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Author(s): Andrew Schiller

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THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL: THE RESTORATION UNRESTORED

BY ANDREW SCHILLER

EVOCATION of the spirit of a former age is one of the surest ways to demonstrate that the past can never be the present. Sheridan, in writing *The School for Scandal*, made an excursion into the Restoration, an act of literary nostalgia, and a recognition, perhaps, that he had been born a century too late. His purpose was clear: to write a neo-Restoration high comedy of manners.¹ That he achieved it outwardly is certain. That he succeeded in resurrecting the spirit is a question—one which raises still another question: wherein lies the “spirit” of Restoration comedy?

Allardyce Nicoll has made a brave attempt to lay a finger on this intangible: “The manners school, after all, depends rather on an atmosphere which cannot be precisely analysed than on outstanding characteristics . . . We may, however, disentangle some of what appear to be the true characteristics of the species. In the main, we may say, the invariable elements of the comedy of manners are the presence of at least one pair of witty lovers, the woman as emancipated as the man, their dialogue free and graceful, an air of refined cynicism over the whole production, the plot of less consequence than the wit, an absence of crude realism, a total lack of any emotion whatsoever.”²

I think, though, that Nicoll’s definition fails. It is easy to point to one comedy after another which does not qualify on one or more of the counts; conversely, there are few (if any) which solidly demonstrate them all.³ It is weak to argue that this is an ideal list and the absence of even a

¹ R. C. Rhodes, in his edition of *The Plays and Poems of Richard Brinsley Sheridan* (New York, 1929), II, 5, says in his introduction to the play: “From his contemporaries *The School for Scandal* won for Sheridan the name of ‘the modern Congreve.’ It was the highest title they had to bestow upon a master of the comedy of manners. Sheridan had almost deliberately invited the comparison: one of his first plans on assuming the management of Drury Lane was to revive the comedies of Congreve. . . . In this way he had prepared his actors and his audience for the great comedy which, even then, was still uncompleted.”

² *A History of Restoration Drama 1660–1700*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1928), p. 185.

³ In Nicoll’s terms, the “true” Restoration comedy of manners would be most nearly approached by *The Man of Mode*, *Love for Love*, and *The Way of the World*. Wycherley’s two masterpieces, for instance, obviously fail to qualify. Can we say that *The Country Wife* lacks “crude” realism, or that its plot is subordinate? *The Plain Dealer* is scarcely a comedy at all; it is tense with emotion, bitterly realistic, and again the plot is of paramount importance. But why go on? Suffice it to point out that even the most typical plays fail on some counts. Is there any playgoer so insensitive as to find no emotion in *The Man of Mode*? Mrs. Loveit’s jealous rages are real enough, and the little *aubade* between Dorimant and Bellinda in IV.ii is as tenderly romantic in its own way as its parallel scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. Congreve’s two greatest comedies come closer, perhaps, to Nicoll’s Platonic idea but still not close enough. Consider, for instance, whether the Fainall plot in *The Way of the World* does not get seriously emotional!

single good prototype does not invalidate it. The real objection is that the list is symptomatic rather than causal; it touches the surface and does not penetrate into the structure of the plays. We should ask, rather, after the more profound motivations which, to be sure, so frequently manifest themselves in these seven (and other) symptoms.

It is the prerogative of literary criticism (like theology, its sister art and nearest of kin) to move beyond the Efficient Cause to the Final Cause. And so we ask not *How* but *Why*. Charles Lamb was speaking very much to the point when he said that the Restoration comedy of manners reflected a unique world. Unfortunately, he concluded that therefore it was not to be taken seriously (as if there is any other way to take good comedy!). But there, at least, is a beginning. We postulate a special world, quite in the same way that we speak of the "world" of Dickens, or Thomas Hardy. Literary worlds are like machines in that we may ask after their mode of operation. As machines run by water power, the combustion of oil, of gasoline, or by atomic fission, so literary worlds have a *primum mobile*, be it money, salvation, or the Bluebird. This is the question we must ask of the rare world of Etherege, Congreve, and the rest. What is the basic force, the conflict, which generates the motion that keeps their world spinning? The answer is, the struggle between the socially elect and the parvenus. The major characteristics of the Restoration comedy of manners, I believe, can be subsumed under this single one.⁴

From Dryden's *The Wild Gallant* to Congreve's *The Way of the World* we mark a succession of high comedies of manners which deal with this theme: that some are to the manner born and some are not; those who are are innately civilized, those who are not are oafs or worse. The socially elect are a moral law unto themselves, since their virtue is innate, hereditary and self-defined. Of the rest, there are some who strive to enter the circle of the elect. In their inevitable failure they make themselves even more ridiculous, thereby dramatizing the difference between the castes, and in this revelation lies the comedy. The parvenus must pretend to virtue, the elect need not—and therein lies the moral irony—for the virtues

⁴ To be sure, it is foolish to try to be mechanically all-embracing in these matters. The limits of application of such a statement as this are bounded by the precision with which we can define the genre to which it applies. Or, putting it another way, the criterion of the elect-parvenu conflict might be arbitrarily applied as the definitive touchstone of the genre of Restoration high comedy of manners. Whichever way we take it there will necessarily be a shading off into generic limbo. A suggestive discussion of this problem of genre is to be found in Ch. 1 of Kathleen's Lynch's *The Social Mode of Restoration Comedy* (New York, 1926). Here it is argued that Restoration comedy is a reflection of social reality and that the mainspring of its irony is the conflict between the good form of the insiders and the bad form of the outsiders.

of the two groups are as different in kind as are the respective groups themselves.

What Charles Lamb failed to see was that this is by no means an unreal world. The half-century following the Restoration was indeed the period of assertion of the bourgeoisie, and Puritanism was its concomitant. With a combination of arrogance and insecurity, the middle classes were infiltrating into that holy of holies of the upper classes, the circle of arbitrament of fashion, wit and the arts. Thus it is possible to say that the theater as an institution was the spokesman of a class, and that the playwrights consistently thought in terms of issues which were vital to those whom they spoke for. As the theater ceased to be of, by and for the elect, so too the Restoration comedy of manners gave way to the sentimental, domestic morality dictated by the tastes of the new masters. It is undemocratic, if you like, to point out that the brilliant comic spirit of the theater died as soon as its patronage shifted down to a broader base, but the statement is nevertheless true, and there is, anyhow, nothing democratic about art. It takes its sustenance where it can, not necessarily in inverse proportion to the social stratum from whence it springs. However that may be, the fact remains that the comedies of this type had a basis in certain social facts-of-life and that from this common source in reality there resulted a fairly stable pattern of dramatic devices by means of which that reality was expressed.

Dramatic conflict is an abstraction; it is the ideological, moral or ethical basis of a play. The playwright's problem is to invent a dramatic *activity* to express that conflict. (The activity, in turn, resolves itself into several lines of *action*—i.e., threads, or entities, of plot.) We can say, in these terms, that the main line of action of the Restoration comedy of manners is the love pursuit. Here is one generalization, at least, which should admit of no exceptions. Subsidiary lines of action appear with variable frequency—and of these there are a mere handful which recur so often that from among them we can construct most of the high comedies.

The conditions of the love pursuit action are rather circumscribed. There is a Witty Pair—the hero and heroine—and they contrast neatly in their basic attitudes. The man is sexually experienced, but fundamentally innocent; the woman is a virgin, but more truly worldly-wise. Superficially, the man is cynical about love and marriage, convinced that the one cannot survive the other. The woman, on the other hand, is basically idealistic in that she usually sees the two (or is brought to see them) as compatible. Eventually she reduces the man to her desperate terms, and the comedy ends in their marriage.⁵

⁵ See John Harrington Smith, *The Gay Couple in Restoration Comedy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948).

Balanced against the youthful Witty Pair, there is generally an older Bawdy Pair. Either or both, in this case, may be debauched, and either previously or currently married (in a few cases even to one another). In this couple the cynicism goes deep, since they have experienced in some way the death of love in marriage.

Structurally, then, the groundwork of Restoration comedy is quadrilateral (as opposed to the triangular structure in vogue today). The guiding principle is that of antithetical pairs: young-witty versus old-bawdy. Sometimes these, too, are doubled, giving two gay couples and /or two gross couples. The typical overall structure of the play is, moreover, an elaboration upon this plan, extending to the minor characters (as in the intrigues of the servants aping those of the gentry)—all cohering (at its best) in an elaborate counterpoint.

It is not to the purpose here to tabulate exhaustively the devices of Restoration comedy, but rather to suggest that those devices are the implements of the ideas which they dramatically embody. The principal case in point must of necessity be the love-pursuit. The question is, how is it more than just “love for love”?

If we are willing to accept the fact that these comedies figure forth (no matter how fantastically) social realities, then we must also concede that the individual characters represent some ethical reality. Thus the mating choice becomes the dramatic equivalent of ethical-social choice. The woman who distinguishes between the true and the false wit is pointing out (in terms of dramatic action) the difference between the true and the false elect.

I do not mean to oversimplify in order to give to the case spurious sharpness. It is obvious that the rejectees come from both classes. The climbing, striving ridiculous parvenu fits the scheme well enough, but what about Sir Fopling Flutter and his numerous cousins? The Fop is certainly to the manor born, albeit to the manner overbred. Actually, the difference in dramatic function between the two species is clear enough. Both are types of False Wit, but the distinction is a moral one. The parvenu is basically evil—which, translated into terms of comedy, means “ridiculous”—and his (or her) imposture is generally a symptom of moral hypocrisy. The fop (male or female) is fundamentally an affectionate portrait. It is satire from within rather than from without—the *reductio ad absurdum* of accepted *mores*, and therefore a dramatization of the violation of the principle of the mean. He is an exaggeration of the things the elect recognized in themselves as, up to a point, necessary and commendable. The parvenu, on the contrary, differs from the elect in kind.⁶

⁶ It does not follow, I might add, that the concept of the Fop implies a principle that the elect must maintain and confirm their election by living within a norm. This would indeed be a requirement contrary to the orthodox notion of election. What we have here, I think,

The philosophic basis of Restoration manners is, it would seem, an unconscious burlesque of Calvinism. The social ins and social outs would then represent nothing less than a grand reversal of the dogma of Election and Predestination. The elect in this case are the amoral (who in the end turn out to be "good") and the damned are the pious (who are ultimately exposed as "bad"). The doctrine goes further; it is Antinomianism. The elect, being of the saved, are free to ignore morality totally. Their works matter not; they are predestined to be saved. Nor does the piety of the damned avail; they were born outside the pale and there they must inevitably remain.

On this basis, the most general statement that can be made of *The School for Scandal* is that it is indeed a re-creation of Restoration comedy in its outward aspects, but that it differs vastly from its prototypes on the ideological level. The fabric of the play is woven from characters, situations and devices which are either in direct continuity from the Restoration or are throwbacks to it.⁷ In spite of this (and here history is at work) Sheridan's play manages not to say a single one of the most significant things which the Restoration comedy of manners was designed to express.

Sheridan's obvious model was Congreve, but the quality (moral, not esthetic) of his play is closer to Molière. The reason is simple enough. The crucial problem of *The School for Scandal* arises out of the violation of Christian virtue rather than social mores. Thus its nearest of kin in the Restoration is Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer*. The comparison is a specialized one, and by no means to be pressed. It might do, in passing, to recall that *The Plain Dealer* is most untypical of Restoration comedy, and that there is sufficient cause to doubt whether it is a comedy at all—as much, say, as in *Measure for Measure*. Of *The School for Scandal* the same doubt cannot exist, which is at least one reason why the plays are not seriously to be compared.

The real matter at hand, at least in the terms I have postulated, is to determine whether or not *The School for Scandal* expresses the conflict of the parvenu class versus the elect. Consider the plot matter of the play as separated roughly into four motifs: (1) The scandal plot; (2) The cuckolding-revenge plot; (3) The town-country antithesis; (4) The two brothers ("male Cinderella") motif. Each of these elements, together with its respective appendages, comes right out of the traditional stock-

is a case of moral fluctuations of degree within separate realms of kind. These fluctuations may be parallel, but never congruent.

⁷ The recurrence of stock characters is too obvious to illustrate. The continuity of attitudes, however, is so strong that it sometimes results in echoes of dialogue. Sir Fopling Flutter, for example, says "Writing, madam, 's a mechanic part of wit," and Sir Benjamin Backbite's version is, "To say truth, ma'am, 'tis very vulgar to print . . ."

pile. Nothing is easier than to show a “source” for every scene in the play—nothing is more futile. Conversely, the very fact that Sheridan used the same ingredients to bake a different cake serves to emphasize distinctions which are very much to the point.

The scandal motif (to take them in order) is an almost inevitable one in a comedy of the *haute monde*. From the sociological point of view, pre-occupation with scandal and intrigue is one of the specialized functions of a leisure class. It exists, one might say, by elimination. After all, when a social group is positively forbidden to occupy itself in the earning of sustenance, to engage in any pursuit beyond mere dilettantism, to transgress in any way the limits of its own social circle, there are monotonously few things left to occupy the hours and the days. Basically, these reduce to the jockeying for social position and the pursuit of sex-adventure. A third game, which embraces both the others, is the purveyance of gossip and scandal. “At ev’ry word a reputation dies.”

When we investigate how the scandal plot operates in Sheridan’s play, we discover that it somehow fails to function. Dramaturgically, it is the most awkward thing in the play, despite the prominence given it by the title. The scandal group—Lady Sneerwell, Snake, Mrs. Candour, Sir Benjamin Backbite, et al.—are perilously close to being entirely separable from the main structure of the action. The screen scene, indeed, is the only real jointure. As a matter of fact, Sheridan originally drafted two plays, “The Slanderers” and “The Teazles,”⁸ and the evidence of the carpentry by which he joined them is clear enough. The most obvious evidence is that the scandal group is, in effect, a “frame.” Lady Sneerwell and Snake open the play with a long scene of clumsy exposition. The ensuing action does not, however, immediately take up and advance the scandal plot. On the contrary, the matter is shortly dropped and all but forgotten until it is re-introduced at the end.

The evidence points to more than slipshod dramatic technique, symptomizing perhaps that the scandal plot and the Teazle plot never achieved for Sheridan a final intellectual integration. The fact is that scandal has nothing to do with the outcome of the Teazle problem. Their story is the familiar one of sentimental domestic conflict (either tragic or comic in outcome) which was one of the prevailing themes of the later eighteenth century. Lady Teazle was misled in the first place not by gossip but by vanity—the country girl gone giddy with city fopperies. The revelations in the screen scene, moreover, cannot account for her astonishingly sudden conversion. In truth, she is a static character, and in Sheridan’s conception there was never the remotest possibility that she would permit herself to be seduced. Of this more in a moment. At

⁸ Rhodes describes, in an appendix, the evolution of the play and reprints portions of the two antecedent versions.

this point it should be emphasized that the milieu of Lady Teazle is simply not that of Millamant. The group in which she lives is bourgeois in its outlook. The major transgressions are no longer those against manners, but those against domestic virtue. Beyond that, Lady Teazle's world is neither so limited in scope nor as homogeneous as Millamant's. Scandal's power was not, in 1777, what it had been a century earlier, and therefore it never had the same weight of reality for Sheridan.

Perhaps it is not pressing too hard to point out, in this connection, that there may be some significance in the fact that scandal, in this play, is thought of as being exerted more potently through the printed than the spoken word. Snake is the prototype of our modern “gossip columnist.” As an indicator of historical change, this is worth noting. A century ago the “Town” had been small enough for scandal to spread by word of mouth. Everybody (who was somebody) knew everybody else (ditto). By 1777 the “Town” as an integrated group did not exist, except as a fiction in such plays as *The School for Scandal*.

The second of the major motifs is that of revenge by cuckolding. In the conversation between Lady Teazle and Joseph Surface (II.ii), the following dialogue takes place:

Lady T. . . . you know I admit you as a lover no farther than fashion requires.

Joseph S. True—a mere platonic cicisbeo—what every London wife is entitled to.

Lady T. Certainly, one must not be out of the fashion. However, I have so much of my country prejudices left, that, though Sir Peter's ill-humour vex me ever so, it never shall provoke me to . . .

Joseph S. The only revenge is your power. Well—I applaud your moderation.

Margery Pinchwife would never have made so much of her country prejudices, and thereby hangs the tale, or part of it at least. The plot situation in *The Country Wife* is so nearly parallel to the Teazle story that a comparison is worth while. In both cases a middle-aged man marries a young country girl and brings her to London; in both cases the young wife becomes enamored of the gay, wicked ways of the town. Here the similarities cease. Mr. Pinchwife is actually cuckolded; nevertheless he is in no way a sympathetic character. He is made ludicrous by the fact that he is himself a former rake and notorious cuckold. Now, too old for such shenanigans, he marries Margery and keeps her hidden in the country in order (as Wycherley delicately puts it) to keep a whore to himself. Yet this is not all. The profoundest level of ridicule is that Pinchwife is an apostate against his class. He has hypocritically assumed the bourgeois virtues after having become too debilitated to endure the aristocratic vices.

Not so Teazle. In his behalf it can be said that he is the very model of husbandly forbearance, neither living down a lurid past nor contem-

plating vengeful peccadilloes for the future. Sheridan may dress him up as he will, Teazle's middle-class virtue obtrudes through the trappings as indomitably as his middle-age.

As for his more sprightly helpmeet, she gives herself away, as the foregoing quotation shows, even when she would be at her most wicked. The superb innocence with which Margery Pinchwife surrenders herself to the devil and the flesh is quite beyond recapture for Lady Teazle. She is, from the beginning, beset by the sense of sin. Quite literally, both she and Sir Peter live in a world different from the Pinchwives', one narrowly bound in by familial virtues. The Teazles are sent through the motions of the *haute monde*, but in truth they are no more than puppets clumsily acting their parts. In the world of *The School for Scandal* there is, really, no elect in the Restoration sense. The only distinction, when all is said, is that of morality.

One of the most typical conceits of the Restoration thus goes overboard, namely the notion that love and marriage are incompatible. Moreover, the Charles Surface-Maria affair is shockingly heretical in that its intent is not seduction but marriage. The sanctity of this institution is, in fact, at the core of the play, and it is one of Sheridan's unintentional ironies that the very devices of the gay comedy of the last age should be put to such a purpose.

The town-country antithesis was meaningful to a society in which a small group in London served as the arbiter of culture. The prevailing notion that all beyond Hyde Park was outer darkness was not unreasonable, once the premises were accepted. Sir Tunbelly Clumsey, in *The Relapse*, is a broad burlesque, but the reason it had some point in its time (and still has some vitality in our own) is that the burlesque had a real object. (Even though that object were nothing more than a state of mind, an attitude, there is a reality to that.) Eighty years after *The Relapse*, that vague entity of the "Town" no longer existed, but the myth persisted as a pleasant convention.

The account of Lady Teazle's pre-marital occupations in the country (II.ii) finds its precedent in any number of Restoration comedies, the most exquisite example of which is perhaps the little interchange between Harriet and Dorimant at the end of *The Man of Mode*. It is worth pointing out, in this regard, that there is a real difference in the attitudes involved in the two cases. Harriet comes from the country to the city as one coming home. Being of the elect, she is none the less urbane for her bucolic breeding. Her chastity, though under heavier assault in the city, is as safe in her keeping as if she had never left the rooks and daws. Lady Teazle, however, is a country girl. No sooner does she come to the city than she assumes a new and (for her) unnatural way of life. She falls into mortal peril of her chastity. She becomes bewildered and awry. The

city, in short, is too much for her. By Restoration standards she would have been ridiculous—a parvenu. By Sheridan's standards she comes close to being a sentimental heroine in a domestic tragedy. It takes the screen scene to bring her to her senses. How else could it be? By 1777 the sympathies had been reversed. Those who were of the caste which had in the former age been glorified in the persons of Millamant and Harriet were now figured forth as Lady Sneerwell and Mrs. Candour, symbols of depravity, before whom the middle-class members of the audience sat in righteousness.

The last of the major motifs upon which the play is constructed, that of the bad elder brother versus the good younger brother, is of double significance. On the one hand it arises out of, and is sometimes a commentary upon, the institution of primogeniture. On the other hand it furnishes the playwright with a conveniently ironical framework for a juxtaposition of the shadow and the substance of virtue. In the present case the situation is applied in both directions, though more heavily on the latter side. Since *The School for Scandal* is a kind of bourgeois morality play (in the format of a Restoration manners comedy) the emphasis is inevitable.

The problem of the younger brother in the system of primogeniture was one of the major themes of Vanbrugh, dealt with most dramatically in *The Relapse*. Considered as a “problem comedy,” however, Sheridan's play is no more satisfactory than Vanbrugh's so far as foursquare treatment of this theme is concerned. In both cases the social problem remains unresolved, its real consequences unexplored, the necessity of logical dénouement avoided by irrelevant circumstance. Sheridan was no more prepared than Vanbrugh to face the exigencies of such a theme. High comedy of that sort was not to appear on the English stage until the advent of George Bernard Shaw.

The juxtaposition of moralities is Sheridan's real concern, as it was the concern of Shadwell in the *Squire of Alsatia*, and of Fielding, the playwright-turned-novelist, in *Tom Jones*. These three works are well-spaced instances of the continuum of a persistent literary motif—the “male Cinderella.” The intellectual, no less than the moral relationship between the two brothers is curiously invariable. The wicked older brother is generally of some intellectual power as compared with his younger brother, who is typically so simple in his virtue that even his vices are winning in their naive openheartedness. When this is not the case (as in the *Squire of Alsatia*) the pendulum swings completely to the other extreme, to the extent that the wicked brother comes near to being the feeble-minded brother. *The Relapse* is yet another case in point here.

The relationship between Joseph and Charles Surface is an interesting

combination of the two varieties. The parallelism between the situations in the Shadwell and Sheridan plays is very close—up to a point. Belfond, Senior, like Joseph Surface, is the false paragon. He is held up as the example of the virtuous and well-bred young gentleman. Belfond, Junior, like Charles Surface, is an abomination in the eyes of his brother's admirers. He is the moral rake, sowing his traditional wild oats, and in the process running through his inheritance even before he has it. As Shadwell puts it, he is "somewhat given to women, and now and then to good fellowship, but an ingenious, well-accomplished gentleman, a man of honor and of excellent disposition and temper." The plot activity in each play develops from the rivalry of these two brothers, the unmasking of the vice of the one and the revelation of the virtue of the other. There are further similarities in detail, but in large outline the two plays part company here.

In the Restoration play, Belfond, Senior, is "bred after his father's rustic, swinish manner" but, coming to the city, is taken by the new fopperies and strange vices. This is the transformation which Lady Teazle underwent, except that in the case of Belfond, Senior, the victim is not sympathetic, is really depraved, and is—above all—ridiculous. He is the typical social "out" trying to behave like an "in," drunk upon an unaccustomed world of fashion to which he was never bred. Yet even his depravity, his repellent boorishness, is of a different order than the unsavoriness of Joseph Surface. Joseph's sexual plans upon Lady Teazle are never consummated. Nor is much else, for that matter. Setting aside his hypocritical cant, he does not actually *do* very much of the villain's work. When you come right down to it, Joseph comes out in most respects to be almost as impeccable as he would have the world believe him to be. This is the fault of Sheridan rather than Joseph Surface, but that points up a strong difference between the obligations of the playwright in 1668 and in 1777.

Belfond, Senior, actually does do all the things which Joseph Surface never quite accomplishes, yet for all his literal depravity he is funny and therefore not entirely unsympathetic. He is the pseudo-Fop. Fundamentally his offenses are against manners and caste. Conversely, Joseph Surface offends against morality. He is, therefore, more monstrous than funny. He is no country lout, any more than Iago. He is the Vice of the medieval morality plays reincarnated in Hanoverian comedy. Or, to put it closer to home, he has the character of Blifil in the approximate situation of Belfond, Senior.

Parallel distinctions apply to the two younger brothers. Belfond, Junior's, wild oats are far wilder than Charles Surface's. The matter of sexual promiscuity, for example, has been avoided in the later play. The

Dorimant-type of hero was obviously no longer acceptable to Sheridan's audience. When we consider the theme of the play, in fact, *The School for Scandal* is remarkably free from "offense." There is no bawdry in the dialogue, and none of the intended evil in the action is ever accomplished. Even the villains cannot be debauched when the final curtain rings down. All of this, to be sure, is not remarkable at all in historical context. Sheridan's mixed audience was not secure in its superiority, as was Shadwell's homogeneous audience. The playwright's task, in Sheridan's time, was to turn the comedy of manners into a vehicle of Addisonian didacticism.

The method of this transformation was basically simple, involving nothing more than the substitution of one transgression for another—from *mores* to morality. Curiously enough, we come to the conclusion that Sheridan was successful after all. He did not, in any proper sense of the term, write a Restoration comedy, but he did succeed in translating, so to speak, that comedy into terms that were significant and acceptable to his own times. Throughout his career, it was Sheridan's constant preoccupation to tailor his output to conform with changes in dramatic taste. George Woods Williams has shown that from 1775, when Sheridan launched his attack on the sentimental comedy, to 1806, the date of *The Forty Thieves*, we witness "the end of a cycle which had its beginning in eighteenth century reason and satire and its end in early nineteenth century romanticism."⁹

The School for Scandal, then, is more than a typical product of its Age. It reflects accurately the tastes of the very moment. For purposes of illustrating this conformity, however, it is better than most of its contemporaries, simply for the reason that it represents a most deliberate attempt to recapture the tone of the preceding Age. In this theoretical failure lay its practical success. The play did indeed restore to some extent the wit, bustle and brilliance of the high tide of English comedy. At the same time it satisfied in every particular the moral as well as the esthetic sensibilities of the dominant group who sat in judgment upon it. In short, Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* is one of the triumphant examples of the yoking together of opposed forces into a work of art. We may put it into an affectionate paradox and say that here is a case of the Restoration successfully unrestored.

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

NAVY PIER, CHICAGO 11

⁹ "The Stage History of Sheridan's Less Known Plays," unpubl. thesis, George Washington Univ., 1949, p. 111.