

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Richard Brinsley Sheridan was born in Dublin, Ireland, and was christened on November 4, 1751. His father was an actor and author, a path that Sheridan himself would choose for his vocation. He was educated at Harrow School in London, England. After the family moved to Bath in 1770, Sheridan met and eloped with a young singer, Eliza Linley. Their marriage contract was invalid due to a lack of parental consent, however. Sheridan fought two duels on her behalf, nearly dying in the second, and finally, after three years, the couple's families withdrew their opposition and the pair were legally married in 1773.

Sheridan had begun to study the law the year before, and, in 1773, he entered as a barrister in the Middle Temple. When the law failed to provide him with adequate financial means, Sheridan turned his attention to writing drama. His first play, *The Rivals* was completed in a few weeks and opened in 1775 at the Covent Garden Theatre. The production closed the same day; Sheridan revised the work, shortening the structure and recasting his actors. The play reopened to great success only ten days later. A few months later his second work, *St. Patrick's Day*, opened. Sheridan next collaborated on an operatic play, *The Duenna*, with his father-in-law. Both of these works were popular with audiences.

After writing and producing three successful plays in 1775, Sheridan and some partners bought the Drury Lane Theatre in 1776, and he became its manager. In 1777, his play *A Trip to Scarborough* was presented at the Drury Lane, and, three months later, *School For Scandal* became his most popular play. In 1779, Sheridan became the sole owner of the theatre, and his last play for another twenty years, *The Critic*, opened to the same success as his earlier works.

Despite critical and popular success, Sheridan had accumulated a huge amount of debt. On the surface, he appeared a success. By his late twenties he was the owner of the most famous theatre in England and was a well-known, successful playwright, yet his finances were in ruins.

In 1780, Sheridan was elected to Parliament. By all reports, Sheridan was a brilliant orator, but he never achieved the kind of success he desired, due in part to British prejudices against his Irish birth. Sheridan's wife died in 1792; she had left him years earlier because of his drinking and infidelity. The same year, the Drury Lane Theatre was condemned and torn down. Sheridan went even further into debt but managed to rebuild the theatre. Three years after his wife's death, he married Hester Jane Ogle, the nineteen-year-old daughter of the Dean of Winchester. Sheridan wrote his last play, *Pizarro*, in 1799. The income from this last successful production only slightly reduced his mountain of debt. Finally, Sheridan was ousted from Drury Lane's management due to his mishandling of funds. When he lost his Parliament seat, he also lost protection against arrest for his debts. Sheridan was imprisoned several times for failure to pay his debts; his furniture was sold, and he was living in filth at the time of his death in 1816. Although he died in financial ruin and ignominy, the work that he produced for the stage in the years 1773-1779 earned Sheridan a place among the great writers of drama.

## PLOT SUMMARY

## Act I

*School for Scandal* opens with Lady Sneerwell and her henchman Snake plotting a means to break up the romance between Charles Surface and Maria. It is Snake's job to assist in disseminating the gossip that Lady Sneerwell creates, and when he asks why she wishes to destroy this romance, Lady Sneerwell reveals that she wants Charles for herself. Maria's hand would then go to Charles's brother, Joseph.

In the first act, the audience is introduced to the characters who surround Lady Sneerwell and their true nature is revealed. Gossip and slander fill their time; they consider the destruction of marriages and reputations as entertainment.

Maria is the exception in this group. She condemns their gossip and refuses to be persuaded that Charles is unworthy of her. Sir Peter and his servant, Rowley, arrive on stage at the change of scene. Sir Peter is openly questioning his wisdom in marrying such a young wife. He thought that by marrying an innocent country girl, his happiness would be assured. Instead, Sir Peter reveals to the audience that his wife spends too much time with her friends and too much money on dresses and extravagances. Rowley tells Sir Peter that Charles and Joseph's uncle, Sir Oliver, is returning to London after a long absence. The audience also learns that it is Rowley's opinion that Charles has more potential than Sir Peter recognizes.

## Act II

The second act opens with an argument between Sir Peter and his wife, Lady Teazle, about the money she is spending. He focuses on her extravagant purchase of fresh flowers during the winter. She is not intimidated by his anger. When her husband reminds her of how he rescued her from a simple but poor life, Lady Teazle nearly admits that she would wish her husband dead as his next step toward rescuing her.

In the next scene, the gossips are busy slandering everyone they know as they prepare for a card game at Lady Sneerwell's. Lady Teazle joins them and in a few moments is joined by her husband. Maria is also there and is joined by Joseph who presses his suit for her attention. She is clearly annoyed and pleads with him to change the subject.

In the following scene, Sir Oliver has returned and is briefed by Rowley and Sir Peter regarding his nephews, Joseph and Charles. Rowley and Sir Peter differ in their appreciation of the two young men. Sir Oliver is determined to investigate and decide the nature of his nephews for himself.

## Act III

Rowley, Sir Peter, and Sir Oliver are joined by the moneylender, Moses. Moses will take Sir Oliver to meet Charles under the guise of a moneylender, Mr. Premium. Moses coaches Sir Oliver in the behavior and manners of a moneylender, and the two depart for Charles's home. When Maria enters, Sir Peter takes the opportunity to chastise her for her rejection of Joseph, but Maria stands her ground, proclaiming her love for Charles.

The scene ends with a humorous exchange between Sir Peter and his wife. Although the two begin lovingly enough, the compliments soon turn to an argument as the two each claim that the other one is always at fault for their constant quarreling.

In the next scene, Moses and the disguised Sir Oliver arrive at Charles's home. Charles is happily at play gambling, singing, and drinking with his friends, but he is delighted to be visited by the moneylender, since Charles needs cash quite badly. Charles agrees to sell the family portraits to raise money. It is agreed that he will make a game of an auction to sell the pictures to Mr. Premium.

#### Act IV

During the auction, Sir Oliver buys all the portraits except his own, which Charles will not sell. He has a fondness for his uncle whom he has not seen in many years and refuses to part with the portrait. Sir Oliver is charmed and forgives Charles his faults. While still disguised, Sir Oliver gives Charles far more money than the agreed upon price and leaves with Moses. Charles immediately sends some of the money to a poor relation.

In the next scene, Lady Teazle has called upon Joseph. He has been attempting to seduce her, and, although she has resisted thus far, she has come to Joseph's home because she is tempted. When her husband is announced, Lady Teazle hides behind a

screen. Sir Peter has arrived to ask Joseph if his brother, Charles, is having an affair with Lady Teazle. Joseph is taken aback by the suggestion, and although he hedges a bit, finally states that he cannot think Charles guilty of such a thing.

At that moment Charles is announced, and Sir Peter asks to hide so that he might overhear Joseph ask Charles about Lady Teazle. When Sir Peter goes to hide behind the screen that conceals his wife, Joseph tells Sir Peter that his arrival had interrupted a rendezvous with a French milliner and the young woman is hiding behind the screen. Sir Peter hides in a closet just as Charles is ushered into the room.

In a few moments Joseph learns that Lady Sneerwell is arriving, and he leaves the room. Sir Peter, having heard Charles profess that he has no interest in Lady Teazle, reveals himself. When Charles pronounces Joseph too worried about his reputation to risk scandal, Sir Peter knocks down the screen, thinking that he will reveal a French milliner. Instead, his own wife is revealed hiding behind it.

Joseph rushes back into the room and attempts to create a story to explain everything. But Lady Teazle, who has overheard her husband's plans to honor her, is ashamed of her near betrayal and confesses everything to Sir Peter. Sir Peter declares Joseph a villain. The act ends.

#### Act V

Sir Oliver, unaware of the recent activities, arrives at Joseph's disguised as a poor relation. He asks Joseph for help but is turned quickly away. Rowley returns to tell Joseph that his Uncle, Sir Oliver, has returned to London and wishes to meet with both brothers.

The next scene opens with all of the gossips clamoring for more information about what really occurred between Sir Peter and his wife and Joseph. In a matter of moments, they have concocted a duel and a near fatal injury for the participants. They are interrupted when Sir Peter arrives and throws his wife's former friends outside. Lady Teazle resigns from the scandal club. In the library of Joseph's house, Sir Oliver arrives. Charles and Joseph recognize him from the disguised identities he assumed. Sir Oliver's true identity is revealed, but at that moment, Lady Sneerwell arrives for one last try at breaking up Maria and Charles.

Sneerwell fails when it is revealed that Snake has betrayed her to someone who would pay him a higher price. She leaves. Joseph follows her after it is made clear that everyone present now recognizes his hypocrisy. Sir Oliver and Sir Peter confer their blessings upon Maria and Charles.

## **CHARACTERS**

### **Sir Benjamin Backbite**

Backbite is a suitor to Marie. He is a gossip who will slander anyone, even those he does not know. Lady Sneerwell admires Backbite's wit and poetry. Backbite is an especially malicious character whose rude behavior is encouraged in the company of his uncle, Lady Sneerwell, and Mrs. Candour.

### **Sir Harry Bumper**

Toby is one of Charles's friends who spends his time drinking, gambling, and singing.

### **Mrs. Candour**

Mrs. Candour is a good-natured and friendly gossip whose talkative nature makes her dangerous, since she spreads slander more effectively than Backbite or Crabtree.

### **Careless**

Careless is one of Charles's friends. He plays auctioneer when the family pictures are sold to Mr. Premium.

### **Crabtree**

Crabtree is Backbite's uncle and as big a gossip as his nephew.

### **Maria**

Maria is Sir Peter's wealthy ward. She is in love with Charles and he is in love with her. Her nature is sweet, and she is very disturbed at the vicious gossip she encounters at social functions. Although Maria is considered a principle character, she has only a small role in the play.

Moses

Moses is the moneylender who has been lending money to Charles. He has tried to help Charles with his money problems and bring his spending under control. Moses is honest and helps Sir Oliver in his pretense as a moneylender.

Old Stanley

*See Sir Oliver Surface*

Mr. Premium

*See Sir Oliver Surface*

Rowley

Rowley is Sir Peter's servant and was formally a steward to Joseph and Charles's father. He recognizes that Charles is kind-hearted and good in spite of his problems managing money. Rowley has caught Snake at forgery and uses the information to force Snake to betray Mrs. Sneerwell. Rowley serves

## MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

- *School for Scandal* was videotaped in 1965. The 100 minute-long black and white film, taped during a stage performance of the play, stars Joan Plowright and Felix Aylmer. The Hal Burton production is available from Video Yesteryear.

as go-between for Sir Oliver when he disguises himself to visit his nephews.

Snake

Snake works for Lady Sneerwell; he undertakes the actions that destroy reputations. He is indeed a snake, since his job is to slither around gaining and dispensing gossip. Snake willingly goes to the highest bidder and in the final scene admits that Rowley has paid him a greater fee to betray Lady Sneerwell.

Lady Sneerwell

Lady Sneerwell was the target of slander in her youth. She now directs her efforts at ruining the reputations of other women. She prides herself on her delicacy of scandal, which she manages with only a hint of asneer (she "sneers well"). Slander is her primary source of pleasure. Lady Sneerwell is secretly infatuated with Charles, and that is the real reason she wants to break up his relationship with Maria. Lady Sneerwell plots with Joseph to secure Charles for herself and Maria for Joseph, but the plot blows up when Joseph is exposed to Sir Peter and when Maria refuses to consider

Joseph as a suitor. She forges letters in a final attempt to further her plot but is revealed when her partner, Snake, sells his loyalty to a higher bidder.

### Charles Surface

Charles is the protagonist of the play and the younger Surface brother. He is extravagant but good-natured. He is in love with Maria and wishes to marry her. Mrs. Sneerwell, however, wants him for herself. Charles sells his uncle, who is in disguise, the family portraits, since he, as usual, needs money. He wins his old uncle's heart when he refuses to sell his beloved uncle's portrait. Sir Oliver finds that Charles is honest and generous. In the final scene, Charles and Maria receive the endorsement and good wishes of her guardian, Sir Peter, and that of Sir Oliver.

### Joseph Surface

The elder Surface brother, Joseph is amiable and well regarded. But he is a hypocrite, since he is courting the wealthy Maria behind his brother's back while also flirting with Lady Sneerwell and trying to seduce Mrs. Teazle. When Joseph refuses to help his disguised uncle, his true nature is revealed. He is artful, selfish, and malicious, but he has Sir Peter completely convinced of his merit and good name until Lady Teazle tells her husband that Joseph has attempted to seduce her. Joseph lacks the qualities of truth, gratitude, and charity.

### Sir Oliver Surface

Sir Oliver is Charles and Joseph's rich uncle. He returns to England and attempts to test his nephews' character without revealing his identity. Sir Oliver assumes the identity of a moneylender, Mr. Premium, to test Charles's loyalty. Later, he assumes the identity of Old Stanley, a poor relation, to test Joseph. In the final scene he reveals his true identity to both brothers, and Joseph is disinherited while Charles is rewarded by his uncle for his honesty and generosity.

### Lady Teazle

Lady Teazle is young and was educated in the country. But since her marriage and move to London, she has learned to dress well and to spend lavishly. She counts Lady Sneerwell among her friends and engages in flirtations with young men. She fights frequently with her husband, contradicts him, and flaunts his authority, but he continues to love her. When Lady Teazle engages in gossip with her friends, there is a noticeable meanness in her words. Yet her country upbringing makes her hesitate when she considers engaging in an affair with Joseph. When Lady Teazle overhears her husband's plan to settle an income on her, she realizes that he does love her and she quickly comes to her senses. She reveals to Sir Peter Joseph's attempts to seduce her. In the final scene, she resigns from the company of gossips and reaffirms her devotion to her husband.

### Sir Peter Teazle

A neighbor of Lady Sneerwell, Sir Peter is also the guardian of Joseph and Charles Surface. Sir Peter was an older bachelor when he married his much younger wife six months before the start

of the play. She is making his life miserable with her extravagances and her friends. But he loves his wife, although his friends sneer at him for letting her take advantage of him. Although Sir Peter has always favored Joseph (he even suspects Charles of trying to seduce Lady Teazle), Joseph's hypocritical nature is revealed when Lady Teazle confesses to her husband that Joseph was attempting to seduce her. Eventually, Sir Peter approves of the marriage of his ward, Maria, to Charles.

Toby

*See Sir Harry Bumper*

Trip

Trip is Charles's footman. He also needs to borrow money and seeks out the moneylenders when they come to see Charles.

## **THEMES**

Honor

Initially honor seems to be in short supply in *School for Scandal*: The gossips are completely without honor; Lady Teazle is considering abandoning the lessons about honor that she learned growing up in the country; Joseph is ready to betray his brother to secure a wealthy wife; and Charles is hopelessly in debt to moneylenders. Even Sir Oliver, whose honor should be above question, is ready to assume a disguise to test his nephews' honor.

By the conclusion of the play, however, it is clear that only the gossips have no true honor. Lady Teazle realizes that she values her husband and that she has more honor than her friends had supposed. Charles, though foolish and intemperate with gambling and money, is honorable. He pays his debts, if slowly, and he is willing to help a poor relation without being asked. Sir Oliver's deception unmasks Joseph's hypocrisy. And the moneylender, Moses, is a man of so much honor that he assists Charles in managing his debts.

Morality

Sheridan asks his audience to question the morality of society in this play. Slandering one's

neighbors, acquaintances, and friends is an entertainment. There is no real interest in the truth—and even less consideration is given to the damage that such gossip causes.

In the early acts of *School for Scandal*, the subjects of such gossip are not known to the audience, who cannot determine the truth of Lady Sneerwell and Mrs. Candour's observations. But by the last act, it becomes clear that these gossips need absolutely no element of truth to fuel their stories. The felling of the screen in Joseph's library—and the confrontation that took place immediately after—are fresh in the audience's mind. This earlier scene serves as a nice contrast to the

speculation and innuendo that engages the gossips. Although it is all comedy, it is comedy that teaches a lesson to the audience.

## Sentiment

*School for Scandal* is generally regarded as a refutation of the sentimental drama that was prevalent on the London stage prior to and during Sheridan's era. Sentiment was much admired as a replacement for the debauchery of Restoration comedy, but it often proved bland and boring. Often the protagonists were pure to the point of generic blandness. In Sheridan's play, Joseph Surface is much admired for his sentiment. Conversely, his brother Charles is chastised because he is not the man of sentiment that his brother is: "He is a man of sentiment . . . there is nothing in the world so noble as a man of sentiment." That Joseph is really not at all noble or admirable makes Sir Peter's compliment more damning and more a mockery of this eighteenth-century convention.

## Truth and Falsehood

Trying to determine the truth occupies much of Sheridan's play. Lady Sneerwell and Snake are engaged in deception and falsehood, and Joseph is willing to bend the truth to get what he wants. When Sir Oliver, disguised as old Stanley, approaches Joseph to ask for money, Joseph easily lies that he has no money. He even blames his brother, Charles, stating that Charles's free-spending has left Joseph without funds. Of course the gossips have no interest in the truth; their goal is to entertain one another with wild speculation. When compared to such exciting exaggerations as theirs, reality—and the truth—is boring.

## Wealth

This is certainly a play about wealth. The poor in London were much too busy trying to find shelter and food to engage in such idle distractions as gossip or gaming. Wealth really sets the characters in this play apart from the rest of society. For instance, Sir Peter complains that his wife spends too much on silk dresses and fresh out-of-season flowers. Charles spends his money gaming and drinking with his friends, and the moneylenders are on their way to being wealthy, thanks to idle young men such as Charles. Maria is the object of Joseph's plotting only because she is wealthy, and Sir Oliver is primarily interested in the morals of his nephews because he plans to leave them him wealth.

## STYLE

### Act

A major division in a drama. In Greek plays the sections of the drama signified by the appearance of the chorus were usually divided into five acts. This is the formula for most serious drama from the Greeks to the Romans and to Elizabethan playwrights like William Shakespeare. The five acts denote the structure of dramatic action. They are exposition, complication, climax, falling action, and catastrophe. The five act structure was followed until the nineteenth century when Henrik Ibsen (*A Doll's House*) revolutionized dramatic structure by combining elements into fewer acts.



*School for Scandal* is a five act play. The exposition occurs in the first act when the audience learns of Lady Sneerwell and Joseph's plan to break up the romance between Charles and Maria; the audience also meets the gossips. By the end of Act II, the complication, the audience has met Sir Oliver and knows that he plans to test his nephews' morality. The climax occurs in the third act when Charles meets his uncle disguised as a moneylender and agrees to sell him the family portraits.

The conflict between Maria and her guardian, Sir Peter, is revealed when she refuses his request to allow Joseph to court her. There are several near misses as a series of visits, Lady Teazle and her husband, Charles, and Lady Sneerwell all arrive at Joseph's. As Lady Teazle and her husband each hide in separate areas and each peek to see what is occurring, the screen finally provides the falling action, and the catastrophe occurs in the last act when Sir Oliver's arrival restores order and Sir Peter is reconciled with Maria and Charles.

### Plot

This term refers to the pattern of events. Generally plots should have a beginning, a middle, and a conclusion, but they may also be a series of episodes connected together. Basically, the plot provides the author with the means to explore primary themes. Students are often confused by the two terms; but themes explore ideas and plots simply relate what happens in a very obvious manner.

Thus the plot of *School for Scandal* is the story of how Joseph and Lady Sneerwell each try to lie their way to getting what they want, while its parallel plot is how Sir Oliver attempts to discover the truth about his nephews. But the themes are those of falsehood (in the form of malicious gossip), honesty, true love, and a rejection of sentiment as a virtue.

### Setting

The time, place, and culture in which the action of the play takes place is called the setting. The elements of setting may include geographic location, physical or mental environments, prevailing cultural attitudes, or the historical time in which the action takes place. The location for Sheridan's play is London during the eighteenth century—more specifically, it is set in London's richer quarters. No exact time markers are provided, but the action takes place during a short period of time.

### Character

A person in a dramatic work. The actions of each character are what constitute the story. Character can also include the idea of a particular individual's morality. Characters can range from simple stereotypical figures to more complex multi-faceted ones. Characters may also be defined by personality traits, such as the rogue or the damsel in distress. "Characterization" is the process of creating a lifelike person from an author's imagination. To accomplish this the author provides the character with personality traits that help define who he will be and how he will behave in a given situation.

*School for Scandal* provides two types of characters. There are traditional heroes and villains and a vulnerable young woman. But some characters are also defined by his or her name. Lady Sneerwell clearly does a good job of sneering contemptuously at everyone else. And Backbiter lives up to his name as well. Charles and Joseph's natures are revealed in their surname, Surface, indicating that they are somewhat superficial characters interested in appearances.

## Genre

Genres are a way of categorizing literature. Genre is a French term that means "kind" or "type." Genre can refer to both the category of literature such as tragedy, comedy, epic, poetry, or pastoral. It can also include modern forms of literature such as drama novels or short stories. This term can also refer to types of literature such as mystery, science fiction, comedy, or romance.

*School for Scandal* is most frequently classified as a comedy of manners, although it has also been accurately described as social satire and anti-sentimental drama.

## Comedy of Manners

"Comedy of manners" is a term applied to a type of play that provides a depiction of the very artificial manners and conventions of society. Characters are usually types and not individuals. Their names reflect their "type." The dialogue in these plays is witty and is of more interest to the audience than the plot, which serves more as an excuse to deliver humorous lines. The comedy of manners is associated most closely with the Restoration of the late-seventeenth century. But the illicit love affairs and lack of morality that defined the genre eventually resulted in their disappearing from the stage. Sheridan revived this genre in the late eighteenth century.

## Satire

Satire attempts to blend social commentary with comedy and humor. Satire does not usually attack any individual but rather the institution he or she represents. The intent is to expose problems and create debate that will lead to a correction of the problem. In *School for Scandal*, Sheridan satirizes a society that is so shallow that gossip and slander—and the destruction of a reputation—are forms of entertainment.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sheridan's England was a very different one than that of earlier British playwrights. The mid-seventeenth century had brought the German House of Hanover to the English throne. The first two King Georges spoke little English and had no interest in patronizing the arts. Royal patronage, which had supported so many writers in the past, ended. By the time George III became king in 1760, England was more concerned with colonization and reform than with supporting the arts.

While the British were cementing their control over Canada and India, the American colonists were proving themselves restless with Britain's rule. England had always seen itself as a military power; when the discontent in the colonies developed into the American Revolutionary War, which the British ultimately lost, George III took the news badly. But George III, who had always

been popular with his subjects, was ill and at the mercy of his son who constantly plotted to seize the throne.

At the same time, the industrialization of England had resulted in an even sharper division between classes. Industrialization brought a great deal of wealth to England but little of it found its way to the working class or the poor. What the poor had, instead, was even less than before. With the Enclosure Act, the lower class were shifted from the country, losing a simple existence that permitted them to grow some of their food and trade for their needs.

With no where else to go, these displaced people moved into London. There was little shelter and even fewer jobs to greet them. But there was cheap gin, and public drunkenness became a serious problem. But there were also public executions to entertain the poor and prisons for those who could not pay their debts. For those with money, there was tobacco and opium. There were coffeehouses, where tea was served more frequently than coffee, and men met there to drink and talk and read the newspapers.

Women were usually excluded from these social activities, but they did make attempts at social integration and suffrage (the right to vote). Gambling was a proper occupation for gentlemen, as was the visiting of brothels. While paying a prostitute for sex or having a mistress was acceptable for men, the same behavior was not permitted for women.

Ladies of the eighteenth century were to be chaste and early marriage was encouraged to ensure this; girls could wed at twelve years-of-age. Still, no such high standard interfered with men's behavior.

By the last half of the eighteenth century, drama had almost disappeared from the theatre. There were many great actors, but few playwrights were creating memorable work. There was little incentive for good writing. The playwright collected only the third, sixth, and sometimes (if the play lasted), ninth nights' profits. Theatre owners and actors, however, made a great deal of money. Still, theatre flourished, and several of London's more notable drama houses (including Sheridan's own Drury Lane Theatre) were established in the 1700s.

Surrounding the theatres were brothels, and this reflected the dual nature of the city. London was a complex city, and, in many ways, it reflected the chaos of the royal family. There were huge stores that imported the finest objects from around the world, and the city was crowded with artisans and street singers. The municipality tried to keep the streets cleaned and sewers were being built. But coal dust turned the buildings black and covered everything in its path. And on the edge of all this civility the slums existed. Sewage was dumped into the river Thames, and the poor made use with outside privies and slept in the doorways. Whole families shared one room—if they could afford it.

The city overflowed with life and vitality, but there were two distinct worlds present. One of the rigidly defined life of society, where social convention ruled behavior. This is the world of Sheridan's *School for Scandal*. The other world lay just outside the theatre's doors. Those dark, depressed, and often twisted lives would not be the subject of plays until the next century.

## **CRITICAL OVERVIEW**

*School for Scandal* opened in May 1777 to enthusiastic audiences. Since it appeared at the end of the London theatre season, it played only twenty performances before the season closed, but Sheridan's play reappeared the following season for an additional forty-five performances. Since few plays enjoyed runs of more than fifteen performances, *School for Scandal* was, by prevailing standards, a success.

In the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Mark S. Auburn noted that "the play engendered wildly enthusiastic support. Passing by the outer walls of Drury Lane just as the famous screen fell and the audience exploded in laughter and applause, a journalist of that day claimed to have run for his life in fear that the building was collapsing."

The reason for the play's success, stated Auburn, is "the witty repartee of fashionable society, the Cain-and-Abel motif, and the delightful recitation of the May-and-December theme." Richard C. Taylor, writing in *Sheridan Studies*, noted a different reason for the play's success. Taylor stated that critics overlooked the play's faults because they "recognized the topicality of Sheridan's moral concern and that Sheridan was targeting hypocrisy." Still, both Auburn and Taylor felt that *School for Scandal* was very popular with audiences and with reviewers. The audience appreciated the plot, especially since gossip had become an important feature in newspapers of the time (a foreshadowing of the gossip-frenzy that dominates many forms of multimedia information in the twentieth century).

But besides plot, Sheridan himself had ensured the play's success by opening it after a popular revival of William Congreve's comedies at Drury Lane. Sheridan eliminated some of the more offensive sexuality, and Congreve's work, which had been unpopular in recent years, received generally good reviews. When Sheridan opened *School for Scandal* immediately after showcasing three of Congreve's comedies, the critics quickly drew comparisons between the two dramatists. Suddenly Sheridan was the new comedic playwright of his generation, just as Congreve had been in his era.

Several critics, who made the intended connection between Congreve and Sheridan, pronounced Sheridan's work the superior while additionally congratulating him on resurrecting Congreve's reputation. In an examination of Sheridan's ties to Congreve, Eric Rump included several of the 1777 reviews of *School for Scandal* in an essay for *Sheridan Studies*. For instance, the reviewer for *The Gazetteer* applauded Sheridan's "Manly sentiments, entirely divested of affectation, and which are conveyed to the heart through the purest channels of wit." But an even more important compliment follows when the same reviewer stated that Sheridan's work presents a real challenge to Congreve's "royal supremacy."

The reviewer for the London *Evening Post* celebrated *School for Scandal*'s "wit and fancy . . . decency and morals." Sheridan, stated the same reviewer, demonstrates that "the standard of *real comedy* is once more unfurled." Seven years later, the connection to Congreve was not forgotten; a critic for the *Universal Magazine* wrote that Sheridan's play "has indeed the beauties of Congreve's comedies, without their faults; its plot is deeply enough perplexed, without forcing one to labour to unravel it; its incidents sufficient without being too numerous; its wit pure; its situations truly dramatic."

*School for Scandal* has endured as a popular play worthy of revival. The work was produced in England in 1990, and while the language, dress, and behavior appear alien to modern audiences, the revival still found appreciative viewers. The 1990 London production's director, Peter Woods, stated in *Sheridan Studies* that the characters are difficult, since "Nobody's fond of anybody."

The play is more difficult to stage in the contemporary dramatic era because audiences are too far removed from the issues presented in the play. The falling screen is still considered funny, but the context is not as filled with tension. Adultery and divorce are simply not as scandalous to a twentieth-century audience. Whereas a 1777 London audience would be tense with anticipation that Lady Teazle might be discovered, with the falling screen providing an explosion of laughter and release, a modern audience might only appreciate the slapstick nature of the scene. Woods described *School for Scandal* as "an artificial comedy about an artificial society in an artificial city."

An additional reason for the difficulty in staging the play is the anti-Semitism in its references to moneylending. Contemporary audiences are not comfortable with this, said Taylor, and the sections cannot be cut without compromising an important part of the play. Still, many of the societal malignancies that Sheridan sought to criticize are just as prevalent in modern society as they were during the playwright's lifetime. Combined with its distinction as a model comedy of manners, these touchstones to contemporary life allow *School for Scandal* to be appreciated by generations of audiences.

## **The School for Scandal Themes**

### **Gossip**

Gossip is perhaps the most central theme of *The School for Scandal*. Gossip, or rumors, may be true or may be false; in general, however, gossip is spread by both unofficial channels (word-of-mouth) and official channels (newspapers). Since word-of-mouth spreads faster, gossip is mostly spread in the play through that channel, but it is clear from discussions between characters that the spreading of rumors through newspapers has a particular way of spreading information far and making it seem credible. The main rumor spread in the play is that Charles and Lady Teazle are having an affair (spread purposefully by Lady Sneerwell, Joseph, and Snake), but other rumors arise and circulate as well, such as Charles's debt, Joseph and Lady Teazle's affair, and Sir Peter being wounded in a duel.

### **Marriage**

Marriage is another key theme of the play. This theme is mostly explored through the troubled marriage of Sir Peter and Lady Teazle. Sir Peter and Lady Teazle are different ages, come from different backgrounds, and seem to have different opinions about how people in the upper class should act; Lady Teazle believes she needs to keep herself integrated by spending money to stay in fashion and taking part in gossiping and judging. Sir Peter, on the other hand, would rather they live more simply and morally, and seems to not have expected this behavior from his wife. This

says something about the way their relationship progressed and the way that husbands and wives generally behaved with one another in Sheridan's time. Though the couple attempts to be friendly at times, the pressure Lady Teazle feels from society, especially as an outsider, damages their marriage. Interestingly, Sheridan also does not seem to believe that an affair necessarily means the end of a relationship: while the constant arguing in the first half of the play does force the couple to contemplate separation and perhaps drives Lady Teazle to pursue the affair, Sir Peter finding out about this actually gives him hope and confidence that his relationship with his wife may strengthen from her remorse.

### **Gender**

Gender is an important theme in *The School for Scandal*, especially as it interacts with other themes of the play such as gossip, marriage, and family. Women in upper-class, 18th-century England were generally viewed as less than men, and were treated as objects. In this play, they play two main roles: daughters and love interests. Lady Teazle even comments directly on these two options open for women, and the different power structures in the two: she tells Sir Peter, "if you wanted authority over me, you should have adopted me, and not married me"(p.47). In fact, Sir Peter is shown to have little authority over either his wife or his adopted daughter (or ward) Maria, who continues to lust after Charles and refuse the love of Joseph, despite her substitute father's wishes. Gender is also important to the theme of gossip because much of the gossip, especially the more trivial gossip, is focused on women. For example, in one long conversation, a group of gossipers discuss the makeup use of a few women who are not shown directly in the play. In another case, the men at Charles's house sing a song about different kinds of women, remarking on particular aspects of their physical appearances and characters.

### **Family**

Morality in *The School for Scandal* seems to be most judged by the way you treat your family. This theme is shown through the comparison between Charles and Joseph Surface, brothers who both seek inheritance from their rich uncle Sir Oliver Surface. Sir Oliver goes to each in disguise. He goes to Charles disguised as Mr. Premium, a money lender, and is appalled when Charles agrees to sell the collection of their family's portraits. This act represents him disregarding and disrespecting his family and lineage. However, he refuses to sell the portrait of Sir Oliver, and Sir Oliver completely forgives him. Sir Oliver goes to Joseph, who is generally regarded as the more moral and proper brother, dressed as Mr. Stanley, a destitute family member. Joseph is shown to lie and not help Mr. Stanley, even though Sir Oliver knows he has the money to do so. However, Charles, who is deeply in debt and thought to be a selfish young man, does send 100 pounds to Mr. Stanley. Weighing all of this, Sir Oliver decides that Charles will be his heir. This shows that, other moral failings aside, Sir Oliver sees the loyalty and willingness to support one's family as the most worthy trait in a man. It can be surmised that Sheridan wanted to promote this value, especially in cases where it might conflict with perceived social propriety.

### **Politics**

Satires, like *The School for Scandal*, are inherently political. While farces simply parody aspects of society through exaggeration, humor, and irony, satires do all this while pushing a particular message about an aspect of society that the author thinks needs to change or receive more attention and understanding. In this play, the theme of politics intertwines with the more general theme of gossip or scandal. It seems that there were not laws in place at the time to protect individuals from false rumors, or slander, which Sheridan shows has the power to ruin people's reputations and cause unrest in society as a whole. Sheridan challenges this through the character of Sir Peter, especially in dialogue with Lady Sneerwell. Lady Teazle challenges him, "Would you restrain the

freedom of speech?"(p.53), and a scene later he has a prepared retort when the subject arises again, responding "if [parliament] were to consider the sporting with reputation of as much importance as poaching on manors, and pass an act for the preservation of fame, I believe many would thank them for the bill...in all cases of slander currency, whenever the drawer of the lie was not to be found, the injured parties should have a right to come on any of the indorsers"(p.67-8). Sir Peter believes punishment should be wrought both on the original creators of the rumor and those who spread them, making illegal much of what causes the conflicts of the play.

### **Physical Appearance**

Physical appearance was clearly of great importance in the upper class in 18th-century England. This is of particular importance in this play since it is a comedy of manners, meaning that it focuses on upper-class social customs, and since drama itself as a medium focuses on physical appearance more than genres that are purely textual. Physical appearance in *The School for Scandal* intersects with the theme of gender in that the physical appearances of women are more remarked upon due to their lower status in society. For example, there is a long, gossip-filled conversation between men and women alike about the makeup habits of some women who are not seen onstage in the play (one woman in particular is criticized for using makeup on her face but not blending it with her neck, creating an effect like an old statue whose head has been mended back onto its body (p.59)). In another scene, a group of men at Charles's house sing a song about different kinds of women, focusing particularly on their different physical characteristics such as having light or dark skin and having or lacking dimples (p.110).

### **Money**

Since *The School for Scandal*, as a comedy of manners, focuses on the lives and flaws of upper-class people, it is fitting that money or wealth is a strong theme in the play. A major question in the play is whether characters and the audience should believe Charles or Joseph to be the more moral and/or worthy brother. Joseph is shown to be wise and proper but stingy with his money, while Charles is fun-loving and spends himself into debt but is willing to give money to a poor relative, valuing family over his own wealth. Money is also the main issue that plagues Sir Peter and Lady Teazle's marriage, since she likes to (and feels the need to) spend more lavishly than he approves of. She seems to do this to try to stay in fashion, and thus in good standing, with high society. Sheridan thus shows how money played an important role in social standing, often to the point of causing interpersonal difficulties.

### **Quotes from The School for Scandal**

"Tale-bearers are as bad as the tale-makers."

Mrs. Candour, p.28

In this quote, Mrs. Candour raises one of the central questions of the play. Are those who spread rumors and scandal, as she says, as bad as those who create them purposefully to harm the reputations of others? While Sheridan seems to believe so, that Mrs. Candour suggests this is ironic and hypocritical since she is one of the major spreaders of gossip in the play.

"To pity, without the power to relieve, is still more painful than to ask and be denied."

Joseph, p.192

Throughout the play, the audience has been led through the conversations of many characters to believe that Joseph is the more moral and worthy of the two Surface brothers. However, in Act V Scene I, Joseph refuses to give any money to Sir Oliver, who has disguised himself as Joseph's poor relative, Mr. Stanley. In this quote, Joseph even tries to spin the situation as if it is more difficult for him, who supposedly feels deep pity for Mr. Stanley but simply does not have money to give, a fact which Sir Oliver knows is not true.

"Wounded myself in the early part of my life by the envenomed tongue of slander I confess I have since known no pleasure equal to the reducing others to the level of my own injured reputation"

Lady Sneerwell, p.15

In Act I Scene I, Lady Sneerwell directly tells Snake and the audience about why she is willing and eager to spread rumors she knows could ruin others' reputations. This kind of honesty, especially so early in the play, is surprising because of how guarded and deceitful the play's characters generally are in the public sphere. This quote and the surrounding scene set up one of the major conflicts of the play: the rumor that Charles and Lady Teazle are having an affair, which causes both Sir Peter and Maria to doubt their lovers.

"If you wanted authority over me you should have adopted me and not married me"

Lady Teazle, p.47

This quote is representative of the ongoing arguments that plague Lady Teazle and Sir Peter's marriage, but it also alludes to the theme of gender and the role of females in the play. See the discussion in the "Themes" section for more on the theme of gender and this quotes' relation to it.

"There is no trusting to appearances"

Lady Sneerwell, p.199

In this quote, the word "appearances" alludes to a number of different themes and events in the play. First, physical appearance itself is of high importance since looking youthful and fashionable was important to maintaining one's social status. In this and other scenes in the play, small groups of people gossip ruthlessly about people's appearances, and especially their use of makeup, which is criticized if it is too heavy or improperly done, since this reveals one's failures to appear beautiful, youthful, and in fashion. Second, this quote reminds the audience of the theme of disguises in the play. This is seen both literally through Sir Oliver's visits to his nephews in two different disguises, and figuratively in the social act of disguising one's flaws, as Joseph does by pretending to be moral and caring but actually being selfish and greedy.



"A School for Scandal! tell me, I beseech you,  
Needs there a school this modish art to teach you?  
No need of lessons now, the knowing think;  
We might as well be taught to eat and drink."

Prologue narrator, p.11

This quote begins the prologue to the play, given after the "portrait" (p.5) but before the play truly begins with Act I Scene I. In this prologue, themes of gossip and gender, among others, are foreshadowed and discussed ironically. Specifically, this quote asks the audience whether anyone actually needs to be taught how to spread scandals in society at that time, since it seemed to come as naturally to people as eating and drinking.

"If they were to consider the sporting with reputation of as much importance as poaching on manors, and pass an act for the preservation of fame, I believe many would thank them for the bill."

Sir Peter, p.67-8

The political nature of the play's morals becomes clear in Sir Peter's discussion of a bill for the preservation of fame. Though Sheridan's play is humorous and entertaining, at its heart it is a satire, which means Sheridan sought social awareness and change. Specifically, he sought to shed light on the devastating effects of gossip and scandal on individuals and society at large, and suggested through the character of Sir Peter that there should be harsher laws to punish rumor-spreaders and to protect those whose reputations might be threatened.

"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."

Lady Sneerwell, p.24

Another major question the play raises is whether smart, funny people could have an entertaining conversation without judging and gossiping rudely about others. While Sir Peter and Maria suggest that this could and should be the case, many other characters seem to believe that being mean is simply part of normal conversation, especially if the conversation is meant to be humorous. They do not care about the negative effects of their speech on those present or on those whom they discuss.

"I'll not debate how far scandal may be allowable; but in a man, I am sure, it is always contemptible. We have pride, envy, rivalry, and a thousand motives to depreciate each other; but the male slanderer must have the cowardice of a woman before he can traduce one."

Maria, p.24

Maria's character is a symbol of moral purity in the play. Even when she is in a large group of people all gossiping about someone, she refuses to engage with them and often speaks up against what is happening. In this quote, she shames the other characters for their rumor-spreading and underscores the interplay of the themes of gossip and gender. She seems to suggest that women are more prone to gossip, though Sheridan also, perhaps pointedly, shows that many of the characters who create and help to spread rumors in the play are male.

"I have got a room full of ancestors above: and if you have a taste for old paintings, egad, you shall have 'em a bargain!"

Charles, p.124

The portraits of Charles's ancestors are a symbol of his apparent disregard for family in pursuit of money. This is a major event in the play since Sir Oliver needs to decide which of his nephews are worthy of inheriting his fortune and many characters have argued throughout the first three acts of the play about whether Charles is actually devoid of morals. Sir Oliver promises himself that he will never forgive Charles after the young man agrees to sell his family's portraits, thereby symbolically giving up the family's proud lineage, especially for "a bargain"(p.124), but he soon forgives his nephew when he refuses to sell the portrait of Sir Oliver for any price.

#### Commentary

*School for Scandal* opened at the Drury Lane Theatre in London, England, in May of 1777. It was an enormous success. Reviews heralded the play as a "real comedy" that would supplant the sentimental dramas that had filled the stage in the previous years. While wildly popular in the eighteenth century, the play has not been as successful with contemporary audiences.

One significant problem is the anti-Semitism that runs throughout the play. Post-World War II audiences are understandably sensitive to the disparaging remarks made about moneylenders, who were often Jewish. That the character of Moses is portrayed as honest and concerned is depicted in the play as an aberration. When Sir Oliver is learning how to disguise himself as a moneylender, he is told that he must ask 100% interest because it is expected that he must behave as an "unconscionable dog."

But anti-Semitism is not the only problem with modern staging. By current standards, the play appears artificial in the characters' speech, dress, and motivations. A comedy about manners is not as interesting to twentieth century audiences because manners and the rules of society are far more permissive and wide-ranging than they were in the 1700s. When *School for Scandal* was revived on the London stage in 1990, the director stated that another problem with staging was the lack of any one strong character to drive the play.

Perceptions regarding the nature of drama also play into contemporary perceptions of Sheridan's work. Peter Woods, who directed the 1990 revival, stated in an interview in *Sheridan Studies*, that "today's audience supposes itself to be watching ART. Sheridan's audience was looking at the funnies." Woods believed that audiences taking themselves and historical plays too seriously are what prevents Sheridan's comedy from being as successful today. Nevertheless, *School for Scandal* remains a standard for comedies of manner and is considered Sheridan's defining work.