

ALCHEMIST OF THE THEATRE:  
A STUDY OF SHERIDAN'S DRAMATIC ART

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore Sheridan's dramatic art as it develops in his minor plays--St. Patrick's Day, The Duenna and A Trip to Scarborough--and particularly his comic masterpieces--The Rivals and The School for Scandal. To the Restoration and sentimental modes of comedy, the plays owe many of their themes and Sheridan much of his inspiration and craftsmanship as a comic dramatist. Sheridan, however, is no mere imitator who mechanically adheres to either tradition. Rather, to his blending of the Restoration and sentimental comic modes, he adds his own distinctive comic ingredients. Thus, his Restoration and sentimental models are transformed into a new comic mode.

This study, then, shows how Sheridan effects a blending of his two inherited traditions. Even more importantly, it indicates Sheridan's own artistry and his skill as a transformer, or alchemist, of comic modes. In Chapter One, a brief summary of the Restoration and sentimental modes establishes the nature of Sheridan's basic comic models. Chapter Two, which deals with the minor plays, points to Sheridan's attempt to transform the two traditions into a new comic mode. The third chapter is devoted to a detailed discussion of The Rivals, one of Sheridan's more successful efforts as a transformer of comic traditions. It is in The Rivals that Sheridan adds to his blending of traditions his

own comic standard of "absolute sense." The final chapter discusses The School for Scandal, Sheridan's greatest comedy for it displays most fully his talent as an alchemist of the theatre. In The School for Scandal, Sheridan develops his own theme of "absolute sense," almost perfectly blending it with the Restoration and sentimental modes. I have chosen to conclude the study with a brief glance at The Critic, since it summarizes Sheridan's views of comedy at the same time as it reveals his comic artistry. Thus, this study establishes Sheridan's stature as a comic playwright by revealing his skill as a transformer--a dramatic alchemist of the theatre.

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## INTRODUCTION

Sheridan inherited from the Restoration and sentimental modes, which gave him his dramatic impetus, the challenge to maintain his artistic independence. To follow slavishly in the footsteps of such a great comic playwright as Congreve could not give to Sheridan a stature of his own. Nor could the sheepish reiteration of sentimental themes, such as those espoused by Steele. To achieve his own singular distinction, Sheridan had to innovate a mode of his own or, in some way, conform to the inherited comic modes. As an alchemist of the theatre, he did both.

To call a comic dramatist an "alchemist" requires some justification. I contend that Sheridan's distinction as a comic dramatist lies in his unique ability to glean from both the Restoration and sentimental modes the best elements, and then transform them. Both Restoration wit and eighteenth-century sentimentalism exist inter-dependently in Sheridan's best plays and, without them, he could not write the sparkling comedies he does. Pruned of its moral baseness, Restoration comedy yields him wit, the spirit of vis comica. Similarly, sentimental comedy, its excessive moralizing snipped away, affords him benevolence, the spirit of good-will. Sheridan's combination of wit and feeling produces a balance which is effective but genuinely comic. He does not demean the best, and basic, elements from either

tradition; he exalts them. From this balance of wit and feeling, a new, enriched mode of comedy results.

In this study, I intend to describe this new comic mode. By describing first the comic traditions which provide Sheridan with his basic themes and models, I then show that his own plays reveal an artistic blending of the Restoration and sentimental modes of comedy. I have chosen those plays which I think exhibit his distinctive achievement. Thus, such a play as Pizarro, an adaptation of Kotzebue's sentimental play The Spaniards in Peru, cannot be considered as an integral part of Sheridan's comic canon. Not only was Pizarro written some twenty years after Sheridan's retirement from the stage but, most importantly, Pizarro conforms so completely to the sentimental, and even heroic, traditions that it really reflects a dramatic mode quite different from that of his other plays. Although Sheridan's minor plays, which include St. Patrick's Day, The Duenna and A Trip to Scarborough, fall between his masterpieces, The Rivals and The School for Scandal, they do reveal touches of Sheridan's dramatic alchemy in a more relevant way than does Pizarro. I have chosen to begin my study of Sheridan's dramatic art with these minor plays, for they prepare the way for a full discussion of his artistry as it is best seen in his masterpieces. The plays under consideration show how Sheridan extracts the best characteristics from the comic

modes and thus, they reveal him to be a true "alchemist of the theatre."



## CHAPTER ONE

### THE COMIC HERITAGE: 1660-1775

Because of its diversity, the dramatic epoch under consideration does not lend itself readily to a succinct analysis. However, Sheridan derives much of his comic impetus from the two comic traditions prevailing between 1660 and 1775--the Restoration and the eighteenth-century sentimental traditions. At the risk of over-generalizing, I have chosen to discuss some of the basic differences between the two dominant modes. I will then proceed to discuss briefly some "typical" plays which represent each of these two modes.

Implicit in the drama of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is a view of man which determines, to a great extent, the particular tone and ethos of the plays. In a sense, the drama of the period moves from the plush drawing-room of Millamant in The Way of the World to the sedate country seat of Amanda in Love's Last Shift. On the one hand, Millamant is carefree and individualistic; on the other, Amanda is staid and moralistic. The difference between these characters reflects the change in comedy's attitude toward human nature and toward the nature of comedy itself.

In Restoration comedy there is no moralistic import and no illusion as to man's perfectibility. On the contrary, in the Restoration view man can be a foolish or a knavish creature, incorrigible in his susceptibility to folly

and dissipation. In addition to his basic profligacy is his basic social nature. With relish, he seeks the baubles with which "the town" can furnish him. However, the social milieu often approximates a tinsel jungle replete with deliberate rules designed to preserve the socially "fit." To survive, Restoration man must rely less on emotion than on intellect, and the intellect's most desirable attribute is wit.

In Restoration comedy, wit is not only verbal prowess in making succinct, unexpected connections between seemingly disparate things; it is also the ability to exploit and control the social situation. Wit, then, affords the Restoration character the means to remain both emotionally detached and socially superior. Yet, it is the very possession of wit which allows him to reveal, surreptitiously, his underlying emotion. Disguised by the witty connection, emotions still exert themselves but without the sacrifice of social mastery or self-possession.

For example, the famous "proviso scene" in The Way of the World (IV,i) exemplifies the hero's and heroine's need to remain aloof at the same time that they possess the need to express emotion. To ensure that they will retain their individuality and not lapse into the "nauseous cant"<sup>1</sup> to which most husbands and wives of their acquaintance are prone,

1. William Congreve, "The Way of the World," in Congreve, ed. Eric Bentley (New York: Hill and Wang, Inc., 1956), Act IV, scene i, p. 345. All further references to plays will be documented parenthetically.

Mirabell and Millamant, seemingly detached, conduct the proposal of marriage as though it were a purely legal matter. They list their conditions of marriage, while at the same time clearly conveying their own emotions. Thus, Millamant fears that they will behave as though they "were proud of one another the first week, and ashamed of one another ever after" (p.345). Mirabell, in turn, expresses his fear that Millamant will become the vain and frivolous wife who sacrifices marriage on the altar of cosmetics: "Item, I article, that you continue to like your own face, as long as I shall: and while it passes current with me, that you endeavour not to new-coin it" (p.346). Thus, both Millamant and Mirabell wittily use legal language as a device. Legal provisos assure them that they will forfeit neither individuality, social control, or emotion.

Such detachment, however, is not encouraged in eighteenth-century comedy. The heart and not the intellect becomes the dramatic focus and hence, feelings are to be expressed openly. Since in the eighteenth-century sentimental view man is perfectible, comedy seeks to reform him by presenting characters who possess benevolent hearts and tongues. Didactic in its aim, sentimental comedy applauds virtue in order that man will emulate the virtuous. Sentimental comedy depicts man in his ostensible folly and then, in a final scene of reformation, reveals his underlying goodness. Thus,

while Restoration comedy frequently satirizes man's folly, sentimental comedy champions his goodness. Biting satire is superfluous; "punitive laughter"<sup>2</sup> achieves the desired end.

This change in comic viewpoint is also reflected in the differing attitudes to marriage. Whereas the seventeenth-century hero sacrifices his personal freedom in order to conform to marriage--a basically social occurrence--the eighteenth-century hero gives up a life of bachelor dissipation for a life of wedded virtue. Hence, marriage in the case of the sentimental hero is symbolic of a conversion from bad to good rather than of a compromise between the personal desire for independence and the social need for domestication.

Comic dramatists who wrote in the sentimental tradition described in their prefaces their view of man as an inherently good creature. Stuart Tave contended that this transition from the Restoration view reflected "the general development of comic theory, practice, and criticism in the eighteenth century" (p.102). However, many prefaces to Restoration comedies, in their description of the seventeenth-century view of man, also reflected a trend towards the enunciation of critical theory.

For example, Vanbrugh affirms the corrective value of Restoration comedy; ridicule and laughter possess for him

2. Stuart Tave, "Corbyn Morris: Falstaff, Humor and Comic Theory in the Eighteenth Century," Modern Philology, L (August, 1952), p.102.

a moral power. As he states, "what I have done is in general a Discouragement to Vice and Folly."<sup>3</sup> In regard to the function of comedy, he contends that

. . .the Business of Comedy is to shew People what they shou'd do, by representing them upon the Stage, doing what they shou'd not. . . . The stage is a Glass for the World to view it self in; People ought therefore to see themselves as they are; if it makes their Faces too Fair, they won't know they are Dirty, and by consequence will neglect to wash 'em. (p.134)

For Vanbrugh, then, the stage is designed to reveal things as they are and not to paint things as they ought to be. Moreover, he makes it clear that the moral onus is on audiences; they are the ones who must see the folly and vice, and then set about to correct their own. Their participation in the play involves their ability to realize that the flaws of the "bad" character are not meritorious.

Similarly, Steele in his preface to The Conscious Lovers expounds on the sentimental view of comedy. The play itself was to have been "an innocent Performance," ostensibly written "for the sake of the Scene of the Fourth Act,"<sup>4</sup> where

3. Sir John Vanbrugh, "A Short Vindication of the 'Relapse' and the 'Provok'd Wife,' from Immorality and Profaneness," in English Literary Criticism: Restoration and Eighteenth Century, ed. Samuel Hynes (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), p. 133.
4. Sir Richard Steele, "Preface to The Conscious Lovers," Ibid., p. 196.

Bevil moralizes on the evils of duelling. Steele contends that "any thing that has its Foundation in Happiness and Success, must be allow'd to be the Object of Comedy; and sure it must be an Improvement of it, to introduce a Joy too exquisite for Laughter, that can have no Spring but in Delight" (pp.196-7). What he proposes, then is not robust laughter but sympathetic tears or, at most, smiles of approbation.

Thus, sympathy is a prime emotion which the sentimentalists tapped. What they stress, above all, is the individual's ability to express "generous pity," which enhances the onlooker's self-knowledge and self-approval. Comedy itself, then, becomes a vehicle by which virtuous action is initiated. The singular importance of the comic character resides in the inculcation of the moral--the "ought to be" which Vanbrugh rejects. Indeed, it is both the Restoration and the sentimental comic characters in particular who reflect this transition from a ridiculing to a sermonizing treatment of man.

In the Restoration tradition, loquacious fools attempt to emulate the heroes' witty repartee which is deemed to be a social grace. While the heroes and heroines have a genuine wit, the forced wit of the fool becomes ludicrous and a fit subject for satire. True wit is sincere; affected wit is "what we would be, under a Voluntary Disguise."<sup>5</sup>

5. William Congreve, "Concerning Humour in Comedy," op.cit., p. 90.

To the socially adept the "dear pleasure of dissembling"<sup>6</sup> is a mere diversion; to the fop it is an affectation which "may in time become a Habit."<sup>7</sup> Hence, the fool's character is determined by his extreme desire for all that is fashionable without a thought to what is fit or just. As Mirabell describes the fool, Witwoud: "He is one whose conversation can never be approved, yet it is now and then to be endured." Thus, the fop's wit is coarse because "he so passionately affects the reputation of understanding raillery, that he will construe an affront into a jest; and call downright rudeness and ill language, satire and fire."<sup>8</sup> So eager is the pseudo-wit to display his "mental acuity" that he feels compelled to display his "oracular talents" at every opportunity.

Witwoud himself is a good example of the fool who does not know the real meaning of social grace, a quality which the heroes and heroines--the true wits--possess in abundance. In reply to Millamant's plea, "truce with your similitudes," Witwoud says: "I cannot help it, madam, though

6. Sir George Etherege, "The Man of Mode," in Plays of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century, eds. Dougald MacMillan and Howard M. Jones (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931), Act III, scene i, p. 99. All further references to plays will be to this edition, unless otherwise stated, and will be documented parenthetically.

7. Congreve, op.cit., p. 90.

8. Congreve, "The Way of the World," ed. Bentley, op.cit., Act I, scene ii, p. 302.

'tis against myself" (II,ii,p.318). His passion for the simile is in accordance with his character, for the extensive use of the comparison is a veritable trademark of the fop. In contrast, the wit of characters like Mirabell is clever but always apt. In Act I, scene ii, Mirabell suggests that Witwoud is the whole fool and any relation of his, like a half-brother, must be merely half the fool. In his conceit, Witwoud misses the barb. By juxtaposing the hero and the fop, the comic dramatist establishes the proper social form, and exposes and ridicules pretense.

A further juxtaposition is that between youth (the heroes and heroines) and old age (the guardians or parents). Like the fop, the aged matron who believes herself to be still young and desirable, and the aged sire who fancies himself an irresistible gallant, are also guilty of affectation. Lady Plyant in The Double-Dealer exemplifies the matron who is convinced that she still possesses physical attractiveness. She construes Mellefont's pleas to be his avowal of love, and her comment, "How can I help it, if I have charms?" (II,i,p139), only accentuates her foolishness. Since Sir Paul Plyant lives in enforced abstinence because his wife is proud of her untainted innocence, Lady Plyant's vanity and hypocrisy in this scene expose the absurdity of the older generation of which she is a part. Thus, she serves as a definite contrast to Mellefont and Cynthia, the young lovers. Similarly, Old Bellair in The Man of Mode, as a member of the older



generation, inhibits the happiness of the hero and heroine because of his vanity and obstinacy. His son, Young Bellair, expounds on the natural course of events when a hard-headed father tries to impose his will: "When I saw I could not prevail with him to be more indulgent, I dissembled an obedience to his will, which has composed his passion and will give us time, and I hope, opportunity, to deceive him" (II,i,p.92). In Restoration comedy, then, the willful parent brings about his own discomfiture. Moreover, old Bellair's amour with Emilia, his son's beloved, proves to be a further source of his humiliation. That the father intended to wed the very woman with whom his son is in love is a comic irony which augments the contrast between the hero and the aged--between the youth and the elderly fool.

Servants, too, play a definite role in Restoration comedy. Both master and servant are capable of hurling the witty barb as well as of conforming to proper social behaviour. For example, in The Relapse Lory possesses as much verbal acuity as his master, Young Fashion. In a sense, the servant is often the reflection of the master, and serves to underline the gross and foolish behaviour of the aged or the fop who cannot compete successfully.

Significantly, in the eighteenth century only the servants retain some of the wit which is a Restoration hallmark. For example, Phillis and Tom in The Conscious Lovers

afford some mirth. Yet, "honest Humphrey" (I,i,p.552) soon castigates them for their sense of fun. In general, the trend in sentimental comedy is to make some of the servants as moral and delicate as the heroes and heroines in order to extol more forcibly the power of virtue, temperance and benevolence.

Perhaps no play illustrates the trend toward a sentimental style of moral delicacy more strongly than does Love's Last Shift. The heroine, Amanda, is described as "a woman of strict virtue" (p.309) and, indeed, she differs greatly from her Restoration counterparts, Narcissa and Hillaria, whose very names suggest their frivolity. In contrast to Amanda, they believe a widow should be gay and should care only for masculine attention and wealth. All that concerns Amanda is that she has "been true to virtue" (I,i,p.314). Never will she forsake her husband, despite his behaviour toward her.

Naive in matters of sex and courtship, Amanda's language accords with her innocent nature. Her plot hatched, she sets about not so much to reclaim a husband as to exalt the power of virtue.

Amanda. Oh, to reclaim the man I'm  
bound by heaven to love, to expose  
the folly of a roving mind in pleasing  
him with what he seemed to loathe  
were such a sweet revenge for slighted  
love, so vast a triumph of rewarded  
constancy as might persuade the looser  
part of womankind even to forsake them-  
selves and fall in love with virtue.  
(III,i,pp.324-325)

The sentences are ornate, and emotional in their plea for the reward of constancy and virtue. There is no instance of the witty comparison. Even the rhetorical structure of the speech reflects a character that is interested to the point of obsession in virtue. The ejaculated "oh" and the two parallel ideas are less important than the central thought, which embodies her benevolent hope for victory. To position the dominant idea at the end is an effective rhetorical device for purposes of a concentrated moral expressed in language approaching that of a formal sermon. Indeed, it is Amanda's language, rather than her person, that pricks Loveless to repentance (V,ii,p.343).

Loveless, too, possesses this capacity for verbalizing his emotions. The "discovery" scene abounds in emotionally packed words and motions. His former dissipation is exaggerated in order that his conversion to virtue may seem all the more marvellous.

Loveless. For hitherto my soul has  
 been enslaved to loose desires, to  
 vain, deluding follies, and shadows  
 of substantial bliss, but now I wake  
 with joy to find my rapture real.  
 Thus let me kneel and pay my thanks  
 to her whose conquering virtue has  
 at last subdued me. (V,ii,p.343)

Loveless's rhetoric reflects the transformation of a man from dissipation to virtue. Prior to his newly gained insight, he is "enslaved" to follies which "delude" him into a state of false happiness. Amanda's virtue "subdues" his

soul and conquers his vanity. In Restoration comedy, the amorous intrigues of the belles and beaux are love games; each lover is an adversary and each vies for domination. In sentimental comedy, too, there is a game; the suffering heroine, through her acts of patience and benevolence, finally awakens the hero and "wins" him over to the side of virtue. His kneeling, his tears of penitence and cries of gratitude underline the victory of virtue over vice.

The sentimental hero, although temporarily living a life of irresponsibility, is at heart a good fellow overflowing with the milk of human kindness. Belcour, in The West Indian states the sentimental view of the redeemable hero:

Belcour. I am the offspring of distress, and every child of sorrow is my brother. While I have hands to hold, therefore, I will hold them open to mankind. But, sir, my passions are my masters; they take me where they will; and oftentimes they leave to reason and to virtue nothing but my wishes and my sighs. (I,v,p.751)

Like Loveless, Belcour finds his redemption in his beloved. Because he is not truly wicked, because he does have a noble and generous heart, the conversion is to appear more probable. Whereas Amanda's words strike Loveless's soul, Louisa's eyes lead Belcour back to virtue: "but there is a healing virtue in your eyes that makes recovery certain" (V,v,p.783). Exalted to the position of a deity, the heroine,

through the power and grace of her eyes, pierces the hero's very soul and reclaims him. Hence, in sentimental comedy, the heroines are the vehicles of redemption, or the objects of an honourable and virtuous affection.

Love for the virtuous is not the only trait which the sentimental hero possesses. Even an errant hero in sentimental comedy exhibits one quality which his Restoration counterpart does not--an "excess of filial affection" (False Delicacy, III,i,p.730). The older generation is no longer a subject of ridicule but an object of veneration. For example, Steele's Bevil Jr. states: "My tender obligations to my father have laid so inviolable a restraint upon my conduct that till I have his consent to speak, I am determined on that subject to be dumb forever" (The Conscious Lovers, I, ii,p.559). Parental ties are binding, and neither parent nor child desires to break them. Hence, delightful scenes of jaded old men and women are rare. Moreover, in sentimental comedy the older generation are not only good but wise. For example, Sir John Bevil is the epitome of tender fatherly concern: "therefore, as soon as he grew towards man, I indulged him in living after his own manner. I knew not how, otherwise, to judge of his inclination; for what can be concluded from a behavior under restraint and fear?" (I,i,p.552). The "best of fathers," Sir John is a man devoted as much to his son's interests as to his own.

Thus, sentimental comedies abound in good and virtuous characters. Although fops and villains may be present, they are not like those found in Restoration comedy. Their presence merely underscores the munificence of virtue. Often, foppery and dissipation are relieved, if not overpowered by, the strength of virtue. For example, the pretentious Cimberton in The Conscious Lovers is duped and loses Lucinda. Myrtle, his rival, tricks him and, because of his ill-manners, Lucinda scorns him. There is no battle of wit, for to expose the fop is not of primary importance. Villainy too is present in these plays for very definite and virtuous reasons. As Dudley says in The West Indian, "'tis the work of Providence, 'tis the justice of heaven that would not suffer innocence to be oppressed, nor your base aunt to prosper in her cruelty and cunning" (V,vi,p.783).

At all times, then, the cause of sober virtue is dominant in sentimental comedy. The sentimental lovers are deeply serious. The heroines radiate unerring constancy and undying faith in the power of their virtue and love. Lady Easy, for example, in The Careless Husband trusts to her virtue and her husband's basic good nature; she rejects the impulse to upbraid him and finally receives "the dear reward of long desiring love!"<sup>9</sup> Their reconciliation scene continues

9. Colley Cibber, "The Careless Husband," in British Dramatists from Dryden to Sheridan, eds. George H. Nettleton and Arthur E. Case (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1939), Act V, scene vi, lines 145-146.

for a full one hundred and sixty-five lines, and the emotional tension is not allowed to lessen.

The Restoration heroine, on the other hand, goads her lover into a confession of love. For example, speaking of love, Harriet in The Man of Mode states that, if Dorimant is going to speak "on that idle subject," she will assume her "serious" look and not reply to his speech. Only when Dorimant can forego passionate advances of love, only "when [his] love's grown strong enough to make [him] bear being laughed at" (IV,i,p.111), will she allow him to speak on so sober a subject. For, "though I wish you devout, I would not have you turn fanatic" (V,ii,p.124). Hence, in a Restoration play, a potentially emotional scene is not allowed to become unduly sober or excessive.

Thus, comic drama underwent a drastic change in the century from Wycherley to Sheridan. The Restoration love for ribald, satiric wit yielded to over-fastidious, didactic moralizing. After 1730, however, the grossest forms of sentimentalism gave way to more modifying trends. Garrick and Colman were among the first to attempt to remove the sentimental plague of tears and mawkish sentimentalizing from the stage. However, they were only partially successful. Only Sheridan, in the 1770's, seems able to infuse into his plays the necessary brilliance to counteract sentimentalism and to establish himself as a dramatist of lasting distinction.

Yet, because of their attempt to allay the sentimental trend, Garrick and Colman deserve consideration.

A professional man of the theatre, Garrick possessed a mind and sensibility attuned to the theatrical tastes of the public. He collaborated with Colman to write The Clandestine Marriage, a comedy in the laughing comic tradition of the seventeenth century. Two years later, he wrote a Prologue for Kelly's sentimental play, False Delicacy, in which he took a swipe at sentimentalism: "You'll soon expect this house to wear a steeple! / For our fine piece, to let you into facts, / Is quite a sermon, - only preached in acts" (Prologue to False Delicacy, ll.4-6).

However, curiously enough, his own play, The Lying Valet, exploits both the Restoration and the sentimental modes. Gayless is an extravagant hero very much like those found in Restoration comedy. Yet, there is one distinct difference. As Gayless himself puts it: "though my fortune has been ill spent, I have, at least, purchased discretion with it."<sup>10</sup> Determined to reform, Gayless agrees to Sharp's proposal to cheat Melissa. Sharp himself is a descendant of the clever servants who abound in Restoration comedy. He shrewdly persuades Gayless to "gulp" down his honour so that the two of them can eat. However, the piece ends on a

10. David Garrick, "The Lying Valet," eds. Nettleton and Case, op. cit., Act I, scene i, ll. 59-60.



sentimental note. With tears designed to soften his beloved's bosom and with a kneeling posture to show his "real contrition" (II,i,1.613), Gayless is made a convert: "The wild impetuous sallies of my youth are now blown over, and a most pleasing calm of perfect happiness succeeds" (II,i,11.699-701).

In Colman's The Jealous Wife, a similar combination of the two modes persists. The hero, Charles, is guilty of irresponsibility and suffers from what Harriot, the heroine, calls, a "wild disposition."<sup>11</sup> However, like his sentimental prototypes, Charles raises his sword in "defence of innocence in distress" (II,iii,1.313) and, finally, through the power of Harriot's displeasure and delicate sensibility, he reforms: "I see my folly, and am ashamed of it. You have reclaimed me, Harriot!" (IV,ii,11.217-218).

Although she is at heart a sentimental heroine, Harriot herself is not entirely devoid of Restoration wit. Her verbal portrait of Lord Trinket, a fop, illustrates her ability to use the witty style effectively:

Harriot. Yes, [Lord Trinket] is just polite enough to be able to be very unmannerly with a great deal of good breeding, is just handsome enough to make him most excessively vain of his person, and has just reflection enough to finish him for a coxcomb; . . .  
(II,iii,11.80-84)

11. George Colman, "The Jealous Wife," eds. Nettleton and Case, op.cit., Act I, scene i, ll. 408-409.

Lord Trinket's good qualities, then, are wittily used to expose his folly. Yet Harriot is, on the whole, a sentimental heroine, virtuous and dutiful. Colman offers his criticism of such a character through Lady Freelove who says to Harriot: "your way of talking gives me the spleen; so full of affection, and duty, and virtue, 'tis just like a funeral sermon" (II,iii,11.53-55).

The Clandestine Marriage also boasts a sentimental heroine in the character of Fanny and a sentimental hero in Lovewell. However, the character of Lord Ogleby provides a unique combination of the two modes. Like the foolish old people in Restoration comedy, he believes the youthful heroine to be in love with him, and even goes so far as to suppose that Miss Sterling, her sister, is jealous of him. Yet, Lord Ogleby is more than an example of vanity and gallantry; "he is humane at the bottom. He is vain to an excess; but withal extremely good-natured" (IV,iii,p.701). Finally, in spite of his chagrin, Lord Ogleby honours his promise of protecting Fanny, for "'tis a debt of honour, and must be paid" (V,ii,p.713), even at the expense of his own wishes. Hence, he is at once gallant and benevolent.

Authors like Garrick and Colman attempted, by combining sentiment with laughter, to impede the growth of sentimentalism. It was Sheridan, however, who first succeeded in fully blending the Restoration and sentimental traditions

and thus helped to restore, for however brief a time, the true vis comica. Nor did his accomplishments end there. As a veritable alchemist of the theatre, he transformed his comic heritage.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE MINOR PLAYS

To blend the Restoration and sentimental comic traditions into a cohesive, fully unified comic mode demands consummate artistic genius. In his comic masterpieces, The Rivals and The School for Scandal, Sheridan fully realizes his aim of distilling a new dramatic elixir. Unfortunately, those comedies which fall between his two masterpieces are less successful. However, although they are imperfect expressions of Sheridan's genius, these minor plays do show flashes of the brilliance of which he was capable. Intermittent as those flashes are, they reveal fundamental elements of Sheridan's comic art. Sparkling in its simplicity and its precision, Sheridan's style lends force to his artistic alchemy. Even in the less masterful minor plays, language and character form a fertile partnership which aids Sheridan in his attempt to blend the two comic modes.

Sheridan's distinctive blending of disparate comic elements shows itself initially in his ability to balance each mode against the other. Primarily, characters who represent either mode comically offset one another. In The Duenna, for example, the romantic Ferdinand stands in humorous contrast to his servant, the witty Lopez. Like Faulkland in The Rivals, Ferdinand peevishly frets over his beloved in language which is excessively emotional

and sentimental: "O Clara, dear, cruel disturber of my rest."<sup>1</sup> He is a man of feeling who indulges his sensibility. Lopez's humour balances Ferdinand's sentimentality. To Ferdinand's rebuke, "Peace, fool, don't mention sleep to me," Lopez wittily replies that he doesn't refer to "low-bred, vulgar, sound sleep;" rather, he attempts to encourage Ferdinand to rest, "if it were only for the novelty of the thing" (p.189). Like his Restoration predecessors, Lopez possesses a keen insight into the foibles of the lover who, in the pursuit of his beloved, denies himself the comforts of daily living. Ferdinand, in his fretfulness, betrays as much caprice as Clara in her coquetry.

Ferdinand. Is there in the world so inconstant a creature as Clara?

Lopez. I cou'd name one.

Ferdinand. Yes; the tame fool who submits to her caprice.

Lopez. I thought he cou'dn't miss it.  
(I,ii,pp.189-190)

With great comic effectiveness, Sheridan contrasts the fretful musings of Ferdinand, a sentimental character, with the witty insights of Lopez, a Restoration type of character.

However, such a balance does not really represent

1. Richard Brinsley Sheridan, "The Duenna," in The Plays and Poems of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Vol. I, ed. R. Crompton Rhodes (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1962), Act I, scene ii, p. 189. All subsequent references to Sheridan's plays will be to this edition and will be documented parenthetically.

a blending of the two traditions. Rather, it constitutes a manipulation of the two comic modes more for the purpose of immediate comic effect than for the purpose of transforming them into a new comic mode. Sheridan most sharply exhibits his understanding of his comic heritage when he includes, within a single character, traits from both traditions. At his most successful, Sheridan blends and transforms those traditions. At his least successful, he modifies them slightly--and not always for the better.

In the minor plays particularly, many of Sheridan's characters are hybrid versions of their parents, or the comic modes from which they spring. In general, the characters conform to one or the other tradition fairly consistently but, in some of their specific actions and language, they exhibit oddly inconsistent traces of the opposite tradition.

For example, Justice Credulous in St. Patrick's Day and Don Jerome in The Duenna clearly exhibit their Restoration origins. Both are obstinate men who attempt to dominate their children in the tradition of the willful, interfering parent. Justice Credulous goes so far as to hire a man to guard his daughter from the advances of her lover, O'Conner. Because of his blind obstinacy, the magistrate is tricked, again according to Restoration precedent. In actuality, the watch-dog, "honest Humphrey," is the daughter's

lover. Similarly, Don Jerome is vehement in his determination to dictate to Louisa his own will. If she refuses to obey him in his choice of a husband for her, "never more will [he] see or converse" with her; only when she acknowledges her duty will she be allowed to emerge from the confines of her room. As Don Jerome says: "we'll try who can be most obstinate" (The Duenna, I,iii,p.196). Because of his obstinacy, he too suffers from the wit of the lovers. Louisa escapes and the Duenna, determined to marry Jerome's proposed husband for his daughter, remains in her place. Both men, then, follow the Restoration model, for they are obstinate, willful fathers who are blind to everything but their own wishes. Accordingly, they are fit objects for deception.

However, in Sheridan's hand this Restoration model receives some modification. Although they are both duped, each father, upon learning of the deception, displays more beneficence than anger. For example, Don Jerome forgives all in the end: "I'm an obstinate old fellow when I am in the wrong; but you shall now find me as steady in the right" (The Duenna, III,vii,p.246). Thus, like a sentimental patriarch, he is capable of generous action and of good-will. In his own gruff way, Justice Credulous too acknowledges the lovers' marriage. Although his acceptance of the turn of events does not exhibit the graciousness of Don Jerome's, his admission that only O'Conner can manage such a "sly,

tricking, little baggage" (St. Patrick's Day, II,iv,p.170) as his daughter, is, in effect, a confession that he cannot impose his will upon her and that O'Conner has earned the right to wed her.

Yet, in spite of Sheridan's modifications, both Justice Credulous and Don Jerome reveal an incongruous mixture of Restoration and sentimental traits. Generally, they conform to the seventeenth-century tradition in which the interfering sire suffers for his obstinacy. Almost unaccountably, however, they forgive all that has been done against them, and their characters then smack of the sentimental benefactor. Thus, like Garrick and Colman, Sheridan tends, at least in these two characters, to present an impure mixture, and not a smooth blending of the two comic modes.

Nevertheless, these minor plays do show traces of Sheridan's alchemical skill. For example, the character of O'Conner in St. Patrick's Day reveals Sheridan's more successful attempt to blend the disparate modes. O'Conner does not conform entirely to either tradition. Rather, the combination of traits from both the Restoration and sentimental comic modes gives to his character its singular comic shape.

O'Conner would appear to have as his prototype the carefree Restoration rake who respects only his own inclinations.



For example, in order to see Lauretta, his beloved, O'Conner gleefully tricks Justice Credulous into believing himself poisoned; posing as a foreign doctor, O'Conner then extracts a promise of consent from the obstinate old sire. Besides his love for deception, O'Conner's wit also reveals his Restoration roots. With succinctness and a keen insight, he describes, for example, how fashionable ladies have become warriors. Their "circumvallation of hoop," their "breastwork of whalebone," their "concealed weapons" which pass for black hair-pins, and their "standard of feathers" (St. Patrick's Day, I,i,p.148) defend them from the onslaught of Cupid's arrows. Their fashionable dress, like a Roman phalanx, makes them impregnable. The conventional metaphor of Love wounding his adversary takes on a witty novelty, for these women ward off Cupid as successfully as they do his disciples.

However, while his gaiety and wit conform to Restoration precedent, O'Conner's character as a whole assumes a different shape. Without sacrificing his sense of humour, O'Conner also possesses a sincere concern for his men. For example, he jokingly calls his men a band of "thoughtless vagabonds," and then reflects, "upon my conscience, 'tis very hard these poor fellows should scarcely have bread from the soil they would die to defend" (I,i,p.147). His reflection on the harsh treatment his men receive reveals his benignity.

His oath, "upon my conscience," punctuates the sentiment, although he uses this same oath in his witty reference to the fashionable female warriors of London. Thus, unlike Justice Credulous and Don Jerome, O'Conner does not shift radically and incongruously from wit to sentiment. Indeed, his compassionate nature sets him apart from his Restoration antecedents without revealing any sustained kinship with his sentimental ones. This touch of the sentimental never detracts from O'Conner's basically jovial nature. It adds dimension to his character. Thus, to include in O'Conner's character the sentimental quality of compassion clearly illustrates Sheridan's expert use of his comic heritage, by means of which he gives a different and colourful shape to his comic characters.

At least in her attitudes to love, the character of Louisa in The Duenna exemplifies even more fully Sheridan's artistic skill as an alchemist of the theatre. Like Julia in The Rivals, Louisa prizes self-sacrificing love. Willing to forfeit wealth and parental blessing, Louisa intends to wed her lover, the destitute Antonio, whom she professes to love for himself alone. In one of her songs, she sings:

Thou can'st not boast of fortune's store,  
 My love, while me they wealthy call,  
 But I was glad to find thee poor,  
 For with my heart I'd give thee all.  
 And then the grateful youth shall own,  
 I lov'd him for himself alone.

(I,iii,p.194)

In her basic character, Louisa would appear to be sentimental. Indeed, that she respects paternal authority accords with the attitude of the sentimental heroine. For example, Louisa resolves that she must have Don Jerome's consent before she can marry Antonio, and she even sends a note, sentimental in tone, to her father: "My dearest father, how shall I intreat your pardon for the rash step I have taken, how confess the motive?" She goes on to say that if she has a "spirit too resentful of ill usage," she also has a "heart as easily affected by kindness" (III,i,p.226). The language conveys emotion; she "entreats" him to "pardon" her, and her "heart" suffers from "ill usage." Most decidedly, then, the appeal is sentimental.

Louisa, however, also exhibits Restoration traits which tend to modify the sentimental outline to her character. She shows a Restoration trait in her refusal to forfeit her individuality by marrying a man not of her own choosing. Also, like a Restoration heroine, she relishes her powerful position in her lover's heart; Antonio will be the "grateful youth" who recognizes the importance of her condescension, her sacrifice on his behalf.

In Louisa's attitude to love, both traditions simultaneously exhibit themselves. Yet, Sheridan goes beyond mere modification of comic tradition. He endows Louisa with coquettish and sentimental traits which not only

balance each other but which are also inter-dependent--that is, one could not exist without the other. Like the romantic Lydia in The Rivals, who thrives on the presence and devotion of a destitute lover, Louisa cherishes Antonio's impoverishment. His impecunious state allows her to profess, like a sentimental heroine, that she will sacrifice all for the hope of wedded bliss. At the same time, however, his position also allows her to remain assured that it is still her choice, and her choice only, to make that sacrifice. Thus, Louisa's coquettish desire to play the role of the sentimental heroine conforms to neither tradition. Louisa's attitude to love, then, illustrates Sheridan's alchemy. She assumes a new, highly individual dramatic identity.

Such characters as Louisa and O'Conner reveal Sheridan's ability to blend and transform the Restoration and sentimental comic modes. Yet, in plays which but imperfectly express his full range as an alchemist of the theatre, these characters represent isolated instances of his skill.

Although A Trip to Scarborough is a relatively successful adaptation of Vanbrugh's The Relapse, it cannot be considered to be one of Sheridan's masterpieces. What Sheridan attempts to do in his own plays--that is, to transform comic traditions--he also attempts to do in this adaptation. The result is a play pruned of its Restoration ribaldry and sprinkled with hints of Sheridan's own witty

and masterful style.

Vanbrugh had designed his play as a rebuttal to Cibber's sentimental comedy, Love's Last Shift. Yet, in spite of Vanbrugh's proposed criticism of excessive sentiment, his own play begins on a mawkishly sentimental note. Amanda, the virtuous heroine, and Loveless, the tamed rake, are found conversing in sentimentally coloured language. Loveless refers to the depraved town as an "uneasy theater of noise,"<sup>2</sup> and to the innocent country as a "little soft retreat" in which "the raging flame of wild destructive lust" smothers itself in the "warm pleasing fire of lawful love" (p.353). Here, in his peaceful country hermitage, his mind contents itself with thoughts of love and offers its gratitude to Heaven and to Amanda. The untainted Amanda herself indulges in virtuous, but jealous, thoughts; for example, the pain of separation, of her lover's death, may only fall to her: "Men find out softer ways to quench their fires" (p.354). Although this first scene introduces the themes of country versus town, and of the probability of the reformed rake relapsing into dissipation, it nevertheless is decidedly sentimental. Only in the second scene, between Young Fashion and his servant, Lory, does Vanbrugh give a free rein to his comic wit.

2. Sir John Vanbrugh, "The Relapse; or, Virtue in Danger," in Plays of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century, eds. Dougald MacMillan and Howard M. Jones (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931), Act I, scene i, p. 354. All further references to this play will be to this edition and will be documented parenthetically.

Significantly, Sheridan deletes the ponderously sentimental first scene and begins his version with the jaunty scene between Young Fashion and Lory. Thus, Sheridan not only tidies up the original by removing the Restoration indelicacies but he also exercises restraint. By retaining the gaiety and wit of the original, and the more moderate sentiments, Sheridan accomplishes what Vanbrugh did not--the presentation of a play in keeping with the sentimental sensibility of the age, and yet sparkling in its true vis comica. However, because A Trip to Scarborough is an adaptation, Sheridan's distinctive blending of traditions is less evident and undoubtedly less brilliant than in his best original plays. Only glimpses of his dramatic art reveal themselves, but they are enough to indicate his craftsmanship and his artistic intent.

In the comic scene between Young Fashion and Lory, for example, Sheridan adds touches of his own. Whereas in The Relapse all that remains in Young Fashion's portmanteau is a waistcoat, in A Trip to Scarborough, the ever-resourceful Lory stuffs the bag "to save appearances" (I,i,p.293). The plot to trick Lord Foppington out of a wife also unfolds in this first scene. Colonel Townly, Berinthia's cast-off lover, describes the naiveté of the bride and, most importantly, offers his assistance in duping the vain fop. Thus, Lord Foppington suffers from trickery to an even greater

extent in A Trip to Scarborough than he does in the original. All the major characters conspire against him and successfully dupe him.

A further note is added in this scene. Unlike Vanbrugh's Worthy, Colonel Townly's pursuit of Amanda derives "partly from pique, and partly from idleness" (I,i,p.296). He "diverts" his chagrin at having been snubbed by Berinthia "by offering up chaste incense to the beauties of Amanda" (p.296). Townly, then, is less a rake than an admirer, less a scoundrel than a disappointed lover. As Young Fashion says, Berinthia will resume her place in Townly's heart, "especially as friendship [to Loveless] will prevent [his] pursuing the other too far" (p.297). The sentimental flavour pervades, but without the sacrifice of comic intrigue.

Loveless himself retains his Restoration colouring in A Trip to Scarborough by still lapsing into thoughts of infidelity. Nor is his sentimental regard for Amanda lessened in Sheridan's version. For example, the scene in The Relapse, (III,ii,p.371), where Loveless tells Berinthia of his desire for her, remains (A Trip to Scarborough, III,i,p.322). Prior to this confession of his lust, Vanbrugh's Loveless muses in a sentimental vein. He ponders on his past folly and his recent conversion: "Did [Amanda] not rescue me, a grovelling slave, / When chained and bound by that black tyrant vice, / I labored in his vilest drudgery?" (The

Relapse, III,ii,p.371). In A Trip to Scarborough, the reduction of Loveless's sentimental outpourings illustrates the sparkling precision of Sheridan's style. Sheridan deletes, for example, Loveless's effusive reflections on the nature of love (The Relapse, III,ii,p.371). He sustains the theme of the hero lapsing into infidelity, includes the sentimental note in the obligation to repent, and yet snips away mawkishness and profanity. Loveless simply says, before he enters Berinthia's bedchamber: "I believe [Amanda] mistrusts me, and by my life I don't deserve her tenderness; however I am determined to reform, tho' not yet" (A Trip to Scarborough, IV,iii,p.337).

Berinthia, too, receives an added dimension to her basically Restoration character. In The Relapse, her language and actions accord with her flippant delight in being a widow, free to indulge herself in luxuries and amorous intrigues.

Ber. Were I that thing they call a  
slighted wife, somebody should run  
the risk of being that thing they  
call - a husband.

Aman. Oh fie, Berinthia! no revenge  
should ever be taken against a husband.  
But to wrong his bed is a vengeance,  
which of all vengeance -

Ber. Is the sweetest, ha, ha, ha!

(II,i,p.368)

She panders on behalf of Worthy's ignoble designs upon Amanda, and admits that her part in the plot "exercises



almost all the entertaining faculties of a woman; for there's employment for hypocrisy, invention, deceit, flattery, mischief, and lying" (III,ii,p.374).

Sheridan's Berinthia is a transformed character. He endows her with a sensibility which complements her coquettish nature. For example, he retains Berinthia's bantering speech of Act II where she refers to the "sweetest revenge" possible to a slighted wife. Yet, Amanda's virtuous declamation, against Townly's attempt to convince her that Loveless has "relapsed," rouses both Loveless's and Berinthia's more sentimental side. Berinthia confesses, for example: "[I] affect more levity than I have." She even offers an aphorism: "A readiness to resent injuries, is a virtue only in those who are slow to injure" (A Trip to Scarborough, V,i,p.345). Nor has there been any promiscuous desire on her part. She allows Loveless to make his amorous advances only to make Townly jealous: "my object in trifling with you was nothing more than to pique Townly" (V,i,p.344). Although she may be a Restoration coquette in general, the character of Berinthia also reveals touches of the sentimental heroine. She, like Townly, is less a lascivious, selfish coquette than a rebuffed, hurt lover.

If the speeches of Loveless in A Trip to Scarborough illustrate Sheridan's stylistic precision and the character of Berinthia exemplifies his attempt to recast an old play

into a new mold, then the character of Sir Tunbelly Clumsey provides a most effective illustration of both Sheridan's precise style and his artistic intent. In Vanbrugh's play, Sir Tunbelly storms out in a rage, damning all those involved in the deception (V,v,p.399). In contrast, Sheridan's Sir Tunbelly finally shows his good nature in much the same fashion as Don Jerome and Justice Credulous. However, Sheridan takes care that Sir Tunbelly's generous reaction conforms to his generally impatient nature. If he must forgive all--with only Lord Foppington's disgrace for consolation--then he will join the young lovers' hands: "look whether I am a barbarian, or not; there, children, I join your hands, and when I'm in a better humour, I'll give you my blessing" (A Trip to Scarborough, V,i,p.354). Sir Tunbelly, then, reveals his good nature in a manner appropriate to his character. No sudden shift from the obstinate Restoration father to the kind sentimental benefactor occurs. Thus, Sheridan's attempt to blend, if not transform, the comic traditions is discernible even in his adaptation.

However imperfect, these minor plays exhibit, albeit sporadically, Sheridan's talent as an alchemist of the theatre. His attempts to manipulate and transform the Restoration and sentimental modes indicate his familiarity with, and indeed mastery of, his comic heritage. His

"wholesome pruning" of Vanbrugh's The Relapse points to Sheridan's ardent desire to preserve the true vis comica and, at the same time, to soften the indelicate with touches of the sentimental. From the beginning, he seems to look forward to the time when the former masters of comedy "are outdone by the living ones" (A Trip to Scarborough, II,i, p.305). And Sheridan himself comes close to outdoing them in his first masterpiece, The Rivals, and perhaps does outdo them in his final play, The School for Scandal.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE RIVALS

In The Rivals, Sheridan adds to the comic tradition another comic strand. His intention is not merely to purify the sentimental comedy by adding Restoration comic ingredients, although the touches of anti-sentimentalism appear frequently. His treatment of Lydia's romanticism and Faulkland's sentimentalism, for example, would seem to be almost too harsh. What Sheridan creates in The Rivals, however, is a positive standard of comedy that fully exploits the best qualities of both comic traditions. As the title itself suggests, Sheridan's basic theme is not an anti-sentimental one; rather, it is the theme of rivalry--rivalry at various levels and among various types of characters and attitudes.

The Prologue in particular emphasizes Sheridan's comic focus. The opposition of the two figures of laughing and sentimental comedy introduce the theme. On the primary level, the theme of rivalry resides in the contention between two views of comedy, one of which boasts a laughing face and the other a countenance of woe. By contrasting one figure of comedy with the other, Sheridan recreates the true vis comica undistorted by either cynicism or sentimentalism. Both Lydia and Faulkland, for example, comically illustrate how a way of life based on sentiment can become distorted.

Sheridan goes further; he also points to the cause--human nature itself. Whereas a "captious, unsatisfied temper"<sup>1</sup> leads Faulkland into betraying his peevish sentimentality, Lydia falls victim to her own romanticism. Captain Absolute states, for example, that "Lydia is romantic - dev'lish romantic, and very absurd of course" (V,ii,p.104). Thus, like wit, sentimentalism has the potential to become excessive, foolish and affected.

In The Rivals, as in Sheridan's other plays, it is the characters in particular who reflect his theme and embody his artistic aims. Sheridan's basic technique is to give to characters who exhibit a Restoration character, sentimental touches and to those who conform to the eighteenth-century prototype, Restoration idiosyncrasies. As in the minor plays, then, Sheridan initially attempts to effect his blend of the comic traditions through the inclusion, within a single character, of traits from both the Restoration and the sentimental modes.

In the character of Sir Antony Absolute, for example, Sheridan presents the willful seventeenth-century father intent on his son's obedience. Sir Antony represents

1. Richard Brinsley Sheridan, "The Rivals," in The Plays and Poems of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, ed. R. Crompton Rhodes (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1962), Vol. I, Act III, scene ii, p. 63. All further references to The Rivals will be to this edition and will be documented parenthetically.

obstinate old age; he is unwilling to listen to Jack's desire for independent choice. The old sire tells his son: "you know I am compliance itself - when I am not thwarted; - no one more easily led - when I have my own way" (II,i,p.53). The antithetical syntax underlines the blind self-interest of old age. Also like his Restoration predecessors, Sir Antony possesses a hypocritical side to his nature. Although he himself has married for beauty and love, he resents Jack's desire to do likewise.

Sir Antony's hypocrisy reveals itself in a manner which pointedly illustrates Sheridan's comic art. Sir Antony's use of the tree imagery illustrates Sheridan's metaphorical skill in exposing Sir Antony's blindness and hypocrisy. Sir Antony compares the circulating library to an evergreen tree, and then makes the association between the library as a tree of "diabolical knowledge" and the Biblical tree of knowledge. Thus, he makes the conventional connection between pages of a book and the leaves of a tree, but he extends his metaphor to include moral behaviour: "they who are so fond of handling the leaves, will long for the fruit at last" (I,ii,p.38). Just as the fruit represents the culmination of growth and maturation, so too sexual maturation will be the culmination of indiscriminate library reading. In spite of these sentiments, Sir Antony nonetheless desires an alliance between his own son and the very girl (Lydia) whose reading habits

prompt his comments. In a concrete and forceful manner, then, Sheridan manipulates the figure of the tree so that it expresses Sir Antony's own moral bigotry.

Thus, Sir Antony's obstinacy and hypocrisy make him as comic a character as any Restoration figure of authority. Yet, one important difference emerges. Sir Antony's pleasure in the fact that Jack is not the "dull, insensible varlet [he] pretended to be" (IV,ii,p.86), represents a modification to the character of old age. Contrary to his Restoration predecessors, Sir Antony can take delight in Jack's witty antics, designed to relieve him of parental domination. Sir Antony also displays the good humour and sympathetic spirit of a sentimental character: "Come, come, Mrs. Malaprop, we must forget and forgive" (p.87). Although he exhibits certain similarities to the Restoration father who interferes in the affairs of the lovers, Sir Antony's "sentimental" capacity for forgiveness significantly modifies his character. In effect, he embodies both comic traditions.

Restoration traits are also discernible in the character of Bob Acres, who resembles in some ways the Restoration fop. In spite of his country background, for example, Acres desires to be the fine gentleman adept at dancing, duelling and love-making. Because of the superficiality of his gentlemanly pose, he serves as a comic

foil to the other characters. Like the Restoration fop, he loves the hyperbolical simile, as for example in Act II, scene i: "I've travelled like a Comet, with a tail of dust all the way as long as the Mall" (p.46). Jack Absolute's response typifies the Restoration hero who possesses a truer wit: "Ah! Bob, you are indeed an excentric Planet." This double-entendre wittily sustains the astrological figure while serving as a comment on Acres's ridiculous pose as a man of the world. Acres's bumptious mannerisms and naiveté contrast sharply with the more sophisticated manners of Captain Absolute, who possesses the ability to manipulate situations and master social customs. And so, because he is a transplanted bumpkin attempting to become a city gentleman, Acres is a comic figure. The presence of David, his servant, further heightens the comedy. For example, to Acres's "aye, David, there's nothing like polishing," David replies, "so I says of your Honour's boots" (III,iv,p.74).

Acres's character, then, is thematically important. Acres's pose as a gentleman, like the "sentimental swearing" (II,i,p.51) of which he is so fond, ironically represents an "echo to the sense," a hollow imitation of the real. Through Acres's admiration for the "oath referential," Sheridan slips in one criticism of sentimentalism--the danger of a genuine sentiment being replaced by a banal oath.



Yet, Acres is not condemned for his foolishness or his shallowness; in the end, he comes to recognize his own folly and seeks to correct it himself: "I make no pretensions to any thing in the world" (V,iii,p.111). In this final scene, then, he abandons his former pose and ceases to be an example of the Restoration fop. His character has undergone a transformation, for the bumpkin achieves insight.

The servants in The Rivals represent two common types of servants inherited from Restoration comedy. For example, Lucy resembles the Restoration servant in her remarkable ability to match wits with the other characters: "commend me to a mask of silliness, and a pair of sharp eyes for my own interest, under it!" (I,ii,p.41). Fag, too, suggests the Restoration servant. Vivacious and jocular, his antics enhance the humour; his undue civility and verbosity, when he comes to inform the ladies of the duel, is highly comic: "Ma'am, I should hold myself very deficient in every requisite that forms the man of breeding, if I delayed a moment to give all the information" (V,i,p.100).

Faithful David differs rather more from Restoration antecedents. With humour, he indicates the absurdity of Sir Lucius's notion of honour, which demands death if an affront is made to either one's self-esteem or to one's lineage: "Under favour, the surest way of not disgracing [ancestors], is to keep as long as you can out of their

company" (IV,i,p.80). As a figure of common sense, he refers, then, to Sir Lucius as one of those "bloodthirsty cormorants" (p.79), who feed on antiquated doctrines of honour. Thus, all three servants--the witty Lucy, the humorous Fag, and the common-sensical David--point to the blending of traditions, for their wit and common sense balance the excesses of other characters in the play.

Sir Lucius O'Trigger himself exemplifies one such excess. A man dedicated to the "art" of duelling, he espouses, in a distorted form, the Restoration concept of honour, which demands a scrupulous preservation of one's reputation. His exclamation, "what the Devil signifies right, when your honour is concerned" (III,iv,p.76), indicates his moral myopia. His, then, is a shallow "gentility" which, like Lydia's romanticism, constitutes a mere "echo to the sense." For example, Sir Lucius strictly follows the "duelling decorum." There must be no passion for, above all, one should "do the thing decently, and like a Christian" (p.77). Contrary to all principles of decency and brotherhood, however, Sir Lucius's way of life represents an excess, a blind conformity to a shallow interpretation of honour. With superb irony, Sheridan exposes the man from "Blunderbuss-Hall" (p.76). When Faulkland, by balking at the duel, threatens to "spoil the party," Captain Absolute replies: "O pray, Faulkland, fight to oblige Sir Lucius" (V,iii,p.108). Yet, Sheridan

gives to his duel-monger an added, sentimental dimension which points to his attempt to blend his comic heritage. In the end, even Sir Lucius exhibits good-will: "for as I have been disappointed myself, it will be very hard if I have not the satisfaction of seeing other people succeed better" (p.112). Such a character as Sir Lucius, then, thematically offsets those who are even more sentimentally inclined. By counterpointing Sir Lucius's false notion of honour, for example, with Lydia's false notion of romanticism, Sheridan masterfully criticizes both the Restoration and the sentimental traditions.

The character of Lydia, the absurdly romantic heroine, exemplifies the tendency of sentimentalism to lapse into crassness and falsity. Like Faulkland, Lydia indulges her feelings and her whimsical, sentimental desires. "The dear delicious shifts" (V,i,p.99) which she makes Beverley undergo, for example, she prizes for their own sake, and not for any inherent value they may possess. Her description of her rendezvous with her beloved only underlines the falsity of her romantic notions.

Lydia. 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.

(V,i,p.100)

Although for her the scene is an instance of "the prettiest distress[es] imaginable" and one befitting a girl who has planned "one of the most sentimental elopements" (p.99), in actuality the scene illustrates her absurdity. The "grand" lover, Jack, reduced to the level of a passive object, pathetically drips and sneezes. Sheridan heightens the humour by including two opposites--heat and cold--in the description. That Jack, "shivering with cold," should attempt to persuade Lydia to sympathize with his "flame" and to "glow" with a mutual ardour is a humorous combination. Thus, Lydia's account of the episode reveals her interest in the sentimental trappings rather than in the genuine emotion. Her sentimentalism, then, like Acres's sentimental swearing, is an "echo to the sense."

However, Lydia is not all false sentimentalism. Displaying as much caprice as a Restoration heroine, she resembles a coquette in her demands that Jack conform to her notions of love. While Jack may not suffer from her wit, he does suffer from her romanticism. For example, Lydia contrives quarrels as readily as she contrives sentiments; in order to tease Beverley, she writes a letter to herself to inform herself of his unfaithfulness. Nor does Lydia lack the wit of a Restoration coquette. Referring to Julia's sense of obligation to Faulkland, for example, Lydia pronounces

her witty comment: "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!" (I,ii,p.36).

Her willingness to deceive her guardian constitutes another Restoration trait. Mrs. Malaprop's determination that her ward marry a man of her choice accords with the Restoration tradition of the interfering guardian, and Lydia's attempts to outwit her guardian also conform to the Restoration outline. However, there is another, and more thematically important, reason for Lydia's deception of Mrs. Malaprop, and that is Lydia's own romantic determination for a sentimental elopement complete with poverty and distress. Mrs. Malaprop's edict that Lydia not see Beverley only heightens Lydia's desire because, as a consequence, she will lose most of her fortune, and then be able to become in fact a sentimental heroine.

In Faulkland's excessive indulgence in feeling, Sheridan attacks, to an even greater extent, crass sentimentalism. Although Faulkland's affection for Julia is "ardent and sincere," it nevertheless, as Julia recognizes, "engrosses his whole soul" (I,ii,p.35). That his ardour is self-indulgent becomes clear when he says: "How mean does this captious, unsatisfied temper of mine appear to my cooler judgment! Yet I know not that I indulge it in any other point" (III,ii,p.63). Faulkland's uneasiness about

his own worth and about the source of Julia's affection only underscores his absurdity: "And for person - I have often wish'd myself deformed, to be convinced that I owned no obligation there for any part of [Julia's] affection" (III, ii, p.65). Yet, for all his fretfulness and for all the pain which it causes both himself and Julia, he "would not change this too exquisite nicety, for the gross content with which [Captain Absolute] tramples on the thorns of love" (IV, iv, p.94). Far from being an example of a Restoration lover familiar with what Julia terms the "fopperies of love" (I, ii, p.35), Faulkland steeps himself in his own sentimental excess. Captain Absolute summarizes Faulkland's character, and points to the folly of this brand of sentimentalism.

Absolute. . . . but a captious  
sceptic in love, - a slave to  
fretfulness and whim - who has no  
difficulties but of his own creat-  
ing - is a subject more fit for  
ridicule than compassion! (IV, iv, p.94)

And Sheridan does ridicule the foolish and fretful Faulkland. For example, Faulkland's description of his fears serves to expose his peevish self-indulgence.

Faulkland. . . . what grounds for  
apprehension, did you say? Heavens!  
are there not a thousand! I fear  
for her spirits - her health - her  
life. . . . If it rains, some shower  
may even then have chilled her deli-  
cate frame! - If the wind be keen,  
some rude blast may have affected her!  
The heat of noon, the dews of the  
evening, may endanger the life of her,  
for whom only I value mine. (II, i, p.45)

Faulkland fears first for Julia's health and life, and for the most ordinary of natural events--the heat and the dew. Through the skillful and effective voicing of Faulkland's fears, Sheridan competently satirizes Faulkland's sentimental absurdity.

Sheridan sets Julia's basic emotional integrity against both Lydia's romantic falsity and Faulkland's sentimental absurdity. For all her contrivances, Lydia must finally submit to a position decidedly less romantic and sentimental than the one she had anticipated. Julia is the one who is faced with the sentimental situation and who must act in a sentimental fashion. For example, Faulkland's rescuing her from drowning testifies to Julia's acquaintance with the sentimental situation.

If their encounter is sentimental, then so too is Faulkland's "test" of her. Appealing to her as a destitute man in danger of his life, he draws from her a series of sentiments worthy of any eighteenth-century heroine. Like the language of all sentimental heroines, Julia's is emotional and grandiose. For example, her "soul is oppress'd with sorrow" (V,i,p.95) and, "on the bosom of [his] wedded Julia," Faulkland "may lull [his] keen regret to slumbering" (p.96). Such words as "comforter," "compunction," and "keen regret" are all important in the sentimental vocabulary.

However, Julia's character reflects more than mere

sentimental distress and good nature. For example, to Faulkland's confession that he has been testing her, she cries tears of thanks that his story is not true, and then proceeds with great emotion to upbraid him. Her reaction, then, is both sentimental and unsentimental. Harsh words gush from her in such a torrent that he cannot utter a word in his own defense. Although she states that she will not castigate him, she nevertheless points out to him all that she has had to bear. Her rebuff of Faulkland illustrates her less benevolent, and more individualistic nature. As capably as any Restoration heroine, Julia defends her own individuality. This seventeenth-century touch to Julia's basically sentimental character points to Sheridan's basic theme of rivalry.

By setting Julia beside Lydia, Sheridan exposes the dangers of either sincere or affected sentimentalism. While Julia betrays Restoration colouring in her chastisement of Faulkland, she nonetheless has had to deal with actual distress of a sentimental nature. Julia's more sincere sentimentalism, then, contrasts with Lydia's romantic affectations. That the two girls are cousins dramatizes the kinship between sincere and affected sentimentalism. Thus, Sheridan exposes the pitfalls of both excessive self-indulgence and excessive good nature. As individuals, Julia and Lydia are rivals, each maintaining the worth of her own kind of sentimentalism. To Julia's charge, for example, that she shows



caprice, Lydia in turn points to her cousin's fostering of caprice in Faulkland. Neither sincere nor affected sentimentalism lacks pitfalls.

Yet, the device of pitting each girl against the other also enables Sheridan to effect a balance. Just as Julia and Lydia are cousins, so too are both kinds of sentimentalism, and indeed both comic modes.

Finally, these two "rivals" confront a third rival -- "absolute sense" (III,i,p.61). George Niederauer contends that Sheridan "seems to prefer a code of 'common sense' to either the sentimental or Restoration code."<sup>2</sup> Captain Absolute best embodies this "code of common sense," but Sheridan adds to this a balance between the two modes. Again, the theme of rivalry helps to establish this balance.

Superficially, there is the rivalry for Lydia's hand. Involved are Bob Acres and Sir Lucius, and finally Captain Absolute, who, by competing with himself in his disguise as "Ensign Beverley," serves to heighten the comedy. However, at this individual level, Captain Absolute's dual personality exemplifies the basic rivalry between sentimental and laughing comedy. Shorn of the rakish exploits of the Restoration heroes, he still commands all their wit and charm.

2. Rev. George Niederauer, "Wit and Sentiment in Sheridan's Comedies of Manners," unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Southern California, 1966, p. 80.

For example, when Faulkland states that Lydia, knowing that Captain Absolute and Ensign Beverley are the same man, can now follow both duty and inclination, Absolute responds in witty fashion.

Absolute. Aye, just as the eyes do  
of a person who squints: - when her  
love eye was fix'd on me - t'other -  
her eye of duty, was finely obliqued:  
- but when duty bid her point that  
the same way - off t'other turn'd on  
a swivel, and secured its retreat with  
a frown! (IV,iv,p.92)

The comparison of Lydia's caprice to two improperly focussed eyes demonstrates not only Captain Absolute's wit but also his ability to perceive character. Also like his Restoration ancestors, Captain Absolute is not adverse to deceiving his father or his lover. That his deceptions are not done for the "dear pleasure of dissembling" does not alter the fact that he does deceive in order to advance his own interests.

On the other hand, as Ensign Beverley he possesses shades of the romantic love ideal replete with sentimental language and posturings. For example, his ejaculations, "ah! my soul," "proud of calamity," and "gloom of adversity" (III,iii,p.72) are not uncommon from a sentimental hero. Moreover, Captain Absolute as himself is not alien to sentimental language, as manifest in Act II, scene i: "Sir, your kindness overpowers me - such generosity makes the gratitude of reason more lively than the sensations even of filial affection" (p.52). Although Lydia demands such sentiments

from her "Beverley," Captain Absolute also exhibits his capacity to utter them.

However, neither Captain Absolute's wit nor his sentiment distorts his common sense. He possesses a judicious mixture of the two. Like Faulkland, for example, he is a lover, "and a romantic one too" (II,i,p.44), but he is not steeped in excess. What distinguishes Captain Absolute is his control of the situation. An excellent example of this control occurs in Act III, scene iii, when he first meets Mrs. Malaprop. He makes a slip, and tells the old matron to inform Lydia that "Beverley" waits below. Upon realizing his error, he quickly replies to Mrs. Malaprop's "what did you say of Beverley," with "O, I was going to propose that you should tell her, by way of jest, that it was Beverley who was below - she'd come down fast enough then -" (p.70). Like the Restoration heroes, then, Captain Absolute manipulates such a social encounter through the power of his wit.

However, his greatest attribute is his "absolute sense" (III,i,p.61), a trait which explains not only his name but also his thematic function in the play. Since The Rivals is basically a play about excess--Mrs. Malaprop's language, Lydia's romanticism, Faulkland's ardour--Captain Absolute is the character who, because of his absolute sense, establishes an equilibrium. For example, he checks Lydia's

excessive romanticism and chastises Faulkland's fretful jealousy. Most importantly, because Ensign Beverley and Captain Absolute are one person, and because he manifests both Restoration and sentimental characteristics, Captain Absolute embodies the rivalry between the two comic modes. Through the device of the double personality, Sheridan achieves a unique transformation of the two modes. His distinctive achievement lies in this presentation of a character who possesses a perfect blending of wit, sentiment and "absolute sense."

The theme of rivalry ends finally in Act. V. The characters who represent the older generation discontinue their interference which is in itself a form of rivalry. Faulkland reforms by mending his temper; in essence, he conforms to the more prudent Julia's temper. Lydia's "ill directed imagination" (V,iii,p.112) is checked as much through love of Jack as through his good sense.

Thus, through the theme of rivalry, as it is worked out through the device of balancing characters and characteristics against one another, Sheridan succeeds in transforming the two comic modes. As a result, The Rivals is neither derivatively Restoration nor crassly sentimental. There is wit but there is also morality; each tends to balance the other. The superbly original tone of the play is set by Sheridan's own "gay Invention" (Prologue, p.27),

a tone which is perhaps brilliantly realized in the delightful character of Mrs. Malaprop.

She, too, exhibits Restoration characteristics. Like the sullied and aging matrons of seventeenth-century comedy, she fancies herself attractive and desirable. In her pursuit of a husband, however, she does exhibit one sentimental trait--her choice of the name "Delia" for her role as a romantic lover. That she corresponds with her "lover" under an assumed name is itself a sentimental gesture. However, like her Restoration counterparts, she reveals signs of hypocrisy. For example, although she herself follows her own romantic inclinations, toward Lydia she is sterner than ever. As Lydia says: "Since she has discovered her own frailty, she is become more suspicious of mine" (I,ii,p.34). Also like so many Restoration matrons, Mrs. Malaprop is particularly susceptible to flattery. For example, Jack Absolute's extravagant compliments deceive her into believing that everyone thinks she is what she fancies herself to be--an intelligent woman of the world. He claims that his interest in Lydia derives from "the honour of being allied to Mrs. Malaprop" who displays such intellect, such "elegant manners, and unaffected learning" (III,iii,p.67), and thus immediately flatters himself into her good graces.

Yet, the attribute which differentiates Mrs. Malaprop from other matronly comic characters is her peculiar

use of her "oracular tongue" (p.69), which enables her "select words" to be "ingeniously misapplied, without being mispronounced" (I,ii,p.36). Indeed, Mrs. Malaprop's most basic characteristic is her pride in her vocabulary. Her insistence that a young woman be the "mistress of orthodoxy, that she might not mis-spell, and mis-pronounce words so shamefully as girls usually do; and likewise that she might reprehend the true meaning of what she is saying" (I,ii,p.39), is a humorous comment on her own idiosyncrasy; for while Mrs. Malaprop does not mispronounce words or blunder syntactically, she misapplies words so that their meaning is comically changed. Most certainly, she is the ironic "queen of the dictionary" (II,ii,p.57).

Captain Absolute's meeting with Mrs. Malaprop exemplifies Sheridan's comic ingenuity at its best. Captain Absolute's double personality lends itself to an enriched, ironic dialogue. Because of his dual role and her own vanity, Mrs. Malaprop remains unaware of the hidden meaning behind many of his statements, as for example, when he "innocently" asks who the "old weather-beaten she-dragon" is who is referred to in the intercepted letter. What offends her most in the letter is not the aspersions upon her beauty, but the aspersion upon her "parts of speech." Her declaration, "sure if I reprehend any thing in this world, it is the use of my oracular tongue, and a nice

derangement of epitaphs" (III,iii,p.69), epitomizes Sheridan's skillful exploitations of Mrs. Malaprop's verbal gaucheries for comic effect.

Thus, Sheridan individualizes the Restoration prototype of the vain old matron. Mrs. Malaprop's Restoration origins have been transformed by Sheridan to produce a character with a distinctive and singularly comic personality. Mrs. Malaprop fully exemplifies Sheridan's ability to draw a vibrant, humourous character with deft strokes. Whatever her dramatic origins, she has been transformed. In the character of Captain Absolute, too, Sheridan proves himself to be an alchemist of the theatre. Hence, the comic tradition provides the models which Sheridan has the skill to revitalize and transform into original, and memorable, characters and comic situations. The result is a play which goes far beyond mere imitation of tradition and which initiates a new comic standard of "absolute sense"--a standard that is richly sustained in Sheridan's masterpiece, The School for Scandal.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL

Although Sheridan's first play, The Rivals, sparkles in its unique blending of comic traditions, it is surpassed by The School for Scandal, in which Sheridan's skill as a transformer of dramatic traditions is displayed even more impressively. Because theme, characterization and style fully complement each other, The School for Scandal reveals an artistic fusion which the earlier plays lack. Woven together in masterful fashion, the dramatic threads of The School for Scandal present a rich, smooth tapestry.

As in his early plays, Sheridan in The School for Scandal draws upon both the Restoration and the sentimental traditions. However, in The School for Scandal, the attack against sentimentalism is more adamant and convincing than it was in the earlier plays. Sheridan criticizes the sentimental tradition because it espouses a morality which is verbal only. The main focus of Sheridan's anti-sentimental theme--that the utterance of fine or virtuous sentiments does not necessarily indicate benevolence--centres on his devastating portrait of the arch-hypocrite Joseph Surface. In reality, Joseph Surface is, in the words of his accomplice, Lady Sneerwell, "artful, selfish, and malicious - in short,



a sentimental knave."<sup>1</sup> He is a man who possesses a stock of sentiments which he can use at will. The implication is inescapable. Sentiments are to be genuine, if not spontaneous, and not mere rote responses. Joseph Surface represents, then, Sheridan's most trenchant attack on a dramatic tradition which early shows a tendency to become excessive or shallow.

Throughout the play, Joseph is considered by many of the characters to be a man of sentiment, integrity and virtue. Through the use of soliloquy, however, Sheridan exposes Joseph for what he is. Even the style of the soliloquies points to the underlying superficiality of Joseph's grandiose, but insincere, sentimentalism. For example, in Act V, scene i, Joseph soliloquizes on the difficulty of maintaining a benevolent posture.

Joseph S. This is one bad effect of a good character; it invites application from the unfortunate, and there needs no small degree of address to gain the reputation of benevolence without incurring the expense. The silver ore of pure charity is an expensive article in the catalogue of a man's good qualities; whereas the sentimental French plate I use instead of it makes just as good a show, and pays no tax. (V,i,p.97)

The image of French plate clearly reveals Joseph's

1. Richard Brinsley Sheridan, "The School for Scandal," in The Plays and Poems of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Vol. II, ed. R. Crompton Rhodes (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), Act I, scene i, p. 27. All further references to The School for Scandal will be to this edition and will be documented parenthetically.

character and the nature of his hypocrisy. Pure charity is like "silver ore," and hence expensive. What Joseph uses instead is a cheaper metal--"the sentimental French plate"--which is mere ostentation. That he can substitute the cheaper metal for the silver ore at all is a powerful comment on the possibility of sentimentalism degenerating into mere show. Moreover, either metal--the real or the sham--accomplishes the same thing, for they both make "just as good a show." In addition to its effective comment on the flaws of sentimentalism, the image also reveals Joseph's nature. Indeed, it is a confession that he is grossly insincere. He, too, resembles French plate in that he is a gaudy facsimile.

Thus, Sheridan takes exception to the sentimental claims that external actions and verbal declarations reflect a benevolent heart within. Furthermore, Sheridan rejects the sentimental notion that all men are inherently good. Joseph proves to be hypocritical, Lady Sneerwell vindictive, and the scandal-mongers malicious. And none of them "reform." Indeed, Sheridan suggests that man is a creature more given to error and folly than to virtue. For example, Sir Peter Teazle, smugly convinced of his rightness, finally discovers his judgment to be fallible.

In addition to Sheridan's style, it is his characters who most effectively present his view of man. The seduction scene (IV,iii) exemplifies this marriage of character,

theme and style. Both the character of Joseph Surface and the imagery of disease and health, which is applied to the moral condition, underline man's basic vulnerability. In his disguise as a man of honour and virtue, Joseph successfully dupes Lady Teazle into believing him to be the fashionable lover. Foolishly, she listens to his attempts to debauch her. He tells her that her "character at present is a like a [sic] person in a plethora, absolutely dying from too much health" (IV,iii,p.82). Lady Teazle's character, so free from taint, is really indicated by her physical well-being. However, this physical and moral health Joseph labels a "plethora" and, since corpulent virtue retards the exercise of discretion, he suggests that only a non-virtuous action can restore the balance. Earlier, the scandal-mongers had insisted that only the "puny sickly reputation" (I,i,p.34) can survive, for infection breeds discretion. It is the healthy individual who succumbs first to fever and to scandal. Thus, the connections between death and health, and between death and virtuous living illustrate Sheridan's view of man. The virtuous--the healthy--are the most vulnerable. In spite of virtuous living, man is inherently frail and hence subject to infection. The sentimental notion that man is inherently good Sheridan considers to be open to question.

In order to punctuate his thrusts against sentimentalism, Sheridan includes both Restoration and eighteenth-

century elements. His characters display characteristics from both traditions. Thus, the technique of pitting characters, as well as ways of life, against each other, is as important in The School for Scandal as it is in the earlier plays. The first scene of Act I, for example, involves the sophisticates, or those individuals who, at least for a time, can manipulate others; they have the ability to control a situation. On the other hand, the first scene of Act II involves the less sophisticated, the naive victims. Lady Teazle is the country girl with "country prejudices," who strives to gain admittance into the sophisticated world of malice. As a character, Sir Peter himself shows remnants of another age; the old man who weds a young girl is a favourite theme of the Restoration. Both the Teazles are gullible and both are the victims of the Scandal College. The first two acts, then, are significant in that they reveal Sheridan's careful artistry; they effectively enable him to illustrate and contrast two modes of life--the worldly-wise and the naive. Neither of the two traditions embodied in these two groups, however, is given prominence over the other. Consistent with his method in the earlier plays, Sheridan frequently includes elements from both traditions within a single character.

Some of the characters of The School for Scandal, however, have the characteristics of only one tradition. Such a character is Trip, Charles's vivacious servant. Like

Restoration servants, Trip emulates his master so slavishly that he is, indeed, "a shadow of his master" (III,ii,p.64). Yet, Trip's emulation never goes beyond the level of the shadow, or the superficial. As Sir Oliver states, servants like Trip "have their vices, like their birthday cloaths, with the gloss on" (IV,ii,p.79). In effect, then, Trip is like the gloss on his clothes, he is all surface and no substance. However, Sheridan uses Trip's superficiality for a specific purpose. What Trip emulates is only his master's superficial behaviour for, as Charles's surname implies, the dissipation and frivolity are mere external trappings which hide his true nature. Hence, in the character of Trip, Sheridan extends his Restoration borrowings and transforms them to include his own individualized themes.

In the character of Lady Teazle, Sheridan has also added new dimensions to a character who has Restoration origins. A woman of mirth, wit and fashion, Lady Teazle is like many a Restoration coquette in her desire for wealth and rank, and for a husband who has the good sense to die early. She abides by the fashionable habit of a "daily jangle" (II,i,p.42) with her husband not only because it provokes him, but also because she is conscious of her adeptness at witty repartee: "if you wanted authority over me, you should have adopted me, and not married me: I am sure you were old enough" (p.40).

But Lady Teazle also retains strong traces of the country bumpkin. She is the transplanted country girl who assumes a frivolous, extravagant posture in an effort to appear as less of a bumpkin. The theme of the country girl caught in the whirlwind of the city again has its origins in Restoration comedy. Yet, while she poses as a woman of fashion, in the hope that she will be metamorphosed into one, she nevertheless retains her "country prejudices" (II, ii, p.50). Hence, Sheridan stresses her country background, first, to heighten the comedy and secondly, to pit two ways of life against one another. From the dull routine of country life, where she has led a "curious life" (II, i, p.41), Sir Peter takes his wife to the fashionable world of London. In the seduction scene (IV, iii), for example, her fashionable desires and her country prejudices struggle for mastery. Although she admits that Sir Peter's ill-usage could provoke her to outwit him, she nonetheless shows enough hesitation to prompt Joseph to remark: "Ah! the ill effects of your country education, I see, still remain with you" (IV, iii, p.82).

Yet, the rivalry between town and country extends even further, for each way of life derives from two comic views. Compliance with the fashionable habit of adultery was a constant temptation to the Restoration heroine. Lady Teazle's "country prejudices," however, are in the sentimental tradition. Steadfast virtue and fidelity, even in the face

of temptation, are common characteristics of the sentimental heroine. Lady Teazle's reformation speech (IV,iii,p.93) resembles those in the sentimental plays. For example, Sir Peter's tenderness for her has "penetrated so to [her] heart" to the extent that in future her behaviour "should have spoken the sincerity of [her] gratitude." Thus, in Lady Teazle, Sheridan presents two comic types side by side; she embodies the "twin rivals," town and country.

Lady Teazle's marriage to Sir Peter also contributes to the blending of two comic modes. In his attempt to transport country innocence to the city, Sir Peter resembles his Restoration predecessors. He is "the foolish old bachelor, who [has] married a girl" (p.34). However, if the May-December marriage is Restoration in origin, the marriage is sentimental in outcome. Although Lady Teazle plagues him with her frivolity and extravagance, Sir Peter confesses that "the worst of it is, I doubt I love her, or I should never bear all this" (I,ii,p.37). Sheridan's stress on the attachment of Sir Peter to Lady Teazle is significant. Contrary to Restoration precedent, Sir Peter is not an object of scorn. Rather, like the sacrificing sentimental heroes, he becomes a sympathetic figure. In his conference with Joseph, for example, he is less a Restoration character than a sentimental one. Forlorn and seemingly abandoned, he professes his love for Lady Teazle and his unhappiness over her behaviour.

Yet, he generously determines to give the capricious Lady Teazle the separate maintenance she seems to desire. Indeed, his generous action and forgiving spirit belie his Restoration behaviour.

Sir Peter's self-righteousness and credulity are also important thematically. Because he is "too credulous" (IV,iii,p.93) and too self-assured--"I was never mistaken in my life" (I,ii,p.38)--Sir Peter naively trusts the untrustworthy Joseph. Indeed, Sir Peter's trust in appearances enables Joseph's hypocrisy to bloom. These basically Restoration characteristics--his credulity and his self-assurance--finally enable Sheridan to comment upon both traditions. Sir Peter, reconciled to the penitent Lady Teazle, learns to trust the man and not the manner. He also learns to distrust easy sentimentalizing. For example, he prevents Rowley from uttering a sentiment with the words: "Hold, my dear Rowley! if you have any regard for me, never let me hear you utter anything like a sentiment" (V,ii,p.106). Thus, in the end, Sir Peter cannot be said to conform to either of the comic traditions. His May-December marriage culminates in fulfillment and happiness, and his sentimental characteristics are overshadowed by his new distrust for sentimentality.

The character who is the source of Sir Peter's disgruntlement with sentimentalism is, of course, Joseph.



Perhaps no other character in the play is as brilliantly drawn as is the arch-hypocrite. What distinguishes Joseph in particular is his keen perception of himself: "Sincerely I begin to wish I had never made such a point of gaining so very good a character, for it has led me into so many cursed rogueries that I doubt I shall be exposed at last" (II,ii,p.51). That he predicts his own downfall testifies to his self-awareness. Indeed, it is this self-awareness which enables him to control situations and to maintain his sentimental pose as long as he does.

Joseph's sincere attempts to be esteemed as a man of sentiment are ironically juxtaposed with his basic insincerity. For example, in his discussion about wit with Maria and Lady Sneerwell, he argues both sides of the question. Never daring for a moment to drop his mask, he offers the appropriate sentiment at the appropriate time. That the gentle Maria turns to Joseph for his opinion at all indicates how masterfully he has performed his role.

Maria. For my part, I confess, madam, wit loses its respect with me, when I see it in company with malice. - What do you think, Mr. Surface?

Joseph S. Certainly, madam; to smile at the jest which plants a thorn in another's breast is to become a principal in the mischief.

Lady Sneer. Pshaw! - there's no possibility of being witty without a little ill nature: the malice of a good thing is the barb that makes it stick. - What's your opinion, Mr. Surface?

Joseph S. To be sure, madam; that conversation, where the spirit of raillery is suppressed, will ever appear tedious and insipid. (I,i,p.29)

Both women ask him to offer an opinion; Joseph, however, offers only sentiments. The passage is ironic, for Joseph, not wishing to jeopardize his reputation as the man of sentiment, actually betrays his hypocrisy. He can argue as well for one side as for the other, and his sentiments, moreover, accommodate either side.

So dedicated, so "sincere," is Joseph in his hypocrisy that, when he is finally exposed, he still attempts to wear his sentimental mask. He continues to be "moral to the last drop!" (V,iii,p.113). Ironically, even the sentimental hypocrite--and a convicted one at that--utters moral aphorisms. Such dedication to hypocrisy is significant not only in relation to the theme of anti-sentimentality but also in relation to the theme of scandal.

Joseph belongs to a world of his own, a world which operates with a perverted sense of virtue. For example, he criticizes Snake because "that fellow hasn't virtue enough to be faithful even to his own villainy" (I,i,p.29). What constitutes "virtue" in Joseph's world is fidelity to roguery. That such a world includes the sentimental bigot is a telling comment on sentimentalism. This hypocritical world of perverted values reflects the world of the scandal-mongers.

The scandal-mongers represent the fashionable world, the sophisticated, exclusive circle to which Lady Teazle desires admittance. However, Lady Sneerwell's parlour is not the seat of wit. Rather, it is the den of "this Hydra, Scandal" which, even if the head is severed from the body, "still the tongue is wagging" (Prologue, p.24). Unlike the wit of the Restoration heroes and heroines, which scoffs at those with pretensions, the "wit" of the scandal-mongers is the malicious spreading of falsehood. Gone is the intellectualized, startling wit of the Mirabells and Millamants. Gone, too, is the false wit of the Witwouds. In their place are the obloquies of the Crabtrees and the Backbites. The Hydra, scandal, with its venom has usurped the throne of refined banter. The scandal-mongers and their tales spread like a disease, their slander infecting all whom they choose to defame. The scandal-mongers, like Joseph, belong to a world of perverted values. They are as dedicated to calumny as Joseph is to hypocrisy. Furthermore, Joseph's conspiracy with Lady Sneerwell, the dean of the Scandal College, underlines the perversity of both worlds and emphasizes, at the same time, their kinship.

In contrast to these characters who represent the world of perverted value are the characters who embody sentimental refinement and the Restoration sense of humour. Sheridan, however, does not merely blend traditions. As an

alchemist of the theatre, he transforms them by including the element of "absolute sense." Hence, "absolute sense" is pitted against Joseph's "virtuous villainy" and the scandal-mongers' slander.

In the character of Rowley, the old steward of the Surfaces, Sheridan presents one "rival" to the world of inversion. Indeed, Rowley's role is a key one, for his presence helps to effect a balance between the old Restoration love for jest and the new sentimental regard for benevolence. Like Restoration characters, the old steward is capable of humour. Much to the discomfiture of Sir Peter, for example, Rowley's "to be sure, Joseph with his sentiments" (V,ii,p.104) underlines not only Sir Peter's folly in trusting to appearances, but also Rowley's own sense of humour. Furthermore, his belief that Charles "will retrieve his errors yet" (I,ii,p.37) testifies to his fundamentally sentimental faith in Charles's goodness and yet, the fact that he "has never . . . been a friend" (I,i,p.29) to the hypocritical Joseph testifies to Rowley's fundamental good sense. Indeed, he is not given, as is Sir Peter, to trusting in appearances; nor is Rowley a credulous old fool. Hence, because of his perception, "honest Rowley" counterbalances the world of perverted values. His honesty contrasts with Joseph's hypocrisy and the scandal-mongers' falsehoods. He prevents their world from infecting and destroying the world

of the lovers. His discovery of Snake's forgery, for example, enables him to expose both scandal and hypocrisy and, thus, leave intact the world of value and sense. Because he is a man of humour, of benevolence and of sense, Rowley well illustrates Sheridan's masterful transformation of the comic traditions. Rowley represents a world dedicated to moral health and thus, he stands as a "rival" to the world of moral perversion. Sheridan broadens his dramatic focus to include not only "rival" traditions but also "rival" spheres.

Maria and Sir Oliver Surface also belong to the sphere of value and sense. Like Rowley, they too embody characteristics from both comic traditions and they also fulfill a thematic function. While it is not extensive, Maria's role in the play is important. Not only is she the prize for whom the Surface brothers contend, but she also stands as a "rival" to the world of perversion. In effect, her sentimental characteristics establish her in this position. For example, in the first act, her opposition to the activities of the Scandal College counteracts the malice of its members. Maria's sentimental language serves as a reminder that for all the scandal-mongers' apparent gaiety and wit within that "wit" there are thorns and beneath the sparkling veneer there is malice. Maria declares: "If to raise malicious smiles at the infirmities or misfortunes of those who have never injured us be the province of wit or humour,

Heaven grant me a double portion of dullness!" (II,ii,p.49). Thus, Sheridan's stress on Maria's good and benevolent heart illustrates his moral intentions. Juxtaposed with the malicious or hypocritical characters of the perverted world, Maria's sentimental character helps to establish a balance between perversion and its opposite, virtue.

Sir Oliver, however, is the character who most effectively illustrates Sheridan's masterful transformation of the two comic modes, for Sir Oliver's wit and benevolence are tempered by his "absolute sense." Sheridan adds to this transformation of traditions an important thematic function. Although, like his Restoration ancestors, Sir Oliver prizes his single status and rails at matrimony--to be wed is to stand on "the stool of repentance!" (II,iii,p.51)--he also prizes benevolence and a good heart. Thus, his sentimental love of goodness balances his Restoration dread of marriage. Yet, his decision to forgive Charles his imprudence "if Charles has done nothing false or mean" (p.52) not only illustrates Sir Oliver's sentimental side, but also reveals a more basic characteristic, his common sense. Because he too was young and imprudent, Sir Oliver does not condemn Charles's behaviour. As he says: "What, shall I forget, Master Rowley, when I was at his years myself?" (p.52).

Thus, unlike the old guardians of Restoration comedy, Sir Oliver is no hypocrite. Nor does he naively believe

Joseph's moralizing to be an indication of a nobler heart within. If Joseph will "salute" him "with a scrap of morality in his mouth," Sir Oliver vows to be "sick directly" (p.53). And so sentimentalism again comes under attack. To trust in verbal declarations and to offer sentiments freely is, to Sir Oliver, a sign of possible insincerity. Joseph's faith in the maxim "'Charity begins at home,'" Sir Oliver wittily terms a faith "of that domestic sort; it never stirs abroad at all" (V,i,p.95). With absolute precision, Sir Oliver describes the possibility of benevolence becoming an exclusive, ostentatious brand of sentimentalism which utters moral precepts at the expense of honesty. Indeed, Sir Oliver's common sense, coupled with his unobtrusive benevolence, effectively counteracts the verbal glibness and insincerity of Joseph's false sentimentalism.

Sir Oliver, then, because of his "absolute sense," also counteracts the world of hypocrisy and malice at the same time that he illustrates Sheridan's artistic mastery. The character of Sir Oliver goes beyond mere imitation of comic traditions. Sturdily he upholds the standard of "absolute sense"--which is as opposed to bland sentimentalizing as it is to crass and malicious "wit."

The object of Sir Oliver's concern is, of course, the gay Charles Surface. Like so many of Sheridan's comic characters, Charles displays traits of both the Restoration

and sentimental traditions. Yet, like most of the characters in The School for Scandal, Charles goes beyond his comic antecedents to emerge as a character in his own right. The introduction of Charles is shrewdly contrived by Sheridan. While Charles himself does not appear until the third act, during his absence he is the centre of attention for most of the characters. For example, the scandal-mongers, in their slanderous way, discuss his frivolity and imminent ruin. More importantly, Lady Sneerwell admits to her passion for "that libertine, that extravagant, that bankrupt in fortune and reputation," the man for whom she "would sacrifice everything" (I,i,p.27). Thus, prior to Charles's actual appearance, Sheridan has carefully delineated the typical Restoration rake, frivolous and unprincipled. Moreover, in the scenes prior to the discovery of Charles in the company of his extravagant friends, Sheridan further heightens the illusion that Charles is a libertine. While obeying Sir Peter's injunction that she refrain from seeing Charles, Maria nevertheless retains some sympathy for the young man whose reputation has convinced her "that he is unworthy [her] regard" (III,i,p.58). Maria, then, strongly condemns Charles for his vices and although she will not, as Sir Peter suggests, "give [her] heart and hand to a worthier object" (p.58), she also refuses to marry Charles. Hence, because of her sentimental character, Maria's criticism intensifies the



illusion that Charles is an irresponsible young rake.

In addition, the appearance of the very woman, Lady Teazle, whom Charles is rumoured to have debauched, also heightens the illusion. Before Sir Oliver and Moses invade Charles's domain in order to determine his true nature, Sir Peter accuses his wife of adultery with the words: "yes, madam, I now believe the reports relative to you and Charles, madam" (III,i,p.61). Thus, Charles's reputation for loose moral behaviour is fully established. Trip, too, contributes to the illusion. His emulation of his master, shallow as it is, causes Sir Oliver to remark regretfully: "If the man be a shadow of his master, this is the temple of dissipation indeed!" (III,ii,p.64).

With the long-delayed appearance of Charles, Sheridan shatters the illusion which his other characters have helped to create. Charles's dealings with Sir Oliver--who is disguised as Little Premium--are engagingly straightforward. There is no pretense. Charles admits, for example, that he is "an extravagant young fellow" (III,iii,p.68) in need of money. Yet, his need is not only for himself but also for his friends and for his poor relation, Stanley. For all his apparent extravagance, then, we learn that Charles is at heart generous. He stoutly avers that "while I have, by Heaven I'll give" (IV,i,p.78). Charles's sincerity and his benevolence enable Sheridan to develop his anti-sentimental

theme. What distinguishes Charles from most sentimental heroes is his persistent refusal to reform at the end: "Why, as to reforming, Sir Peter, I'll make no promises" (V,iii,p.114). Because, unlike Joseph, he is forthright, Charles will make no extravagant protestations. Charles too is contrasted with Joseph and the perverse way of life which relies on verbal declarations and seeks to perpetuate the trust in appearances.

By exalting Joseph in the minds of some of his characters as well as by creating the illusion of Charles's dissipation, Sheridan pits the two brothers against each other--the pretender to benevolence against the disguised exemplar. On a less obvious level, Sheridan destroys illusion and subversion at the same time that he reveals the truth which lies beyond appearance.

Perhaps no single scene in The School for Scandal embodies so entirely the consummate expression of Sheridan's themes as does the famous "screen scene" in Act IV, scene iii. It effectively pits character against character and the inverted mode of living against the proper mode of living. For example, as the representative of the proper mode, Charles and his sincerity contrast sharply with Joseph and his hypocrisy. With the screen down, falsehood and hypocrisy have been exposed. In Sir Peter's and Charles's decision to "have a peep at the little milliner" and in their action

of "unveil[ing] her" (IV,iii,p.91), mere appearance and pretense are torn away. Thus, the screen scene fulfills Sheridan's intention as Sir Oliver states it to be: "if not to reclaim a libertine, at least to expose hypocrisy" (V,ii,p.105). Since Charles is not at all a libertine, true nature reveals itself with the exposure of deceit.

Moreover, "absolute sense" also asserts itself. As Joseph expresses it, "though I hold a man of intrigue to be a most despicable character, yet, you know, it does not follow that one is to be an absolute Joseph either!" (IV,iii,p.87). His statement is double-edged. Not only are absolute and sentimental prudery to be scorned--the very qualities with which Joseph builds his reputation--but also absolute pretense. In between prudery and pretense, then, lies not the rake, but the moral man of "absolute sense."

The screen scene exemplifies Sheridan's complex skill as a comic dramatist in The School for Scandal. The elements of character, theme and style merge into a fine, balanced pattern. Just as these elements form a homogeneous whole, so too do the "rival" or conflicting elements of the Restoration and sentimental traditions. Although the play is adamantly anti-sentimental in its exposure of false sentimentality, Sheridan nonetheless applauds the truly benevolent heart. As the character of Sir Oliver exemplifies, Sheridan tempers sentimentalism with Restoration wit so that both

effect a balance. This balance possesses a thematic function. As Sheridan's fever and disease imagery indicates, man is susceptible to infection. That mere verbal declarations of benevolence are taken as truths and considered trustworthy reflects, then, both man's vulnerability to disease and perversion, and also his vulnerability to appearances. Malice and sentimentalism based on external show perpetuate appearance to the exclusion of the genuine. Indeed, there is a school erected for the inculcation of malice and the spreading of falsehood. The title itself, then, points to man's vulnerability. Thus, Sheridan's artistic blending of disparate comic elements indicates that in order to dissipate appearance and find the reality behind it, man must be both benevolent and wittily aware.

## CONCLUSION

Sheridan's dramatic heritage bequeathed to him Restoration wit and eighteenth-century benevolence--rival comic attitudes which he attempted to blend together to produce an original comic mode. If, indeed, Sheridan did succeed in joining the spirit of mirth with the spirit of good-will, then he may well qualify as a kind of alchemist of the theatre. By way of conclusion, then, a brief look at The Critic, in which Sheridan exposes the flaws of his inherited comic models, will provide some final insight into his ideas on comedy and perhaps more clearly reveal his own artistic aims.

Sheridan's disgruntlement with the reigning comic voices of his time reflects his own sense of moderation. On the one hand, tragedy steeps itself in excessive verbiage or, as Puff puts it in the play, in "trope, figure, and metaphor, as plenty as noun-substantives."<sup>1</sup> Dangle's comment, that "the stage is 'the Mirror of Nature'" (I,i,p.195), is comically twisted, for Nature deserts the stage. Even Richard Fitzpatrick's Prologue to The Critic intimates the gross excesses of the prevailing dramatic forms. The "Tragick

1. Richard Brinsley Sheridan, "The Critic," in The Plays and Poems of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Vol. II, ed. R. Crompton Rhodes (New York: Russell and Russell Inc., 1962), Act II, scene ii, p. 220. All further references to The Critic will be to this edition and will be documented parenthetically.

Queen, to please a tasteless crow'd, / Has learn'd to bellow,  
 rant, and roar so loud" that Nature is frightened away by  
 "the blust'ring beldam's company" (Prologue, p.191). Nor  
 has comedy fared better, as Fitzpatrick also points out in  
 the Prologue, for tragedy's "comic Sister, who had wit 'tis  
 true, / With all her merits, had her failings too" (Prologue,  
 p.191). Because of its occasional but tasteless vulgarities,  
 propagated "in those gay days of wickedness and wit,"  
 Restoration comedy drove modesty from the stage. Thus, "a  
 style too flippant for a well-bred Muse" (p.191) comprises  
 comedy's excess. With the whole-sale reformation of the stage,  
 however, one excess is merely replaced by another: "Thalia,  
 once so ill behav'd and rude, / Reform'd; is now become an  
 arrant prude, / Retailing nightly to the yawning pit, /  
 The purest morals, undefiled by wit!" (pp.191-192). Sneer's  
 proposal, (I,i,p.197), which repeats Kelly's sentiments that  
 the stage be a "school of morality,"<sup>2</sup> does not satisfy Sheridan  
 who, in the "motley scenes" of The Critic offers "a slight  
 remonstrance to the Drama's queens" (Prologue, p.192).

It was a "bungling reformation" which took away all  
 chance for the "double entendre" and the "smart inuendo" (I,  
 i,p.197). Even the greatest of the Restoration comic playwrights,

2. Hugh Kelly, "False Delicacy," in Plays of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century, eds. Dougald MacMillan and Howard M. Jones (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931), Act V, scene ii, p. 744.

like Vanbrugh and Congreve, were obliged to submit to the saintly pruning knife of the sentimentalists. With witty vehemence, Sheridan attacks the artificiality of the reforming spirit.

Sneer. Yes, and our prudery in this respect is just on a par with the artificial bashfulness of a courtesan, who encreases the blush upon her cheek in an exact proportion to the diminution of her modesty. (I,i,p.197)

Sentimentalism, then, like Restoration wit, was in danger of lapsing into excessive or affected self-aggrandizement--the very theme of Sheridan's best plays.

The attempt by eighteenth-century sentimental comic dramatists to inculcate a moral and reform the theatre-going populace results in a loss of distinction between comedy and tragedy. Sheridan comically comments on his own position as a playwright and stage-manager, and points to the neglect of the comic spirit which, in sentimental hands, fits as easily into tragedy as it does into comedy. Sir Fretful Plagiary, the delightful caricature of the sentimental comic dramatist Sir Richard Cumberland, speaks of the interchangeability of tragic and comic elements: "Why, Sir, for ought I know, [the manager of Drury Lane] might take out some of the best things in my tragedy, and put them into his own comedy" (I,i,p.200).

Moreover, comedies which seek to combine wit and sentiment for strictly moral ends do not re-establish the true vis comica. Sneer's "new comedy," The Reformed Housebreaker,

is "replete with wit and mirth, yet of a most serious moral." Through the "mere force of humour," crimes such as housebreaking will appear ridiculous and the moral end will be served, for "bolts and bars will be entirely useless by the end of the season." According to this "new plan," "the follies and foibles of society" are improper and unworthy subjects of the Comic Muse who should deal only with the "greater vices and blacker crimes of humanity - gibbeting capital offences in five acts and pillorying petty larcenies in two." Rather than being a school of morality, the stage is now to be "a court of ease to the Old Bailey" (I,i,p.197). Such a combination does not remove tragedy or sentimental moralizing from the domains of comedy; in effect, the abolition of crime would be as effectively accomplished by sentimentality as by humour. As Dangle realizes, such a play as The Reformed Housebreaker, based as it is on this new plan, is less humourous than it is moral. Such a combination, unlike Sheridan's blending of antithetical comic traditions, constitutes a false alchemy.

Although the pages of The Critic "aim themselves to be critical" (Dedication, p.190), there are hints of Sheridan's own comic intention. Puff admits, for example, that the theatres "don't bring out half what they ought to do" (I,ii, p.211) in the way of farce or comedy. Humour, divorced from the spirit of comedy and wedded to bombastic morality, needs to be revived. Even Puff's attempts to "improve on the



established modes" (II,ii,p.229) suggest Sheridan's own attempt to glean the best from both the Restoration and sentimental modes, and then to transform them.

In his best plays, Sheridan succeeds in transforming the comic standards of Restoration wit and eighteenth-century sentimentalism. Their excesses stripped away, wit and sentiment are joined in a new way through Sheridan's own comic standard of "absolute sense." Thus, although these earlier standards retain some of their distinctive flavour, even in Sheridan's best plays, they are transformed into genuine dramatic gold by Sheridan's own remarkable wizardry as an alchemist of the theatre.

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