

**THE SCHOOL FOR
SCANDAL: A
COMEDY IN FIVE ACTS**

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The school for scandal: a comedy in five acts by Richard Brinsley Sheridan

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A COMEDY IN FIVE ACTS

BY
RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN

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A FEW REMARKS
ON
THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL.
BY
WILLIAM WINTER.

ALTHOUGH genius is elemental, and therefore is not created by circumstances, it is certain that circumstances exert an important influence upon its drift, and upon the channels and methods of its expression. Sheridan—whose father was an actor and whose mother was a dramatist, and who was born at Dublin in 1751, and trained at Harrow School from 1762 till 1769, when he went to reside with his father at Bath—came upon the scene at a period when English fine society was in an exceedingly artificial condition; and this prevalent artificiality of manners, as experience subsequently proved, was destined to increase and to prevail during the whole of his career [he died in 1816], and not to decline until after the death of George the Fourth, in 1830. When Sheridan went to reside at Bath he was in his nineteenth year; a remarkably handsome youth; ardent and impressible; and Bath was then one of the gayest cities in the British kingdom. In that brilliant city and in that opulent, insincere, tattling, backbiting society—intermittently, but most of the time—he lived during the perilous years of his youth, from 1770 to 1776: there he loved and won for a wife the beautiful Eliza Linley—eloping with her to France, and fighting duels in her defence when he came back; there he wrote "The Rivals" and "The Duenna," and there he planned and partly executed "The School for Scandal." Into "The Rivals" he wrought much of his own personal experience, duly and artistically modified and veiled. Into the "School for Scandal" he wrought the results of his observation—working in a manner essentially natural to his order of mind, yet one that was to some extent guided and impelled by the study of Etherege, Wycherley, Farquhar, Vanbrugh, and Congreve, who are his intellectual ancestors. There is more freedom, more freshness of impulse, more kindness, more joy, more nature in "The Rivals" than

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there is in "The School for Scandal;" but both are artificial; both reflect, in a mirror of artistic exaggeration, the hollow, feverish, ceremonious, bespangled, glittering, heart-breaking fashionable world, in which their author's mind was developed and in which they were created. The "School for Scandal," indeed, is completely saturated with artificiality, and the fact that it was intended to satirize and rebuke the faults of an insincere, scandal-mongering society does not—and was not meant to—modify that pervasive and predominant element of its character.

Satire, in order to be effective, must portray the thing that it excoriates. The "School for Scandal" rebukes a vice by depicting it, and makes the rebuke pungent by depicting it in a brilliant and entertaining way; yet there is no considerable comedy in our language, not even one by Etherege or by Congreve*—authors whose influence was naturally and cogently operative upon the kindred mind of Sheridan—that stands further off

* The student of the comedies of Sheridan is aided in his appreciation of their quality, their spirit, their peculiar excellence, by a preliminary study of Etherege, Wycherley, Farquhar, Vanbrugh, and Congreve. The intellectual line represented by those writers closed with Sheridan. No successor has arisen, although of imitators there have been scores. Sir George Etherege [1636?-1689] wrote "The Comical Revenge" [1664], "She Would if She Could" [1668], and "The Man of Mode, or Sir Fopling Flutter" [1676]. William Wycherley [1640-1715] wrote, between 1672 and 1677, "Love in a Wood," "The Gentleman Dancing-Master," "The Country Wife," and "The Plain-Dealer." Moore found it difficult to believe that Sheridan was unfamiliar with the last of these pieces: it is extremely probable that he had a cursory knowledge of them all. George Farquhar [1678-1707] wrote "Love and a Bottle" [1699], "The Constant Couple" [1700], "Sir Harry Wildair" [1701], "The Inconstant" [1702], "The Twin Rivals" [1703], "The Stage Coach" [1705], in which he was assisted by Peter A. Motteux [1660-1718], "The Recruiting Officer" [1705], and "The Beaux Stratagem" [1707]. Sheridan had the same Irish grace that is found in Farquhar, but he more closely resembles Congreve in terseness and glitter. Sir John Vanbrugh [1666?-1726] wrote "The Relapse" [1697], "The Provoked Wife" [1697], "Æsop" [1697], "The Pilgrim" [1700], "The False Friend" [1702], "The Confederacy" [1705], "The Mistake" [1706], "The Cuckold in Conceit" [1706], "The Country House" [1715], and "A Journey to London" [1728]. "Squire Trelooby" [1734] is also attributed to him. Vanbrugh wrote with more apparent facility than either of the others in this group, and his language is more flexible, more like the language of actual men and women, than that of the rest. William Congreve [1670-1729] wrote "The Old Bachelor" [1693], "The Double-Dealer" [1694], "Love for Love" [1695], "The Mourning Bride" [1697], "The Way of the World" [1700], "The Judgment of Paris," a Masque [1701], and "Semele" [1707]. Moore notes the significant fact that the best comedies have generally been written by young authors. All of Congreve's pieces were written before he was twenty-five. Farquhar died at thirty. Vanbrugh began early. Sheridan at twenty-seven had written "The School for Scandal," and he never surpassed it; indeed, practically, he wrote no more for the stage—for "Pizarro" and "The Stranger" (which substantially are his) are scarcely worth remembrance. But the reason why good comedies may be written by clever young men is not obscure. Comedy must necessarily treat of actual life and manners, and this subject, which ceases to be interesting as men grow old, is for youth a delightful inspiration.

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from the simplicity of nature, moves in a more garish light, or requires for its intelligible and effective interpretation a more studied, manufactured, fantastic manner. It contains no person upon whom the imagination can dwell with delight, or to whom the heart can become devoted; no person who either fires the mind by example, or arouses the imagination by romantic nobility, or especially wins esteem whether for worth of character or excellence of conduct. Once or twice indeed—as in *Charles's* impulsive expression of grateful sentiment toward the bounteous uncle whom he supposes to be absent from the scene of the Auction, and in *Sir Peter Teazle's* disclosure to *Joseph* of his considerate intentions toward his volatile wife, in the scene of the Screen—it imparts a transient thrill of feeling. But it never strikes—and, indeed, it never aims to strike—the note of pathos, in its portraiture of human life: so that, in the main, it contains scarcely a single trait of simple humanity. And yet its fascination is universal, indomitable, irresistible, final—the fascination of buoyant intellectual character, invincible gayety, pungent satire, and a gorgeous affluence of polished wit. It succeeded when it was first produced, and now, after the lapse of a hundred and thirteen years, it still continues to please, equally when it is acted and when it is read. There is a moral in this, which ought to carry comfort to those votaries of art who believe in symbol rather than in fact, the ideal rather than the literal; who know that a dramatic picture of life, in order that it may be made universal in its applicability and incessant in its influence, must be made to present aggregate and comprehensive personifications and not local and particular portraits, and must be painted in colors that are not simply true but delicately exaggerated. This is the great art—the art which has made Shakespeare to survive when Ben Jonson is dead. The absence of genial emotion—of the glow of expansive humanity and of pathos—in the "School for Scandal" is, perhaps, to be regretted; but in this case a deficiency of the melting heart is counterbalanced by a prodigality of the opulent mind. The piece transcends locality and epoch. The resident not only of Bath and of London, but of New York and San Francisco, the denizen not only of great capitals but of provincial villages, the inhabitant of yesterday, to-day, and to-morrow, can perceive the meaning, feel the power, and rejoice in the sparkling gayety of "The School for Scandal."

This great comedy—produced when its author was in his twenty-seventh year—was written slowly, painfully, and with patient labor. Moore devotes about thirty pages of his "Life of Sheridan" to an exposition of the two distinct sketches that the dramatist first made, when rearing the fabric of the piece, and dilates with particular admiration upon the scrupulous study, the fastidious care, and the anxious severity of revision with which he selected his language, moulded his materials, and blended and fused the many scattered threads of his fancy and inventive thought into one symmetrical fabric of crystal wit. "Nothing great and durable,"

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exclaims the delighted biographer [and Moore was a man of excellent judgment, great reading, and a beautiful faculty in literature], "has ever been produced with ease. . . . Labor is the parent of all the lasting wonders of this world, whether a verse or stone, whether poetry or pyramids." The original manuscripts of the comedy manifested especially to Moore's discerning eye "a certain glare and coarseness," showing the effect of recent study of Wycherley and Vanbrugh; but also they revealed the steady pressure of a delicate taste and the incessant operation of strenuous refinement, alike in the improvement of the characters, the conduct of the plot, the formation and arrangement of the sentences, and the choice of epithets. One of Sheridan's peculiarities, indeed, was a light, graceful, indolent manner of elegant leisure. He preferred that people should suppose that his work was always done spontaneously and with careless ease. In reality he accomplished nothing without effort. During a considerable part of his life—certainly till he was thirty-six, when he joined Edmund Burke's sentimental crusade against Warren Hastings, and fortified the rancorous rhetoric of that statesman by a refulgent burst of verbal fireworks concerning the Begum Princesses of Oude—his industry was minute, assiduous, and vigilant. No man was ever a more pertinacious worker, and no man ever seemed to have less occupation or less need of endeavor for the accomplishment of splendid things. He did not, as so many fussy people do—who cannot endure to be employed without an everlasting fluster of cackle over the virtue of their toil—intrude his labor upon the attention of his friends. He displayed the finished statue; he did not vaunt the chips and the dust that were made in the cutting of it. He gave results; he did not proclaim the process of their production. "Few persons with so much natural brilliancy of talents," says Moore, "ever employed more art and circumspection in their display." But Sheridan's reticence in this particular was not exclusively of a theatrical kind. He held the most of human achievements to be [what certainly they are] of slight importance; he shrunk with all his soul from the disgrace and humiliation of being a bore; and he possessed in extraordinary fulness, and therefore he abundantly exerted, the rare faculty of taste. There can be no doubt that as time wore on the character of Sheridan was weakened and degraded by misfortune, embarrassment, profligate associations [with the Prince Regent and his shameless set], and most of all by intemperance; but at the beginning of his life, and for some years of his splendid productiveness and prosperity, he was a noble gentleman and a most individual mental power; and there is no reason why a virtue of his character should be set down to its weakness.

The "School for Scandal" was produced under auspicious circumstances. Garrick had read it and pronounced it excellent. Garrick, moreover, had assisted at its rehearsals, and had written a prologue to introduce it. Murphy, in his life of that great actor—then retired from

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the stage—says that Garrick was never known on any former occasion to be more anxious for a favorite piece. On the first night, May 8, 1777, the doors of Drury Lane Theatre, which were opened at half-past five, had not been opened an hour when the house was crowded. The receipts that night were £225. King spoke the prologue, which is in Garrick's more whimsical and sprightly manner. Colman furnished an epilogue. The rehearsals had been numerous and careful. Sheridan, who was manager as well as author, had taken great pains. Every part was well acted. The incessant play of wit created an effect of sparkling animation. Mrs. Abington, King, and Smith—who played respectively *Lady Teazle*, *Sir Peter Teazle*, and *Charles Surface*—were uncommonly brilliant. Palmer, as *Joseph Surface*, was superb. The only defect noticed was a sluggishness of movement in act second, incident to some excess of talk by the clique of scandal-mongers. Garrick observed that the characters upon the stage at the falling of the screen waited too long before they spoke. At the close of the screen scene, nevertheless—ending the fourth act—the applause was tremendous. Frederick Reynolds, the dramatist, happening to pass through the pit passage, “from Vinegar Yard to Brydges Street,” about nine o'clock that night, heard such a noise, all at once, that he thought the theatre was about to fall, and ran for his life. The public enthusiasm, after the final descent of the baize, was prodigious. Sheridan was so delighted that he quaffed unlimited wine, got drunk, made a row in the street, and was knocked down and put into the watch-house. The London newspapers teemed with praises of the comedy, not only on the next day but on many days thereafter. Horace Walpole, who speedily went to see it, wrote thus from his retreat at Strawberry Hill: “To my great surprise there were more parts performed admirably in this comedy than I almost ever saw in any play. Mrs. Abington was equal to the first in her profession. Yates, Parsons, Miss Pope, and Palmer, all shone.” Boaden, the biographer, in allusion to King and Mrs. Abington as *Sir Peter* and *Lady Teazle*, said they were so suited to each other that they lost half their soul in separation. For years afterward the success of “The School for Scandal” was so great in London that it clouded the success of the new pieces that were brought forward in its wake. From the capital it went to Bath, Edinburgh, York, Dublin, and other large towns of the kingdom. Moore records that the scenes of the Auction and the Screen were presented upon the Paris stage in 1778, in a piece called “*Les Deux Neveux*,” and that the whole story soon found its way to the Théâtre Français, under the name of “*Tartuffe de Mœurs*.” Genest, commenting on the first cast, and speaking from his ample knowledge of the chronicles of the first performance (if not, possibly, from personal recollection), observes that “this comedy was so admirably acted that though it has continued on the acting list at Drury Lane from that time to this [1832], and been several times represented at Covent Garden and The Haymarket, yet no new performer has ever ap-