

**THE CRITIC: OR, A
TRAGEDY
REHEARSED: A FARCE**

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The Critic: Or, A Tragedy Rehearsed: A Farce by Richard Brinsley Sheridan & G. A. Aitken

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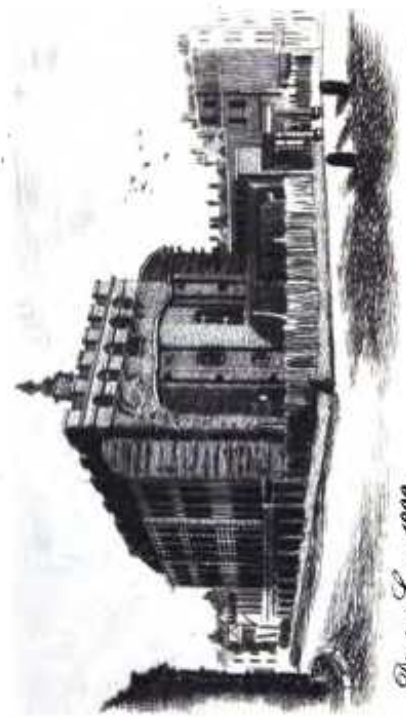
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RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN & G. A. AITKEN

**THE CRITIC: OR, A
TRAGEDY
REHEARSED: A FARCE**



Dressy Lane 1879.



THE CRITIC

OR

A TRAGEDY REHEARSED

A Farce written by

RICHARD BRINSLEY
SHERIDAN

Edited with Preface and Notes

by

G. A. AITKEN

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Preface.

History of the Play. Sheridan's farce, *The Critic, or a Tragedy Rehearsed*, was brought out on the 30th of October 1779, when the author, then aged twenty-eight, was manager of Drury Lane Theatre; and its wit has kept it alive to this day, though many of the personal allusions have long since ceased to be understood by the reader. There is the usual story of Sheridan's procrastination. We are told that two days before the play was to be produced the last scene was unfinished, and that it was only by inveigling Sheridan into the green-room, where there was a fire, wine and supper, stationery, and the incomplete manuscript, and then locking him in, that he was brought to finish the work. It is said that he laughed heartily at the joke; certainly he was not loth to have such stories told, for he liked it to be thought that his brilliant scenes were thrown off without any of the care which, in reality, he bestowed upon them. *The Critic* was not printed until 1781, when, unlike Sheridan's other plays, it was published with the author's approval. The original edition has an engraved title-page, which was afterwards used, without modification, in later issues; the genuine first issue can thus only be distinguished by examining the watermarks in the paper.

Parsons, as Sir Fretful Plagfary, the author; Miss Pope, as the tragedy heroine Tilburina; and Bannister as Don Ferolo Whiskerandos, were among the chief successes of the original cast. In later days the names of Farren and Charles Matthews have been associated with the play, and many changes have been introduced

on the stage in order to bring the satire up to date. Matthews published in *Tinsley's Magazine* for November 1872 a defence of the system of "gags" which he and others introduced into the piece with the view of suiting it to a modern audience. Unfortunately *The Critic* is now rarely acted in public, and never in its original form.

In drawing the character of Sir Fretful Plagiary, Sheridan had in mind the dramatist Richard Cumberland, who had prefixed to his play, *The Cholerick Man*, a Dedication to Detraction. Cumberland was sensitive, vain, and envious. In one of his letters to Garrick he complains of Sheridan's neglect when one of Cumberland's tragedies was being read to the actors: "It gave me not the slightest offence, as I put it all to the habit of dissipation and indolence." There is a well-known tale that when Cumberland and his family witnessed the first performance of *The School for Scandal*, Cumberland asked his children what they found to laugh at, adding, in an undertone, "keep still, you little dunces!" When Sheridan heard of this incident he said, "It was ungrateful of Cumberland to have been displeased with his children for laughing at my comedy, for when I went to see his tragedy I laughed from beginning to end." There are other versions of the story, and it is only fair to add that Cumberland's first tragedy was not acted until 1778, a year after *The School for Scandal*, and that he denied that he was present at the first performance of Sheridan's play. The original of Dangle is said to have been a Mr Vaughan, who had bustled himself in the affairs of the Richmond Theatre, and had written letters in the *Morning Post*. George Colman had ridiculed him, under the name of Dapper, in the papers called *The Genius* (1761-2). Among the plays satirised by Sheridan was John Home's *Fatal*

Discovery, one of the bombastic tragedies which were rendered obsolete by the wit of *The Critic*. One such piece, William Hodson's *Zoraida*, brought out in 1780, ran for eight nights only, because its heroine at once recalled Tilburina to the audience. Mad heroines who raved in white silk were no longer possible on the stage.

Between the production of *The Critic* on the stage and its publication, two skits appeared. In one of those pieces *The Critic, or a Tragedy Rehearsed*, "a new dramatic piece in three acts, by the author of the *Duenna*," 1780, the names of Sheridan's characters are borrowed, and applied to the purposes of political satire. The other piece, *The Critick anticipated; or, The Humours of the Green Room*, a Farce, by R. B. S., Esq., 1779, is a personal attack on Sheridan, with a dedication to the actors at Drury Lane and Covent Garden. Sheridan appears as Young Psalter, his father as Old Psalter, and his wife as Mrs Psalter; and there are various allusions to the elder Sheridan's work as teacher of elocution and compiler of dictionaries. A newspaper paragraph is read to the effect that Sheridan had been detected pilfering from scenes of different authors left in his custody for representation; and that the authoress of a tragedy called *The Woeful Countess* was greatly enraged at the manager's conduct. It will be remembered that Sheridan himself laughed in *The Critic* at the charge that he stole from plays forwarded to him as manager. Sir Fretful says he will never send a play to Drury Lane; "It is not always so safe to leave a play in the hands of those that write themselves"; they may steal, "and, egad, serve your best thoughts as gipsies do stolen children, disfigure them to make 'em pass for their own. . . . A dexterous plagiarist may do anything. Why, sir, for aught I know, he might take out

some of the best things in my tragedy and put them into his own comedy."

Forerunners of "The Critic." Sheridan's *Critic* is in one sense less original than either *The Rivals* or *The School for Scandal*, but a charge of plagiarism is as misplaced in the one instance as in the other. There had, of course, been several plays ridiculing the rant and fustian of conventional tragedy, among the best of them being Henry Carey's burlesque, *Chrononhotonthologos*, and Fielding's *Tragedy of Tragedies, or, The Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great*; and the rehearsal of a play, often with humorous references to the author's difficulties with the actors, had been a common theme. In Beaumont and Fletcher's *Knight of the Burning Pestle*, Ralph the apprentice acted the part of a quixotic knight, to the admiration of his master and mistress, who were seated on the stage; and Garrick had produced, in 1767, his successful *A Peep behind the Curtain, or, The New Rehearsal*. Sheridan had himself written, while a lad, in collaboration with his friend Halhed, a farce called *Jupiter*, in the form of a rehearsal, with an author, Simile, who is suggestive of Puff. Fielding used the idea of a rehearsal several times, and notably in *Parquin*, in which two plays are rehearsed, one a tragedy, the other a comedy, in the presence of their self-satisfied authors, and of a critic, Sneerwell, who reminds the reader of Sheridan's Sneer. Another piece of Fielding's dealing with a rehearsal, *The Historical Register for the year 1736*, has a character, Dangle, whose name Sheridan used in *The Critic*. There are, too, in this piece, four Patriots who shake their heads significantly, like Sheridan's Lord Burleigh. The play, however, which most resembles Sheridan's is the Duke of Buckingham's *Rehearsal*, published in