

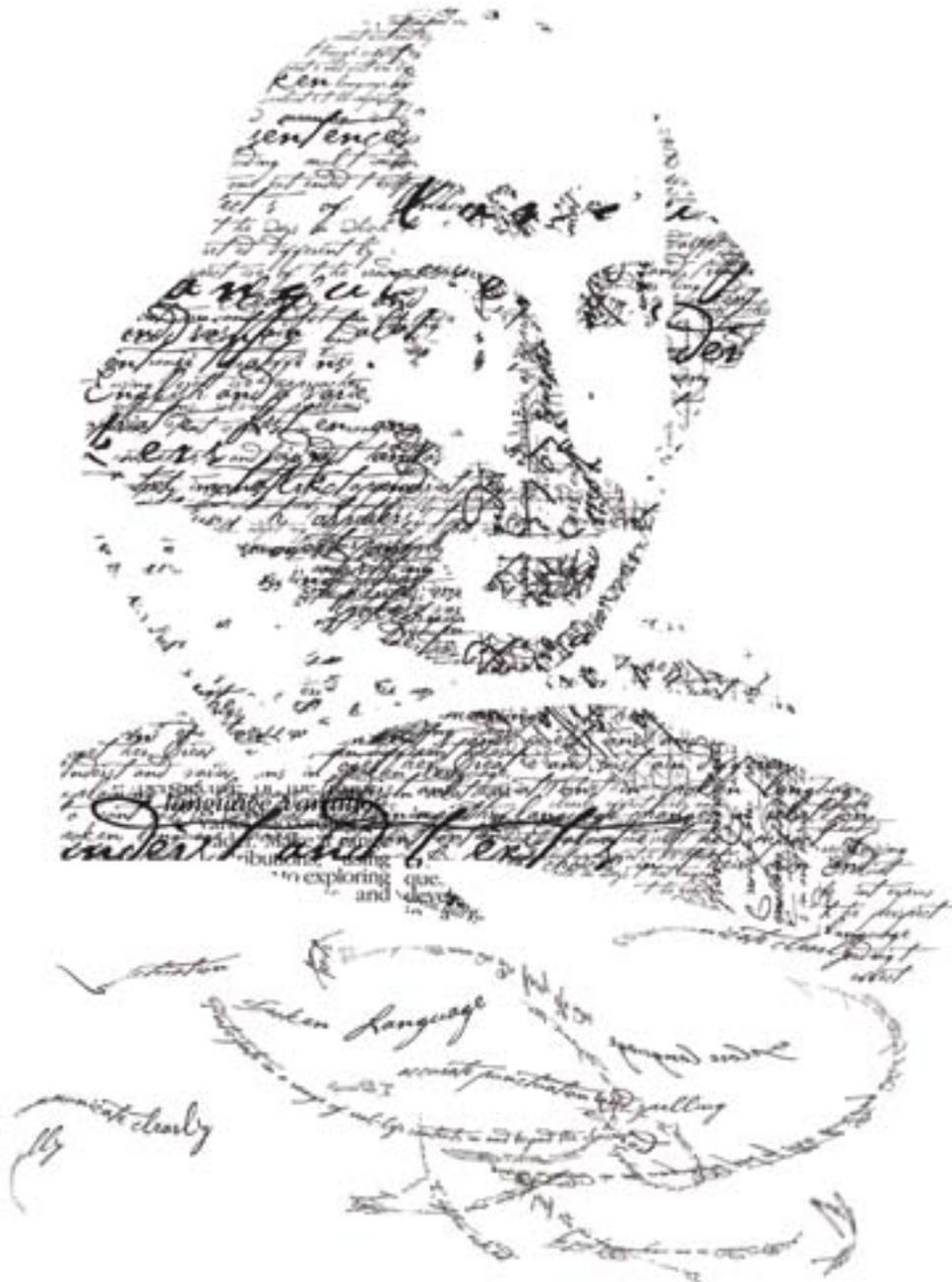
A LEVEL

ENGLISH LITERATURE H071 H471

INTRODUCTION AND GUIDED READING

THE RIVALS (1775)

Richard Brinsley Sheridan



Richard Brinsley Sheridan - *The Rivals* (1775)

From September 2012, OCR will be introducing new set texts for unit F663. To support you and your learners through this change, OCR has commissioned senior members of the examining team to write an introduction and guided reading list for each text in Section B. You can choose to use these materials with your learners as you see fit.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan *The Rivals* (1775)

At the Heart of the Repertoire

The plays of Sheridan and Goldsmith may not have enjoyed the high literary esteem of those of their Restoration predecessors such as Wycherley and Vanbrugh, but they have held the stage much better. Audiences find the Georgian comedies better crafted, more continuously dramatic, 'as good as a novel in the reading' (Hazlitt) and less insistently lubricious. They are not always, possibly, so easy to discuss in terms of the History of Ideas, and, as a result of Walpole's Licensing Act of 1737, they are compelled to avoid political subjects; but they are just as intimately connected to the life of the fashionable Cities that produced them, and their continuous and frequent revivals over the past two hundred years bears witness to a dramatic vitality that arguably matches that of Shakespeare. No plays have been more frequently revived, indeed, between Shakespeare and the joint appearance of Shaw and Wilde in the 1890s, than Sheridan's two great 'genteel comedies'.



AO4 Literary history as context
AO3 Critical views

The Irish Connection

The contribution of the Anglo-Irish minority (Yeats's 'indomitable Irishry') to the drama in English is staggering. Since Sheridan's time major Protestant Irish dramatists have included Boucicault, Shaw, Wilde, Synge, O'Casey and Beckett; in the eighteenth century there were Congreve, Farquhar, Goldsmith and Sheridan himself. Unlike his contemporary Goldsmith, Sheridan does not seem to crystallise memories of his native Ireland into a bittersweet Eden (as Goldsmith does in his poem *The Deserted Village*). He seems to have left Ireland unsentimentally at the age of eight, never thereafter returning, rising in the English ranks as writer and politician after the model of his great Irish forebear Edmund Burke. His career resembles an eighteenth and nineteenth century archetype, dubbed by the historian Roy Foster that of the 'Mick on the Make'.

In his preface Sheridan says he did not intend any national reflection in the character of Sir Lucius O'Trigger, the play's single Irishmen, though he approaches the contemporary stereotype of the Irish gentleman as impetuous and bloodthirsty, and insanely sensitive to 'jests' at the expense of his country. Sheridan may not have been above dramatic exploitation of his countrymen to further his own career.

Useful biographies of Sheridan are Madeline Bingham, *Sheridan: The Track of a Comet* (1972) and Fintan O'Toole, *A Traitor's Kiss* (1998).

The Text

Most currently available texts of the play reproduce the text established by Cecil Price for the Oxford edition of Sheridan's works. Originally the playwright's script was much longer, running nearly four hours, but judicious advice from the first reviewers to 'curtail some of the scenes' led to drastic cuts, reducing the importance of the eccentric Sir Lucius O'Trigger and augmenting the more traditional bumpkin role of Bob Acres. Thereafter editions of the play tended to reflect the taste of companies and audiences rather than enquire too closely what Sheridan actually wrote. This means that you may occasionally encounter apocryphal expansions, particularly to the role of Mrs Malaprop. One early edition records Jack as 'graceful as a young gazette' and Beverley as a 'conceited young pendant'. But then, suggests Mark S. Auburn, 'what Malaprop did not improvise? ...'

AO4 Literary historical context

A02 Textual development

The Eighteenth Century Stage: A Closed World

Sheridan wrote his first play for Covent Garden, one of the two 'Patent Theatres' that dominated the London scene at this time (the other was Drury Lane). He chose Covent Garden because it had recently had a notable success with Goldsmith's *She Stoops* with which *The Rivals* had similarities. John Rich had rebuilt the Covent Garden Theatre in 1732, so it was in a comparatively intimate playhouse that Sheridan's play made its debut. The stage and auditorium were only 36.3 metres, front to back, and 19.5 metres wide. As the forestage thrust deep into the seating area, any actor who wished could deliver his lines in the lap of the paying public: no spectator was more than about 17 metres from the stage. The full depth of the performing area was masked by rows of painted scenic flats, which could be pulled back to form (rather stylised) outdoor scenes such as the Act 5 duel on King's-Mead-Fields. Though Drury Lane was rebuilt and enlarged in the 1794, burning down soon after, some smaller Georgian Theatres have survived, such as the 1788 214-seater at Richmond in North Yorkshire.

Virtually all the major players in *The Rivals* had previously taken similar roles in *She Stoops to Conquer*, further demonstrating the intimacy and intensity of the Patent Theatres at this time. Edward Shuter, who created Anthony Absolute, had previously played Hardcastle in *She Stoops*: he was good at comic gestures and making long faces, but he was difficult to work with as he ad-libbed when he forgot his lines. A review of the second night of *The Rivals* found him, 'as usual, shamefully imperfect.' Yet despite such imperfection, work in the Patent Theatre at this time was well-paid (some comic actors grossed £1,000 per annum) and opened doors into the corridors of power, as the actress Mary Robinson (1758-1800), (who may have bedded Sheridan) discovered when she became mistress of the Prince of Wales, later George IV.

Good textbooks on Georgian Theatre are J. Loftis, *Sheridan and the Drama of Georgian England* (1976) and Peter Thomson, *The Cambridge Introduction to English Theatre* (2006)

AO2 Theatrical and
social context

Sheridan's Bath

'What kind of place is this Bath?' asks the Coachman in the first scene of *The Rivals*. Bath was, in the later eighteenth century, a more-or-less purpose-built inland resort town for the rich, the aspirant and the shabby-genteel. In contemporary literature it features in Sheridan's *The Rivals*; as an important early staging-post in Smollett's travel-novel *Humphry Clinker* (1771); as the setting for Christopher Anstey's mildly racy poem in heroic couplets, *The New Bath Guide* (1766); and, from a rather later period, it hosts parts of two Jane Austen novels, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* (published 1818).

The focus of this up-market holiday-camp was the Roman Baths, now closed to the health-seeker, but then site of a major bathing industry. A character in *The New Bath Guide* is concerned that washing and drinking water are the same: 'while little TABBY was washing her Rump, / The Ladies kept drinking it out of a Pump.' Smollett's Matthew Bramble, admittedly a rather squeamish gentleman, becomes apoplectic at the same thought. He thinks all drinks sold in the Bath pump-room are concocted from 'sweat, and dirt, and dandruff; and the abominable discharges of various kinds, from twenty different diseased bodies' boiled up in the 'kettle' of the King's Bath below.

Sheridan knew Bath well. He had gone there on friendly terms with his father at the age of just twenty, encountering a mixture of beautiful and pretentious ladies, including at the house of one Mrs Miller, a possible original for Mrs Malaprop. Sheridan was cranked by the City into his first literary effusions, a mixture of personal satire and idealised sonnets. One of his lampoons even saw off the elderly lover of a sixteen-year-old professional singer, but to banish a younger suitor he had to fight a pair of duels, the second ending almost fatally. Duelling, as the play demonstrates, was strongly discouraged by Bath's Master of Ceremonies. Many of these incidents from Sheridan's lively career in the City find their way, suitably transposed, into *The Rivals*.

The first act of the play is dominated by Lydia's taste in the contemporary English novel, one of the major recreations at Bath, and for the circulating libraries, which hired out books and charged whacking late-fees, a major source of income. Lydia is clearly an excellent subscriber. The Edwardian critic George H. Nettleton made extensive study of the twenty books listed in Act One Scene Two, concluding that, though some of them are obscure, none has actually been made up by Sheridan. Novels were at this time often written by women, and consumed substantially by them, though Lydia (reflecting her creator's taste) seems to prefer a generally male authorship. Most of her borrowings are sentimental novels, presenting 'nature' (ie sex) in a warm (ie frank) yet 'delicate' style; though there is one exception, a novel called *The Innocent Adultery*, which is as prurient as it sounds.

It is likely, therefore, that Lydia was reading on the Bath stage what her audience were reading off it. The play certainly proved to the taste of Bath theatregoers, outside the Capital the largest and most discerning audience in the country. 'I never saw or heard anything like it,' wrote one eye witness, 'before the actors spoke they began their clapping.' Sheridan's extraordinary career, which would take him from dramatist to theatre manager to Minister of the Crown, had begun.

AO4 Social and literary context (setting)

Comedy of Artifice

Another approach to Alysoun of Bath sees her The life of eighteenth century fashionable resorts was all about seeing and being seen: in ballroom, Assembly Room and on the Parades. As *The New Bath Guide* puts it, 'Persons of Taste and true Spirit, I find, / Are fond of attracting the eyes of mankind'. As Anstey's irony hints, this social intercourse was often about surface, not depth. The brothers in Sheridan's other major play *The School for Scandal* are both called 'Surface', despite the fact that one is a hypocrite and the other basically honest. Public life involved elaborate 'surfaces' of hair and clothes. Society ladies pretended to be shepherdesses; the 'quality' took the waters in flannel blankets and beribboned hats; fashionable gatherings meant donning cockades, periwigs, powder, pomatum and stylised skin blemishes. Even fashionable architecture was not quite what it seemed. In Bath John Wood the Elder's Circus (1767-74) only presents its iconic neoclassical frontage to the world from one theatrical angle: behind, out of sight, the houses were completed in a bewildering number of styles, with roofs at different heights, and as few or many out-offices as the individual owners preferred. The same is true of his son's Royal Crescent (1754-68).

In Sheridan's *The Rivals*, as in the civilisation which inspired it, deception abounds. Jack, the leading gent, pretends to be a poor junior officer; his lover believes herself a heroine of romance; Faulkland and Julia both strive to live up to impossible precepts, while Mrs Malaprop signally fails to convince us she's a linguistic guru.

Sir Lucius seems to want to make the whole world into a battlefield, like those eccentrics Toby and Trim in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, which their huge model of the Siege of Namur. In short everything in the play walks on literary stilts, and belongs to a world of artifice. All is on show, aware of the effect it is having – in the 1770s *The Rivals* would have been given with the house lights up, the characters speaking to the audience with a confident, direct, intimacy. All Sheridan's signposts as to plot and theme would have been plainly visible. Even his borrowings from and references to the work of earlier dramatists would have been viewed as part of the effect. For Sheridan, like many eighteenth century writers, would not have claimed originality, merely dramatic dexterity and technique. As Hazlitt put it, imitation, both of literature and the fashionable world, was itself for Sheridan a kind of creativity: 'He could imitate with the spirit of an inventor.'

Much of the best Sheridan criticism is collected in *Sheridan: Comedies* (Macmillan Casebook, 1986). Katherine Worth's *Sheridan and Goldsmith* (1992) is also very useful.

AO4 Eighteenth century
social and aesthetic context

'Fastidious Comedy' and 'Laughing Comedy'

In 1773 Goldsmith argued in his essay 'On the Theatre' 'by our being too fastidious, we have banished humour from the stage.' He was complaining about the empty sophistication of a run of plays in the 1760s and 70s that celebrated the moral advantages of 'delicate' feeling, the so-called 'sentimental comedies'. He was getting at plays like Richard Cumberland's *The West Indian* (1771). Cumberland's hero is an obscenely wealthy Jamaican planter who believes in love at first sight and has so far relied on slaves to do everything for him. Arrived among streetwise Londoners, he is overcome by cunning and deception. Yet the plot is kind to him at every turn, everyone listens to his increasingly sentimental sermons, and eventually welcomes him as a paragon of fashionable taste. Goldsmith thought that Cumberland's writing went much further than merely whitewashing stereotypes, like that of this ignorant, moonstruck 'West Indian'; the dramatist 'drew men as they ought to be, not as they were,' he wrote in his 1774 satire, *Retaliation*. Cumberland's gallants are faultless, his women divine, / And comedy wonders at being so fine.' It was the duty of the next generation of playwrights, Goldsmith insisted, to cut through this new-fangled refinement and restore traditional realist humour ('Laughing Comedy') to the English stage. Yet the cult of sensibility had, as Peter Thomson, puts it, 'a long reach', and proves a more durable influence on Sheridan's *The Rivals* than might be expected, even if he wished to follow the advice of his fellow-Irishman.

The *West Indian* is currently available in facsimile reprint from the British Library (MOD1002761089)

AO4 Literary context

The Cult of Sensibility

The eighteenth century cult of sensibility (or 'sentimentalism') was a corporate design on the part of writer and reader to take feeling seriously, and explore it for its own sake, often with what Faulkland in *The Rivals* calls 'too exquisite nicety'. It began with the little cellular movements of consciousness observed by readers of Richardson's epistolary novel, *Clarissa* (1747-48), expanding to the gusts of empathy demanded by the affecting moments in Sterne's anti-novel *Tristram Shandy* (1760). Sterne consolidated his status as prime mover in the fashion with *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), while Henry Mackenzie wrote a book called *The Man of Feeling* (1771) in which each chapter invites the reader to pipe his or her eye at the designated moment, and another, even more extraordinary, called *Julia de Roubigné* (1773), in which the characters re-enact the tragedy of *Othello*, destroying themselves entirely on the initiative of their superfine sensibilities, without an Iago in sight.

Though the characters of these books, like Faulkland in *The Rivals*, find their 'whole soul' engrossed with the highest motives, much of the empathy projected at human and animal suffering in novels of this genre (dead monks, dead goats) was performative, owing much to affectation. Devotees shuddered with sighs, dripped tears, and were fashionably indisposed (as Faulkland wishes Julia to be) at every reversal of fortune. The cult of sensibility spread to Europe too: in Rousseau's *Julie, or La Nouvelle Eloise* (1761) and Goethe's very influential *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) with its suicidal lead character. The emergence of this blaze of sensibility immediately before the French Revolution, at the beginnings of Romanticism, and as a reaction against the high watermark of Enlightenment culture and Empirical philosophy is not an accident. Not surprisingly, as we have seen, by about 1770 sentimentality was all the rage on the English stage as well as in the novel.

Janet Todd's *Sensibility: An Introduction* (1986) is an excellent guide. See also John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (1988); and John Richetti, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth Century Novel* (1993).

The Rivals as Sentimental Comedy?

A gauge of how supercharged with sensibility is the atmosphere surrounding the play comes when the blockish Acres is able to instruct us in a new system of 'sentimental swearing', in which every cuss-word is 'genteely' grounded in the exact emotion which generates it. Whenever feasible, as here, the dramatist points out the absurdities inherent in the tradition. Yet, as has often been pointed out, he brandishes what an Edwardian critic called 'the choicest flowers of eighteenth century sentiment' should his play seem momentarily light on philosophic earnestness or threaten to degenerate into mere farce. In short he both wrote as a Man of Sentiment and as a scoffer at current fashion. He had his cake and ate it.

The test-case has always been the Sentimental lover, Faulkland. Is he intended as a satire on or a psychological study of fashionable obsession? It is certainly possible Sheridan based some aspects of the character on his own sensational behaviour some two or three years before writing the play. When he eloped with Elizabeth Linley, he was just twenty, and idealistic as Lydia Languish, hoping to fly with her Beverly. Sheridan followed his Elizabeth all the way to a French convent as her chaste cavalier, before returning home to defend her honour with weapons. Nothing in Faulkland's experience seems quite as grandiloquent as this, though Julia does 'entrust' her 'person' to his honour. Whether or not Faulkland derives from the excesses of his creator, his histrionics have certainly divided the opinions of critics and theatregoers. Writing at the fag-end of the sensibility cult, early in the nineteenth century, Mrs Inchbald considered Faulkland the most 'original' character in the comedy, and his exchange with Julia at the beginning of Act 5 was particularly commended in an early review, which praised it 'even beyond the pitch of sentimental comedy, and may not improperly be styled metaphysical'. Victorian producers, however, thought Faulkland 'a decided bore', and 'irremediably dated', and did what they could to prune his lines.

He has fought back steadily over the last century. Modern actors tend to play the subtext of his rhetoric with some directness, showing the bizarre but uncontested emotional logic by which in Act 5 he provokes Julia to rush exasperated from his presence purely out of a desire to spare her any pain. One critic has suggested he be played as an analyst-haunting Woody Allen character, obsessively raking over his emotions. For almost everything Faulkland says proceeds from a humanist conviction that in a Godless universe we can only turn to our Other Self for support. As Matthew Arnold puts it: 'Ah, Love, let us be true to one another!'; or as Faulkland puts it himself: 'The mutual tear that steals down the cheek of parting lovers is a compact, that no smile shall live there till they meet again.'

But if, on balance, theatre history urges us to take Faulkland's psychobabble seriously, it suggests that Lydia's excesses should be viewed rather as satirising the sensibility cult. Her romantic conception of moonlit elopement, heroic tests to determine her lover's true nature (an assignation in a freezing January garden) and sense, like the heroine of Charlotte Lennox's wonderful 1752 novel *The Female Quixote*, of always being the most important person in her own life, all owe a good deal to self-seeking idealism. Yet her misguided fulsomeness about romance need not necessarily deflate her into a selfish schoolgirl, who needs to learn the difference between novels and life. Lydia's fantasies in Act 5 comprise some of the finest writing in the play, and if it is the sentimental tradition that ironically propels them, then power to it. The great tradition of English romantic comedy, whether 'laughing' or 'sentimental', has always recognised that dreams and ideals are powerful factors of reality, and cannot simply be extinguished without significant imaginative cost. The heroines of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* come to view things this way; as does the heroine of Austen's Bath-set *Northanger Abbey* who is herself, like Lydia, surfeited on late eighteenth century novels.

AO4 Literary Context
AO3 differing opinions of Faulkland
AO2 Presentation of Lydia

Social Distance

The first act is sandwiched between apparently inconsequential short scenes involving servants. At curtain-up Fag patronises Sir Antony's 'Coachman'. It is disconcerting how in the know he is, identifying most of the chief issues, characters and relationships of the play. In an upwardly mobile society like eighteenth century Bath everyone makes what use they can of the trappings of fashionable life. As one critic puts it: 'Fag wears his master's wit like his lace, at second hand.' The lady's maid Lucy, whose soliloquy (a servant soliloquising?) closes the act, has just as close tabs on the lives and needs of the play's female characters, and is just as prepared to exploit them for profit, pitting them one against another if need be.

Thus Sheridan insists from the off that the doings of the privileged are closely watched by pert unscrupulous underlings. There was a 'world above' and a 'world below', and the latter by definition lived off the former. Fag's dealings with his superiors are far from deferential: they are circumspect, even circumlocutory, as if he were consulting his own interests carefully before performing any aspect of his duty.

The actor Lee Lewis, who originated the part, made his career playing such self-interested and self-contained valets.

If Lucy and Fag subvert the class-system by undermining it, Acres' servant David has a different role. This time the master does not exploit the man, but functions as a kind of tutor to him. When, at the beginning of Act 4, 'Fighting Bob' Acres wants to fight a duel to preserve his 'honour', David reminds him of noblesse oblige: there are old retainers and even dumb beasts at the family seat, Clod Hall, to whom he owes a living. David goes on to preach a sermon on the frailty of a gentleman's 'honour'. It sounds like a paraphrase of Sir John Falstaff's 'catechism' on 'honour' before the Battle of Shrewsbury in *The First Part of King Henry IV* 5:1, and it just as effectively punctures genteel hang-ups about reputation, notably those of Sir Lucius, whose 'mansion house and dirty acres' may have slipped through his fingers, but who clings to his 'honour' with violent punctiliousness. Sheridan's servants can be poets just as well as profiteers.

AO4 Social context

Divine Mrs Malaprop

Malapropism, in which the dramatist makes creative capital out of the ignorant verbal usage of the ignorant or the pretentious, has a long history on the English stage. Shakespeare's most famous exponent of malapropism is the over-promoted Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*, though the self-aggrandising Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Mistress Quickly, the brothel-keeper who mourns Falstaff in *Henry V*, are often more creative. Sheridan's Mrs Malaprop, is not, therefore, an original creation, but, like so much of his work, the consummation of two hundred years of dramatic history. Some scholars have even argued that the germ of the character lies in Mrs Tryfort ('Try-for-it', i.e. le mot juste) in *A Journey to Bath*, a manuscript play by Sheridan's mother, Frances, which certainly anticipates Malaprop's 'contagious countries'. Yet the very extensiveness of the lexicographic territory she mis-maps distinguishes her in degree, if not in kind, from all her forebears. She tramples over the contemporary tourist-industry: 'you have no more feeling than one of the Derbyshire putrefactions' [those limestone formations known as the 'Wonders of the Peak']; over *Hamlet*: 'an eye, like March, to threaten at command – a Station, like Harry Mercury, new – Something about kissing – on a Hill' [Hamlet's encomium on his father in 3:4]; over psychiatry: 'it gives me the hydrostatics to such a degree'; prophecy [?] 'we will not anticipate the past'; evidence: the 'perpendiculars'; and (I think) beards and painters: 'thou barbarous Vandyke'.

Mrs Malaprop differs from production to production more than any other character in the play. The tradition is to make her vulgar (studied ignorance is thus responsible for her mangling of meanings) and elderly; but she works just as well if she is an under-educated social-climber, with youth (or what passes for youth in eighteenth century Bath – her niece, Lydia, is just seventeen) still on her side. In short she can be a portentous establishment figure, or an insecure but ambitious outsider. I once read a review of a production of the play which complained that a particular actress was too young and beautiful to play the role. But the part as Sheridan wrote it lacks clear specification about age and appearance. This is because Mrs Malaprop is conceived at a linguistic rather than a literary level: her mistakes about words are the most significant aspect of her.

All this gives her something in common with Dickens characters, like Mrs Gamp, who live in a world of linguistic fantasy whose purpose is to feed her fertile ego with good references; characters who convince their fans that their fantasy worlds have more substance than the prosaic details of everyday life. Orwell argues that Mrs Harris, an alleged former employer of Mrs Gamp 'who does not exist', is more 'real' than the characters of most novelists. Mrs Malaprop's language, like Mrs Gamp's, seems to operate in a sealed linguistic world, ultimately about and responsible only to itself. In this it seems to me to anticipate not only Dickens, but the Victorian nonsense writing to which his inspiration is linked. Top-notch Malaprop phrases such as the 'pine-apple of politeness' (teased out from Jack's reference to an 'Orange-Tree') and 'a nice derangement of epitaphs' seem close to the hard-core nonsense of Edward Lear. Possibly another Anglo-Irish writer, and another Victorian, Oscar Wilde, was thinking of Mrs Malaprop when he created Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. For Lady Bracknell is another arbitrary centre of linguistic power, who can be portrayed at a variety of ages, and who may simultaneously seem to satirise the society of which she seems faintly to be a part, yet also to transcend it by dint of her glowing absurdity.

Critics who look straightforwardly for satire of eighteenth century society in Mrs Malaprop will, however, be disappointed. Max Beerbohm, perhaps the greatest of all English caricaturists and literary satirists, was so, and concluded as a result her linguistic coinages were artless, arbitrary and meaningless. 'If I spoke of her botanical, vernal humour I should not expect anyone to be amused, and it vexes me to think that Sheridan expected people to be amused by such devices.' It is his loss.

AO2 Use of language

HELPING YOU BRING ENGLISH TO LIFE

Richard Brinsley Sheridan - *The Rivals* (1775)

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'Women Guide the Plot'

Despite Faulkland's hypersensitivity and Mrs Malaprop's linguistic 'hydrostatics', *The Rivals* is also a play concerned with the robust and practical aspects of the marriage market. As A.N. Kaul writes, 'Sheridan is concerned with nothing less than the problem of a woman's freedom in a society that looks upon women as property and upon marriage as a business transaction'; what Lydia terms 'a mere Smithfield bargain' [after Smithfield, the London meat-market]. Julia was given the teasing lines from the 'Epilogue', which argue:

Man's social happiness all rests on us:
Through all the drama – whether d-n'd or not –
Love gilds the scene and women guide the plot.

Julia, as played by Mrs Bulkely, was the star of early performances. Despite the obvious subordination of her healthy inner life to Faulkland's cranky one, or possibly even because of it, she was the most even-keeled character in the play, and in the best position to draw attention to this sub-text of gender politics as the final curtain fell.

Lydia's moral authority is less strongly signposted than Julia's, though she does a good deal more than the former in terms of 'guiding the plot'. In some ways she is a tougher, more self-confident version of Jane Austen's Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*, stuffed with sentimental fiction, and not caring very much how she mixes her dreams and desires up with waking reality. Hazlitt thinks her the quintessential product of an eighteenth century boarding-school, a clever girl who has been force-feeding herself for years on hedonistic nonsense.

Yet she is much more certain what she wants than Julia, and much more determined to wring concessions out of her lover, Captain Absolute, than Julia is able to get change out of the narcissistic Faulkland. Her desire to marry someone beneath her has both the charm of romance and the authority of democracy about it; though no-one else takes her progressive political spirit very seriously (after all, an Ensign - now Second Lieutenant - is only one rank beneath a Captain) she does, even to the point of cultivating a feisty 'hoydenesque' demeanour, which contrasts interestingly with Julia's more mannered and sophisticated modes of speech.

Jack, for all his man-of-the-world pragmatism, thinks the world of her imagination ('devilish romantic, and very absurd of course') and is happy to perform the sentimental equivalent of Labours of Hercules for its sake:

How often have I stole forth, in the coldest night in January, and found him in the garden, stuck like a dripping statue! – There would he kneel to me in the snow, and sneeze and cough so pathetically! He shivering with cold, and I with apprehension! And while the freezing blast numb'd our joints, how warmly would he press me to pity his flame, and glow with mutual ardour!- Ah, Julia! That was something like being in love.

'Women Guide the Plot' continued

The woman's world of *The Rivals* is thus a sophisticated one, here exploring a chaste manifestation of sexual sadism that would not have been unfamiliar, a few years later, to another 'sentimental' writer, the Marquis de Sade. Both girls are literate, articulate and, despite some surface turbulence initiated by their male lovers, reliable human beings. Sir Anthony's view of the circulating library ('an ever-green tree of diabolical knowledge') is too daft to deserve rational consideration, attracting only the garbling concurrence of Mrs Malaprop. Neither he- nor she-dragon has any effect on female education in the play. Both want words to mean more than the dictionary says (for example, Sir Anthony's absurdly hyperbolic warning to his son 'don't enter the same hemisphere with me'), so they end up meaning nothing ('I'll unget you!').

Lydia's view of words, and books, is altogether more rational. She has some of the best of the new sentimental novels by Sterne and Mackenzie, and some of the most lurid (*The Tears of Sensibility*), mixed with Ovid's more earthy writings on love and sex. She also keeps a stock of sermons and theological works ('Addressed to a Young Lady') on-hand to deceive prying chaperones. Her reading of the *Letters of Lord Chesterfield* is presumably to teach her about, or maybe even to teach her, worldly wisdom and hypocrisy. Dr Johnson said the book recommended 'the manners of a dancing master' and the 'morals of a whore.' Lydia is a young woman to be reckoned with, her feistiness and resourcefulness a taste of things to come.

AO4 Gender politics

