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The Importance of Witty Dialogue in *The School for Scandal*

It is generally acknowledged that Sheridan's plays succeed on account of their witty dialogue and in spite of their dramatic action. As early as 1825 Thomas Moore showed by reference to the manuscripts that *The School for Scandal* was a fusion of two of Sheridan's earlier draft plays. He attributed its "flaws" of plot and characterization to this fusion.¹ But both the defects and the virtues of the play are characteristic of Sheridan's other comedies as well, and one wonders whether they are not the outcome of Sheridan's method of writing rather than of an accident of composition. The draft play manuscripts, showing as they do the various stages of composition, throw interesting light on the matter and suggest a more satisfactory explanation.² An examination of them leads one to believe that Sheridan constructed his plays around witty sayings, that he was prepared to accept or ignore flaws of plot or character in order to preserve favorite aphorisms intact—in short, that his eye was upon dialogue rather than action. It is possible to demonstrate from the draft manuscripts the steps by which Sheridan transformed unconnected witty sayings into *The School for Scandal*; it is also possible to show that these steps are responsible for the characteristic shortcomings of the play.

The changes made in four scenes from the draft plays as they appear in the Frampton Court manuscript may serve as examples.³ The opening scene at Lady Sneerwell's, the testing of Joseph Surface, the quarrel between Sir Peter and Lady Teazle, and the flirtation between Lady Teazle and Joseph Surface, provide us with illustrations of Sheridan's preoccupation with dialogue.

In the opening scene of "The Slanderers" Lady Sneerwell and Spatter are found plotting scandal together. Those aphorisms and plays of wit which are removed from the first scene as it appears in

¹ Thomas Moore, *Memoirs of the Life of the Right Honourable Richard Brinsley Sheridan*, 2nd ed. (London, 1825), I, 208-253.

² The draft play manuscripts consist of three notebooks bound together: two of the play "Sir Peter Teazle" and one of "The Slanderers." These, and the holograph Frampton Court manuscript—the earliest known version of *The School for Scandal*—, are in the library of Mr. Robert H. Taylor of Yonkers, New York. It is a pleasure to acknowledge Mr. Taylor's generosity in allowing me to examine the manuscripts and to publish extracts from them.

³ The text of the Frampton Court manuscript may be found in *Sheridan's Plays, Now Printed as He Wrote Them*, ed. W. Fraser Rae (London, 1902)—referred to below as Fraser Rae.

the Frampton Court manuscript are brought in later as part of the conversation after Sir Benjamin Backbite's entrance; Sheridan could not bear to part with them. In the draft play the opening wit was based on the ways of initiating a scandal and a notable example—the case of Miss Shepherd of Ramsgate: “Ha! ha! did your Ladyship never hear how poor miss . . . [?Shepherd] lost her Lover & her character last Summer at Scarborough—this was the whole of it. . . .”⁴ The speech originally belonged to Spatter, but when it reappears in the Frampton Court version it is given to Crabtree.⁵ Similarly, Lady Sneerwell's remark, originally made to Spatter alone, that “. . . a Tale of Scandal is as fatal to the Credit of a Prude as a fever to those of the Strongest Constitution—but there is a sort of sickly Reputation that outlive[s a] hundred of the robuster Character of a Prude . . . ,” is also placed after Sir Benjamin's entrance.⁶

In neither case do the displaced lines do anything to further the plot, and they could be made by any of the witty characters in the play without impropriety. It seems probable that Sheridan removed them from the beginning of the play because their irrelevance tended to obscure the action. He was not willing, however, to abandon good lines, and as a result he placed them in a part of the play where they would have no effect upon the action whatsoever. We have here a clear illustration of Sheridan's use of witty dialogue for its own sake.

In addition to moving dialogue around when it is not essential to the action, Sheridan will sometimes retain a whole scene, virtually word for word, and without any readjustment of lines change the persons involved in it. Some of the inconsistencies of character arise from one figure's stepping into the part of another. One of the most convincing examples occurs in the scene in which Sir Oliver—disguised as Stanley, a poor relation—tests Joseph's generosity. In “Sir Peter Teazle” the scene takes place before the arrival of Lady Teazle—i.e. before the screen scene—while Joseph is impatiently awaiting her. Stanley is announced by a servant, Joseph leaves the stage for a short time, and the servant prepares Stanley for the interview by warning him about Joseph's nerves. I give the scene in full as it has not been published:

Surf.—‘Sdeath you Blockhead you should have said I was gone out of Town or sick or anything sooner than have let the Fellow stay to tease me now—you know I expect Lady Teazle to call this morning.

⁴ “The Slanderers,” [p. 4].

⁶ “The Slanderers,” [p. 5].

⁵ Fraser Rae, p. 155.

Serv.—Upon my word, Sir, He was so importunate I knew not what to do—
He insisted on staying 'till you came in & said He was sure you would be glad to see him.

Surf.—Glad to see him indeed—Why the Fellow comes a begging—A Relation of my Mothers as He pretends [*sic*]—says his Name is Stanley doesn't He—

Serv. Yes Sir but He doesn't carry himself as if He came to ask the Favours—

Surf. Yes—Yes I know his Errand—He has plagued me with Letters.—well I must see him—

ex Serv.

This is one bad Effect of a good Character! it invites applications from the unfortunate and it requires no small Degree of Address to gain the Reputation of Benevolence without the expence of it—I must leave Directions to be interrupted as soon as possible (ex.)

Enter Serv. & Sr: Oliver

Serv. My Master—Sir was here this Instant—He will speak to you in a moment—tho' He was very angry with me for suffering you to see him.⁷

Sr: Ol. Impossible Fellow if you told him I was—

Serv. O Lud, Sir, Thence rose his Anger—Sir my master has wonderful weak nerves—He swoonds at the sight of a Poor Relation.

Sr: Ol. He is known to be a man of a most benevolent way of Thinking—

Serv. True Sir—I will venture to say He has as much speculative Benevolence as any private Gentleman in the Kingdom—

Sr: Ol. Tis a heavenly Virtue.

Serv. Yes Sir, and what makes it more estimable in him is his great self denial in the exercise of it—for tho' you may know by his conversation that his Bosom is full of it—yet has [as?] his Philosophy denies [his being] so sensual as to indulge himself in the exercise of it.—they say Charity [*sic*] begins at home—but my Masters is of that domestic sort that never stirs abroad at all.⁸

In the above passage the humor results from the servant's simple but two-edged remarks and Sir Oliver's sceptical and impatient response to them. By the time this scene appears in the Frampton Court manuscript, it is played between Sir Oliver and Rowley. It is greatly reduced—reduced to the best aphorisms of the original—and the servant's lines are spoken by Rowley.⁹ And while there may be some doubt as to whether or not the servant's words are ironic in the draft play, there can be no doubt that they are ironic when spoken by Rowley, both because he is not sympathetic towards Joseph and

⁷ The opposite page bears the alternative reading: "I am afraid I have brought you too abruptly—I don't [know] how I shall break you to him—for his Nerves are so weak—the sight of a poor Relation may be too much for him."

⁸ "Sir Peter Teazle," II, 1-[3].

⁹ Fraser Rae, pp. 204-205.

because he is the most sensible man in the play. At the same time, however, throughout the rest of the play Rowley is portrayed as a grave but not a witty man. "Honest Rowley" in this one scene steps out of character. This change in him, this inconsistency, comes about not as a result of dramatic action, but as the price paid by Sheridan for his habit of manipulating the plot to fit the dialogue.

Sheridan's careful polishing of lines is generally recognized; in *The School for Scandal* it affects the characterization. The scene of Sir Peter and Lady Teazle's quarrel provides us with an example of the effect of what Macaulay described as "polished taste." In "Sir Peter Teazle" both Sir Peter and his wife are exceedingly forthright to one another—so forthright indeed that a reconciliation seems improbable. Sir Peter is made out to be a doddering old fool and Lady Teazle to be an unconscionable young vixen. Their remarks about their respective reasons for marrying are coarse and unrestrained:

[Lady T.] Why then the Truth is I was heartily tired of all those agreeable Recreations you have so well remember'd—& having a spirit to spend and enjoy a Fortune I was determined to marry the first Fool I could meet with.—& pray what induced you to fix on me. . . .

[Sir P.] O your youth & personal accomplishment to be sure—

[Lady T.] To say truth your Age would have been an insuperable objection—But as I prudently consider'd that as a maid I was then so anxious to be wife—I might even [as] a wife wish as much to be a widow. . . .

[Sir P.] If I were to die what would you do

[Lady T.] countermand my new Brocade—

[Sir P.] you might have [been a] maid still but for me—

[Lady T.] Well you made me a Wife—for which I am much obliged to you & if you have a mind to make me more grateful still make me a widow—¹⁰

The version in the Frampton Court manuscript shows the effect of Sheridan's urbane and witty style. The speeches of both parties are made subtler and more polished; there no longer seems to be a hint of the rolling-pin behind Lady Teazle's spirited repartee:

Sir Pet. This, madam, was your situation—and what have I not done for you? I have made you [a] woman of Fashion of Fortune of Rank—in short I have made you my wife.

Lady Teaz. Well then and there is but one thing more you can make me to add to the obligation.

Sir Pet. What's that pray?

Lady Teaz. Your widow.—

¹⁰ "Sir Peter Teazle," I, [6-7].

Sir Pet. Thank you Madam—but don't flatter yourself for though your ill-conduct may disturb my Peace it shall never break my Heart I promise you—however I am equally obliged to you for the Hint.¹¹

The couple sound more like people of fashion than before, not because they are being more polite, but because their manner of speaking has acquired an elegant cadence and a pretty turn of phrase.

It has been noted by various commentators that Sheridan tends to avoid coarse dialogue in his plays. Walter Sichel attributes this policy to Sheridan's natural "delicacy": "Some coarseness may have lurked under his elegance, but to the last he was proud of never having published a word that could revolt modesty. This unmodish delicacy was due to something more than mere nicety of taste. Though his life was free, his emotions were religious. . . ." ¹² It seems probable, however, that the "something more than mere nicety of taste" consisted of a fine ear for an elegant sentence rather than of any squeamishness about coarse sentiments. The very fact that coarse dialogue finds its way into the draft plays is an indication that it was to Sheridan's taste even if he did not think it fit for publication. Sir Peter Teazle and his wife have been refined and altered when we find them in the final version of *The School for Scandal*, but their transformation is the result of a change from rough to polished prose.

Moore notices in passing Sheridan's practice of retaining "the outstanding jokes . . . in recollection upon the margin, till he can find some opportunity of funding them to advantage in the text"; but he finds it "curious" rather than significant.¹³ In fact, however, Sheridan's delight in his marginal aphorisms sometimes goes so far as to modify whole scenes. The flirtation scene between Young Pliant and Lady Teazle is a good example. Moore points out Sheridan's apparent obsession with the saying: ". . . you would have me sin in my own defence, and part with my virtue to preserve my reputation."¹⁴ As he states, it appears frequently, scrawled upon the pages of the draft play manuscripts. This single aphorism seems to be responsible for the course taken by Lady Teazle's flirting. Her statement that reason and not passion will rule her actions is out of character with her behaviour and sentiments throughout the rest of the play; but if the flirtation scene is to be concluded with Sheridan's sophisticated paradox there can be no alternative preamble. In the draft play Lady Teazle cuts short Young Pliant's passionate effusions with:

¹¹ Fraser Rae, p. 160.

¹² *Sheridan* (London, 1909), I, 108.

¹³ Moore, I, 247.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 234n.

Nay nay I will have no Raptures either—This much I can tell you that if [I] am to be seduced to do wrong—I am not to be taken by Storm . . . but [by] a deliberate capitulation—and that only where my reason or my Head is convinced—¹⁵

Young Pliant rises to the occasion:

[Young P.] Then to say it once the world gives itself Libertys—

[Lady T.] Nay—I am sure without cause for I am as yet unconscious of any ill tho' I know not what I may be forced to.

[Young P.] The Fact is my dear Lady Teaze—that your extreme Innocence is the very cause of your Danger—it is the integrity of your Heart which makes you run into a Thousand Imprudences—which a full consciousness of Error would make you guard against—now in that case you can't conceive how much more circumspect you would be—

[Lady T.] Do you think so—

[Young P.] most certainly in short—your character is like a person in a Pl[ethora] absolutely—dying of too much Health

[Lady T.] So then—you have me sin in my own Defence—& part with my Virtue to Preserve my Reputation—¹⁶

When this scene appears in the Frampton Court manuscript Sheridan seems to have realized that the maxim is too sophisticated for the naive and innocent Lady Teazle, and he provides Joseph Surface—who succeeds Young Pliant—with more lines to lead her up to it. Nevertheless, the remark still seems inappropriate.¹⁷ An examination of the flirtation scene strongly suggests that the tone of the dialogue has been determined by the aphorism with which it concludes. Sheridan seems to have been aware of the consequent shortcomings but reluctant to lose so pretty a piece of wit.

The four examples which I have offered illustrate various ways in which Sheridan's dialogue has a determining effect upon the dramatic action of *The School for Scandal*. The first shows the transfer of whole pieces of dialogue from one character to another. From it we can conclude that some at least of the dialogue of *The School for Scandal* has no effect upon or relevance to the plot. The second offers an explanation of inconsistency of characterization in the play—characters are given one another's lines, and these sometimes prove inappropriate. The third shows the kind of modification of character

¹⁵ "Sir Peter Teazle," I, [33].

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, I, [33].

¹⁷ Interestingly enough it was omitted from the Dublin edition of 1799, but the authority of this text is too much in question for us to be able to tell whether or not the omission had Sheridan's sanction.

which results from the polishing of Sheridan's prose. And the fourth demonstrates the importance of the aphorism in the action of the play.

Once having conceived the draft plays in terms of dialogue, Sheridan was reluctant to lose any of his witty sayings. In spite of the difficulties involved in constructing a coherent story out of the situations he had drawn, he was loath to abandon a single dictum. The plot of *The School for Scandal* is the invention which somehow manages to connect the original scenes together.

A preoccupation with witty sayings and brilliant dialogue seems to account for both the unique virtues and the special faults of *The School for Scandal*. It is probable that the fusion of the draft plays, far from being the cause of the defects, simply served to accentuate the characteristics of what was for Sheridan a habitual method of writing plays. The success of this method is amply attested to by the continuing popularity of *The Rivals* and *The School for Scandal*; in this kind of comedy it seems possible that wit is as important an element of composition as action.

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Swinburne's Greek Plays and God, "The Supreme Evil"

When Swinburne published *Atalanta in Calydon*, in 1865, the play was, on the whole, well received. The young poet was praised for the developing flexibility and depth of his work, for he had not merely conformed to the needs of Greek drama but actually absorbed many of its qualities.¹ There was, however, one jarring element in the play: Swinburne's bitter attack upon the divine treatment of man. Not only was the attack distasteful to the Victorian reader, it was also said to exceed the limits of Greek tragedy. Althea's attitude toward the gods and accusations of injustice placed a strain upon the fidelity of the play, but it was one long, beautifully written chorus which introduced the most shocking departure from traditional references to the divine nature.

Beginning in the third stasimon, at line 1038, the chorus asks, "who hath given man speech," and ends nearly two hundred lines

¹ See "Atalanta in Calydon," *The Nation*, I (1865), 590.