype of the clever, acquisitive servant, who betrays her master's confi-dences for personal gain.

Mrs. Malaprop

Mrs. Malaprop was probably based on Henry Fielding's Mrs. Slipslop from his 1742 novel *Jo-seph Andrews.* Mrs. Slipslop, in turn, may have roots in the character Dogberry in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing.* Her literary pedigree aside, Mrs. Malaprop is one of the most memorable characters in the play, if not in eighteenth-century drama. She is the epitome of middle-class longing to be acceptable amongst the upper class, and her means of achieving this status is through language. She criticizes the improper language and protocol of her niece and other sentimental girls, yet she herself presents a comic representation of a failed attempt to adopt a sophisticated style of speaking. Her "nice derangement of epitaphs" reveals that she may have a passing knowledge of high-sounding words, but no idea of how to use them. Thus her name has evolved to mean words that are misused or as Julia aptly says, "select words . . . ingeniously *misapplied* without being *mispronounced.*" Some of her malapropisms take on an ironic second meaning due to her innocent misuse. For example, Mrs. Malaprop assures Sir Anthony that girls "should have a supercilious knowledge in accounts," which subtly implies the kind of snobbery Mrs. Malaprop desires, and she agrees with him, too, that in child-rearing, there is "nothing so conciliating to young people as severity." In the latter utterance, she inadvertently underscores the fact that severity often has little effect. Mrs. Malaprop tries to dissuade Lydia from her affair with Captain Beverley, and she joins with Sir Anthony to arrange a marriage for her niece with Jack Absolute instead. She is partly motivated by her own budding relationship with Sir Lucius O'Trig-ger, who has been corresponding with her, foolishly thinking her letters are from the niece.

Julia Melville

Julia plays the role of the ideal female lover. She remains true, tender, and steadfast to Faulkland, despite his ridiculous and unfounded fears that she does not love him adequately or for the right reasons. Her language, fitting to her quality, is precise, fluent, and rich. In each of her speeches, Julia demonstrates patient thoughtfulness and intelligence, taking a balanced viewpoint. She chides Lydia against treating Beverley capriciously, and she patiently protests that she loves Faulkland, in spite of himself. She even defends his poor behavior as stemming from his lack of experience in love; she

overlooks his faults, not naively but with a true generosity of spirit. When she finally loses her confidence in him, her eloquent speech requesting that he reflect upon his "infirmity" and realize what he has lost, finally breaks through to him, making him realize the effect of his own lack of faith. She further adds to her credibility and dignity when she warmly takes him back, once he expresses true penitence.

Sir Lucius O'Trigger

Sir Lucius is an older Irish gentleman, and a devious fop and trigger-happy ex-soldier who foolishly believes his letters are going to Lydia, and that it is this seventeen-year-old beauty who writes back lovingly, not her aging aunt. He knows his correspondent as "Delia," whose imprecision in language only endears her to him as his "queen of the dictionary." He is too old to be playing love games. While waiting for Lucy to deliver a letter, he falls asleep in a coffeehouse and nearly misses her. He is also ridiculous in his amorous overtures with Lucy, with whom he flirts openly, not realizing that she encourages this behavior simply to increase his generosity. Sir Lucius was also a soldier, and it is his Irish propensity for quarrelling that leads him to pressure Acres into dueling Absolute. Taking no risk upon himself (for he claims to have other duties that evening), he has no compunctions against putting Acres at risk. It is he who has to tell Acres how to pace out the dueling field, and he patiently explains why Acres should not stand sideways (because of the greater likelihood that a bullet would hit his internal organs), but should face his opponent squarely. Despite, or because of, his common sense about the physics of dueling, Sir Lucius skillfully avoids having a duel with Acres by muttering, "Pho! You are beneath my notice." Then, when a duel with Jack seems unavoidable, he rises to the occasion, but leaps at the chance of reconciliation the moment Jack makes a gesture of apology.

Thomas

Thomas is Sir Anthony Absolute's coachman. He sports a wig, hoping to look like a lawyer or doctor. Thomas has the same odd manner of talking as the country squire, Bob Acres; he uses oaths such as "odds life" and "odds rabbit it," which belie his pretensions and reveal his humble social standing.

Themes

Artifice

With the exception of Julia, each of the characters in *The Rivals* practices artifice, or lying, to get what he or she wants from the other characters. Beginning with David's wig, his vain attempt to pass as a member of a higher society that has already dropped the wig from fashionable dress, and ending with Faulkland's last attempt to trick Julia into admitting base motives for loving him, no one willingly presents things as they really are. In fact, many of the characters lie outright. Fag lies to Sir Anthony for Jack about the son's reasons for being in Bath, and Lucy lies to Sir Lucius about who is writing love letters to him. Other characters simply misrepresent themselves. Jack masquerades as Ensign Beverley in order to win Lydia's love, while Mrs. Malaprop tries to appear more sophisticated by peppering her speech with fancy vocabulary that she neither understands nor can pronounce.

Of all the characters, Lucy stands to profit the most from her artifice, and that is because she serves as a go-between for the intrigues of the others. She tells the audience in a soliloquy, "commend me to a mask of *silliness* and a pair of sharp eyes for my own interest under it." Her comment amounts to a definition of artifice: appearing innocent enough to fool others, while actively seeking one's own selfish interests through their trust.

Courtship

The Rivals puts the two common avenues to courtship—arranged marriage and falling in love—into opposition. Marriages were one important means for wealthy families to maintain or increase their dynastic power. For ambitious members of the middle class, an "advantageous" marriage of a

daughter offered a means of securing a foothold into the next level of society. Girls were protected, therefore, as a kind of investment, and thus were not allowed to choose their own mates, and their public appearances were carefully planned and guarded. Places like Bath and certain public areas of London as well as parlor gatherings offered arenas for young people to view and parlay with the opposite sex without the risk of commitment on either side. The actual marriage arrangements were made by parents (usually the father) or by a legal guardian, in the case of orphans. Inevitably, young men and women disagreed with their parents, who often were motivated by other interests than those of their children. The many novels, poems, and plays concerning such conflicts attests to the centrality of courtship issues to eighteenth-century culture.

Sentimentality and Sentimental Novels

Sentiment, or the ability to "feel," was valued greatly during the eighteenth century. The genre that responded to a rampant interest in feelings—what inspired them and how to control them—was the novel. The European novel was "invented" in Spain during the seventeenth century and, as the newcomer to literary genres, it was looked upon with circumspection if not downright disfavor. In an age that favored formality such that much of the poetry consisted of rhyming couplets, the less structured format of a novel was seen as aimless and prone to corrupt its mostly female readers. Novels rose out of a rich precedent of conduct manuals and travel literature and ultimately grew into the chronicle of a protagonist's psychological "coming of age."

Sentimental novels were the most popular novel type favored by women. These works described romantic intrigues with bold lovers and winsome, virtuous women who epitomize the feeling heart. When Lydia Languish recites the list of novels she wanted Lucy to procure for her, the titles represent actual works available at the time. Lydia does not buy these books but sends Lucy to borrow them from the lending library, to which its patrons could subscribe for a reasonably small annual fee. The lending library was another new phenomenon, one that put books within reach of every young lady anxious to script her life according to these fictional models. The reading of novels by young, impressionable girls was condemned by the male patriarchy on one hand, and lauded by them as a viable alternative to education on the other.

Education and Language

One of the means to social advancement is education, and the social measure of this education is spoken language. Thus, in *The Rivals*, it is not the content of the verbal wit that matters, but the relative quality of the rhetoric employed by each of the characters. Oratorical ability is a sign of social competence, and rhetorical blunders symbolize a character's social inadequacies. Thus, Julia's formal and intellectually wrought speeches stand in stark contrast to the verbal blunderings of provincial Bob Acres, whose speech is peppered with phrases such as "odds swimmings" and "odds frogs and tambours."

At the same time, those who feign sophistication are brutally satirized. Mrs. Malaprop is a target of ridicule because her sophisticated-sounding words, used in the wrong context, expose her failure to achieve her goal of self-education. A good education would allow her to pass unnoticed among the social class she wishes to enter. Many among the audience would identify with her desire, at the same time that they mocked her inability to satisfy it.

Style

The Comedy of Manners hails from the Restoration period (1660-1700), but was revived a hundred years later toward the end of the eighteenth century by Richard Sheridan and his contemporary Oliver Goldsmith. While Restoration comedy was bawdy and playfully lewd, the eighteenth-century version is refined and genteel. Both satirize the affected manners of sophisticated society. Often the plot revolves around a love affair, which takes the form of a pitched battle with words as weapons. The dialogue is witty and characters are distinguished by their ability to match wits with their partners. Characters are usually thinly drawn, representing types rather than individual personalities. Emphasis is placed on the language, such as wit and clever double-entendres, rather than the characters' motives or actions.

The Comedy of Manners of the eighteenth century served a different audience than that of the Restoration period. Whereas the early Comedy of Manners was designed to entertain those it ridiculed—the social elite—later variations of this form of comedy served a more diverse audience, which included a growing middle class hungry to acquire the social mannerisms necessary to move up the social ladder.

Sheridan and Goldsmith revived the Comedy of Manner as a protest to the plays of sentimental comedy that predominated in the middle eighteenth century. Didactic and moralizing, sentimental comedies with titles such as *False Delicacy, The Clandestine Marriage,* and *The Fashionable Lover* portrayed tender lovers who make huge social mistakes and pay dearly for them by the last curtain. Sentimental comedies thus predicted the social reformist drama of the nineteenth century.

In the late eighteenth-century climate of puritanical conservatism, Sheridan revived the satiric bite of the true Comedy of Manners, yet in a more subdued and less bawdy form. In *The Rivals*, Sheridan satirized popular sentimental comedy by ridiculing his heroine's misguided sentimental ideas instead of presenting them as caused by society's unfairness. Lydia Languish is not to be pitied, but to be mocked. Her very name reveals the playwright's attitude toward her mawkish desire to fulfill the fantasies of sentimental novels. Her return to her senses at the end of the play as she lets go of her foolish whimsies is Sheridan's subtle attack on mawkish sentimentality.

Historical Context

High Georgian Theater

Theater in Sheridan's time appealed to everyone who could afford to attend. Prices ranged from one to five shillings, which amounts to roughly five to twenty-five American dollars in today's monetary terms. After the license of Restoration Theater, Georgian Theater must have seemed almost prudish. Gone were the bawdy burlesques, with their ribald humor. Instead, the plays would be drawn from the new Comedy of Manners, as well as well-known stock pieces from the Shakespeare repertoire, the latter usually representing half of the season's offerings.

The newly revived and adapted Comedy of Manners plays contained a moral embedded in highly sentimentalized drama or comedy. It is this genre of sentimental comedy, also known as the *comédie larmoyante* ("crying comedy") that Sheri-dan adapted and satirized in *The Rivals* and *The School for Scandal*. For this reason, his comedies, and those of Oliver Goldsmith, were known as "laughing comedies," a term coined by Goldsmith in an essay on the theater.

The reason for the shift away from court humor to moralizing humor lay in the interests of the new middle class, hungry to gain respectability and to learn how to advance in society. Theater became a vehicle of knowledge as well as a badge of status in itself. The novel as a popular genre was born during this time to reach the same audience, who had the leisure time to read these life scripts. Theaters were expanded to accommodate the larger audiences of approximately 2,300 people, with members of the merchant class literally rubbing shoulders with landed gentry as they sat on the backless benches. Only the very wealthy sat in the raised boxes, once again on backless benches.

The theater itself was brightly lit by oil lamps and candles throughout the performance, and the audience sat close to the stage, creating an intimate acting environment. Elaborately painted scenery panels slid into place on tongue-and-groove slots. The Covent Gardens Theatre owned one such panel representing a scene of the South Parade at Bath, which was used during act five of *The Rivals*. The evening would last a long time, at least four hours, since besides the featured play, there would be introductory music, oratories, singing and/or dancing between the acts, and an after piece.

David Garrick, probably the greatest actor in British theatrical history, reigned as king of theater during the years when Sheridan was still finding his way in his chosen field. Garrick managed the Drury Lane Theatre up until the time that Sheridan and his partners took over, effecting several useful changes, such as removing the "stage loungers" who took their seats right on the stage, and encouraging actors to work together as an ensemble to portray more life-like scenes.

James Boswell attested to Garrick's status as "the undisputed monarch of the British stage" and he hailed him as "probably in fact the greatest actor who has ever lived." Garrick had been one of Samuel Johnson's students; together, they had moved to London to find their fortune, Johnson in writing and Garrick in the theater. Garrick was the first to find success, and that success was stupendous. Sheridan knew Garrick, but did not revere him as did the rest of London. Boswell records Sheridan as constantly denigrating Garrick's acting ability as shallow, contrary to popular opinion. Garrick died three years after Sheridan produced *The Rivals*, leaving a powerful legacy to Georgian theater.

Late Eighteenth-Century Fashion in Bath

Wigs were the height of fashion for men and women alike up until the 1770s, with special kinds of wigs worn only by physicians and judges. At the time when *The Rivals* was first produced, however, the wearing of wigs had gone completely out of style. Thus, the fact that Sir Anthony's servant Thomas sports a wig marks him as a provincial, as does his countrified speech.

Swearing also became unfashionable, suggesting unwanted vulgarity; thus Bob Acres practices "sentimental swearing," a form designed not to offend the ears. The late eighteenth century saw the beginning of the Rococo period, where art and music departed from the heavy ornate style of the Baroque to styles that portrayed more refinement and elegance, yet were quite playful at the same time. Clothing and speaking fashions began in Lon-don and Paris, and traveled quickly to provincial towns via coach. It became fashionable to mock the provincials' attempts to copy urbane fashions.

Swords, that marker of the gentlemen, were discouraged in the resort town of Bath. Jack mutters as he hides his sword under his coat, "A sword seen in the streets of Bath would raise as great an alarm as a mad-dog." In addition, shops, coffee houses, and drinking establishments closed early to discourage misconduct there. Bath had been quite a sleepy town before the eighteenth century, visited only by those who wanted to partake of its medicinal waters. But more leisure time and a growing class of successful merchants combined to turn Bath into a resort town, where visitors came to ogle one another and parade their own elegance.

The quiet town of Bath grew quickly after it became the haunt of the fashionable. On the North Parade of Bath, visitors would take an afternoon stroll to show off their finery, to see what others were wearing, and to socialize. Sir Lucius reveals his lack of decorum and his obtuseness to high society when he falls asleep at this social hot spot while waiting for Lucy to bring him a letter from "Delia," or Mrs. Malaprop. Of course, the truly fashionable elite avoided the crowds. Sir Anthony, with his coarse manners, is clearly one of the newly rich who visits Bath to rub shoulders with his betters.

Age of Johnson

Prior to the five-year period when Sheridan was managing the Drury Lane Theatre and writing plays, he befriended some of the London's literary lions. These included Samuel Johnson, when the older man was at the height of his literary fame, James Boswell, Johnson's biographer, and John-son's circle of literary lions. In 1762, Sheridan missed the witty and intelligent conversation that had been a part of his shabby genteel life in Ireland. He had spent a decade writing his famous *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), and had spent approximately two years with James Boswell, who would soon produce Johnson's biography, published in 1791.

Critical Overview

Samuel Johnson called *The Rivals* and Sheridan's *The Duenna* "the two best comedies of the age." Indeed, as reported in Walter Sichel's 1909 biography of Sheridan, *Sheridan: From New and Original Material,* the play "never left the stage" from its inception until a slowdown in the latter nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, revivals have been sporadic, but successful. The first night, however, was a disaster. The theater was packed; the *London Chronicle* of January 21-24, 1775, as noted in Sichel, proclaimed "there had not been seen so many ladies and people of fashion at a first night's representation for a long time." Most of the audience abhorred the play. Sichel summarizes the effect: "A whole chorus hissed disapproval.... The play itself was damned. Its blemishes—length, exuberance, and drawn-out sentiment."

As quoted in Sichel, the *Morning Post* of Janu-ary 20, 1775, called it "the gulph of malevolence," while the next day's *Morning Chronicle,* recalled in Richard C. Taylor's "Rereading Sheridan's Reviewers," in *Sheridan Studies,* pronounced it too long: "insufferably tedious." A scant number of reviewers approved of some aspects, such as the reviewer on January 27, 1775, (before the revised version; also in Taylor) who saw "some of the most affecting sentimental scenes" he could remember.

Sheridan's satire was lost on his audience. Few of the reviewers understood his linguistic jokes: the January 18, 1775, *Public Ledger* found the language "defective to an extreme" with "shameful absurdities" and the same day's *Morning Chronicle* pronounced Mrs. Malaprop's lines not "copied from nature" (both reviews in Taylor). The press approved of Sheridan's decision to withdraw the play for revisions. The overhauled play appearing on January 28, 1775, met with a completely different reaction. Although some reviewers bridled at the attack on libraries, the *Morning Post* of January 30, 1775, printed a verse in rhyming couplets pronouncing the play a "perfect piece," joining a general chorus of praise (Sichel). The success was complete. Years later, when Sheridan was an old man, his son Tom arranged for a special production of *The Rivals* with an old flame of Sheridan's and Tom and his wife playing key roles. Sheridan loved it.

The Rivals enjoyed consistent play during the nineteenth century, but interest in it dwindled during the twentieth century. It became a "period piece," one that was exhumed occasionally in theaters, and more occasionally served as fodder for academic research into the eighteenth-century theater. During the 1970s, critics looked at the play through the lens of social justice, John Loftis proclaiming in 1975 that it represents a world "of social and financial practicality . . . in which a rich and repulsive suitor such as Bob Acres might be rejected in favor of a rich and attractive suitor such as Jack Absolute." Twenty years later, in 1995, Jack Durant drew parallels between Sheridan's obsession with proper language in his letters, and the valuation of "well-governed language" in his plays, including *The Rivals*. Today, *The Rivals* still enjoys occasional production and respectable reviews.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Hamilton is an English teacher at Cary Academy, an innovative private college preparatory school in Cary, North Carolina. In this essay, Hamilton examines the construction of ethos as a central theme of the play and as a key issue in eighteenth-century British society.

In 1780, Richard Brinsley Sheridan's father, Thomas Sheridan, saw his much-awaited pronouncing dictionary, ten years in the making, come to print. The idea had come from Thomas Sheridan's godfather, the satirist Jonathan Swift, who had dreamt of a British counterpart to the language standards of the French Academy. After Swift died, Thomas took on the task. As Swift had anticipated, this work found an immediate audience, and ran to eleven printings in its first year. Buyers wanted a reliable pronunciation guide that would help them move into a higher social class, by adopting an ethos of intellectual prowess. Ethos is the Greek term for "character."

Aristotle had written that to be a credible person, one essentially must *create* the person others will see, in order to earn their respect and trust, through a combination of ethos (character), logos (vocabulary), and pathos (emotional appeal). Sheridan, a talented orator who would pursue a thirty-year career in the British Parliament, knew the importance of a person's way of speaking in establishing credibility.

One of the most hilarious characters in *The Rivals* is Mrs. Malaprop, whose name has become synonymous with failed attempts at using big words correctly. The character of Mrs. Malaprop is a showcase role for talented actresses with a flair for oratory and style. Mark Auburn in his 1977 *Sheri-dan's Comedies* recommends that "[t]he actress playing Malaprop is well-advised to emphasize each malapropism with self-satisfaction, vain pluming and preening, and conscious stress: in this way the incredible vanity will provide absurd contrast to [her] learned ignorance." Despite her protestations that she would not want her daughter to be a "progeny of learning," or to study the "inflammatory branches of learning" such as "Greek, Hebrew, or Algebra," Mrs. Malaprop herself takes pride in her "oracular tongue," her ability to speak in what she comically refers to as "a nice derangement of epitaphs."

Mrs. Malaprop professes to Sir Anthony that a young girl should strive to be what she calls "mistress of orthodoxy" so that she will not "miss-spell and mis-pronounce words so shamefully as girls usually do." She does not want them to learn too much, so she disapproves of their reading novels, which she and Sir Anthony agree would corrupt them, as it has Lydia. Therefore, Mrs. Malaprop asserts, a girl's education should be limited: "the extent of her erudition should consist in her knowing her simple letters, without their mischievous combinations." Her own endeavor to appear educated is compromised by the very method she proposes, for her education is incomplete: she knows only enough to pronounce big words, not how to use them correctly. Her mistakes are comic, and her ethos is comic because her desires are fueled by vanity. Vanity prevents her from recognizing that Jack Absolute is reading his own letter aloud to her, and that he authored its numerous insults aimed at her "ridiculous vanity which

makes her dress up her course features, and deck her dull chat with hard words—which she don't understand."

The letter goes on to state outright that her blindness "does lay her open to the grossest deceptions from flattery and pretended admiration." She is duped by her own ego, and she is the only one who fails to get the joke. Mrs. Malaprop thinks that girls should attend school only to acquire "a little ingenuity and artifice," but her own artifice is as shallow as make-up. Her attempted ethos fails because she does not fully understand the power of oration, as though she has bought the pronouncing dictionary and stopped there. She tries to get by with the surface features, never comprehending what she lacks, yet all-too-ready to prescribe her method to others. The ironies of her absurd linguistic errors and her blindness to the impression she makes is a powerful reminder of the importance of verbal skills in establishing credibility.

Bob Acres offers another role for talented comic actors. Bob exhausts every opportunity to create for himself the ethos of the country gentleman. However, it is apparent to everyone from his valet to his dueling partner that no gentrified silk purse will emerge from this country sow's ear. From "training" his hair for the latest style and capering ridiculously across the stage as he rehearses fencing moves, to practicing his own style of "referential oaths," Bob cuts not a suave figure, but a ridiculous and pathetic one. He rues his gracelessness, saying that although he can dance a country dance well enough, his English legs "don't understand their curst French lingo!"

Of course, dancing is a form of communication, and one that his country bumpkin body cannot speak. Sir Lucius O'Trigger easily feeds into Bob's pretensions and persuades him to challenge his rival for Lydia's hand to a duel. But O'Trigger has to dictate the letter for him, because Bob lacks the decorum necessary to set the right tone of self-righteous politeness. Bob knows that words can help create an external ethos of ruthlessness to frighten his opponent. Therefore, he asks his friend Captain Absolute—actually Bob's would-be opponent in the guise of Ensign Beverley—to refer to him as "Fighting Bob," a ruthless opponent who "generally kills a man a week" and now is in "a devouring rage." Bob supplies the epitaphs, but out of cowardice, he asks Jack to deliver them. Bob doesn't trust himself to project his new ethos in person.

Bob's valet David provides a useful foil to his master. David refuses to join in Bob's mania, instead reminding his master that honor holds no value in the grave. David's speech, in contrast to that of Bob Acres or Mrs. Malaprop, is simple and lacks artifice. He represents the sober voice of reason in this play of inflated egos, providing a sane view of the characters's folly that the audience can use as a measure.

Bob desires the status of the gentry, but his ethos lacks depth, just like Mrs. Malaprop's, because his adopted style of speech cannot mask his true state of mind at the time—fear, just as Mrs. Malaprop cannot mask her lack of education. Because they speak from a fantasy idea of themselves and not from the heart, their projects of ethos-creation fail, making them comic figures.

Unlike Mrs. Malaprop and Bob Acres, Julia always speaks from her heart. There is no disconnect between her words and her essential person, therefore, she has no need to manufacture an external ethos. Not surprisingly, Julia is a good orator. She chooses her words with care, in order to represent the truth as she sees it, not the fantasy she wishes were true. She patiently explains to Lydia that Faulkand's lack of trust stems from his inexperience at love. Her speech, a sermon on the topic of honest love, rings with truth. Her diction and wording portray her natural ethos of impeccable moral character. Furthermore, never do her words contradict her true feelings. Her true character shines through, and she is credible to everyone—except for Faulkland. Faulkland suffers from a "fear of ethos" engendered by living in a world full of social climbers who present an artificial exterior. Faulkland wrongly accuses Julia of not loving him but merely esteeming him, of not feeling sad enough when he is away. Not until he has tested her beyond the limits of her patient endurance does Faulkland realize his mistake. His failure to recognize a true character when he sees one is understandable, given that he is surrounded by those who present a false ethos whenever they can.

In *The Rivals* as in eighteenth-century society, ethos-creation goes on amongst the servant class as well, although they focus mostly on matters of dress. They seem to forget, as the audience cannot fail to do, that their language gives them away. The fashion façade of Sir Anthony's coachman Thomas is as transparent as Bob Acres's heroic ethos. Tho-mas sports a wig, that symbol of strained image construction, but as Fag quickly points out, wigs are now hopelessly passé.

With or without the wig, the audience recognizes Thomas's lower-class status as soon as they hear his heavy brogue, filled with such linguistic giveaways as "look'ee" and "Odd rabbit it." They appear in the first act in the play, setting the stage for the series of ethos-manufacturing characters to come, whose fragile constructions also will be rent asunder as the plot unfolds. Fag dons gloves like a nobleman and generally dresses better than does Thomas, but, it is his more formal speech, and his ability to control his language when surprised, that marks him as higher in the servant pecking order than Thomas. Fag maintains his cool with a "hold—mark! mark!" in contrast to Thomas's simplistic outburst, "Zooks!" Like their masters, these servants wish to convey an ethos of social superiority, but their failure to change their style of speaking makes it impossible for them to rise above the level of the servant class.

Not all of the characters gear their ethos toward social advancement. Lydia and Jack have an entirely different purpose in mind—they seek the higher purpose of love. Lydia's purpose adopts the ethos of the woman who falls in love beneath her class, an idea she has gleaned from the sentimental novels that she consumes by the dozens. She also dreams of marrying against her aunt's wishes and being forced to relinquish her 30,000 pound annuity, thus ridding herself of "burden on the wings of love."

Unfortunately, her ethos becomes as static and fixed in her mind and heart as the print from which it derives. She is trapped in a rigid fantasy and therefore unable to respond spontaneously when Jack deviates from the script. Instead of being happy that Ensign Beverley and Captain Absolute are the same man, *and* that he has her aunt's approval, Lydia sulks. In her frustration, she cannot even reply to him, but instead seems to

address her internal life script when she says, "So!—there will be no elopement after all!" Mrs. Malaprop declares that "her brain's turned by reading," expressing a concern common in eighteenth-century society. As the reviewer for the January 27, 1775, *Morning Chronicle* of London exclaimed, "almost every genteel family now presents us a Lydia Languish!" The fear was growing that sentimental novels would transform impressionable young ladies into weepy maidens *languishing* for love.

Jack Absolute is the hero because he portrays someone who can convert a lost young lady back to proper behavior. He does so by pretending to go along with her sentimental script, masquerading as Ensign Beverley, who fits Lydia's bill for an impoverished lover. Jack does not share Lydia's fantasy, but he constructs an ethos that fits the mold. Of course, the imposter Beverley excels at oratory, speaking sentimental language even better than the lovers in her books. He waxes poetic as he assures Lydia that the "gloom of adversity shall make the flame of [their] pure love show doubly bright."

He intends eventually to tell her the truth, but his plans go awry when he must appear as a "new" suitor, Jack Absolute. After calling upon "Ye Powers of Impudence"—an apostrophe to the god of imposters—he can barely croak out a few words in a froggy voice. It is an ethos crisis, and his oratorical skills desert him. He cannot utter words that will undo the damage his masquerade has caused. Jack's ethos fails under pressure because his constructed ethos cannot adapt to the changing situation and because it does not represent his true heart.

Julia alone can speak intelligently and effectively under the pressure of changing situations. It is no coincidence that the character with the truest heart also has the best oratorical skill. Each of her speeches is an oratory worthy of a British Parliamentarian, which her creator would soon become. A good orator not only projects a credible character and speaks with eloquence, he or she also can do so spontaneously, responding to the new information while drawing on a storehouse of knowledge and wisdom. Those who masquerade under a manufactured ethos cannot do so, skewed as they are by their blind faith in their inflated, false egos.

Sheridan seems to have created Julia and her comic peers as an experiment to explore how best to create a credible ethos. Sheridan himself was a newcomer to the London theatrical world, with no credibility as of yet, but with a remarkable eye for identifying imposters around him. His success lay in his ability to hold a mirror up to the society that he wanted to join, and to convince it of his own credible ethos in the process.

Source: Carole Hamilton, Critical Essay on *The Rivals,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Parker examines Sheri-dan's practice of "'absolute sense,' common sense tempered by mirth and softened by good nature," and it's place within eighteenth-century theater.

Sheridan has frequently been accused of trying to revive a moribund dramatic tradition, namely Restoration comedy. In these terms, he becomes a kind of second-hand Congreve, and not a very good one at that. Other critics, pointing to the sentiment in his plays, accuse him of being the very thing he supposedly ridicules, a sentimentalist. Neither of these accusations, which in effect try to put Sheridan's comedies snugly into one of two camps, takes into account what is now starting to become a critical commonplace: the Georgian period had its own view of comedy and, in its own way, developed the laughing tradition. Sheridan is no exception. At his best, he adapted the conventions of the past to his own comic ends.

Unlike what the Scotchman (in Sheridan's fragment of the same name) calls "Grave Comedy", which strives to inculcate a serious moral, Sheri-dan's plays reflect folly and seek to mend it. More than that, like the Restoration comedies of the past, his plays deal with artifice, though in Sheridan's case the artifice is the sentimental pose. Comedy for Sheridan has a corrective function, directed not just at folly, which takes many forms, but also at sentimental excess. Those "things that shadow and conceal" man's true nature can, in Sheridan's terms, as easily be "witty" as they can be "sentimental."

What Sheridan attempts to do in his plays is to create a balance between mirth and sentiment; he is at once benevolent and critical. What to the Restoration dramatist is a tension between the private and the public self, between appearance and reality, becomes to the sentimental dramatist an identifica-tion. Eighteenth-century dramatists like Sheridan once again show the discrepancy between what is shown and what is concealed, but Sheridan does so by writing what Loftis calls "benign comedies with a satirical bite."

Sheridan achieves this balance by his introduction of "absolute sense," common sense tempered by mirth and softened by good nature. In this, he is very much a part of the eighteenth-century tradition. Auburn, in his study of Sheridan's comedies, mentions the importance of common sense to Georgian comic writers in general. Shirley Strum Kenny also argues convincingly that "the Charles Surfaces and Captain Absolutes of later eighteenth-century drama" owe much to the good sense of earlier heroes.

Therefore, freed from both salaciousness and sententiousness, Sheridan's best comedies reflect "flesh and blood." In this respect, his "mix'd character," as Congreve calls such characters in his *Amendments,* is a visible mixture of faults and virtues. Sheridan thereby seeks to show man's un defaced side as well as his more knavish one. His doing so places him firmly within existing dramatic traditions and not within just one camp or another. His doing so also confirms his own stature as a comic dramatist.

In his earliest play, *The Rivals* (1775), Sheridan develops his comic theme of "absolute sense" and adapts the modes of the past to his own ends. Restoration playwrights dramatize the corrupting influence of the "way of the world" and frequently offer ambiguous resolutions to the struggle of the individual to survive the world and its ways. Sheri-dan offers the "better way" of sense at the same time that he dramatizes the excesses of the sentimental way. He mocks the absurdities of sentimental distress and delicacy of feeling. To do so, he reconciles the earlier themes of artifice and "plain-dealing" with his own treatment of virtue and sense. He reveals the folly of a world where a Puff's can't can dupe others and where a sentimental pose leads to absurdity.

Faulkland is one such example of absurdity, and Sheridan mocks the delicate lover in the scene where Faulkland hears of Julia's social activities in the country. Here, Faulkland claims to prize the "sympathetic heart" and the sentimental union of "delicate and feeling souls." To be absent from his beloved is to endure an agony of mind. So, in Faulkland's terms, Julia's "violent, robust, unfeeling health" argues a happiness in his absence. She should be "temperately healthy" and "plaintively gay." Such paradoxical statements point to Faulkland's own sentimental absurdity. He wishes Julia to be a pining heroine whose only true joy comes from her soulful union with him and whose absence from him should subdue her whole being.

But Faulkland fails to see the paradox of both his language and his demands. By wishing her to be temperate and plaintive, he in effect wishes her to be unhealthy and sad. But he does not stop there. A "truly modest and delicate woman," Faulkland says, would engage in a lively country dance only with her sentimental counterpart. Only then, he argues, can she preserve the sanctity of her delicate soul:

If there be but one vicious mind in the Set, 'twill
spread like a contagion—the action of their pulse
beats to the lascivious movement of the jigg— their
quivering, warm-breath'd sighs impregnate the very
air—the atmosphere becomes electrical to love, and
each amorous spark darts thro' every link of the chain!

Faulkland's sexually charged speech comically undermines his role as the delicate lover.

The object of his "sentimental" ardor, Julia, refuses to play a similar role. Not only is her health robust, but she also seems to enjoy the "electrical" atmosphere of the country dance. Once branded as the "unequivocal tribute to the sentimental formula", Julia does possess a lively spirit which, at times, is critical of the over-refined temper. Faulkland's jealousy receives a check from Julia, who reminds him: "If I wear a countenance of content, it is to shew that my mind holds no doubt of my Faulkland's truth." Unlike Lydia, Julia will not create an artificial sentimental distress.

In contrast, Lydia enjoys scenes of distress. To her, wealth is "that burthen on the wings of love," so she must create for herself an "undeserved persecution." She delights in the "dear delicious shifts" her lover must withstand for her sake. Describing one such

romantic encounter with him, she uses homely, inappropriate language. Her lover is reduced to "a dripping statue," sneezing and coughing "so pathetically" as he tries to win her heart. They must exchange vows while the "freezing blast" numbs their joints. Such a scene, told in such language, merely accentuates the falsity and the folly of her pretensions.

In *The Rivals,* then, Sheridan does indeed mock the aspects of sentimentalism that lead to folly. To expose these absurdities, Sheridan effectively exploits both the witty and the sentimental modes. In contrast to the artifice practised by Lydia, and the distress experienced by Julia and Faulkland, traces of the witty comic mode appear in characters like Acres, the country fop, and Mrs. Malaprop and Sir Anthony Absolute, examples of "crabbed age." Acres, like many a fop before him, slavishly attempts to imitate the city gentleman, but captures only the trappings of true gentility and true wit. He, too, becomes a subject for diversion. And like the aging matrons of earlier comedy, Mrs. Malaprop fancies herself to be attractive and desirable, so much so that she is easily duped. The character of Sir Anthony Absolute, who attempts to bully his son into obedience, resembles another conventional character of the past, the obstinate father. At one point, he threatens to disown a son who refuses to capitulate to his wishes.

Foolish pretensions, like Bob Acres's "*sentimental swearing*," represent a comic "echo to the sense," a hollow imitation of the verbal and social mastery that Captain Absolute more truly embodies. In effect, Acres foppishly distorts both sense and sound, and applies Pope's injunction with respect to sound to a comic delivery of oaths. His swearing is also a parody of the sentiment. What should exhort others to a moral truth Acres uses to bolster his courage.

Similarly, Lydia's romantic notions lead to falsity and absurdity, mere "echoes" of the sensibility and sentimental distress that Julia more truly represents. So, too, with Faulkland. His refusal to forgo what he calls his "exquisite nicety" and to follow the more sensible tactics of Captain Absolute also exemplifies an "echo to the sense," for his nicety is soon found to be caprice. Therefore, both wit and sentiment fall into excess and affectation, a "Voluntary Disguise" which cloaks genuine feeling and genuine wit.

Nearly every character in the play indulges in such excess: Mrs. Malaprop with her "oracular tongue," Sir Lucius O'Trigger with his distorted view of honor, Bob Acres with his gentlemanly pretensions, Julia with her excessive good nature, Lydia with her absurd romanticism, Faulkland with his captiousness, Sir Anthony Absolute with his penchant to be "hasty in every thing." These excesses are nonetheless intertwined, and their interrelationship is evident in the play's title. Contrary to the views expressed by Sen and Sherbo, the play's dual lines of action are not anomalous, but thematically linked. Here, in his first play, Sheridan does, as Auburn notes in *Sheridan's Comedies,* show himself to be a "master of comic technique."

Wit and sentiment are "rival" modes, and the rivalry is established as early as the prologue, where the figure of comedy stands in opposition to the sentimental muse. Julia's sweet-tempered nature, often regarded as sentimental, can be viewed only in its relation both to her lover's "captious, unsatisfied temper" and to her cousin's romantic

caprice. As Rose Snider suggests, Julia's sobriety cannot be treated seriously in the context of her own absurdity. Julia's fundamental good nature "rivals," as it were, the more pronounced excess of the other characters.

By pairing these characters, Sheridan strikes a balance between them. Lydia's romantic indulgences lead to imagined distresses that stand in marked contrast to Julia's own trials. While Julia's "gentle nature" will "sympathize" with her cousin's fanciful torments, her prudence will offer only chastisement. Lydia realizes, too, that "one lecture from [her] grave Cousin" will persuade her to recall her banished lover. Later, Julia says: "If I were in spirits, Lydia, I should chide you only by laughing heartily at you."

Faulkland's fretfulness also taxes Julia's good nature and, for the most part, she allows her "teasing, captious, incorrigible lover" to subdue her: "but I have learn'd to think myself his debtor, for those imperfections which arise from the ardour of his attachment." In this manner, Julia herself becomes the victim of excess. Her exaggerated sense of duty to her morose lover and her belabored justifications of his treatment of her are found to be immoderate.

Even though she would, no doubt, crave just such an incident to befall her, Lydia points out the absurdity of Julia's own romantic obligation to the man who rescued her from drowning. She tells Julia: "Obligation!—Why a water-spaniel would have done as much. —Well, I should never think of giving my heart to a man because he could swim!" Once again, Lydia's homely comparison makes the incident more comic than sentimental.

Here, Lydia's clear-sightedness puts Julia's sentimental expostulations into perspective. By indulging Faulkland's every whim and by submitting to his sentimental notions of love, Julia tolerates his fretfulness and fosters her own excess. When Julia introduces the notions of gratitude and filial duty, for example, Faulkland tells her: "Again, Julia, you raise ideas that feed and justify my doubts." He yearns to be assured that she does in fact love him for himself alone; here she raises doubts even as she tries to remove his fears.

Finally, Julia must bear the consequences. Her indulgence eventually leads Faulkland into mistaking her sincerity for coquetry and hypocrisy. Intent on using the impending duel as "the touch-stone of Julia's sincerity and disinterestedness," Faulkland wrongly judges Julia's love. When she hears of the duel, Julia first responds in sentimental fashion. In terms of Sheridan's theme of rivalry, the contrast between this scene of tender self-abnegation and the scene in which Captain Absolute plays the self-sacrificing lover is worthy of note.

As Ensign Beverley, the captain makes use of Lydia's favorite sentimental notions. He will rescue her from her "undeserved persecution," and he pretends to revel in their anticipated poverty. He comically rhapsodizes: "Love shall be our idol and support! We will worship him with a monastic strictness; abjuring all worldly toys, to center every thought and action there." His "licensed warmth," which will "plead" for his "reward," echoes Julia's pledge to her fretful lover. She willingly promises to receive "a legal claim to be the partner of [his] sorrows and tenderest comforter." Jack vows to Lydia that,

"proud of calamity, we will enjoy the wreck of wealth; while the surrounding gloom of adversity shall make the flame of our pure love show doubly bright." Similarly, Julia promises to Faulkland: "Then on the bosom of your wedded Julia, you may lull your keen regret to slumbering; while virtuous love, with a Cherub's hand, shall smooth the brow of upbraiding thought, and pluck the thorn from compunction."

Both Jack and Julia indicate their willingness to endure hardship for the sake of love. But Julia's sentiments, prompted by Faulkland's feigned distress, follow Jack's, and his scene with Lydia is highly comic. In him, artifice clearly predominates over sensibility. The captain is trying to trick Lydia into matrimony and, after his impassioned speech, he quips in an aside: "If she holds out now the devil is in it!" His sentiments are feigned—merely to utter oaths of devotion does not ensure a disinterested heart. Julia's sentiments are more sincere and yet, because they do follow Jack's comic ones, Sheridan here inverts the conventional technique of introducing a comic scene to parody a serious one. In *The Rivals,* the serious scene "imitates" the comic one, and Sheridan thereby undermines Julia's sentiments. Faulkland likewise would trick Julia into a confession of love, unqualified by either gratitude or filial duty. Structurally and thematically, Sheridan in this way suggests the kinship between sensibility and artifice.

Soon, Julia's sensibility itself changes. Once she learns of Faulkland's deception, she resembles earlier heroines who, in the proviso scene, defend their individuality. Her language retains the syntax of the sentiment, but the content does not deal with a moral truth. Rather, she renounces him and soundly condemns his artifice. Delicate feelings aside, she refuses to bring further distress upon herself. To make his comic point, Sheridan prolongs Julia's diatribe, which, in its anger, recalls the tirades of the castoff mistress. Nor can Faulkland interrupt the flow of her reproach.

At last, Faulkland's excess is checked, but not by Julia's language or her finer feelings. Although in the end he pays tribute to the reforming power of her "gentleness" and "candour," here the threat of forever losing her stirs his remorse. Julia, in witnessing the extremes to which her lover will go, also comes to realize the dangers of indulgence. Like Honeywood's in *The Good Natur'd Man,* Julia's indiscriminate good nature must be checked and restrained.

The character of Captain Absolute illustrates Sheridan's comic standard of moderation, the lesson that both Julia and Faulkland must learn. Durant remarks: "[Jack] is a sensible and practical young man; and the main thrust of the comedy comes of this practical young man's efforts to achieve sensible aims in an utterly illogical world." Auburn in *Sheridan's Comedies* writes that Jack is mildly clever, motivated by honest, not entirely selfish desires, and he is "warmly human." Unlike the other characters, who are "absolute" in their self-indulgent excess, the captain is "absolute" only in his sense. To Faulkland's suggestion that he immediately run away with Lydia and thus fulfill her romantic desire for a sentimental elopement, Captain Absolute retorts: "What, and lose two thirds of her fortune?" Like the Restoration hero, he is willing enough to woo a lady with a substantial inheritance, but he is equally unwilling to sacrifice himself to a life of poverty. As he tells Lydia: "Come, come, we must lay aside some of our romance—a

little *wealth* and *comfort* may be endur'd after all." To live in an impoverished state may be romantic, but it is also needlessly foolish.

On another level, his moderation offsets Faulkland's sensibility. At one point, the captain urges Faulkland to "love like a man," and, at another, he chides his friend even more severely: "but a captious sceptic in loved—a slave to fretfulness and whim—who has no difficulties but of *his own* creating—is a subject more fit for ridicule than compassion!" Like the balance achieved through the relationship of Lydia and Julia, the Captain's good sense also balances Faulkland's excess.

Like Faulkland's, Lydia's folly must be mended, and by the captain. After Lydia discovers that Captain Absolute and Ensign Beverley are one and the same person, he initially appeals to her sensibility. Meeting with no success, he must then challenge her very pretensions to sensibility. He points out to Lydia how her reputation will suffer in a world where sentiment thrives only in the lending libraries or in whimsical imaginations. It is a point which, although critical of the sentimental mode, also modifies the earlier theme of artifice. Now, sentiment becomes just another form of affectation. Later, of course, in Joseph Surface, Sheridan will personify this kind of sentimental sham. Here, Sheri-dan indicates that the stage of the world and the world of the stage do not mutually influence each other. Captain Absolute brings into comic focus the illusory and ultimately absurd nature of Lydia's attempt to transfer the fictional realm of sentimentalism into her own life.

Yet, he is also a lover, "aye, and a romantic one too," and this aspect of his character exemplifies Sheridan's use of convention. After his breach with Lydia, the captain agrees to a duel. Indeed, this prospect proves more successful in winning him the hand of Lydia than all his tricks, a reversal of the Restoration practice and an apparent concession to pathos. But it must be stressed that, unlike Steele's treatment of the duet in *The Lying Lover,* in *The Rivals* the duel becomes an effective comic device. For both Captain Absolute and Faulkland, the duel is a gesture of despair, and Sheridan has clearly indicated the absurdity of it by juxtaposing their motives with those of O'Trigger, who would fight "genteelly" and like a Christian over some imagined insult. The captain here momentarily forsakes sense, and he almost meets a romantic end. In a final comic twist, Lydia's romantic desires are almost realized, and art does indeed almost become life. It is enough to shock all the characters into sense, and pathos is thereby averted.

Therefore, the duel exemplifies the basic rivalry between the sentimental and the witty modes, and the dangers to which both are subject. Lucy capably wears a "mask of *silliness*" and yet, like the witty servants of the past, she possesses "a pair of sharp eyes for [her] own interest under it." It is her self-interest that has led to such serious misunderstandings. The fop, too, has contributed. Seeking to master the art of "*sentimental swearing*," Acres hopes to prove his courage. A blustering oath, delivered with "propriety," would then achieve an effect which the cowardly "fighting Bob" could not do otherwise. But the duel shows his courage to be as suspect as his "sentimental swearing."

More important is the dual character of Ensign Beverley/Captain Absolute. His disguise also leads to misunderstandings, but he plays the key role of the man of sense. The comic excesses of the rival modes have been checked, largely through him. The rivalry between the various suitors for Lydia's hand reaches its climax at King's-Mead-Field, and the concomitant rivalry between wit and sentiment, represented by the combatants, finally ends. Out of rivalry, balance finally reigns.

The balance is reflected in Julia's concluding speech. Earlier, the actress who has played the part of Julia has delivered a prologue critical of the sentimental muse. Now, at the end of the play, she delivers a word of caution: "and while Hope pictures to us a flattering scene of future Bliss, let us deny its pencil those colours which are too bright to be lasting." Julia's caution highlights the folly of trusting to appearances, at the same time serving to warn against risible excess. Though couched in sentimental language, this final speech hints at the true nature of things. "Flesh and blood" as mankind is, he indulges himself in the extremes of hope or despair, wit or sentiment. The "squinting eye" of excess swivels either one way or the other. Julia's speech, then, is less a testament to a sentimental reconciliation than a plea for moderation. Sheridan has at last shown that only "absolute sense," freed from excessive wit and sentiment, will ultimately triumph.

Source: Anne Parker, "'Absolute Sense' in Sheridan's *The Rivals,*" in *Ball State University Forum,* Vol. 27, No. 3, Summer 1986, pp. 10-19.

Adaptations

In 1961, *The Rivals* was transformed into a musical with words by Bruce Geller and music by Jacques Urbont. The show starred a then new and unknown actor named Dom Deluise. The musical script is available from Music Theatre International in New York City. A 1962 sound recording of the production is available from Mercury records.

Topics for Further Study

Read one of the sentimental novels of the eighteenth century, such as Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental Journal through France and Italy.* After reading it, identify several defining aspects of the sentimental man. You might also consider contrasting the qualities of the sentimental man with those of a sentimental woman, as portrayed in Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote.*

At the end of the play, Lydia decides to marry Jack. Do you agree with her assessment of him as a marriage prospect?

What special considerations of the status of women in the eighteenth century, as opposed to

that of women in the twenty-first century, might affect the female protagonist's choices of suitable marriage partners?

What roles do Mrs. Malaprop and Bob Acres play in this comedy? How do their language difficulties reflect on the issues that cause conflict between the lovers?

Read Oliver Goldsmith's "An Essay on the Theatre; Or, A Comparison Between Laughing and Sentimental Comedy" (1773). Define "Laughing Comedy," and then, find evidence in Sheridan's play that supports the interpretation that *The Rivals* is a "laughing comedy."

Compare and Contrast

Eighteenth Century: A small group of women intellectuals, nicknamed "bluestockings," claims to be the equal of male intellectuals, but they are both rare and resented. Samuel Johnson expresses a typical sentiment when he remarks about a female preacher, "A woman's preaching is like a dog walking on his hinder legs. It is not well done; but you are surprised to find it done at all."

Today: While women professionals and intellectuals no longer suffer such ridicule for their accomplishments, they do not necessarily command equal pay or respect compared to their male counterparts.

Eighteenth Century: Formal education is available only for men, and being costly, only for landed or wealthy men. A handful of daughters of enlightened fathers enjoy home tutoring, and a few philanthropists try to provide education for less affluent young men. For the middle class, an education is the marker and the passkey for entry to high society. This class of ambitious young men becomes a willing market for tutors, conduct guides, and newspaper columns aimed at educating them.

Today: Public education is available for men and women of all socioeconomic groups. However, a growing number of non-English-speaking immigrants presents challenges to school systems to offer this group equal access to society through equal education.

Eighteenth Century: Going to the theater is popular and fashionable. Theatergoers have favorite actors and plays, and they pay dearly for their seats on backless benches. The tickets range from one to five shillings, which equates roughly to $25 to $50 in today's currency.

Today: Although the theater still thrives, it has been largely overshadowed by film and video technology. A handful of dedicated theatergoers still are willing to spend substantial amounts to experience live theater in houses that are often ten times the size of their eighteenth-century counterparts. In addition, today's audience is both further from the stage and also separated from the action by the dimming of the house lights, which makes it possible to view the scenes on stage without being visible in return.

Eighteenth Century: In the later part of this century, England is entering a period of increased propriety and temperance after the bawdiness of the Restoration period. Self-restraint is a considerable virtue, a mark of men who would place themselves above the mob. Accordingly, Bob Acres in *The Rivals* has formulated a new manner of swearing, since "the damns have had their day."

Today: After a period of liberalism during the second half of the last century, the new millennium may be seeing a move toward conservatism, such that prayer in school is again under consideration, and television and film industries are anxious to serve both

the conservative and liberal public by clearly announcing the level of sexual and language-related offensiveness of their products.

What Do I Read Next?

In Samuel Richardson's 1740-1741 *Pamela, Or Virtue Rewarded,* a young servant girl fights to repulse the advances of her master, eventually forcing him to legitimize his desire through marriage.

Frances Burney's *Evalina; Or, The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (1778) is the story of a witty and plucky young girl who selects her mate from a host of admirers.

Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story* (1791) relates the plight of a young girl who falls in love with her protector, who inconveniently happens to be a priest.

In Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752), a naïve female protagonist—influenced by reading too many romantic novels—persists in being completely honest, no matter what the circumstances, to the bafflement of her friends and would-be lovers.

London Assurance (1841), by Dion Boucicault, is a drawing room farce with aptly metaphorical character names, and it also portrays the plight of a son whose father wants to marry him off to the very girl with whom he has already fallen in love.

Oscar Wilde's Comedy of Manners *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) is a spectacularly witty take on the theme of the mistaken identity of a lover.

Further Study

Kelly, Linda, *Richard Brinsley Sheridan: A Life,* Sinclair-Stevenson, 1997.

Kelly presents a detailed examination of the playwright's life, with a balanced portrayal of both his brilliance and his dalliance.

Morwood, James, *The Life and Works of Richard Brinskey Sheridan,* Scottish Academic Press, 1985.

Morwood's biographical account focuses primarily on Sheridan's plays and theater management.

Morwood, James, and David Crane, eds., *Sheridan Studies,* Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Morwood and Crane collect ten scholarly essays on Sheridan's plays, including one on producing Sheri-dan by director Peter Wood.

Porter, Roy, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century,* The Penguin Society History of Britain, Penguin Books, 1990.

Porter looks at the political, social, and economic world of eighteenth-century British society.

Stone, George Winchester, Jr., ed., *The Stage and the Page: London's "Whole Show" in the Eighteenth-Century Theatre,* University of California Press, 1981.

Acting, stage construction, song, and the various forms of comedy and drama are discussed in the context of eighteenth-century society.

Taylor, Richard C., "Future Retrospection: Rereading Sheri-dan's Reviewers," in *Sheridan Studies,* edited by James Morwood and David Crane, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 47-57.

Taylor presents a collection of snippets from contemporary and later reviews of *The Rivals.*

Worth, Katherine, *Sheridan and Goldsmith,* St. Martin's Press, 1992.

Worth puts the key plays of Sheridan and Goldsmith into the context of the conventions of eighteenth-century drama and comedy, especially sentimental comedy.

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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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