

**THE DRAMATIC WORKS OF
RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN.
WITH A BIOGRAPHICAL AND
CRITICAL SKETCH**

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The Dramatic Works of Richard Brinsley Sheridan. With a Biographical and Critical Sketch by Leigh Hunt

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LEIGH HUNT

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BIOGRAPHICAL AND CRITICAL SKETCH

OF

RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN.

BY LEIGH HUNT.

THE subject of the following notice has been so lately before the world, and played so long and distinguished a part in it, in connexion with other celebrated men and public events, that our slight and hasty sketch must be considered rather as arising from the necessity of saying something about him, however short, in compliance with a plan of publication, than as an attempt to do justice to his fame. Whether it is, also, that the writer of it has come lately from graver studies, or not long since been occupied with the comic dramatists of a former day, who appeared to him warmer-hearted men, he cannot say; but, notwithstanding his admiration and enjoyment of the comedies of the "Rivals" and the "School for Scandal," he is conscious of a want of enthusiasm for the genius of Sheridan; and as, in default of greater detail of his own, he would refer the more curious reader to the two volumes of "Life and Memoirs," written by a distinguished living poet, with an information no less abundant than his wit, so, as a counteraction, if need be, to his own too sparing encomiums, he has concluded his sketch with a passage out of Mr. Hazlitt's *Lectures on the Comic Writers*, in which that admirable critic has panegyricized our author with a zeal approaching to fondness.

RICHARD BRINSLEY BUTLER SHERIDAN (for so he was christened, after Brinsley Butler, second Earl of Lanesborough, though he dropped the latter name in his signature) was born in Dorset Street, Dublin, in the month of September 1751. He was the son of Thomas Sheridan, actor and elocutionist, and grandson of Dr. Sheridan, a celebrated schoolmaster, the friend of Swift. His mother was Frances Chamberlaine, authoress of "Nourjahad" and "Sidney Biddulph." He went to school, first in Dublin, and afterwards at Harrow; and was so careless at both places, and acquired so little, that his Irish schoolmaster pronounced him "an impenetrable dunce;" and the masters at Harrow, though they discerned his capacity, could do nothing with it, either by severity or indulgence. When he left Harrow, he could not spell; and he seems to have pronounced as badly, if we are to judge from his writing *think for thing*; but his aristocratic schoolfellows surpassed him in vulgarity of mind, for they taunted him with being the son of a player.

On leaving school, he did not go to the university, probably because his father was poor; yet, in spite of his inaptitude for being taught, which continued the same at home, his inclination to letters was so great, that he and a schoolfellow (Halhed, whose vivacity afterwards made so strange an end in the dull mysticism of Brothers) had already entered into a sort of partnership of wit and versification, which they now proposed to turn to account with the booksellers. The only project, however, which they completed, was the translation of a book not worth the trouble, the "Epistles of Aristænetus."

Sheridan had already got a habit of delay, which spoiled all the projects, both of himself and his friends. Yet he now showed what a curious start he could get of them, by turning out to be the accepted lover of a young lady, of whom his own brother and his friend Halhed were both enamoured, and in whose heart, though they both confided to him their passion, they did not know he took any interest. The lady was Miss Linley the singer, a beauty then only sixteen, with whom all the world were in love. Sheridan ran away with her to a secret marriage in France, where her friends thought she had gone to evade her lovers in general. He then fought a duel on her account with a married blackguard, who had worried and defamed her; and, finally, on her return to England, and by extorted permission of her father, repeated the nuptial ceremony by licence in the year 1773. It is said, that while she was residing with her angry friends during the interval of the two weddings, and pursuing her professional avocations, he more than once disguised himself as a hackney-coachman, and drove her home from the oratorios at Covent Garden.

During the early period of his marriage, Sheridan lived upon part of a sum of three thousand pounds, which a good-natured old gentleman had settled upon Miss Linley, in default of being able to induce her to marry him: yet so strange were the husband's notions of dignity, that he would no longer suffer his wife to earn a subsistence by her talents. It appears from Boswell, that Dr. Johnson applauded this pride: but he did so, probably, in ignorance of the other circumstance; certainly in no foresight of the shifts and impreviencies of Sheridan's life.

The approaches of want of money, or most likely the pressure of it, appears to have hastened the composition of our author's first drama, "The Rivals," which was brought out at Covent Garden in January 1775. The admirers of this highly diverting and popular comedy are astonished to hear that it failed on its first night. But the circumstance was attributable, chiefly, to the bad acting of one of the performers; and, on the substitution of another, and the alteration of such passages as a first night's experience generally requires to be corrected, the comedy became the favourite which it remains. The character of Falkland is thought to have been suggested to the author by some tempers of his own during courtship. The wit and trickery of Captain Absolute probably lost nothing from similar self-references: nor may Sir Anthony be supposed to have been the worse for recollections of the paternal will and pleasure of Mr. Sheridan, senior, who was as arbitrary a father as rhetorician. Mrs. Malaprop is a caricature, but a very amusing one, of Mrs. Sliplop. Even her "allegory on the banks of the Nile," however, must yield to the other's anger in behalf of the "frail