The Rivals

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RICHARD SHERIDAN

Richard Brinsley Sheridan was born in Dublin, Ireland, but was brought to England at the age of eight, never to return. He was educated at a British boarding school, where his classmates teased him because his father had the ungentlemanly profession of actor. He came from a literary family: his mother was also a successful playwright and novelist, while his grandfather had been a good friend of Jonathan Swift. Not long after leaving his boarding school, Sheridan moved with his family to Bath, where he fell in love with Elizabeth Linley, the famous and beautiful young singer he was to marry after fighting a series of a scandalous duels that captivated British society. In desperate need of money, he wrote *The Rivals* in 1775. After a poor initial reception, the play was revised and went on to become enormously successful. On the strength of this work, Sheridan was offered a job managing the historic Drury Lane Theater, which he went on to own. His father later served as the theater's manager. Sheridan had ambitions to be a true gentleman, however, which meant escaping the world of the theater. After writing a few other plays, including his other masterpiece *The School for Scandal* (1777), he used money earned from the theater to purchase a seat in parliament. He would serve in a variety of governmental roles over the next thirty-two years and become one of the most respected orators of his time. He was always extravagant with money, however, and in 1808, when the Drury Lane Theater burned down in a fire, he was bankrupted and removed from parliament. He spent his final years hounded by his creditors.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The city of Bath in England was founded by the ancient Romans as a town of spas, but underwent a revival in the 18th century and became a meeting point, sometimes an uncomfortable one, for members of the upper class and the aspiring middle classes. At the time that Sheridan wrote his play, Bath was already beginning to fall out of favor with members of the true upper class, as there were too many members of a rising middle class without a respectable pedigree that flocked there in search of high fashion.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Sheridan lived a century after the heyday ofthe Restoration comedy of manners, a period in theater history which saw the first female actors on the British stage and explored sexual themes with unprecedented openness. One of the famous plays of this period is Aphra Behn's *The Rover* (1677). While Sheridan's comedies were less sexually explicit than Restoration comedies of manners, he drew inspiration from these playwrights, and even staged Restoration Comedies in his capacity as manager of the Drury Lane Theatre, prompting revived interest in these works. He was given the nickname "the modern Congreve," after William Congreve (1670-1729), the celebrated Restoration playwright of witty comedies, including *The Way of the World*, about relationships between men and women and high-society affectation.In contrast to the bawdy works of the Restoration, though, Sheridan and his contemporaries wrote "genteel" comedies, which could be instructive for an audience drawn from both the middle and upper classes looking to cultivate good manners and a genteel aspect. Sheridan's comedies were also considered to be "laughing comedies," as separated from the crying comedies which were extremely moralistic and known to provoke tears. Later literary scholars would compare his plays to comedies of manners by Oscar Wilde, who skewered the affectations and aspirations of upper class Brits of the 1890s in witty and satirical plays like *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:***The Rivals*
- **When Written:**1775
- **Where Written:**London, England
- **When Published:**1775
- **Literary Period:**Georgian comedy, "new" Comedy of Manners, Genteel Comedy or Laughing Comedy
- **Genre:**Comedy
- **Setting:**Bath, Somerset, England
- **Climax:**Absolute is forced to admit to Lydia, Sir Anthony, and Mrs. Malaprop that Ensign Beverley is a false identity he created.
- **Antagonist:**Sir Lucius O'Trigger

EXTRA CREDIT

Pronunciation was paramount. Sheridan's father Thomas became a leading force in the elocutionary movement, a trend in education that emphasized the importance of correct pronunciation and good delivery. Sheridan even worked for a time at the school his father founded in in Bath, teaching men like Squire Acres how to sound more genteel.

Biopics galore. There had already been a play written about the love life of Elizabeth Linley. Samuel Foote's 1771 *The Maid of Bath*, which was based on Elizabeth's broken engagement to

the rich and elderly Walter Long, was still being staged when *The Rivals* first appeared.

PLOT SUMMARY

Two servants,Fag and Thomas, run into one another on the streets of Bath. Thomas explains that his master Sir Anthony Absolute decided on the spur of the moment to bring his entire household to town. Fag teasingly tells Thomas that he no longer works for the younger Absolute; his new master is Ensign Beverley. He explains that Absolute has taken on the identity of an ensign to woo the beautiful, young heiress Lydia Languish.

In Lydia's dressing room, Lydia and Lucy discuss the novels that Lucy has procured for her mistress. They are surprised by the entrance of Lydia's cousin Julia, who has just arrived in Bath with her guardian Sir Anthony. Lydia hastens catches her cousin up on her news: she was barred from communicating with her lover, Beverley,when her guardian Mrs. Malaprop discovered their affair. Mrs. Malaprop thinks an ensign is an unsuitable match for her niece. Meanwhile, Mrs. Malaprop is secretly corresponding with an Irish baronet name Sir Lucius.

Julia can't believe that Lydia really intends to marry a poor ensign, but Lydia is determined to do so and give up two-thirds of her fortune as a result. Julia thinks this silly, but Lydia mocks Julia's own fiancé Faulkland's silly jealousy. Julia defends Faulkland's bad temper as the result of his love for her and insecurity about deserving her.

Later, Sir Anthony arrives to visit Mrs. Malaprop, and together they chide Lydia for her interest in Beverley. Sir Anthony blames such disobedience in a girl on reading. Heargues that girls should be illiterate, while Mrs. Malaprop makes a garbled case for the areas of study appropriate for young ladies, attempting to use sophisticated language and instead sounding ridiculous. Sir Anthony has proposed marrying Lydia and Absolute, and they discuss how to convince the young people to accept the match.

After Sir Anthony leaves, Mrs. Malaprop reflects on her own love affair with Sir Lucius, and worries about how Lydia found out about it. She asks Lucy if she told Lydia, which Lucydenies. Mrs. Malaprop then gives Lucy another letter for Sir Lucius.Once she's alone, Lucy reflects on how much profit she's made in tips and gifts delivering letters for all these lovers, and how, while pretending to be simple, she actually revealed Lydia and Beverley's love affair to Mrs. Malaprop, and led Sir Lucius to believe that he's corresponding with Lydia instead of with her aged aunt.

In Absolute's lodging, Fag and Absolute plan how to keep Sir Anthony from learning about Absolute's courtship of Lydia (in his disguise as Beverley). Faulkland enters and urges Absolute to ask Mrs. Malaprop and his father for Lydia's hand in marriage, but Absolute isn't sure that Lydia will have him once she realizes he's rich and marrying him isn't an act of rebellion. Faulkland, meanwhile, has been in a terrible mood; he says it's because he worries about Julia when they're separated. Absolute reveals that Julia is well and in Bath, then convinces him to stay to hear an update on her from Acres, a neighbor of the Absolutes in the countryside. Acres comes in and tells them that Julia has been in perfect health and charms everyone she meets. Faulkland storms out in a jealous fit.

Acres, who knows nothing about Absolute's courtship of Lydia, now describes to Absolutehis own ridiculous attempts to become more fashionable as he tries to court Lydia. A bit later, Sir Anthony arrives and tells Absolute that he wants to make his son's fortune by marryinghim to someone.But Sir Anthonyrefuses to reveal who the woman is, saying that Absolute owes him unconditional obedience. Absolute responds that he's already in love and cannot obey his father, who curses him and storms off.

Meanwhile, Lucy delivers a letter from "Delia" to Sir Lucius. Sir Lucius still believes that "Delia" is Lydia. Fag has observed all this, and after Sir Lucius leaves he threatens to tell Ensign Beverley that Lucy is also acting on behalf of Sir Lucius, but Lucy explains that the letters actually come from Mrs. Malaprop. She then tells Fag that his master has an even more formidable new rival: Absolute. Fag gleefully hurries off to tell Absolute the news that the woman he loves and the woman his father intends him to marry are one and the same.

Not long after, Absolute spots his father on the North Parade and makes up with him. Without disclosing that he's already courting Lydia as Ensign Beverley, Absolute promises to marry any woman his father commands him to marry, no matter how old or ugly she is. Sir Anthony is disgusted that Absolute seems not to care whether his future wife will be beautiful.

Julia enters her lodgings to find Faulkland there. She asks Faulkland why he doesn't seem excited to see her, to which he says that he'd heard she had been jolly without him and so pretended indifference to her. She says she only put on a happy face so that her friends would not blame him for making her unhappy. He is momentarily reassured, but then presses her again, doubting that she truly loves him and does not merely feel duty-bound to marry him. She runs off sobbing.

Captain Absolute goes to visit Mrs. Malaprop at her lodgings. She is very impressed with his appearance and gallantry, and he flatters her. She pulls out a letter from Beverley (actually from Absolute) and they read it together. In the letter, Beverley mocks Mrs. Malaprop's pretention and ridiculous misuse of language and promises to find a way to see Lydia with Mrs. Malaprop serving as an intermediary. Absolute scoffs with Mrs. Malaprop at this impudence, then asks if he may meet Lydia. Mrs. Malaprop calls Lydia down, and departs. Lydia is shocked to see her lover, Beverley. He tells her that he posed as Absolute so as to be allowed to see her, and she is delighted

that he tricked her aunt. Mrs. Malaprop eavesdrops, but misinterprets what the two lovers are saying, and thinks that Lydia is rejecting Absolute cruelly. She intervenes and sends Lydia out of the room.

Sir Lucius arrives at Sir Acres lodgings and Acres explains that he has come to Bath to pursue Lydia, who is now being courted by a man named Beverley. Although there are no grounds for it, Sir Lucius convinces Acres that he should challenge Beverley to a duel. Acres is very nervous at the prospect, but allows Sir Lucius to guide him and write the letter of challenge. Sir Lucius says he may also soon issue a challenge to a captain who insulted Ireland. A while later, David tries to convince his master not to send the letter of challenge to Beverley. David's worries about the duel frighten Acres, but he is determined to push forward with it. Absolute then arrives, and Acres asks him to deliver the letter to Beverley, since he knows Absolute and Beverley are acquainted.

Mrs. Malaprop is praising Absolute to Lydia, who, believing that Mrs. Malaprop has only actually met Beverley, insists that Beverley is also charming. Sir Anthony and Captain Absolute arrive, but Lydia will not look at Absolute. She wonders, however, why her aunt does not recognize that this is a different man from the one she met earlier. Sir Anthony urges Absolute to speak, but he claims that he is too overcome with nervousness to do so. Finally, he realizes his secret is bound to be discovered. He urges Lydia not to be surprised, but she exclaims "Beverley," upon hearing his voice. At first Mrs. Malaprop and Sir Anthony think Lydia has gone mad, but then they realize that Absolute has deceived them all. Sir Anthonyis pleased that Absolute was lying when he pretended utter indifference to his wife's beauty. Mrs. Malaprop is appalled that Absolute wrote that letter mocking her, but at Sir Anthony's urging they leave the couple alone together. Lydia, however, is furious that Absolute deceived her. She throws away a miniature portrait of him that she had carried and says that she will not marry him. Sir Absolute and Mrs. Malaprop reenter and are dismayed to see an angry scene instead of a loving one.

Absolute walks on the North Parade, muttering about his ruined hopes. Sir Lucius spots him and, giving no explanation, challenges him to a duel. Absolute tries to ascertain Sir Lucius's reasons, but cannot. Yet he agrees to duel Sir Lucius that night. Sir Lucius departs, and Absolute runs into Faulkland. Absolute tells him that he has been rejected by Lydia and challenged by Sir Lucius, and asks Faulkland to be his second in the duel. Faulkland agrees. A servant arrives with a letter from Julia for Faulkland, in which she pardons him for his bad behavior. Although he had been wracked with guilt for having behaved badly towards her, he now thinks it is improper of her to give forgiveness without first being asked. Absolute tells him that he cannot listen to any more of the problems Faulkland invents for himself and exits. Faulkland, to himself, saysthat the duel has given him a new idea for a way to make sure that Julia truly loves him.

Faulkland tells Julia that he must flee England, suggesting that he killed someone in a duel. Julia says she will elope with him. He asks her to consider: they may have little money, and he may become more quarrelsome than ever. Still, she says she wants to be with him. Overjoyed at having proved the sincerity of her love, Faulkland reveals that he fabricated the story of the duel. Julia is furious; she says that this deception is the final straw, and that she will not marry him now. A while later, Lydia wanders in looking for Julia, who she expects to convince her to take Absolute back. She tells Julia about Absolute's deception, and Julia confesses that Faulkland had already told her about it. Lydia is angry at this, but begins to reminisce about the romantic times she and Beverley shared. Julia says she is in no mood to treat her cousin's behavior as humorous: she begs Lydia to be reasonable and not ruin a potentially happy marriage because of a caprice. Fag then enters with Mrs. Malapropand tells the ladies that Faulkland, Absolute, Sir Lucius and Acres are all to be involved in a duel.They all rush off to try to stop it.

As Absolute awaits the duel, Sir Anthony sees him. Absolute successfully hides the fact that he's going to fight a duel, but moments after he departs David runs up and tells Sir Anthony what's going on. They too hurry of to try to stop it.

On King's-Mead-Fields, a little out of town,Acres and Sir Lucius await their dueling opponents. Sir Lucius mentions the possibility that Acres will be killed, and Acres begins to lose courage. Faulkland and Absolute approach. Sir Lucius assumes that Faulkland is Beverley, but Acres recognizes that neither man is Beverley. Sir Lucius then encourages Acres to fight Faulkland in Beverley's stead, but Acres refuses. Absolute confesses that Beverley was a false identity he had taken on, and says that he is willing to fight Acres in Beverley's stead. Acres still refuses to fight. Sir Lucius calls Acres a coward, and Acres accepts the insult without challenging him. Sir Lucius and Absolute begin to fight, and at that moment the other characters hurry in Sir Anthony demands an explanation for how Absolute came to fight, but gets none. Mrs. Malaprop says that Lydia is terrified, and urges Lydia to tell Absolute that she still loves him. Sir Lucius cuts in and says that he can explain Lydia's silence, but Lydia then speaks up, saying that she loves Absolute. Sir Lucius then produces a love letter from Delia and demands whether Lydia wrote it. Lydia denies writing it, and Mrs. Malaprop confesses that she is Delia. Sir Lucius is not interested in marrying Mrs. Malaprop. and he says he foregoes his claim to Lydia. Sir Anthony advises Julia to marry Faulkland, promising that his jealous temperament will improve after they are married, and Acres promisesto throw a party for the newly engaged couples.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Captain Jack Absolute / Ensign Beverley – A confident, charming, and quick-witted Captain in the British army, Absolute is wooing the beautiful Lydia Languish. He tricks Lydia into believing that he is a poor ensign named Beverley in order to take advantage of her romantic disposition. He is a master manipulator, but is not necessarily criticized by the play, partially because his masterful use of language demonstrates his superior intellect. He is able to achieve his aims and be forgiven for all his misdeeds by using artifice, charm, and deception. He is especially keen to trick his father, Sir Anthony Absolute, who seeks to control everything Absolute does. Absolute acts honorably and bravely according to the accepted conventions of dueling. He is also the character that audiences of the time would have compared to Richard Brinsley Sheridan himself.

Lydia Languish – A passionate, book-obsessed girl of seventeen, Lydia Languish is determined to defy both convention and the wishes of her aunt and guardian Mrs. Malaprop in her choice of a husband. She is a fabulously wealthy heiress, but will lose two-thirds of her fortune if she marries without her aunt's consent, as she intends to do. Captain Absolute then uses Lydia's romanticism and determination to have a romance fit for a novel to woo her under the false identity of Ensign Beverley. Lydia is often scolded by her more reasonable cousin Julia for her capricious actions and self-defeating intentions. For instance, when she finds out Beverley is actually Absolute, she swears to break off their ties, although she still loves him.

Mrs. Malaprop / Delia – Lydia Languish's aunt and guardian, Mrs. Malaprop is a self-important and pretentious woman of around fifty, and the comedic heroine of the play. Her speech is garbled by malapropisms (ridiculous misuses of words), as she tries to use sophisticated language, the meaning of which she does not understand, making for some of the play's funniest moments. She lectures Lydia on obedience and proper behavior for a young lady, claiming that it is Lydia's duty to marry someone her elders choose for her. Meanwhile, Mrs. Malaprop herself has fallen in love with Sir Lucius O'Trigger, with whom she is corresponding under the pen name Delia. Unfortunately, Sir Lucius actually has no interest in Mrs. Malaprop, but has been led by the wily maid Lucy to believe that Delia is Lydia's pen name.

Sir Anthony Absolute – A rich baronet with an extremely short fuse, prone to becoming furious at the slightest provocation and with a habit of making decisions hastily. Sir Anthony wants to secure his son Absolute a fortune that will help bolster his social position. To this end he meddles in his son's life, telling him he must marry whomever he, Sir Anthony, chooses or else be disinherited. Sir Anthony ran away with Absolute's mother for love, however, and is nostalgic for the lust and excitement of young love. Sir Anthony is fiercely against women being allowed to read novels, which he thinks makes them forget their duty. Sir Anthony is also Julia's guardian, but has little involvement in managing her upcoming marriage.

Julia Melville – The play's moral core, Julia is as sensible as she is beautiful. An orphan, she is the ward of Sir Anthony, but was betrothed to Faulkland by her father before his death. Faulkland's distrust of her love has led them to delay their marriage. She loves Faulkland and puts up with his questioning of her motives, while putting on a happy face for the world even when he has upset her. She gives practical advice to her cousin Lydia, but is not above laughing at Mrs. Malaprop's silly use of language.

Faulkland – A moody and lovesick young man, Faulkland cannot believe his good fortune in being engaged to Julia and having her love, and constantly probes Julia to find out whether her love for him is real. He is the closest friend and confidante of Absolute, who finds his doubts ridiculous. Faulkland, on the other hand, thinks he loves Julia more deeply than Absolute loves Lydia. As soon as he is reassured of Julia in one way, though, he immediately finds something else to feel insecure about. Although he allows his doubts to drive him to behaving badly, he recognizes that this is a fault in his own temperament that never appears except when it comes to his love for Julia.

Squire Bob Acres – An impressionable and naïve country landowner, Acres is attempting to make himself more fashionable and sophisticated in order to win over the affections of Lydia Languish. His attempts to swear genteelly, learn French dances, and change his hairstyle all fall flat, however. Before Sir Anthony suggested Absolute as a partner for Lydia to Mrs. Malaprop, Malaprop supported Acres in his desire to marry her ward. Acres feels upset at then being put off and supposes that he is being supplanted by "Beverley." Sir Lucius works him up and convinces him to challenge Beverley to a duel, but like the other elements of gentlemanly polish that Acres lacks, he lacks the courage required to fight and potentially die for his honor.

Sir Lucius O'Trigger – An Irish baronet who has lost his land and home, but prizes his valor in duels and family honor above all else, Sir Lucius is carrying on a secret correspondence with "Delia." He is encouraged by Lucy to believe that his secret lover is Lydia, whereas it is in fact Mrs. Malaprop. Lucius hopes to improve his fortunes by eventually revealing this love affair to the world and getting Mrs. Malaprop's approval, thereby securing Lydia's enormous fortune. He is extremely argumentative and sees little need to justify a challenge to fight a duel. Thus, he eggs Acres on to challenge Beverley, and provides no explanation when he himself challenges Absolute.

Lucy – A maid in the household of Mrs. Malaprop and Lydia, Lucy is a master manipulator. Charged with carrying letters

between different courting pairs, Lucy pretends to be simpleminded in order to gain the trust of her social superiors and elicit gifts and tips from them. She is especially flirtatious with Sir Lucius, who she tricks into believing he is corresponding with Lydia, whereas actually the letters he receives are from Mrs. Malaprop.

David – The servant to Acres, David has a provincial boy's understanding of the world and sees the manor where he lives with Acres as the center of the world. He is treated by Acres a bit like a confidant, which is a sign of Acres's own country simplicity. He has a commonsense fear of the practice of dueling and is terrified that his master will be killed in a duel.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Fag – Absolute's servant, Fag has pretentions to being a sophisticated and world-wise man. He speaks pompously to his social superiors and talks down to other servants. He delights in knowing the secrets of Absolute's tricks and deceptions and is fiercely loyal to Absolute.

Thomas – A straightforward and goodhearted man, Thomas serves as Sir Anthony's servant.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

SHERIDAN AND HIS WORLD

Richard Brinsley Sheridan wrote *The Rivals*at the age of twenty-six, hoping to turn bad publicity into good and make money in the process. Although it is not autobiographical, *The Rivals*drew on Sheridan's experiences during his scandalous courtship of his own wife. Sheridan used the notoriety that his courtship had received through the rumor mills of British society to spark a widespread interest in his play, fill theater seats, and make his fortune. Much like Captain Absolute, Sheridan's protagonist in *The Rivals*,Richard Brinsley Sheridan was a talented wordsmith whose charisma and wit allowed him to succeed in the world. He lacked strong principles, but was willing to pretend to have them to get ahead. What he did seem to value were his desires for pleasure, success, and fame.

At the age of nineteen, Sheridan moved to Bath and soon fell in love with a beautiful sixteen-year-old soprano, Elizabeth Linley, who had nationwide fame as a singer and was known as "the maid of Bath." Like Captain Absolute's love interest Lydia Languish in *The Rivals*, Elizabeth had a number of suitors, including Sheridan's own brother Charles. Employing stratagems similar to Captain Absolute's, Sheridan managed to court her secretly, without letting on to his friends and family.

At the time that Sheridan fell in love with Elizabeth, an older, married man named Captain Mathews was attempting to force her to marry him. Sheridan convinced her to run away from this unwanted attention and escape to a convent in France, promising to escort her there as a friend. Once there, he confessed his love and convinced her to marry him, which he said would be the only way to prevent a scandal over their having run away together. Elizabeth, who found that she was already, in fact, in love with the handsome and charming Richard, agreed. The pair's fathers soon arrived in France and brought the two young people back, perhaps without realizing that the two had been secretly married, or perhaps simply determined to ignore this marriage as illegitimate.

While Richard and Elizabeth were in France, Captain Mathews published a denunciation of Richardin the *Bath Chronicle*, claiming that the younger man had spread nasty rumors about his treatment of Elizabeth. Upon Richard's return from France, he fought Mathews in a duel and won, forcing Mathews to print a retraction of his denunciation in the same newspaper. Mathews was then shunned by all his friends for having lost his honor through the embarrassing retraction. Upset at this, Mathews challenged Sheridan to a second duel. By the rules of honor, Richard was under no obligation to accept this challenge, but did, and was severely injured in the ensuing sword fight.

In *The Rivals*the two pairs of combatants set to duel are ridiculous, and neither duel comes to pass. But the behavior of Bob Acres and Sir Lucius O'Trigger echoes that of Captain Mathews. In the first duel Mathews conducted himself as a coward, like Bob Acres, and had to forego his honor. In the second, he challenged Sheridan to fight without providing any real reason, like Sir Lucius O'Trigger. In writing *The Rivals*, Sheridan surely sought to make the public view of his role in the duels more positive, and to have his final revenge on Mathews, who had almost killed him.

Like Lydia and Absolute in *The Rivals*, Richard and Elizabethendured a period of separation when their elders barred them from seeing each other. After their fathers returned the two young people to England, Richard was sent away from Bath to a house in the countryside for several months and then forced to get his law degree, and Elizabeth toured England, singing to packed halls and prompting speculation about her possible engagements to some of the most eligible bachelors in England. Eventually, Elizabeth's father gave up on trying to keep the two apart, perhaps having gethered that they had, in fact, already been married in France. They were officially married in England a year after their clandestine French wedding, and Richard gave up his career as a lawyer after only one week.

After their marriage, the young Sheridans moved to London and lived extravagantly on Elizabeth's savings. Although they could have been wealthy, given the enormous fees Elizabeth could command as one of the most sought-after singers in the country, she stopped singing publicly after their marriage, because it would have been unsuitable behavior for the wife of a gentleman. Having sacrificed such a fantastic source of wealth to conform to his society's beliefs about what constituted proper behavior for a lady, Sheridan would have had this topic in mind when he sat down to create Lydia's character in *The Rivals*.

Desperate to make money to support his household, Sheridan wrote *The Rivals*. Itwas first staged a year and a half after the couple's marriage, when their celebrity was still fresh in the public mind. The play ultimately made Sheridan the great new playwrighting talent of his era. But it is also worth recognizing the way that the play's origin affected its themes. As a work of art that sought, in part, to define its own author's exploits in wooing and dueling as heroic, the play naturally accepts the general norms of society that underpin the rules of courtship and honor even as it makes fun of them for comedic effect.

This acceptance of society's norms was also a consequence of Sheridan's background as the son of an actor and a playwright. His parentage was looked down upon by his peers at Harrow, the prestigious boarding school he attended. This created in Sheridan a desire to join the ranks of "true" gentlemen, those who had not earned their wealth in undignified ways, but had inherited it. The aspiration to be considered one of the "best" men in England is reflected in the conservative outlook of the play, which does not seek to challenge the prevalent assumptions about the superiority of some people over others. Sheridan did not wish to challenge the establishment. Instead, he wished to be fully accepted by it. As a result, *The Rivals*is not critically inclined toward society and instead accepts social norms as ultimately correct and unchanging (or unchangeable), even if they can lead to silliness.

FALSE IDENTITIES AND ARTIFICE

Confusion about who is who drives the plot of *The Rivals*. Several of the characters invent entirely new people in order to delude others and gain their goals. Other characters merely pretend to be people they are not, often by affecting to be more intelligent or fashionable than they truly are.

The most pressing question for the plot of *The Rivals* is when Absolute's created identity of Ensign Beverley will be unmasked as a falsehood, and whether Lydia will still love him once she realizes she has fallen in love with him under false pretenses. And it is the outcome of this unmasking which shows that the play does not view the many acts of artifice or deception that it portrays as necessarily bad.

After all, Captain Absolute is never punished for his trickery. Despite being caught in his lie instead of getting to break the secret of his true identity to Lydia gently, Absolute still eventually gets the girl. And, since he is the most charming character in the play, his ability to manipulate others to achieve his ends is presented as a sign of his canniness, intelligence, and ability to think on his feet.

Indeed,Sheridan himself was the very type of figure he glorifies through his sympathetic portrayal of Absolute: he was enormously charming and creative in his deceptions and manipulations. He also tended to get away with this bad behavior, because almost no one (except his father) could stay mad at him for long.

But the play *does* make fun of those characters who aren't intelligent enough to skillfully use artifice to gain their objectives.Bob Acres and Mrs. Malaprop are constantly pretending, but never think strategically about whom they are trying to manipulate. Their artifice is mere pretense, and although it is supposed to convince others that they are intelligent, brave, or deserving of a high place in the social hierarchy, it is transparent to everyone around them and makes them a source of mockery.

Lydia's principal act of artifice is likewise a failure to use deception strategically. She sends an anonymous letter to herself claiming to know that Captain Absolute is courting another woman and then shows it to Absolute, hoping to quarrel with him and hear his protestations that she is the only one he loves. Since Lydia already has Absolute's love and doesn't actually wish to be separated from him by a fight, her artifice is nothing but an impediment to her own happiness. At the same time, however, Lydia's capacity for trickeryshows the audience that she is not to pitied for being taken in by Absolute. The two lovers are birds of a feather in their willingness to play games with each other's emotions.

There is one act of artifice that the play portrays as neither ridiculous nor admirable, though: Faulkland's lie to Julia when he seeks to test her love for him by suggesting he has killed a man in a duel. Unlike Lydia, Julia has high moral standards, and only uses deceptions to protect Faulkland's reputation, as when she pretends to be happier than she is. Faulkland already has ample evidence of Julia's love and so this manipulation is unnecessary for his purposes; his behavior is motivated by an unjustifiable jealousy, making it nothing more than cruel. The play seems to suggest that acts of artifice must be judged both by the skill they display and by the extent to which the target of the deception *deserves* to be deceived.

LANGUAGE AND PRETENSION

The best comedy in the play is a result of the witty dialogue and rhetorical tricks that Sheridan employs. The characters in the play whom Sheridan

portrays with respect – Captain Absolute, Julia, even Lydia – all have a mastery of language, while those he holds up for mockery lack such skill and, therefore, their use of language betrays their vain attempts to appear better than they are. This quality of the play makes it a comedy of manners, in which the pretensions of society people are skewered and satirized, largely when their use of language betrays those pretentions.

In particular, Bob Acres and Mrs. Malaprop try to communicate their own sophistication, intelligence, and good breeding through the words that they choose to use. But these efforts only end up revealing how little they actually know, and how little mastery of language they have. Indeed, the term "malapropism," which means the accidental substitution of a similar-sounding but altogether different word for the word intended, is named after Mrs. Malaprop because she is such a good – and funny – example of this comedic trait. Her speech is so full of malapropisms that most of what she says is either the opposite of what she means or utterly zany, unintelligible, or unrelated to the topic at hand.

Mrs. Malaprop is especially sensitive to being teased about the way she speaks, and especially susceptible to flattery about it, because she believes that her large vocabulary displays her superior intellect. Malapropisms, then, are a sure sign of pretension. Like the old joke about Groucho Marx who would never want to belong to any club that would be so unselective as to allow him to join, Mrs. Malaprop views any word she knows well enough to use correctly as too common to impress her listeners. So she instead tries to use big words that she believes she knows, but actually mixes up to great comic effect.

Acres is Mrs. Malaprop's male counterpart for silliness in speech. He peppers his speech with swears, employing what he thinks is a fashionable new form of oath that specifies the topic being exclaimed about. He thinks this slang will make him look sophisticated and impress his listeners, but it is clear from Captain Absolute's reaction that Acres is the only person he has ever heard speak this way, and that rather than showing himself to be on the cutting-edge of fashion, Acres makes himself ridiculous.

Finally, neither Acres nor Mrs. Malaprop can tell when Captain Absolute is humoring them, speaking sarcastically, or subtly mocking them to their faces. They are so preoccupied with their attempts to impress with their "refined" speech and manners that they fail to pick up on his actual reactions to them. In a play that portrays a well-crafted deception positively, failing to notice how your words are being taken by your listener is the ultimate sin against the intelligent use of language.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

In the late 18th century, when *The Rivals* was written, there were firm notions for how women should behave. Prior to marriage, a girl of noble birth was supposed to be pure and simple in her understanding of the world and to place her trust in her elders, who would select a man from the same class for her to marry.

The rigidness of these expectations for young girls is parodied in the portrayal of Lydia Languish's guardian Mrs. Malaprop, who objects to practically everything that Lydia says and does by declaring it not proper behavior for a young woman. Yet while Mrs. Malaprop's objections are so repetitive and indiscriminate as to seem ridiculous, her basic contention – that Lydia's duty is to do as she is told – would have been accepted by 18th century audiences. Once married, a lady was expected to carry out her wifely duties without complaining about hardship, and to comfort her husband when he was in low spirits. If her husband became angry, she was supposed to calm and soothe him. If he was sad, she was supposed to be bright and merry to cheer him up. Julia in many ways epitomizes the 18th century's ideal woman, then: although she gets frustrated with Faulkland's distrust of her, she always tries to show him that she loves him, accepts his faults and will remain loyal to him no matter what.

Much of 18th century society considered such "womanly" behavior as critical, and so anything that threatened that behavior was the subject of much debate. And just as "upholders of culture" today might criticize certain music or movies or other media, there was heated debate in British newspapers and across society in the late 18th century about whether the rather new invention of "sentimental novels" perverted young girls and made them unfit to be good wives and mothers.

The sentimental novels that were popular at the time did not stress duty to one's elders or portray young women as happy to have their fates chosen for them. Instead, this literature showed women motivated by love and passion to choose dangerous paths and forbidden lovers. Often the plots of these novels involved love across class boundaries.

The parents and husbands who saw it as their responsibility to supervise the women in their families worried that these books put ideas into women's heads that were potentially disastrous. Girls were supposed to be virgins when they married, so if a girl inspired by novel-reading were to sneak off in search of her own romantic adventures and get pregnant out of wedlock, she (and her family) would become social outcasts (this is exactly the fate that threatens the Bennets of *Pride and Prejudice* after Lydia runs off at the climax of that novel, for instance).

In keeping with the general light tone of the comedy, *The Rivals* makes fun of everyone on both sides of the debate.Lydia, for example, rather ridiculously applies the plots of sentimental novels to her own life. She hopes to be like a heroine in a book, who has such a great love that she is willing to make a sacrifice for it. For Lydia this specifically means marrying a poor man, defying her aunt, and losing two-thirds of the inheritance she

would otherwise receive. Lydia's novel-reading has made her an easy target for someone able to manipulate her romantic impulse.

Sir Antony, not incorrectly, blames Lydia's novel-reading for her determination to marry the penniless Ensign Beverley. His resulting position, though, is extreme to the point of parody: he declares that girls should not be allowed to learn to read at all. And yet even as Sir Antony seems ridiculously strict, the play does *not* suggest that learning or reading has much use for women,as once again Sheridan doesn't really question the status quo.

As it turns out, in an ironic twist, Lydia is not seduced by a poor schemer hoping to take advantage of her. Instead she is forced to sacrifice her fantasy of a star-crossed love affair when it turns out she loves the very rich, suitable man – Captain Absolute – her guardians would choose for her and who had only been pretending to be penniless. The play is a comedy: no one in *The Rivals* will lose their life or fortune, however foolishly they flirt with disaster.

This outcome for Lydia does not *only* reflect the light comedy of the play, however. It also shows the play's ultimately conservative view of social norms. Rather than critique the way his society perceived women or class (unlike, say, *Pride and Prejudice*), Sheridan portrays Lydia's rebellion as a foolish caprice drawn straight from the pages of a book. Meanwhile, the play's least ridiculed character, Julia, conforms perfectly to society's expectations for a young woman, while its charming protagonist, Captain Absolute, is able to take advantage of Lydia's desire to rebel against those norms.

COURTSHIP AND GENERATIONAL CONFLICT

The Rivals revolves around two engaged couples: Lydia and Captain Absolute, and Faulkland and Julia. But in the play getting married isn't as simple as falling in love, because the older generation take an active role in approving or seeking to block matches dictated by the heart.

Sheridan, still in his early twenties when he wrote *The Rivals*, mocks the control the older generation seeks to exert over the young. Although Sir Antony and Mrs. Malaprop clearly see themselves as acting in Captain Absolute and Lydia's best interests, they are too hasty to condemn every independent idea either of the young people have.

Sir Antony shows that his priority is to test whether Captain Absolute will obey him when he demands that Captain Absolute agree unconditionally to marry the woman he chooses. He not only refuses to tell his son that he would like for him to marry Lydia, but also stresses that Captain Absolute should obey him even if the match he intended were ugly and humpbacked (which Lydia, of course, is not). It is only because Captain Absolute sneakily figures out who his father intends for him to marry that Captain Absolute agrees to marry whomever his father chooses. Even in voicing his agreement, though, Captain Absolute mocks his father's ridiculous demand that he sacrifice all control over his own future—saying he would happily marry Mrs. Malaprop if his father should so command.

At the same time, the play *also* mocks young people who are more preoccupied with rebellion against the older generation than with ensuring their own future is happy. Lydia is not only willing to oppose her aunt in the name of a great love, but seeks to oppose her for the sake of opposition itself. When her aunt tells her that she has dropped the idea to marry Lydia to Squire Acres and has a new suitor in mind, Lydia replies, "had I no preferment for any one else, the choice you have made would be my aversion."

In the happy world of the play, the two pairs turn out to have both love and the approval of their elders. In each pair, though, one member naively demands that love be entirely pure and have nothing to do with duty to the older generation. Lydia would have preferred to marry purely out of love and in defiance of the older generation, while Faulkland, who rescued Julia from drowning and was approved of as a son-in-law by Julia's father before his death, doubts Julia's love because he can see it is not only based on love, but also supported by her sense of duty, and that it does not, as the sentimental notions of the time dictated, make Julia suffer.

By mocking both the older and the younger generation, the play seems to take what might be described as a "comedic long view," in which it sees humor in the fact that both the older and younger generations are playing roles of meddling controllers and rebellious youth without realizing that the older and younger generations have always played such roles, and likely always will. Even as it makes fun of both the young and old, then, the play indicates a conservative acceptance that this is just the way things are.

GENTLEMANLY HONOR AND DUELING

For men of the British nobility in the late 18th century, honor was an important social institution. To be considered a gentleman one had to be honorable, which meant being truthful, virtuous, and well-mannered. At the same time, being honorable required courage: both courage in a physical altercation, but also, more commonly, the courage to defend one's honor when it was questioned by another.If one gentleman insulted another, for instance by accusing him of lying, by calling him a name, or by making advances on his wife or sweetheart, the insulted gentleman was obligated by the rules of honor to challenge the offending gentleman to a duel. If he failed to issue a challenge, his reputation as a gentleman would be ruined because he would be seen as either admitting to his lack of honor, or as displaying a lack of courage that, regardless of the truth of the

charges against him, was itself dishonorable.

Part of the idea behind the institution of dueling is that, because gentlemen knew what kinds of behavior would offend another man's honor and cause him to issue a challenge to a duel, this knowledge served as an important check on the behavior of noblemen, leading them to think twice before they lied, cheated, or sexually harassed women.

Captain Absolute fits perfectly into this ideal vision of dueling. He sees dueling as a necessary but unpleasant fact of life. Although he finds it unreasonable that Sir Lucius O'Trigger challenges him to a duel without giving any explanation, after trying to coolly reason with Sir Lucius without getting a satisfactory answer from him, he accepts the challenge. In other words, Absolute acts as an absolute gentleman: he always shows a cool and reasonable temperament, but when challenged by a social equal he courageously meets his obligations to fight and preserve his honor. As a captain who has been in a marching (or active) regiment for his entire adolescence, Captain Absolute has been steeped in the culture of gentlemanly honor. A Captain in the army not only had his own honor to protect, but the honor of the army and of the King to whom the army swore loyalty.

Sir Lucius, on the other hand, is far too keen to fight in duels himself and to see others fight in them. He challenges Absolute to a duel without giving any reason, and even urges Faulkland, who has come to the duel to support Captain Absolute as his second, to duel Acres. Sir Lucius seems to see duels as fun and exciting, and his extreme interest in duels shows that, when carried too far, this social institution which helped to regulate the behavior of young men could also lead to unnecessary carnage and grieving families.

Despite the character of Sir Lucius, though, *The Rivals* is not attempting to level a deep criticism of either gentlemanly honor or of the institution of dueling. Nowhere is this more visible than through the character of Squire Acres. As a country squire, Acres lacks Captain Absolute's formal military training, as well his knowledge of how to act the part of a sophisticated gentleman in general and of the rules of dueling specifically. Most importantly, though,he also lacks courage.As a result, Acres first overcompensates: because he is trying to fit in within the social world of the city of Bath, Acres allows himself to be persuaded by Lucius O'Trigger that he has grounds to challenge Beverley to a duel where there are none. He is not really prepared, however, for the risk involved, and is greatly relieved when Beverley turns out not to exist.

Sir Lucius O'Trigger then insults Acres by calling him a coward, but Acres refuses to defend his honor. In the world of the play such failures, of both knowledge and courage, are unforgivable in a gentleman, and Squire Acres is portrayed throughout as a coward and a fool.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

HAIRSTYLES

Staying up-to-date with the latest fashions preoccupies many of the characters in *The Rivals*, but it is a telltale sign that a character is a country bumpkin if he discusses his appearance. Servants from the countryside worry about the new fashion that dictates that men should give up wearing wigs, which made them feel more comfortable about their appearances, while Squire Acres has just gotten a dramatic new haircut. These discussions show that sometimes vanity and pretentions to be fashionable come into conflict with one another, while the true sign of class (as Sheridan sees it) is not to discuss such matters at all.

FOREIGN WORDS

Characters' attempts to sound sophisticated or worldly are signaled in the play with the use of foreign languages, like French and Latin. When characters use foreign words they are often trying to project a certain image of themselves, despite the fact that their meaning may not be understood by the person they are speaking to. In other cases, foreign words used by some in Bath society provide a barrier to entry for those who are unaccustomed to them. So foreign words therefore become symbols of efforts to either project or protect an otherwise unearned reputation or social status. The characters whose speech the play portrays positively, like Absolute, focus more on the clarity and wit of their speech rather than on the "loftiness" of their vocabulary.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Publications edition of *The Rivals* published in 1998.

Preface Quotes

❝ As some part of the attack on the piece was begun too early to pass for the sentence of *judgment*, which is ever tardy in condemning, it has been suggested to me, that much of the disapprobation must have arisen from virulence of malice, rather than severity of criticism: but as I was more apprehensive of there being just grounds to excite the latter than conscious of having deserved the former, I continue not to believe that probable, which I am sure must have been unprovoked. However, if it was so, and I could even mark the quarter from whence it came, it would be ungenerous to retort: for no passion suffers more than malice from disappointment.

Related Themes:

Page Number: vi

Explanation and Analysis

Sheridan's preface to the play is more of a commentary on Sheridan's reputation than it is an explanation of the play. Sheridan, who had written the play in a bid to make money and improve his social standing, was forced to revise the play after it was poorly received. Here, he is basking in the success of the revised play. He says that he has heard it suggested that the poor reception to the first version of the play may have been the result of enemies of his in the audience who booed and heckled the actors. He also says that he knows of no enemies who would have tried to sabotage his play's opening, but that if these enemies in fact exist, they are likely very disappointed because the second version of the play was such a smash hit. From this we can see that that the play's initial bad reception troubles him most if he interprets it as a reflection of his position in society.

Prologues Quotes

❝ Can our light scenes add strength to holy laws!
Such puny patronage but hurts the cause:
Fair virtue scorns our feeble aid to ask;
And moral truth disdains the trickster's mask
For here their favourite stands, whose brow severe
And sad, claims youth's respect, and pity's tear;
Who, when oppress'd by foes her worth creates,
Can point a poniard at the guilt she hates.

Related Themes:

Page Number: xi

Explanation and Analysis

This prologue compares tragedy and comedy, the theatrical muses who were traditionally used to represent the forces of artistic and imagined as female. At the time that Sheridan wrote, plays were expected to impart a moral lesson to the audience. Sheridan is preparing the audience not to expect this light comedy to teach too grave a lesson. He suggests that in a tragedy, lessons are imparted when the characters die as a punishment for their sins, but that his play will not try to teach lessons in this way. Further he suggests that the forces of morality can find stronger advocates and do not require the support of a light comedy. The focus on the tragic muse also reflects the conservative value that the proper role for a woman is to serve as a society's moral compass.

Sheridan's nod to the moral authorities of his society reflects his desire to be accepted into the highest ranks of that society. Since he hopes to be taken seriously, he feels he must explain why he has written a play that is so unserious.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

❝ FAG
I had forgot.—But, Thomas, you must polish a little—indeed you must.—Here now—this wig!—What the devil do you do with a wig,
Thomas?—None of the London whips of any degree of *ton* wear wigs now.
THOMAS
More's the pity! more's the pity! I say.—Odd's life! when I heard how the lawyers and doctors had took to their own hair, I thought how 'twould go next:—odd rabbit it! when the fashion had got foot on the bar, I guessed 'twould mount to the box!—but 'tis all out of character, believe me, Mr. Fag: and look'ee, I'll never gi' up mine—the lawyers and doctors may do as they will.

Related Characters: Thomas, Fag (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Bath was a thriving town full of people who hoped to move up in the world, becoming both more stylish and respectable. Here Fag, who represents an ambitious

member of the servant class, shows all his pretentions to being fashionable and sophisticated. He urges Thomas to stop wearing a wig, saying that none of the carriage drivers in London – who were seen as fashionable members of the servant class - wear wigs these days. He also uses the French word for tone to convey his worldliness, even though he is speaking to a simple country servant. Thomas lacks Fag's ambitions to become fashionable and wishes to continue to wearing a wig, because it makes him feel more comfortable about his appearance. Thomas is aware, though, of the way fashions move through society: once professional men like doctors and lawyers take up a fashion, then the drivers copy it.

Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

LYDIA
Here, my dear Lucy, hide these books. Quick, quick!—Fling *Peregrine Pickle* under the toilet—throw *Roderick Random* into the closet—put *The Innocent Adultery* into *The Whole Duty of Man*—thrust *Lord Aimworth* under the sofa—cram *Ovid* behind the bolster—there—put *The Man of Feeling* into your pocket—so, so—now lay *Mrs. Chapone* in sight, and leave *Fordyce's Sermons* open on the table.
LUCY
O burn it, ma'am! the hair-dresser has torn away as far as *Proper Pride*.
LYDIA
Never mind—open at *Sobriety*.—Fling me *Lord Chesterfield's Letters*.—Now for 'em.

Related Characters: Lucy, Lydia Languish (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Sir Anthony has come to call and Lydia and Lucy expect him and Mrs. Malaprop to come up to the room. Knowing that these two older people will disapprove of the sentimental literature that Lydia reads, she and Lucy hide the books she likes to read inside decoy books, which are all dull works about proper morality. Lydia is actually interested in books about love, sex, and adventure. *Roderick Random*, for instance, is a novel about a young man who is not treated like a gentleman because he is the son of a gentleman and lower-class woman. He eventually inherits a fortune and is able to convince a woman to marry him without her guardian's permission. The older people who hope to control Lydia's choice of a husband see these books as bad influences, which will make her forget her proper role as a woman.

What business have you, miss, with preference and aversion? They don't become a young woman; and you ought to know, that as both always wear off, 'tis safest in matrimony to begin with a little aversion. I am sure I hated your poor dear uncle before marriage as if he'd been a blackamoor—and yet, miss, you are sensible what a wife I made!—and when it pleased Heaven to release me from him, 'tis unknown what tears I shed!—

Related Characters: Lydia Languish, Mrs. Malaprop / Delia (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Malaprop, ever unable to read her audience, attempts to convince Lydia to obey her elders and marry a man that they choose for her by telling Lydia that she herself hated Lydia's uncle (while using a racist slur to emphasize her point) before she married him. One would expect her to say that their marriage turned out well, but because of the way she garbles her speech, she communicates the opposite. She says "Heaven released me from him" instead of "Heaven released him from me," which was a poetic way to describe someone's death. Instead of saying that she "shed unknown tears," which would mean too many tears to count, she says it is "unknown what tears I shed," which suggests that she may not have cried at all at his death. But whether or not the Malaprops' marriage was a happy one, Lydia has nothing but disdain for her silly aunt's advice on how to be a proper lady or whom to marry.

Mrs. MALAPROP
I would have her instructed in geometry, that she might know something of the contagious countries;—but above all, Sir Anthony, she should be mistress of orthodoxy, that she might not mis-spell, and mis-pronounce words so shamefully as girls usually do; and likewise that she might reprehend the true meaning of what she is saying. This, Sir Anthony, is what I would have a woman know;—and I don't think there is a superstitious article in it.
Sir ANTHONY
Well, well, Mrs. Malaprop, I will dispute the point no further with you; though I must confess, that you are a truly moderate and polite arguer, for almost every third word you say is on my side of the question.

Related Characters: Sir Anthony Absolute, Mrs. Malaprop / Delia (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

Sir Anthony has said that women should not be taught to read, because reading exposes them to harmful ideas. Mrs. Malaprop objects and Sir Anthony asks her to give an account of the proper course of education for a woman. The assumption at the time was that women needed to be educated only for their role in society, and any further knowledge would ruin or pervert their feminine virtues. No one is a less fit advocate for the importance of education for women than Mrs. Malaprop, who fancies herself to be eloquent and well-educated, but mixes up the large words she uses so that her meaning is nearly always garbled. Here, she uses the word "geometry" for "geography," "contagious" for "contiguous," "orthodoxy" for "orthography," "reprehend" for "apprehend," and "superstitious" for "superfluous." Sir Anthony notes that the mistakes in Mrs. Malaprop's speech make her a poster child for the argument against educating women. While the play sees Sir Anthony's position as extreme, it also does not mount any real criticism to the conservative assumption of the era that there should be limits placed on what women studied and learned.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

ACRES
Ha! ha! you've taken notice of it—'tis genteel, isn't it!—I didn't invent it myself though; but a commander in our militia, a great scholar, I assure you, says that there is no meaning in the common oaths, and that nothing but their antiquity makes them respectable;—because, he says, the ancients would never stick to an oath or two, but would say, by Jove! or by Bacchus! or by Mars! or by Venus! or by Pallas, according to the sentiment: so that to swear with propriety, says my little major, the oath should be an echo to the sense; and this we call the *oath referential*, or *sentimental swearing*—ha! ha! 'tis genteel, isn't it?
ABSOLUTE
Very genteel, and very new, indeed!—and I dare say will supplant all other figures of imprecation.

Related Characters: Captain Jack Absolute / Ensign Beverley, Squire Bob Acres (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17-18

Explanation and Analysis

When gentlemen swore in the late 18th century, they generally minced their oaths, which meant they changed the pronunciation of a word so that they would not be breaking the religious taboo against using the Lord's name in vain. "God's sake" became "odds," just as today the word "darn" is a politer version of "damn." Acres, though, wishes to fit in among fashionable people and seeks to change how he speaks to gain acceptance. He is not observant and intelligent enough to discern the way fashionable city people speak, but instead takes on an odd new way of cursing that was described to him by another person from the countryside. A couple of words relevant to the topic being discussed are inserted after "odds" to make an oath that is more specific. The only problem with this is that this kind of swearing is not actually a trend, so Acres seems like he is trying too hard to make his speech sound genteel and ending up making his speech sound odd.

ABSOLUTE
What, sir, promise to link myself to some mass of ugliness! to——
Sir ANTHONY
Zounds! sirrah! the lady shall be as ugly as I choose: she shall have a hump on each shoulder; she shall be as crooked as the crescent; her one eye shall roll like the bull's in Cox's Museum; she shall have a skin like a mummy, and the beard of a Jew—she shall be all this, sirrah!—yet I will make you ogle her all day, and sit up all night to write sonnets on her beauty.
ABSOLUTE
This is reason and moderation indeed!

Related Characters: Sir Anthony Absolute, Captain Jack Absolute / Ensign Beverley (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Sir Anthony is extreme in his demand of obedience in his son. He wants Absolute to agree unconditionally to marry the woman he chooses even if the match he intended was ugly and humpbacked. This extreme position is meant to be parodied as is signaled by the vivid description Sir Anthony gives of his son's hypothetical ugly bride-to-be. The play is mocking the view that young people owe it to their parents and guardians to cede control over the direction they choose for their lives. Sheridan had personal reasons to want to mock this position, as his own father had resolutely opposed his marriage to Elizabeth Linley, and had tried to force him to become a lawyer. At the time that Sheridan wrote the play, his father had still not forgiven him for his marriage to Linley.

Act 2, Scene 2 Quotes

Sir LUCIUS
[Reads.] *Sir—there is often a sudden incentive impulse in love, that has a greater induction than years of domestic combination: such was the commotion I felt at the first superfluous view of Sir Lucius O'Trigger.*—Very pretty, upon my word.—*Female punctuation forbids me to say more, yet let me add, that it will give me joy infallible to find Sir Lucius worthy the last criterion of my affections. Delia.* Upon my conscience! Lucy, your lady is a great mistress of language. Faith, she's quite the queen of the dictionary!—for the devil a word dare refuse coming at her call—though one would think it was quite out of hearing.

Related Characters: Sir Lucius O'Trigger (speaker), Mrs. Malaprop / Delia, Lucy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Lucy has just delivered a letter from "Delia" to Sir Lucius, whom she has deceived to believe that Delia is Lydia's pseudonym, when it is actually Mrs. Malaprop's. The situation provides a perfect study of the ease with which a practiced deceiver like Lucy can manipulate two people who are not perceptive about the world around them. Mrs. Malaprop, besides being unaware that she makes a fool of herself through her scrambled use of language, does not realize that the pseudonym "Delia" is actually a scrambled version of the name "Lydia," which will lead Sir Lucius to assume he is corresponding with the niece, not the aunt.

Sir Lucius, on the other hand, puts no effort into trying to understand the letter he has received. Although it is garbled, her meaning can be sussed out. Mrs. Malaprop compares her current feelings to Sir Lucius to her feelings during her "years of domestic combination," by which she means the years of her marriage. Although the language is unconventional, it is only because Sir Lucius is determined to understand the letter as he wants to and not for what it actually says that he fails to understand this clear evidence that he is not corresponding with a young girl who has never been married before, but with her older, widowed aunt.

LUCY
Nay, Sir Lucius, I thought you wa'n't rich enough to be so nice!
Sir LUCIUS
Upon my word, young woman, you have hit it:—I am so poor, that I can't afford to do a dirty action.—If I did not want money, I'd steal your mistress and her fortune with a great deal of pleasure.—However, my pretty girl, [Gives her money] here's a little something to buy you a ribbon; and meet me in the evening, and I'll give you an answer to this. So, hussy, take a kiss beforehand to put you in mind. [Kisses her.]

Related Characters: Sir Lucius O'Trigger, Lucy (speaker), Lydia Languish

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Lucy is pretending to be naïve to gain Sir Lucius's trust and get information from him that might prove useful to her in the future. She understands that he wants to think of her as a simple girl who trusts and likes him enough to flirt with him. She also pretends to be surprised that he is such a gentleman and will not run off with Lydia without getting Mrs. Malaprop's permission first. Of course, she understands that Lydia loses part of her fortune if she marries without her aunt's permission, but she pretends that such matters are over her head. She succeeds in tricking him, and gets him to reveal his motivations in courting Lydia. He shows that, far from being disinterested in Lydia's money, it is an important reason for his courtship of her.

Act 3, Scene 1 Quotes

Sir, I repeat it—if I please you in this affair, 'tis all I desire. Not that I think a woman the worse for being handsome; but, sir, if you please to recollect, you before hinted something about a hump or two, one eye, and a few more graces of that kind—now, without being very nice, I own I should rather choose a wife of mine to have the usual number of limbs, and a limited quantity of back: and though one eye may be very agreeable, yet as the prejudice has always run in favour of two, I would not wish to affect a singularity in that article.

Related Characters: Captain Jack Absolute / Ensign Beverley (speaker), Lydia Languish, Sir Anthony Absolute

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Absolute has told his father that he will marry any girl his father chooses for him, as Sir Anthony had previously demanded. He does not reveal that he knows that his father wants to arrange for him to marry Lydia, the girl he is already courting, because he is determined to make his father feel how ridiculous was his demand that Absolute show him perfect obedience and surrender any control over his own future. This conflict between the generations has an easy solution, but Absolute is still determined to win a point against his father as a comeuppance for the bullying way Sir Anthony tried to control him. Sheridan was likely also trying to send a message to his own father, who had tried and failed to control his son's choice of a wife.

Act 3, Scene 2 Quotes

I do not mean to distress you. If I loved you less I should never give you an uneasy moment. But hear me. All my fretful doubts arise from this. Women are not used to weigh and separate the motives of their affections: the cold dictates of prudence, gratitude, or filial duty, may sometimes be mistaken for the pleadings of the heart. I would not boast—yet let me say, that I have neither age, person, nor character, to found dislike on; my fortune such as few ladies could be charged with indiscretion in the match. O Julia! when love receives such countenance from prudence, nice minds will be suspicious of its birth.

Related Characters: Faulkland (speaker), Julia Melville

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29-30

Explanation and Analysis

Faulkland has been questioning whether Julia's love for him is true. He bases the reason for his doubt on his understanding of how a woman like Julia may be limited in her capacity to feel because of her attempts to fit into the role that society expects her to play. Faulkland claims that he cannot be sure if Julia really loves him, because he knows she is so invested in doing the right thing. Because her father arranged for Julia and Faulkland's engagement before his death, Faulkland worries that it is merely obedience to her father, not love, that makes her want to marry him. The question of whether Julia loves Faulkland because her father approved of her loving him is strikingly opposed to the question that hangs over Lydia and Absolute's marriage: whether Lydia loves Absolute enough to marry him even though her guardian and society approve of the match.

Act 3, Scene 3 Quotes

Well, but Mrs. Malaprop, as the girl seems so infatuated by this fellow, suppose you were to wink at her corresponding with him for a little time—let her even plot an elopement with him—then do you connive at her escape—while I, just in the nick, will have the fellow laid by the heels, and fairly contrive to carry her off in his stead.

Related Characters: Captain Jack Absolute / Ensign Beverley (speaker), Lydia Languish, Mrs. Malaprop / Delia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

Absolute has just met and utterly charmed Mrs. Malaprop. He has led her to believe that he knows about Lydia and Beverley, but sees himself as Mrs. Malaprop's ally in trying to break that couple up. Of course, he is tricking Mrs. Malaprop, because he is Beverley, but he also wins Mrs. Malaprop's trust completely by suggesting they should be co-conspirators in a plan to deceive Lydia. Thus Absolute further entangles himself in deception and trickery here, and Mrs. Malaprop further allows herself to be taken in by any who wish to manipulate her. In his own life, Sheridan himself carried out a complicated elopement involving many separate deceptions, so the process of scheming before an elopement would have been a familiar one to him.

ABSOLUTE

Ah! my soul, what a life will we then live! Love shall be our idol and support! we will worship him with a monastic strictness; abjuring all worldly toys, to centre every thought and action there. Proud of calamity, we will enjoy the wreck of wealth; while the surrounding gloom of adversity shall make the flame of our pure love show doubly bright. By Heavens! I would fling all goods of fortune from me with a prodigal hand, to enjoy the scene where I might clasp my Lydia to my bosom, and say, the world affords no smile to me but here—[Embracing her.] [Aside.] If she holds out now, the devil is in it!

LYDIA

[Aside.] Now could I fly with him to the antipodes! but my persecution is not yet come to a crisis.

Related Characters: Lydia Languish, Captain Jack Absolute / Ensign Beverley (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Absolute puts his skill as an eloquent speaker who knows exactly what people want to hear to good use. He speaks with the lyrical language used by lovers in the sentimental novels that Lydia loves to read and pledges to make love the most important aspect of his life, and to prioritize it over comfort and money, as those romantic characters generally did. Although his speech does move Lydia, she is determined to draw out their situation and enjoy the drama of being kept cooped up in the house and separated from her lover. True to her name, Lydia Languish enjoys languishing, because it makes her feel that her life is a passionate adventure like that of a lady in a novel. In going so far overboard with his language, Absolute also seems to be subtly mocking his lover, suggesting that Lydia probably wouldn't *really* enjoy living in poverty with only love to comfort her—she just likes the idea of it.

Act 3, Scene 4 Quotes

ACRES

But he has given me no provocation.

Sir LUCIUS

Now, I think he has given you the greatest provocation in the world. Can a man commit a more heinous offence against another than to fall in love with the same woman? Oh, by my soul! it is the most unpardonable breach of friendship.

ACRES

Breach of friendship! ay, ay; but I have no acquaintance with this man.

I never saw him in my life.

Sir LUCIUS

That's no argument at all—he has the less right then to take such a liberty.

ACRES

Gad, that's true—I grow full of anger, Sir Lucius!—I fire apace! Odds hilts and blades! I find a man may have a deal of valour in him, and not know it!

Related Characters: Sir Lucius O'Trigger, Squire Bob Acres (speaker), Captain Jack Absolute / Ensign Beverley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Acres has told Sir Lucius that the woman he was courting is now being pursued by another man, and Sir Lucius encourages him to challenge his rival for her affection to a duel. Both men have a flawed approach to the institution of dueling. Sir Lucius sees no reason why contradictory arguments should not do equally well to serve as the pretext for fighting a duel. Meanwhile, Acres is shocked at the idea of dueling a rival, which shows that he does not understand the institution of dueling that was expected of a gentleman. Yet because Acres wishes to seem like a gentleman and has no idea how to go about it, he trusts that Sir Lucius will guide him in the right direction. These two characters are meant to stand in for Captain Mathews, with whom Sheridan fought two duels. In one duel, Mathews conducted himself like a coward, and in the other he called

for a duel without a sufficient cause and then brutally stabbed Sheridan several times.

Act 4, Scene 1 Quotes

❝ I say then, it would be but civil in honour never to risk the loss of a gentleman.—Look'ee, master, this honour seems to me to be a marvellous false friend: ay, truly, a very courtier-like servant.—Put the case, I was a gentleman (which, thank God, no one can say of me;) well—my honour makes me quarrel with another gentleman of my acquaintance.—So—we fight. (Pleasant enough that!) Boh!—I kill him—(the more's my luck!) now, pray who gets the profit of it?—Why, my honour. But put the case that he kills me!—by the mass! I go to the worms, and my honour whips over to my enemy.

Related Characters: David (speaker), Sir Lucius O'Trigger, Squire Bob Acres

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Acres has written a challenge to Beverley with the encouragement of Sir Lucius, but has not yet sent it. His servant David is trying to convince him not to send the letter at all. As members of the lower classes did not settle difference through dueling, David brings his folksy common sense ideas to bear on the (rather ridiculous) upper-class tradition of dueling. Although David talks like someone from the country, he has sound logic on his side as he gives his speech exposing the futility of dying for an immaterial value like honor. In fact, his position seems even more rational because of his capability to use language clearly and humorously, without any pretentions to sounding like anyone other than himself.

Act 4, Scene 2 Quotes

❝ Then he's so well bred;—so full of alacrity, and adulation!—and has so much to say for himself:—in such good language, too! His physiognomy so grammatical! Then his presence is so noble! I protest, when I saw him, I thought of what Hamlet says in the play:— "Hesperian curls—the front of Job himself!— An eye, like March, to threaten at command!— A station, like Harry Mercury, new—" Something about kissing—on a hill—however, the similitude struck me directly.

Related Characters: Mrs. Malaprop / Delia (speaker), Captain Jack Absolute / Ensign Beverley, Lydia Languish

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Malaprop is praising Absolute to Lydia, in the hopes of convincing Lydia to fall in love with him over Beverley. Absolute's eloquence and flattery of her have prompted Mrs. Malaprop to reach for the most elevated language she can think of: the language of Shakespeare's plays. But, of course, she misquotes the lines from Hamlet horribly. These lines are: "Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself, / An eye like Mars to threaten and command, / A station like the herald Mercury / New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill." Mrs. Malaprop's mispronunciation of the names of ancient Roman Gods is a particularly hilarious instance of her pretentiousness pushing her to use words she does not understand. For instance, she confuses Jove, the Roman king of the Gods, with Job, the biblical character who loses all of his prosperity and everyone he loves.

❝ So, while I fondly imagined we were deceiving my relations, and flattered myself that I should outwit and incense them all—behold my hopes are to be crushed at once, by my aunt's consent and approbation—and I am myself the only dupe at last!—[Walking about in a heat.]

Related Characters: Lydia Languish (speaker), Mrs. Malaprop / Delia, Captain Jack Absolute / Ensign Beverley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Absolute's deception has been uncovered, and Lydia is furious to learn that Beverley was a fictional persona that he made up. She is explicitly angry that her hopes to deceive her relatives will come to naught, and instead she finds that she has been deceived herself. This moment shows that the play has just as satirical a view on the position taken by the young as the old in the conflict surrounding courtship between the older and younger generation. Just as Sir Anthony hopes to control his son Absolute's future absolutely, Lydia puts an undue emphasis on her desire to

rebel against her aunt. By showing that both sides of the generational gap were prone to foolishness when trying to settle the important matter of sons and daughters' marriages for the best, Sheridan takes a conservative position on whether marriages ought to be arranged or not. Ridiculing both Lydia and Sir Anthony, the play treats the topic humorously, but mounts no real criticism to the social practice of the time.

Act 4, Scene 3 Quotes

FAULKLAND
What can you mean?—Has Lydia changed her mind?—I should have thought her duty and inclination would now have pointed to the same object.
ABSOLUTE
Ay, just as the eyes do of a person who squints: when her love-eye was fixed on me, t'other, her eye of duty, was finely obliqued: but when duty bid her point that the same way, off t'other turned on a swivel, and secured its retreat with a frown!

Related Characters: Captain Jack Absolute / Ensign Beverley, Faulkland (speaker), Lydia Languish

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Absolute has run into Faulkland and tells him that he has been rejected by Lydia after she found out his true identity. Despite his disappointment, Absolute can still speak with eloquence and wit about his predicament, coming up with a fine and detailed analogy for Lydia's behavior in the condition of a person with a "lazy eye." Often, if the two eyes do not work together properly, a person with a lazy eye will close one eye to block out the visual inputs from the eye which is not pointing in the correct direction. Lydia, Absolute contends, similarly cannot simultaneously see both her love for him and her duty to obey her guardians and act as she is expected to as a woman. This fine description is further evidence of Absolute's command of the situation and his ability to handle his emotions. Sheridan, who wanted his audience to associate the character of Absolute with himself, was likely trying to spread the idea that he kept his own wits about him even when facing difficult moments in his love affair or life.

Act 5, Scene 1 Quotes

You see before you a wretch, whose life is forfeited. Nay, start not!—the infirmity of my temper has drawn all this misery on me. I left you fretful and passionate—an untoward accident drew me into a quarrel—the event is, that I must fly this kingdom instantly. O Julia, had I been so fortunate as to have called you mine entirely, before this mischance had fallen on me, I should not so deeply dread my banishment!

Related Characters: Faulkland (speaker), Julia Melville

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

Faulkland has come to test Julia's love by suggesting to her that he has killed someone in a duel and must flee the country to escape prosecution. Here, he pretends to believe that she will let him go off alone and end their engagement because of this unfortunate turn his life has taken, because they are not yet married. This way, if she offers to elope with him she proves that her love for him is stronger than her sense of the proper behavior for a young, unmarried woman, which would forbid her to travel alone with a man to whom she was not married. At the same time, he also shifts some of the blame for his becoming involved in a duel onto her shoulders, saying he quarreled with someone because he was agitated after having an argument with her. This also supports the traditional idea that it was women's role to comfort men and influence them to become less aggressive.

LYDIA
Why, is it not provoking? when I thought we were coming to the prettiest distress imaginable, to find myself made a mere Smithfield bargain of at last! There, had I projected one of the most sentimental elopements!—so becoming a disguise!—so amiable a ladder of ropes!—Conscious moon—four horses—Scotch parson—with such surprise to Mrs. Malaprop—and such paragraphs in the newspapers!—Oh, I shall die with disappointment!
JULIA
I don't wonder at it!
LYDIA
Now—sad reverse!—what have I to expect, but, after a deal of flimsy preparation with a bishop's license, and my aunt's blessing, to go simpering up to the altar; or perhaps be cried three times in a country church, and have an unmannerly fat clerk ask the consent of every butcher in the parish to join John Absolute and Lydia Languish, spinster! Oh that I should live to hear myself called spinster!

Related Characters: Julia Melville, Lydia Languish (speaker), Mrs. Malaprop / Delia, Captain Jack Absolute / Ensign Beverley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

Lydia complains to Julia about her disappointment at finding out that Beverley was a false identity of Absolute's. The picturesque elements of the elopement that she dreamed of are drawn from the sentimental literature Lydia reads, but also would have been familiar to Sheridan from his own experiencing wooing and eloping with Elizabeth Linley.

Lydia also disparages the trappings of a conventional wedding. She is especially bothered by the idea that her marriage will be approved of by society, which seems to her vulgar and unexciting, and she hates the unromantic idea that there will be a financial component to the arrangement of her marriage. But she dramatizes her situation to the extreme when she says that she never dreamed that she would become a spinster: someone as wealthy, beautiful, and young as Lydia would have had plenty of other opportunities to marry.

Act 5, Scene 3 Quotes

Sir LUCIUS
Upon my conscience, Mr. Acres, your valour has oozed away with a vengeance!
ACRES
Not in the least! Odds backs and abettors! I'll be your second with all my heart—and if you should get a quietus, you may command me entirely. I'll get you snug lying in the Abbey here; or pickle you, and send you over to Blunderbuss-hall, or anything of the kind, with the greatest pleasure.
Sir LUCIUS
Pho! pho! you are little better than a coward.
ACRES
Mind, gentlemen, he calls me a coward; coward was the word, by my valour!
Sir LUCIUS
Well, sir?
ACRES
Look'ee, Sir Lucius, 'tisn't that I mind the word coward—coward may be said in joke—But if you had called me a poltroon, odds daggers and balls——
Sir LUCIUS
Well, sir?
ACRES
I should have thought you a very ill-bred man.
Sir LUCIUS
Pho! you are beneath my notice.

Related Characters: Sir Lucius O'Trigger, Squire Bob Acres (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Acres and Sir Lucius, the play's two ungentlemanly combatants, show the distinct ways each lacks honor. Acres, who truly had been losing his nerve as the time to begin the duel approached, now says that it is not cowardice that keeps him from fighting, but rather the fact that Beverley has not shown up to the duel. In fact, he is perfectly in the right. Sir Lucius wishes for Acres to fight Faulkland without any cause, and it is not cowardice, but sound logic, that makes Acres refuse to do this. At the same time, Acres is a coward. When Sir Lucius insults Acres and calls him a coward, the only way to keep his honor is for Acres to challenge Sir Lucius to a duel, which he declines to do. By lampooning these two characters' approach to dueling, Sheridan was attempting to shape the popular perception of his own two duels with Captain Mathews, who had behaved

first as a coward and then as a man overly eager to fight. Note also that Sheridan includes more of Acres's humorous oaths to further his ridiculous portrayal of the man.

Then let us study to preserve it so: and while Hope pictures to us a flattering scene of future bliss, let us deny its pencil those colours which are too bright to be lasting.—When hearts deserving happiness would unite their fortunes, Virtue would crown them with an unfading garland of modest hurtless flowers; but ill-judging Passion will force the gaudier rose into the wreath, whose thorn offends them when its leaves are dropped!

Related Characters: Julia Melville (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

Sheridan presents the moral of *The Rivals* in this speech of Julia's, but it seems more likely to fit with Sheridan's own agenda for his reputation than to truly sum up the message delivered by the play. The play is a light comedy, yet the moral given to it in this final speech of Julia's is that couples need to appreciate one another not just for their superficial qualities but for their virtues. She suggests that the beauty of youth will disappear with time and a marriage cannot be a happy one unless the partners are both moral and thoughtful—but the play has not given us any example of this behavior at all. Sheridan did not want to be seen as an unserious person, despite the light tone of his play, and so he gives his most morally upright character the play's last speech, and ends the play with a serious moral precept.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PREFACE

The preface was not included in the original production of the play, but was included in the first printed edition. In the preface, Sheridan notes that plays only receive printings if they have been well-received in the theatre and even then usually need no preface, but that the success of *The Rivals* was unusual and requires some explanation.

Sheridan meant for The Rivals *to secure his position in high society. The Preface tells us more about these aspirations than it does about the play itself.*

Sheridan notes that the play's initial performance on its first night was badly received, after which the play was withdrawn and thoroughly edited. He admits that the first version that he submitted to the theater was twice as long as was appropriate, and that although the manager edited it, he did not edit it enough for fear of wounding Sheridan's pride. Sheridan said that he made this mistake because *The Rivals* was the first play he had written and because he had not studied plays thoroughly, in an effort to avoid inadvertently plagiarizing the plays he read. Looking back, he is not surprised that there were elements in the first version of the play that the audience disliked, but he is surprised at himself for not having foreseen that these elements were objectionable.

Even as he introduces his play, Sheridan tries to distance himself from the ungentlemanly world of the theater. Sheridan grew up in a theatrical family, so his claim to be unfamiliar with theatrical norms is false, as is his claim to have avoided imitating other plays. The Rivals *draws on an unpublished play written by Sheridan's mother, among other works.*

Sheridan notes that some people have suggested that the play was at first poorly received because many people felt malice towards him personally, but he thinks this is unlikely, as he doesn't believe people view him that way. In any case, if someone did feel malice towards him, that person is now sorely disappointed, having witnessed the play's eventual success. Indeed, he is grateful to the audience who booed the first version of the play for its sincerity and for guiding him toward improving the work.

Sheridan continues to try to shape public perception of himself. He seeks to come across as reasonably accepting of deserved criticism. He also rather disingenuously states that he believes he has no enemies, while also claiming a victory over any enemies he does have.

On the other hand, Sheridan professes disdain for critics who write unkind reviews for authors who are not their personal acquaintances, and whose acquaintance he could not possibly be because he is a gentleman and they are not gentlemen. He then addresses those critics who thought his portrayal of Sir Lucius O'Trigger reflected anti-Irish sentiment, saying that he hopes that their feeling of offense deepened their attachment to Ireland. Finally, he thanks and praises the actors and management of the theatre, who have helped him so much to improve as a writer.

Sheridan derides theater critics who wrote negative reviews as both his social inferiors and corrupt, saying they only write favorably about their friends. In fact, Sheridan himself was a corrupt critic: he wrote a glowing review of The Rivals *under a pseudonym.*

PROLOGUES

Prologue on the play's first night. For the performance of the play on its first night, a prologue was performed by the actors playing Absolute and Acres. This prologue portrays a brief scene between an attorney and a court official, the serjeant-at-law, in which the attorney bribes the serjeant-at-law to read a brief to the court on behalf of the poet. The serjeant then presents the play to the judgment of the court of public opinion (i.e. to the audience), saying that if they do not like the play then his client's crime was nothing worse than attempting to please and failing.

In the prologue on the first night, Sheridan once again shows that he saw writing The Rivals *as a means to an end. He wished the play to be well-received and earn him praise and renown. At the same time, he suggests that it is no fault of his own if the play is not well-received and, by showing the serjeant-at-law as a bribe taker, suggests that there is no such thing as a fair and honest reception.*

Prologue for later performances of the play. After its disastrous opening night performance, the play was quickly re-edited. When it returned to the stage, it had an entirely different prologue. In this prologue, the actress playing Julia comes onstage and comments that it is no longer necessary for the serjeant to appear, because while he advocated for the playwright, she, as a woman, is better suited to serve the Muse. First, she addresses the figure of Comedy, saying it is too young and flirtatious to teach moral precepts. Then she addresses the figure of Tragedy, whose guidance would have all the actors and actresses in the play murder one another. The playwright hopes to avoid this, and instead to use comedy to teach a moral lesson. She admits, however, that very severe moralists will certainly find the play inadequate in doling out the punishment for guilt that Tragedy would dictate.

Sheridan's second version of the prologue is less blatantly self-serving and at least attempts to aim at loftier ideals of art and morality. The play is a Comedy (it's funny, and the main characters get married at the end), but Sheridan suggests that he at least wants some of the moral weight that comes with Tragedy to inform the work. Note also that Julia, as a woman, is seen as more of an "art object" than the male deliverer of the original prologue.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

The action begins when two servants, Fag and Thomas, run into one another on the street in the town of Bath. Fag is surprised to see Thomas, but Thomas explains that his ever-impulsive master, Sir Anthony Absolute, decided on the spur of the moment to bring his entire family to town from the countryside. Thomas asks after Sir Anthony's son and Fag's master, Captain Absolute, but Fag surprises Thomas by saying he (Fag) now works for someone named Ensign Beverley. Fag then explains that Ensign Beverley is really the same person as Absolute, which confuses Thomas even more.

The play straightaway displays its dominant feature by beginning with a deception about a deception. Fag has not changed employers, his employer has taken on a false identity, but because he has pretentions to being a man of the world, he draws out his explanation and plays a little joke on the more straightforward Thomas, when he cryptically says that Ensign Beverley and Captain Absolute are two halves of the same man.

Fag explains further: Absolute has taken on the false identity of Ensign Beverley for the sake of love. When Thomas wonders why Absolute, who is a captain, would masquerade as someone of lower rank in the army, Fag explains that the lady whom Absolute loves prefers a poor man to a rich one. Thomas asks if she is rich herself, and learns that she is, and fabulously so. Fag says that she returns Absolute's affections in his character of Beverley, and that her name is Lydia Languish.

The false identity has been taken on in aid of Absolute's pursuit of courtship, although neither servant understands Lydia's odd taste for a poor suitor. Thomas asks first whether Lydia is rich, and then whether she loves Absolute, this serving as a stand-in for Absolute's father, who will prioritize wealth in a potential match for his son.

Thomas professes good wishes for the young couple's future, and asks what there is to do in Bath. Fag invites Thomas to meet him and another servant that night. They then discuss changing fashions for **hairstyles**: wearing wigs has gone out of style and none of the London carriage drivers "of any degree of *ton*" will be caught wearing one, but Thomas does not want to give his up. Then the two men spot Absolute and Lucy, Lydia Languish's maid. Thomas notices that Absolute is paying Lucy money. Meanwhile, Fag rushes off to tell Absolute that his father (Sir Anthony) has come to town.

The more fashionable but also more pretentious Fag is passionately invested in keeping up-to-date with the latest hairstyles. This is linked to his pretentious use of language, because when he makes his case for disposing of wigs, he pronounces the word "tone" in the French fashion. This may impress the provincial Thomas, but it suggests that Fag's French may be limited to words that sound like their English-language equivalents.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

Lucy enters Lydia's dressing room and reports on the outcome of her search for books for her mistress throughout Bath's circulating libraries. Unfortunately, all the books that Lydia requested had already been taken from the libraries by other women of her acquaintance. However, Lucy did manage to get several other books, and she lists off several dramatically titled books like *The Tears of Sensibility* and *The Sentimental Journey* that she has brought for Lydia.

Lydia, like many young fashionable women, is a voracious reader of sentimental novels. These highly sought-after books emphasize the importance of emotions, while also describing dramatic adventures. For wealthy women with few responsibilities, reading such books was both fashionable and thrilling.

A moment later, Julia enters, much to the surprise of her cousin Lydia. They embrace and Julia explains that she came to Bath with Sir Anthony Absolute's party and that Sir Anthony will arrive soon to present himself to Lydia's aunt and guardian Mrs. Malaprop. Lydia hurries to fill her cousin in on developments in her love affair with Ensign Beverley since her last letter updating Julia. Mrs. Malaprop intercepted a love letter Lydia had sent, and now bars Lydia from communicating with Beverley. Meanwhile, Lydia informs Julia in a mocking tone, Mrs. Malaprop has been carrying on her own correspondence with an Irish baronet, using the pseudonym Delia or Celia, but this has not made her more sympathetic to Lydia's love affair.

Lydia and Mrs. Malaprop's lack of sympathy for one another's love affairs is typical of the conflict between the generations when it comes to love and courtship. Although Mrs. Malaprop is corresponding with a man for romantic reasons, she bars Lydia from doing the same. Meanwhile, Lydia thinks it ridiculous for Mrs. Malaprop to be engaged in a romantic correspondence as she has been doing. For the young, love among the old is illegitimate, and vice versa. Neither recognizes their own hypocrisy.

Lydia's worst piece of news is that she provoked a quarrel with Beverley before she was cut off from him by Mrs. Malaprop. Lydia started the quarrel because she realized that they had never fought before, so she sent herself an anonymous letter accusing him of courting another woman. She used the letter as a pretext to start a fight, but then couldn't make up with him because of her aunt's prohibition.

Lydia is hardly to be pitied for being deceived by Absolute to believe he is Beverley, since she too is capable of deception. Her deception is a silly one, however, undertaken without an end in mind that would serve her purposes. It seems likely that Lydia copied this trick from one of the romantic novels she reads.

Julia reassures Lydia, saying that if Beverley deserves her, he won't give up so easily, but asks Lydia if she truly intends to marry someone so much poorer than she is. Lydia professes that she would rather marry a poor man who doesn't care that she forfeits two-thirds of her fortune by marrying him. Julia says this desire is a caprice, and that Lydia could not possibly wish to give up her fortune.

Julia is a voice of reason who respects the established social order. In this case the order she respects is the one established by Lydia's guardians to protect Lydia's fortune. Julia thinks Lydia's determination to defy the older generation by marrying a man who does not care about losing her fortune is foolish.

Lydia counters that Julia's fiancé Faulkland is capricious too and always picks fights with her. Julia explains that she and Faulkland were engaged before her father's death. She says that Faulkland sincerely loves her and misbehaves because he is wracked by anxiety over whether or not she loves him. Lydia asks Julia if she would still marry Faulkland if he hadn't saved her from drowning, and Julia says she loved him even before he saved her.

Again, Julia's respect for the established order leads her to place a great importance on her deceased father's wish that she marry Faulkland. Although she says she loves Faulkland, she also refers to an obligation to him, an explanation which Lydia rejects. Julia's patience with Faulkland makes her the play's prime example of feminine virtue.

Lucy now enters to tell Lydia that Sir Anthony has arrived. Julia departs, and Lydia and her maid hurry to hide Lydia's books. Sir Anthony and Mrs. Malaprop enter and immediately begin lecturing Lydia on her determination to marry Beverley when her elders command that she forget him. Sir Anthony blames Lydia's refusal to be told whom to marry on her reading, while Mrs. Malaprop refers to her own experience with her deceased husband and advises Lydia that it doesn't matter if you hate or like your fiancé, since both sentiments will wear off over the course of a marriage. Mrs. Malaprop says that every argument Lydia makes "does not become a young woman" and eventually sends her from the room.

Sir Anthony believes that the generational conflict he witnesses in Lydia and Mrs. Malaprop's relationship is the result of Lydia's reading books which have made her forget her duty as a young woman to obey her elders. Mrs. Malaprop makes the unconvincing argument that it does not matter whether you love or hate your future husband. Her repeated complaint that Lydia is not acting as a young lady ought to quickly reaches a point of ridiculousness, even telling Lydia that thought itself is unbecoming behavior.

Left alone, Sir Anthony and Mrs. Malaprop debate the value and utility of education for women, with Sir Anthony hinting that books will make girls act promiscuously. He asks Mrs. Malaprop what kind of an education she thinks is proper to give a woman. Mrs. Malaprop breaks down which subjects she thinks it benefits women to study, but she mixes up so many words in her speech that she makes no sense. For instance, saying that a girl should be "instructed in geometry, that she might know something of the contagious countries." Sir Anthony says they will discuss it no further, as many of Mrs. Malaprop's arguments support his position.

Many in the late 18th century worried that literature would lead women to explore sex and get pregnant out of wedlock and be ostracized. Yet Sir Anthony's failure to distinguish between literacy and reading books about sex is a parody of the extremes to which this position could be taken. On the other hand, literacy has done Mrs. Malaprop little good, as she pretentiously uses vocabulary that she believes will make her sound sophisticated, but actually garbles her speech. Sir Anthony hints that he sees Mrs. Malaprop's gibberish as a further proof that women need not learn to read.

The conversation then turns to Lydia: Sir Anthony Absolute proposes that she should marry his son, and Mrs. Malaprop agrees, expressing the hope that Lydia will prefer Absolute to Acres, the first match she had chosen for her niece. Mrs. Malaprop asks Sir Anthony if he thinks Absolute will be receptive to the idea of marrying Lydia, and Sir Anthony promises to force his son to accept the match. He urges Mrs. Malaprop to do the same with Lydia, suggesting that she starve Lydia if she will not comply, then takes his leave.

The older generation is trying to arrange a marriage for the younger, but hardly considers whether the young people will like one another, only how it can assert its control. Once again, Sir Anthony's position is so extreme as to become a parody, this time of parents who seek to totally control their children's futures.

Left alone, Mrs. Malaprop reflects that she would be glad to no longer be required to serve as her niece's guardian, because Lydia has discovered that she is corresponding with Sir Lucius. She wonders if Lucy has betrayed her, but reflects that "had she been one of your artificial ones, I should never have trusted her." She calls Lucy in and asks whether Lucy betrayed the fact of Mrs. Malaprop's correspondence to Lydia. Lucy plays dumb. Mrs. Malaprop believes her, and gives Lucy another letter to deliver to Sir Lucius, warning the maid that she must keep her secret.

Mrs. Malaprop has a misplaced faith in her own ability to see through a deception. She asks Lucy straightforwardly whether Lucy is deceiving her, and takes Lucy's pretended innocence at face value. Mrs. Malaprop's inability to understand that those around her are laughing at her and taking advantage of her receives no sympathy in the play, but only comes in for mockery.

After Mrs. Malaprop has left, Lucy goes over all the tips and presents she has been given while serving as a messenger for Acres, Ensign Beverley, Lydia, Mrs. Malaprop, and Sir Lucius O'Trigger. She has acted simple and uncalculating, but really she is gaming them all. She has gotten tips from Acres without delivering his messages to Lydia, revealed Lydia and Beverley's affair to Mrs. Malaprop, and even tricked Sir Lucius into believing that he was corresponding with Lydia, instead of Mrs. Malaprop, once she realized Lucius would not court the old and unattractive Mrs. Malaprop just for her money.

Lucy, a practiced deceiver, tells her superiors what they want to hear, and presents herself as their ally, all the while betraying them to one another. Lucy is canny enough to recognize exactly which messages to deliver and which to hold back, and has even orchestrated the courtship between Mrs. Malaprop and Sir Lucius under false pretenses because she sees that she can profit from it.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

At Absolute's apartment, Fag tells Absolute that he has seen Sir Anthony, and that Sir Anthony was surprised to hear that his son is in Bath. Fag then promises that he lied to Sir Anthony about what brought his son to town. He then lies to Absolute when he claims not to have told any of Sir Anthony's servants about his own master's reason for being in Bath. The two of them then agree to tell people that Absolute is in town to recruit soldiers for his regiment, with Fag saying he does not mind lying but hates to get caught in a lie.

Fag, who has pretentions to be a fashionable man despite being a servant, is eager to learn from and imitate his master in everything, including in the arts of deception. He, like all the other practiced deceivers in the play, tells others what they want to hear, as when he lies about having told Thomas that Absolute is in town for love. He also obviously enjoys conspiring with Absolute, which makes him feel that they are equals.

Absolute sends Fag to summon Faulkland, whom he intends to tease about Julia. Faulkland soon enters, asks about Absolute's quarrel with Lydia, and urges him to make up and elope with her. Absolute says he will not elope and lose Lydia's fortune in the process, and so Faulkland advises Absolute to ask Mrs. Malaprop and Sir Anthony for Lydia's hand in marriage. Absolute says he is not sure that Lydia will still accept him if she realizes that he is rich and that society will approve of their match, and that he must prepare her gradually before he can reveal his true identity to her.

Absolute has planned his deception carefully, cultivating the image he knew would appeal to Lydia. But since his deception is based on being the man she wants *him to be, he has yet to seize on a strategy for revealing who he* actually *is. This is essential, because he is not yet sure that she loves him fully enough to marry him if she realizes that her aunt will approve of him as a conventional choice for a husband.*

Faulkland refuses Absolute's offer to come to dinner with a group of friends, saying he is too depressed to go out. Absolute tells Faulkland to buck up, commenting that he himself is also a lover but doesn't allow himself to become so sulky and heartsick the way that Faulkland does. Faulkland responds that Absolute is less invested in Lydia than he himself is in Julia; Absolute could love again if he lost Lydia, but for him there is only Julia, and he worries constantly that she may be suffering in his absence or have grown ill.

Faulkland's extreme sensitivity is also reflective of the sentimental novels of the time. His expectations for Julia and himself during their courtship are drawn not from the practical principles of class and wealth that guide Absolute and the older generation, but from the same romantic ideas that Lydia has absorbed from novels. He thinks that because they are in love, he and Julia should suffer.

Absolute then shocks Faulkland by telling him that Sir Anthony has brought Julia to town. Faulkland gets ready to hurry off to see her, but Absolute convinces him to stay and hear how she is from Acres, who lives near Sir Anthony and socializes with the family. Absolute tells Faulkland that Acres is also pursuing Lydia. Further, he explains that Acres, not knowing that Beverley is actually Absolute's alter ego, often complains to Absolute about his rival for Lydia's love to his rival's own face, which amuses Absolute.

Absolute enjoys teasing people: he could have reassured Faulkland of Julia's health as soon as he saw him, but instead he preferred to watch Faulkland squirm. He also amuses himself by letting Acres rant against Beverley to him. In this behavior, Absolute is similar to Sheridan himself, who concealed from his own brother that he loved and was courting the same woman, Elizabeth Linley.


Acres enters and is introduced to Faulkland, whom he congratulates on being engaged to such a wonderful woman. Faulkland questions Acres about how Julia has been. Acres reports that she has been extremely healthy, merry, and has charmed all those around her with her beautiful singing at concerts and dancing at balls. Faulkland complains to Absolute that he feels Julia has the advantage of him, since she managed to be jolly while he couldn't help being a terrible grump during their separation. Absolute mocks his friend for saying all he needed was to know that Julia was well to start feeling better himself, then proceeding to get even more upset that she had been *too* well. Acres begins to notice Faulkland's agitation, so Faulkland rushes away in a huff.

Faulkland has been moping about and refusing to go out, so the discovery that Julia has been enjoying herself and earning the admiration of those around her makes him jealous. For him, a failure to show everyone that she is sad in his absence is a failure to love him.


Acres asks if Faulkland had been upset, and Absolute flatters Acres by saying Faulkland had been jealous of him. Acres notes that he *is* dressing more fashionably and has changed his **hairstyle**, and that he hopes this will win over Lydia. Absolute encourages him. Acres peppers his speech with unusual oaths. If he can find his competition Ensign Beverley, then, he says "odds triggers and flints" he will show him who is boss. Absolute comments on Acres's new way of swearing, and Acres explains that it is called a sentimental oath and is genteel. Absolute has heard no one else swear in the way, but encouragingly tells Acres it will surely become the new fashion.

Acres's manner of speech immediately distinguishes him from Absolute and Faulkland as a less educated and worldly man. He thinks that new clothes and a hairstyle and the adoption of a new way of swearing will be enough to show that he is a sophisticated gentleman, but these attempts only highlight how little he knows. Instead, the drastic changes Acres makes to his appearance, like the drastic changes he makes to his speech, reflect a flailing and failing attempt to remake his persona. At the same time, Acres is a bad judge of others, and is easily deceived by Absolute's flattery.


Acres departs, and Absolute now waits anxiously for his father to enter. When Sir Anthony arrives, he announces to Absolute that he wants to arrange for his son to have a large fortune, and Absolute thanks his father for this generosity. Absolute asks if his father wants him to leave the army, to which Sir Anthony responds that Absolute should settle that with his wife. When Absolute asks what his father means, Sir Anthony reveals that the fortune he intends his son to have comes with marriage. Absolute asks to whom his father intends to marry him, but Sir Anthony refuses to answer, saying that doesn't matter. He does not contradict Absolute when Absolute suggests that his father wants to marry him to an ugly woman, only saying that Absolute should marry whomever his father chooses even if she is deformed.

Sir Anthony is always extreme in his positions: he wants to win the conflict between the generations by deciding on his son's future wife without giving his son any say in the matter. At the same time, he expects Absolute to be grateful to him since the match will bring Absolute a fortune. He is so blinded to the other side of the question that he refuses even to tell Absolute that the girl in question is the beautiful Lydia, although there is no reason to keep this a secret, and it would seem like a likely way to get Absolute to do as he is told.

Absolute protests that he is already in love with another and cannot follow Sir Anthony's command. Sir Anthony flies into a rage, demanding his son's unconditional obedience and passionately threatening to disinherit his son, take away his commission in the army, and never speak to him again. Absolute, keeping his calm, begs his father to be reasonable. Sir Anthony, who is practically frothing at the mouth with anger, accuses his son of raging at him. Sir Anthony storms out, and Absolute reflects that his father should hardly have any difficulty understanding his perspective because Sir Anthony himself married Absolute's mother for love.

Sir Anthony assigns no importance to the fact that Absolute has already proposed to a woman, failing to recognize that he is repeating his own mistakes, since he himself eloped with Absolute's mother. Some of the ridiculousness of Sir Anthony's portrayal likely comes from Sheridan's bitter experience with his own father, who was deeply opposed to his son's marriage to Elizabeth Linley.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

Lucy is out on the street looking for Sir Lucius. When she finds him, she assumes her guise of being a simple messenger. Sir Lucius reads the letter Mrs. Malaprop sent, which begins with the puzzling declaration that "there is often a sudden incentive impulse in love, that has a greater induction than years of domestic combination." The letter continues in this snooty yet flirtatious tone, but makes very little sense. Sir Lucius asks Lucy about the odd language of the letter, to which Lucy responds that "Delia" has a lot of experience. He asks how she has so much experience at only seventeen, and Lucy explains that she only meant that Delia is very well-read. Sir Lucius notes the arbitrary use of language, but does not let it bother him, saying he would run away with his "Delia" if he weren't poor and didn't need her aunt's consent in order to keep her fortune. He gives Lucy some money and kisses her, and she flirts back, pretending to be dimwitted all the while.

Lucy almost loses track of her falsehoods here, forgetting that she must deceive Sir Lucius about the identity of his correspondent while also acting simpleminded and flirtatious in order to keep his trust and get a good tip. Although Sir Lucius thinks the language of the letter is strange, using impressive vocabulary incorrectly, he is much more interested in marrying someone rich, young, and beautiful and raising his own fortunes, and gives little thought to the intellect of his future wife. He feels he must get her aunt's permission for the marriage, because unlike Absolute who has a fortune of his own, Sir Lucius is poor. This also means he can expect opposition to the match from the young heiress's guardian.

Sir Lucius leaves and Fag approaches. Lucy continues to pretend simplicity, but Fag tells her to be straight with him, then reprimands her for passing letters to Sir Lucius, saying he will tell his master, Ensign Beverley, that Sir Lucius is a rival. Lucy tells Fag that the letter is actually from Mrs. Malaprop, not Lydia, but that Ensign Beverley has an even more serious rival: Captain Absolute. Fag laughs at this piece of news, but says he must hurry off to tell his master of it. Lucy, not realizing that Absolute and Beverley are the same person, replies that she is serious and that Absolute sounds like he will be a formidable rival, but that he should tell his master that he still has Lydia's love.

Lucy and Fag are two of a kind, two servants who see opportunities if they can gain the trust of their masters. Both are ready to deceive one another or to deceive their masters. Although Lucy assures Fag that Sir Lucius is not a competitor for Beverley, Fag does not give up his master's secret to Lucy. Each is weighing which secrets are best kept and which are best disclosed to gather information and gain advantage.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

Strolling on the North Parade, Absolute reflects on his luck: he has heard from Fag that his father wants to force him to marry the girl he already loves. He determines to make up with Sir Anthony, but at the same time to keep his relationship with Lydia a secret as a comeuppance for the harsh treatment he received from his father. Absolute then runs into his father, who is still furious. Absolute tells his father he has reflected on the matter and decided that Sir Anthony is right—it is his duty as a son to agree to marry whichever woman his father chooses without knowing who she is.

Unlike Lydia, Absolute is perfectly happy to marry with his father's consent, but he has too much self-respect to simply explain to his father that he has already been courting Lydia. Instead, because Sir Anthony had been trying to force him to give up all autonomy, Absolute stretches out his deception. This way he can point out Sir Anthony's hypocrisy while getting (mostly) back into his good graces.

Sir Anthony, pleased with Absolute's obedience, excitedly reveals that the match he wants to arrange is with the beautiful, young Lydia Languish. Absolute pretends never to have met Lydia and declares that he is indifferent to her beauty, so long as he can please his father. Sir Anthony gets mad at Absolute for not being excited to hear that his future wife is so beautiful. He proclaims that he never would have married an old or ugly woman when he was his son's age. "Not even to please your father?" Absolute asks. Stumped, Sir Anthony grumbles that he hopes his son is only pretending not to care if his wife is beautiful or not, but Absolute persists in professing that he only cares about pleasing his father. Sir Anthony says he will write to Mrs. Malaprop and Absolute will soon pay Lydia a visit.

Sir Anthony wants to control his son absolutely, but also to be thanked for it once he reveals that he is controlling him in a way that he thinks his son is sure to like. Sir Anthony is not only controlling of his son, though—he is also nostalgic for young love and lust and wants to live vicariously through his son, who refuses him this satisfaction by failing to show any excitement at the prospect of a beautiful wife. Instead Absolute gets his father to face down his own hypocrisy by admitting that he defied his own father to marry Absolute's mother.

ACT 3, SCENE 2

Faulkland awaits Julia in her dressing room and reflects that when he first saw her after she had arrived in Bath, she had seemed very happy to see him, but because he had heard how happy she had been in his absence, he had acted like he was not excited to see her. Julia enters. She asks Faulkland why his greeting had been cold and why he now seems upset. He says that he was bothered to have heard that she had been merry during their separation. She chides him for always finding something to be unhappy about, but explains that she only pretended to be so happy so that no one would think he had made her unhappy and rebuke him.

Faulkland means for his cold reception of Julia to level the playing field between them, as he assumes she has been happy in his absence because she loves him less than he loves her. But she is too earnest about her feelings for him and sure in his love for her to be manipulated. Meanwhile, Julia's use of artifice has not been to pursue her own ends and charm those around her, but to protect Faulkland's reputation. In fact, Julia sees protecting Faulkland's reputation as one of her own priorities, again acting as an ideal example of Sheridan's view of feminine virtue.

Faulkland feels better, but when Julia tells him that her heart is pledged to him he gripes at her choice of words. He says that perhaps she is only grateful to him, and does not actually love him. He wishes that he were deformed, so that he could be sure that she loved him for his true essence and not for any superficial reason. She says there are men who are more handsome than he is, but she never looks at them because she loves him. Now he is offended that she does not think him the handsomest man alive, and worries that she is only attached to him because her father arranged for their engagement. Julia responds that they can break off their engagement and she would still have eyes for no other, but now Faulkland gets angry that she would think of letting him go. Finally Julia rushes out crying, saying that she will spare him having to feel guilty for any further insults, because it's clear all he can say to her is insulting. Faulkland calls to her and thinks she will return, but she does not.

Julia and Faulkland's fight reflects their different conceptions of themselves. While Julia feels it is her duty as a future wife to support Faulkland, while also being reasonable and frank with him, Faulkland believes that, if their love is real, they ought to be consumed by passion and indifferent to rational arguments. Julia's view represents a more traditional view of the role of women, while Faulkland's expectations are drawn from the sentimental ideas popularized at that time in some literature.

ACT 3, SCENE 3

Absolute visits Mrs. Malaprop, who welcomes him with flattering remarks about his pedigree and "the ingenuity of his appearance." He flatters her by saying that since he has never met Lydia, his attraction to the family comes from what he has heard about Mrs. Malaprop's "intellectual accomplishments, elegant manners, and unaffected learning." In her usual incoherent way, Mrs. Malaprop comments that most men do not care about the "ineffectual qualities in a woman" and only care what a woman looks like. Few women are both beautiful and wise, like Mrs. Malaprop, Absolute says. Mrs. Malaprop is very impressed with Absolute and asks him what he thinks of Lydia having decided she is in love with a poor ensign whom no one else has ever met. Absolute says he is not prejudiced against Lydia because of it, but Mrs. Malaprop continues to complain that she has not been able to convince Lydia to give up Beverley.

The pretentions of Mrs. Malaprop here comes up against the deceptive powers of Absolute. It is an extremely uneven match. Absolute praises Mrs. Malaprop for the very qualities that she has (unsuccessfully) cultivated, and by pinpointing what Mrs. Malaprop wants to hear is able to gain her trust. His strong command of language is sharply contrasted to her weak one, but he leads her to believe that he sees her as someone to look up to and admire. Mrs. Malaprop aspires to be well-spoken, and so Absolute charms her completely with his eloquent speech about her *eloquence.*

Mrs. Malaprop pulls out a letter that Absolute had sent to Lydia in his character as Beverley. Under his breath, Absolute curses Lucy for betraying him to Mrs. Malaprop. He then reads the letter aloud, stopping at points while he and Mrs. Malaprop interject to scoff at its content. Beverley's letter begins tenderly, then says he is alarmed to hear he has a rival in Absolute, who has the reputation of being an honorable gentleman. It goes on to make fun of Mrs. Malaprop's vanity about her looks and pretentious and senseless way of speaking, and calls her a "weather-beaten-she-dragon." Finally, the letter promises that Beverley has a plan to see Lydia with Mrs. Malaprop serving as his unwitting accomplice by flattering her vanity in order to gain her trust. Mrs. Malaprop laughs at Beverley's audacious claim and Absolute pretends to laugh along with her, while actually laughing at how thoroughly he has tricked her.

Here the layers of deception begin to really pile up. Absolute reads aloud to Mrs. Malaprop a letter he wrote Lydia about his plans to deceive Mrs. Malaprop. Mrs. Malaprop discusses the letter, without suspecting that these plans are being carried out that very minute. The letter is meant to impress and excite Lydia with his proposal to deceive her aunt, but is, at the same time, also a deception of Lydia, who believes her lover to be someone he is not. Indeed, insofar as she knows Absolute is Absolute, the otherwise completely duped Mrs. Malaprop knows more than her niece does about their visitor.

Absolute suggests a plan: that Mrs. Malaprop should allow Beverley to correspond with Lydia, and then when the pair tries to elope together, Absolute will waylay Beverley and carry Lydia off himself. Mrs. Malaprop is delighted with the suggested scheme. Absolute asks to see Lydia, but slips up by asking Mrs. Malaprop to tell Lydia that Beverley is there to see her. He quickly covers his tracks by saying that he meant that Mrs. Malaprop should lie about who was there to visit her, in order to get Lydia to come down. Mrs. Malaprop goes off to summon Lydia to meet Absolute.

Just as Absolute sought to increase Lydia's attachment to him by describing his plan to trick Mrs. Malaprop, he now wins Mrs. Malaprop's trust completely by suggesting they should be co-conspirators in a plan to deceive Lydia. Sheridan himself carried out a complicated elopement involving many separate deceptions, so the process of scheming before an elopement would have been a familiar one to him.

While alone, Absolute reflects that he may lose Lydia if he reveals his true identity to her now. He turns his back to the door. Lydia enters and reflects on how unfortunate she is to have to listen to the wooing of someone other than her beloved. She demands that Absolute turn around and is shocked to see …Beverley! "Beverley" explains that he heard Absolute was coming to visit and found a way to delay him and come in his place. Lydia is delighted to hear how Beverley has tricked her aunt. "Beverley" pleads with Lydia to run away with him, and she asks if he is ready to forego her fortune. He says that he is, and makes a romantic speech about how happy he would be to be penniless with her. Lydia hesitates; she is won over by "Beverley" but feels unready to give up on the excitement of their forbidden courtship.

Absolute delights Lydia with his account of how he tricked her aunt, although still Lydia does not realize that she herself is being tricked. Absolute's speech pledging to run away with her and live in poverty is filled with further deceptions. First of all, he is actually keen to gain her complete fortune. Second, since neither of them are impoverished (even without two-thirds of her fortune, Lydia is still quite rich), so this speech is mere mimicry of the language of the sentimental literature that Lydia loves. As such, Lydia does not immediately agree to run away, but hopes to prolong the drama.

At that moment, Mrs. Malaprop sneaks in and begins to eavesdrop. She misinterprets the lovers' speech and thinks that Lydia has been rudely rejecting Absolute. Mrs. Malaprop comes forward, and Absolute fears that she has discovered that Lydia thinks he is Beverley, but is reassured when she starts to lecture Lydia for her bad treatment of him. Lydia denies that there is any rudeness in saying that she will only love Beverley. Mrs. Malaprop tries to quiet Lydia's speech while ushering her from the room.

The other side of Mrs. Malaprop's inability to use language correctly is an inability to comprehend possible meanings that stray outside of what she expects to hear. Because Mrs. Malaprop brings pre-conceived notions to her eavesdropping, even though she overhears Lydia and Beverley speaking, the deception is improbably prolonged.

ACT 3, SCENE 4

In his lodgings, Acres and his servant David discuss the changes Acres has made to his appearance. David says that those back at Acres's home, Clod-Hall, would scarcely recognize him with his new **hairstyle**.

Acres has dramatically changed his appearance fashionable, but since the only remark on his appearance is that he is hardly recognizable, it seems unlikely that he looks more attractive or more fashionable.

David leaves, and Acres practices dancing, but complains that although he is fine at dancing English country dances, he is struggling to learn the fashionable French dance steps because they are taught to him using **foreign words**. "*Pas* this, and *pas* that, *pas* t'other! – damn me! My feet don't like to be called paws!" he exclaims.

Acres's pretentions run up against his simple, country understanding of language when he tries to learn French dances. The French word for step is "pas," and is pronounced "pah." Acres, who is struggling to master these dances that all true gentleman know, hears this as "paw."

Sir Lucius, a friend of Acres, enters and asks why Acres has come to Bath. Acres explains that he has come for love. He describes his situation with Lydia, although he does not disclose her name. He says that he fell in love with a woman, got encouragement from her family, then followed her to Bath only to find that her friends now plan to marry her off to someone else. The cause of this, he explains, is another lover, Beverley.

Acres is trying to court Lydia in the traditional way, by arranging the marriage with her family, while also hoping to secure her love by improving himself. At the same time, there is an unintended deception between him and Sir Lucius, who is also hoping to marry Lydia.

Sir Lucius asks if Acres's rival has taken his place unfairly, to which Acres unthinkingly agrees. Sir Lucius says it obvious, then, that Acres must call his rival out for a duel. Acres, surprised, says that there has been no provocation, but Sir Lucius counters that stealing the woman another man loves is a terrible thing to do to a friend. Acres objects that he is not friends with Beverley, but Sir Lucius says that it is even worse, in that case. Acres says that Sir Lucius is stirring his anger, but he wishes he had a bit more of a reason that gave him a right to be angry before he calls for a duel. Sir Lucius counters that great men of history like Alexander the Great did not worry about what was right when their honor was concerned.

Sir Lucius's approach to dueling is to disregard many of the conventions about what causes justify challenging someone to fight. In this respect, he is clearly supposed to resemble Mathews, the man Sheridan himself dueled. Sir Lucius argues for the duel using opposing arguments, and mistakes a capacity to win in violent combat for a sign of greatness. Acres has at least a general sense of what kind of an insult constitutes grounds for calling someone out to fight, but because of his desire to become a true gentleman, he is easily influenced by Sir Lucius's arguments.

Acres says he feels as though he is discovering his own valor as Sir Lucius works him up, but Sir Lucius responds that it is proper to be calm when writing a challenge. Sir Lucius dictates a standard letter of challenge with a civil tone, which strikes Acres as not nearly menacing enough. As Acres prepares to send the letter, Sir Lucius recommends that he get the duel over with as soon as possible. Sir Lucius says he can be reached by letter, but is off to settle a matter of his own: he plans on challenging a captain who has made insulting remarks about Ireland. Acres says he wishes he could watch Sir Lucius kill someone, to get courage and inspiration. Sir Lucius again tells Acres to be courageous but not agitated, and they both exit.

Acres knows little about the proper decorum for writing a challenge, but his pretentions suggest to him that he ought to go to extremes by writing an aggressive letter. Sir Lucius, meanwhile, once again gets things backwards when he tells Acres to rush into the duel. Friends of combatants were supposed to urge them to delay and give the matter thought before rushing into combat. The final irony here is that Sir Lucius and Acres themselves have just as much of a reason to duel one another—for they both hope to marry Lydia—as Acres has to duel Beverley.

ACT 4, SCENE 1

Acres's servant David is trying to discourage his master from sending the letter challenging Beverley to a duel, fearing that Acres will be killed. Acres says he must be careful not to risk his honor, to which David replies that Acres's honor should not "risk the loss of him." Acres counters that his honor would follow him to the grave if he died and that he cannot disgrace his ancestors. David replies that the best way not to disgrace ancestors is not to die prematurely.

Unlike his master, who has embarked on a project of self-improvement, David does not seek to become anything other than a simple boy from the country. Acres understands the importance of honor to being a gentleman, but he cannot lose his honor by failing to fight, since he has no grounds to send the challenge in the first place. David, meanwhile, who does not pretend to be a gentleman, sees it as senseless to lose one's life for a principle like honor.

Acres begins to get nervous about the duel and asks David if he really thinks he might die. David says he thinks it ten to one that Acres will be killed. Acres tries to keep his courage up, but he is becoming very scared. As if giving himself a pep talk, he says that he has the challenge ready and he will give it to his friend Captain Absolute to deliver to Beverley. David is glad for this, because he wouldn't want to be the one to deliver the letter. David then goes on to imagine the sad scene on Acres's estate when his dog and horse learn that he has been killed. Captain Absolute is announced and David leaves the room, whimpering worried prayers for Acres's safety.

A new element of dueling begins to occur to the inexperienced Acres: the possibility of being killed. Although he knew all along that death was a possible outcome, he had been too focused on showing himself to be a true gentleman in all things, and dueling to prove it if necessary, to fully grasp this possibility. A true gentleman approaches a duel with courage, which Acres knows he does not have, but is still determinedly trying to fake.

Absolute asks why he has been sent for, and Acres shows him the challenge. Absolute reads the letter, then asks if Acres really intends to fight Beverley. Acres replies that Sir Lucius has convinced him to. When Absolute wonders what he, Absolute, has to do with this duel between Acres and Beverley, Acres asks him to deliver the message to Beverley, since Absolute and Beverley are acquainted. Absolute promises Beverley will get the note. Acres says he wishes to fight that night so that he will still be worked up from his talk with Sir Lucius. Acres then asks Absolute to be his second in the duel. When Absolute demurs, Acres says that Sir Lucius will be his second.

Again Absolute allows Acres to believe that he is not his rival, and finds listening to Acres talk about the coming duel with his alter ego an entertaining spectacle. At the same time, Acres continues to show that he does not know how to conduct himself properly in a matter of honor like a duel. First, he again says he wishes to rush to fight so that his passion will not be wasted, whereas a true gentleman approaches the matter with calm and dignity.

A servant enters and tells Absolute his father is downstairs looking for him. As Absolute gets ready to take his leave, Acres adds an extra request: that, while delivering the letter, Absolute intimidate Beverley and tell him what a ferocious and deadly fighter Acres is. Acres says he hopes to intimidate Beverley, and then Beverley may be too frightened to come to the duel, which Acres says would clear his honor. Absolute promises over and over to do so.

As a further sign of his lack of true gentlemanly honor, Acres asks Absolute to try to intimidate his opponent when he delivers the message. He then says he hopes that Beverley will not attend, so that Acres will not be forced to kill him, although it is clear that he is actually worried that he will be killed in the battle, a clear sign that he lacks the requisite courage.

ACT 4, SCENE 2

At Mrs. Malaprop's lodgings, Mrs. Malaprop is trying to persuade Lydia to accept Absolute as a suitor. Isn't he handsome, she asks Lydia. "The Absolute you have seen," Lydia remarks to herself, thinking that Mrs. Malaprop has met Beverley, not Absolute. She tells Mrs. Malaprop that Beverley is handsome too. Mrs. Malaprop rhapsodizes about Absolute's good breeding and eloquence, but continuously mixes up her words, then grossly misquotes a passage from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to describe him. She cannot remember the end of the quotation, and says "something about kissing – on a hill – however, the similitude stuck me directly."

Lydia laughs at her aunt, thinking that Mrs. Malaprop has been deceived and now praises the same lover she forbade her niece from seeing, but the audience knows that Lydia herself is the dupe here. Yet at the same time, as Mrs. Malaprop tries to give Absolute high praise, her pretentions to be as cultured as the man who so impressed her lead her to try (and fail) to quote a romantic passage in Shakespeare. Comically, she instead chooses one in which Hamlet is describing his dead father, and then botches the recitation.

A servant announces that Sir Anthony and Absolute have arrived. Mrs. Malaprop begs that Lydia act as befits a young lady and show her good breeding, even if she has forgotten her duty, but Lydia says she will neither speak to, nor look at, Absolute. When he enters, Sir Anthony says that he has no idea why, but Absolute kept trying to run away when he was bringing him to meet Lydia, then tells Absolute to speak to Lydia. Absolute, perplexed by the situation, asks his father to leave him alone with Lydia, but is refused. Meanwhile, Lydia, who is still refusing to look at Absolute, wonders why her aunt hasn't noticed that the man in front of her is different from the one she met earlier in the day.

The older and younger generation are finally all assembled in one room. Sir Anthony, unaware of all the deceptions about to be unraveled, tries to force Absolute to act like a lover towards Lydia, while the equally unaware Mrs. Malaprop tries to force Lydia to at least be polite and docile, which is proper behavior for a young woman, even if she is unwilling to be wooed. Lydia, by not looking around at Absolute, prolongs her own deception by him, but begins to get an inkling that something is off, since her aunt seems to recognize the man who visited earlier.

Mrs. Malaprop urges Lydia to turn around, while Sir Anthony begins to grow angry at Absolute for not speaking to Lydia. Absolute tells Sir Anthony that his passion has taken away his presence of mind, but Sir Anthony insists again that he approach Lydia and speak to her. Absolute signals to Mrs. Malaprop that he wishes to be left alone with Lydia, but although Mrs. Malaprop is inclined to do whatever Absolute suggests, she cannot convince Sir Anthony to leave them. Absolute then disguises his voice and begins to speak. Sir Anthony asks why he is speaking like a frog, then asks Mrs. Malaprop to at least get Lydia to turn around.

The play delays the climactic moment when Absolute's deception will be uncovered for as long as possible. He even takes on a new disguise temporarily, changing his voice in the hopes that he can somehow delay for time and find a way to save his false identity from being uncovered. But even his ability to charm can only go so far: with his father there, he does not have free reign to manipulate Mrs. Malaprop.

Absolute realizes he is about to be discovered. He addresses Lydia in his own voice, asking that she suppress her surprise. Hearing Beverley's voice, she turns around and exclaims her surprise at seeing Beverley. Sir Anthony and Mrs. Malaprop are dumbfounded and think that Lydia has gone insane. Sir Anthony says, "the girl's mad! –her brain's turned by reading." Lydia professes that she will always love Beverley, who stands before her.

Lydia's declaration of her love for Beverley exposes the secret of Absolute's deception to all. Further, it is not the quiet and reserved behavior that would be expected of an unmarried girl. This declaration, as well as her mistake about her lover's identity, gives some truth to Sir Anthony's otherwise absurd statement—she would not have been so easily deceived by Absolute if she had not been so filled with the romantic ideas in the books she reads.

Sir Anthony gets an inkling that his son may be behind this confusion and demands to know what's going on from Absolute. Mrs. Malaprop also begins to suspect. In an eloquent speech, Absolute tells Sir Anthony that he is his dutiful son, Mrs. Malaprop that he is her admirer and hopes to become her nephew, and Lydia that he assumed the name of Beverley to test whether she loved him regardless of his station in the world. "So, there will be no elopement," Lydia says sullenly and then lapses into silence.

His deception uncovered, Absolute turns to his powers of speech to attempt to save the situation. He makes an eloquent speech that gains him Mrs. Malaprop and his father's forgiveness. Lydia, on the other hand, must grapple with the disappointment of her romantic hopes for her own life's narrative. Meanwhile, Absolute's claim that he pretended to be poor to test Lydia's love is another clever deception that appeals to her romantic fantasy. That sort of test would fit in a sentimental novel, but of course he actually pretended to be poor for the opposite reason: in order to gain her love.

Sir Anthony is delighted to learn that Absolute was lying to him when he acted like a dutiful son who was indifferent to whether his bride was beautiful. Mrs. Malaprop, however, is shocked to realize that Absolute was the author of the letter calling her a "weather-beaten she-dragon" and mocking her speech. Absolute pleads with his father to leave him and Lydia, saying he is overcome with embarrassment. Sir Anthony tells Mrs. Malaprop they should leave the young people alone and predicts that they will fly into one another's arms. As the two older people exit, Sir Anthony becomes so jolly that he begins to sing and flirt with Mrs. Malaprop.

The conflict among old and young is now resolved for Sir Anthony, who now thinks his hopes to live vicariously through his son's romance of the beautiful, young Lydia will be fulfilled. For Mrs. Malaprop, on the other hand, Absolute's admiration of her has been shown to be false. She is buoyed, though, by being included in Sir Anthony's merriment about the young people's happy future, and her reckoning with the truth of Absolute's opinion of her is very short. Given her pretensions, Mrs. Malaprop does not want to spend long dwelling on such uncomfortable facts.

Lydia remains silent, and Absolute reflects that this does not bode well. He tries to convince her that it is not such a disaster that they will be married with the consent of their elders and go on to live with a little wealth and comfort, but Lydia remains angry. Absolute kneels before her, but she scoffs and says kneeling is meaningless since she will be forced to marry him. He stands and says he will make sure she is not forced into it, if she no longer loves him. Lydia stands up and paces angrily, fuming about what a fool he has made of her, and railing against him for winning her heart through fraud and treating her like a child by manipulating her. She then flings a miniature with his portrait on it at him, saying she no longer loves him. Absolute takes out his own miniature containing her picture from inside his coat and looks at lovingly, saying he will keep it because although it is not as beautiful as she is, it has never ceased to look at him with love.

Lydia is angry not only at being deceived (although she is very angry at this), but also at the destruction of her fantasy of a rebellious marriage that goes against conventional expectations. This disappointment at having lost in the generational conflict and, consequently, being forced to play the role of a proper young woman in her engagement and marriage overshadows, for the moment, her love for Absolute. Although this provides a problem for Absolute in this moment, it is part of the reason they are a good match: both relish the idea of deceiving those around them. In his speech about the portrait, Absolute uses his gifts as a speaker to begin to charm Lydia out of her anger.

Lydia begins to feel badly for Absolute, but says he brought this on himself and she supposes he is perfectly satisfied. Absolute laughs bitterly at this and begins to scoff and speak with biting sarcasm. Of course, he says sarcastically, it's preferable to be broken up to being in love. And it doesn't matter at all that they are breaking their many vows of love to one another. Nor does it matter that people will talk about them and say Lydia doesn't know what she wants or perhaps spread a rumor that Absolute rejected her. At this, Lydia bursts into tears.

Here we see the darker side of Absolute's ability to charm and convince with his mastery of language and understanding of other people's motivations. In rapid succession, he suggests several ways to look at Lydia's hasty decision to abandon their love affair that are both unflattering to her sense of herself and to her reputation in the society they both inhabit.

Sir Anthony and Mrs. Malaprop enter, anticipating the sight of two lovers whispering sweet nothings to one another, but instead find Lydia screaming insults and sobbing. The two elders ask the meaning of this angry scene. Both Lydia and Absolute reply that the other can give a better explanation. Lydia says that she will now obey her aunt, who had told her never to think of Beverley again, and renounces the man in front of her forever, then storms from the room. Mrs. Malaprop asks whether Absolute has acted disrespectfully to Lydia. Sir Anthony starts to laugh, and says that Absolute must have come on too strong sexually and scared Lydia. Absolute strenuously objects that nothing of the sort happened. As Mrs. Malaprop exclaims her disapproval, Sir Anthony pushes Absolute out the door, all the while telling Mrs. Malaprop to convince Lydia to forgive his hot-blooded son.

The elder generation cannot grasp why there should be any further obstacle to Absolute and Lydia's engagement now that their agreement is secured. They do not understand that their consent is actually a barrier to Lydia's happiness (or her idea of happiness). Once again expressing his desire to live vicariously through his son, along with his own apparent sexual fantasies about Lydia and his conception of the proper reactions of a well-bred young woman to those fantasies, Sir Anthony suggests that Lydia is angry because Absolute has been too sexual with her while her guardian was out of the room.

ACT 4, SCENE 3

Sir Lucius is strolling on the North Parade, hoping to run into Absolute and challenge him to a duel. He remarks to himself that officers are always getting in the way of his love affairs. He sees Absolute, who is talking to himself angrily, complaining that Lydia's romantic inclinations have gone to such extreme lengths that all his plans have come to naught. Seeing that Absolute is in a bad mood, Sir Lucius reflects that it would be a good time to get Absolute to quarrel with him.

The rationale behind Sir Lucius's desire to duel Absolute is never made clear. It is possible that he wants to duel him because of some insult to Ireland that occurred outside the action of the play, or that he has realized Absolute is courting Lydia and wants to challenge him for this reason. Additionally, Sir Lucius's eagerness to quarrel with Absolute when he is in a bad mood would have been considered poor form to those who knew the customs surrounding dueling.

Sir Lucius approaches Absolute and says he begs to differ with him. When Absolute asks what about, Sir Lucius says it doesn't matter. Absolute says it appears Sir Lucius means to quarrel with him, to which Sir Lucius assents, but also continues to refuse to explain what the quarrel is about, saying only that Absolute ought to remember an affront he gave to Sir Lucius. Absolute gives up trying to understand the cause of the duel and agrees to meet Sir Lucius at King's-Mead-Fields at six o'clock, which is the same time Acres has set for his duel with Beverley. Sir Lucius says it will be too dark to fight with guns, but it will be perfect lighting for swords, and leaves.

Regardless of Sir Lucius's motivations, he fails to provide a concrete reason for calling a duel. This is not proper etiquette for dueling, but is indicative of Sir Lucius's extreme eagerness to duel, which the play parodies. The offhanded way that he refers to the choice of weapons for the duel also shows that Sir Lucius has an inappropriately casual approach to dueling. Absolute, on the other hand, acts as befits a gentleman. Once he realizes that he cannot get a reason out of Sir Lucius, he accepts the challenge, because Sir Lucius is his social equal, and to refuse the challenge would be to sacrifice his honor.

Absolute next runs into Faulkland and bemoans his current situation, saying if he did not know that he might soon be killed, he could scarcely gather the strength to explain what had happened. Faulkland questions Absolute, and Absolute explains that Lydia has rejected him now that she knows his true identity and Sir Lucius has challenged him to a duel for no apparent reason. He says he needs Faulkland to accompany him as his second.

The ever-confident Absolute is at a low point, finding himself in two situations that he cannot charm his way out of: a duel and a rejection by Lydia. He asks Faulkland to come to the duel and serve to assist and advise him as a second, as was required of combatants by the generally accepted etiquette of dueling.

Faulkland says he wishes the duel were at some other time, because he has treated Julia cruelly and will not feel like himself until they have reconciled. A servant then delivers a letter to Faulkland from Julia. Faulkland fears she will break off their engagement and is scared to look at the letter, so Absolute reads it. Julia writes that she is sure that Faulkland already feels terrible for how badly he treated her and so she will not rebuke him further, but that she wishes to speak to him soon. She signs it "yours ever and truly." Absolute notices that Faulkland does not seem happier upon hearing that he is forgiven. Faulkland says that he thinks it is inappropriate for a woman to forgive without being asked for her forgiveness, just like women should not show that they love a man unless he makes the first move. Absolute responds that Faulkland is incorrigible and is the source of all his own anxiety, and therefore deserves ridicule, not sympathy. He leaves, and Faulkland reflects that Absolute's duel has given him an idea for a way to test the purity of Julia's love.

Once again, Faulkland has found something in Julia's behavior to misinterpret. Whereas earlier in the play he was put off by her less sentimental approach to love and ability to carry on in life without him, he now accuses her of being unladylike because she has forgiven him without being asked. To Absolute, who is attracted to the rebellious Lydia, Faulkland's complaint is a ridiculous one, and even to those in the 18th century audience, who may have seen Julia's letter as an unusually bold one to be written by a proper, unmarried girl, it is clear that Julia must take extreme measures to deal with Faulkland's moods and caprices.

ACT 5, SCENE 1

Julia, in her dressing room, reflects on an alarming message she has received from Faulkland about a dreadful accident. She bemoans how many unhappy moments he has caused her. Faulkland enters and says he must say goodbye to her, then explains that after their disagreement he was in such a bad mood that he quarreled with someone and now must flee England. If they were already married and he could take her with him, he would not dread becoming an exile.

Faulkland pushes Julia's tolerance to its breaking point; she has written sending her forgiveness and instead of a message of thanks, he has sent her a cryptic and worrisome message. When he arrives, he suggests that he must leave the country, and since they are not married, it would not be proper for her to come with him.

Surmising that Faulkland has killed a man in a duel and must now flee to escape prosecution, Julia says if the circumstances were not so serious, she would be glad to have this opportunity to prove her dedication to him. Regardless, she says that they should elope and be married. Faulkland asks whether she wants some time to consider her choice, but she responds that she does not need time: now that his situation has changed for the worse, she knows it is her duty to follow her heart and not abandon him. He says that now that his fortune has been changed for the worse, he will have less money and may be even more ill-tempered: will she really want to be his wife then? She pledges to use her money to support him and her love to comfort him.

Although dueling was a fact of life among members of the upper classes in the late 18th century, and tolerated by the authorities, causing your opponent's death in a duel was prosecuted on a case-by-case basis, so most men in this situation would flee the country and wait to hear by letter whether it was safe for them to come back. Julia agrees to run away with Faulkland and share this uncertain fate, saying that it is her duty to follow him wherever he goes because they are pledged to one another, and that this is also what she truly wants.

Faulkland then exclaims that he has proved Julia's love and throws away the pretense of having fought in a duel and pledges to marry her tomorrow. Astonished, she asks if this means there was no duel at all, and he admits the truth. Julia says she rejoices to hear that he has not committed a crime that she feared even to name, but that she's terribly hurt that his doubts in her drove him to this trick. Faulkland tries to interject, but Julia refuses to let him. She gives a long speech: she endured his treatment of her for a year because she loved him and because her father had arranged their marriage before his death. But now, this new insult, which was so totally unprovoked, has made her give up hope that she will ever be able to make him stop doubting her love. She promises that she will never marry another, but will pray for him to learn to have a better temperament, and to remember that it deprived him of the love of a woman who would have been dedicated to him no matter what. Faulkland curses himself for the trick he played on Julia and curses love for driving him to act so insanely, then rushes off to meet Absolute for the duel with Sir Lucius.

Faulkland has finally found the edge of Julia's patience, and she ends their engagement. The last straw was this lie, which forced her to face the terrible choice between giving him up and choosing to follow someone who had just murdered a man into an uncertain future. In her long speech, which provides an overview of the feminine virtues valued by 18th century moral codes, Julia explains that she stayed with Faulkland through all his bad behavior out of both love and duty. She says that she believed that by being patient and showing her love, she would eventually be able to exert a good, moral influence on him and cause him to become reasonable. She then expresses that her loyalty to him, as someone she is pledged to, will never end, and so she will be bound to him forever even though they will not marry, and so she will not marry anyone else.

Lydia and a maid enter looking for Julia. Lydia reflects to herself that she hasn't gotten over Absolute, and that when Julia chides her for giving him up, as she knows Julia will, she will probably go back to him. Julia enters and Lydia tells her she needs her consolation, but then notices that Julia's face is tear-stained. She asks if Faulkland has been tormenting her, but Julia denies this, saying in an aside that she would not accuse him even to a sister.

Julia immediately proves the truth of her statement of loyalty to Faulkland by refusing to reveal what has happened between them to Lydia. Lydia has come looking for Julia because she hopes to get a lecture on why she ought to forgive Absolute for his deception—because she trusts Julia to remind her of her role as a woman.

Lydia then says that her woes must surely surpass Julia's: she has found out that Beverley is Absolute. Julia confesses that Faulkland had already told her about Absolute's disguise. Lydia is angry to hear that Julia and Faulkland had been in on the trick and says she will never have Absolute now. She pines for the romantic elopement she had dreamed of having and denigrates the conventional wedding she can expect if she does marry him. Lydia reminisces about cold nights when she would sneak out to see Beverley, to which Julia responds that she would laugh at Lydia if she were in a better mood. But, since she is in a bad mood, she says that she must be earnest and tell her cousin not to let her caprice cause unhappiness to herself and a man who loves her sincerely, and that she ought to forgive and marry him.

After taking such pleasure in the idea that Beverley was deceiving her aunt, Lydia now has a taste of the other side of being deceived while others know the truth. Lydia is disgusted at the idea that she will now have to have a conventional wedding and disappointed that she will never get to live through the adventure of an elopement with a penniless ensign. Still, Lydia is nostalgic for the romance of her trysts with Absolute, and Julia can see that she still loves Absolute. She reminds Lydia of the stakes of her decision: there is no reason to give up on a happy marriage because of these disappointments.

Mrs. Malaprop, Fag, and David now burst into the room, Mrs. Malaprop shrieking incoherently about "suicide, parricide and simulation." After a great deal of pretentious preamble and unnecessarily roundabout explanations of the need to communicate news of such importance to women who are so concerned in the fates of the men involved, Fag and David reveal that Captain Absolute, Acres, and Faulkland are involved in a duel. Julia says that they should hasten to the scene of the duel to stop it, but Mrs. Malaprop objects that this is not their place. Then David reveals that Sir Lucius is involved as well, and Mrs. Malaprop exclaims that they must hurry to stop the bloodshed. Fag promises to lead the ladies to the spot, while David goes off in search of Sir Anthony.

With this comic entrance and lead-up to the crucial information being revealed, Sheridan ends the scene by preparing the audience for a climactic showdown between all of Lydia's suitors—those both real and imaginary. Apparently Sir Lucius has a reputation as a fearsome or at least bloodthirsty dueler, as the mention of his name immediately changes Mrs. Malaprop's mind about the seriousness of the situation.

ACT 5, SCENE 2

Absolute awaits Faulkland, who is late, on the South Parade, with a sword hidden in his coat. He sees his father coming and muffles up his face in hopes of going unrecognized. Still at a distance, Sir Anthony remarks how strange it is: he could have sworn that this was Absolute, but it must be a stranger, as the man does not greet him. Sir Anthony goes up to the man and, despite Absolute's attempts to disguise himself as a "Mr. Saunderson," Sir Anthony recognizes his son.

Absolute does not want his father to know that he is going to a duel, as Sir Anthony would certainly interfere, so he resorts to yet another act of disguise. In this case, though, his father has already seen him, and even the clever Absolute cannot deceive the eyes of his own father with just a scarf.

His attempted disguise gone, Absolute tells his father he was just joking and scrambles to come up with a story for where he is going, finally saying he plans to go to Lydia and beg her forgiveness. Sir Anthony begins to opine about the hearts of the young, and as he does so reaches out and touches Absolute's chest. Feeling the hard sword, he becomes suspicious. Absolute says it is merely a small gift for Lydia, but Sir Anthony asks to see what it is. When he sees the sword, Sir Anthony demands to know why Absolute is armed. After buying time for a moment, Absolute laughs as he comes up with the perfect excuse: he intends to threaten to kill himself if Lydia will not take him back. Approving of this as likely to win over Lydia's romantic heart, Sir Anthony lets Absolute depart.

Absolute can deceive his father by letting him in on a (made-up) story about how he will once again deceive Lydia in order to gain her forgiveness. His father believes that Lydia will be won over by the sentimental scene created when his son threatens suicide out of despair for the loss of her love. At the same time, by letting his father in on this (fabricated) plan, Absolute indulges Sir Anthony's desire to live vicariously through his love affair with the young and beautiful Lydia.

David runs up to Sir Anthony, screaming about murder. He tells Sir Anthony that Absolute is headed to a duel with Sir Lucius, and Sir Anthony angrily exclaims at being tricked again, as the two set off to stop the duel.

Sir Anthony is angry to have been deceived again. He does not realize, though, that he is so easily deceived because of his son's canny ability to know what lie he wants to hear.

ACT 5, SCENE 3

Sir Lucius and Acres are awaiting their opponents in King's-Mead-Fields. Sir Lucius is coaching Acres in the correct conduct of duels, but Acres is getting very nervous. Sir Lucius inquires if Acres has any final requests, in case he dies in the duel, but Acres responds with surprise, as if the prospect of death in the duel had never occurred to him. Sir Lucius specifies: if Acres is killed, would he like to buried in Bath or preserved and shipped home for burial. Acres is spooked by this, prompting Sir Lucius to ask whether Acres has ever been involved in a duel before. Acres has not. Sir Lucius says that's a shame, and then asks how Acres intends to stand. Acres shows his planned position: with his body perpendicular to his foe. Sir Lucius says if he stands that way and gets hit, the bullet will whizz through his body and be twice as likely to hit an organ. Acres is dumbfounded by this possibility. As two men approach them from across the field, Acres becomes even more nervous, while Sir Lucius chides him, telling him to think of his honor.

Sir Lucius and Acres would have been seen by contemporary audiences as each representing Captain Mathews in one of the two duels he fought with Richard Brinsley Sheridan. In that first duel, Mathews surrendered and was marked as a coward; like Acres, he seemed not to have considered the possibility of losing his life in a duel he himself had called. The second duel he called for without any justification, and savagely stabbed Sheridan several times with a sword. While Sir Lucius has courage, he lacks discretion as to when it is appropriate to duel. Acres lacks both courage and an understanding of the rudiments of fighting.

Sir Lucius greets Absolute and Faulkland, whom he assumes is Beverley. He says that he sees that Absolute will also be serving as a combatant in one duel and a second in the duel between Beverley and Acres. Acres is shocked to see Absolute and Faulkland appear, when he had expected Beverley. Sir Lucius, indignant, demands that if Beverley does not show up, then Faulkland and Acres should fight. With tongue in cheek, Absolute encourages Faulkland to fight "to oblige Sir Lucius." Faulkland says he will fight against Acres if Acres wants. Acres says there is absolutely no need for him to fight against his friends; he only intended to fight against Beverley, who is too much of a coward to show his face.

Again, before Absolute can be unmasked as the inventor of Beverley, the play draws out the confusion among the other characters for as long as possible for comic effect. Sir Lucius assumes that Faulkland is actually Beverley, while Acres can barely conceal his relief that Beverley has not shown up, and is horrified at Sir Lucius's suggestion that he fight Faulkland anyway. Faulkland, having quarreled with Julia, is in a reckless mood and says he will fight if need be.

Absolute then steps forward, saying that Beverley was a made-up identity of his, and that he is prepared to fight both as Absolute and as Beverley. Sir Lucius counts this as lucky, since now Acres will be able to fight after all. Acres refuses categorically to fight his friend Absolute, which prompts Sir Lucius to accuse Acres of having lost his valor. Acres replies that he is prepared to be Sir Lucius's second in his duel with Absolute and will dutifully carry out Sir Lucius's final wishes for his corpse. Sir Lucius calls Acres a coward, but Acres does not challenge him to a duel. Sir Lucius announces that it is time for his fight against Absolute. They both draw their swords.

Here Absolute's respect for the tradition of dueling trumps his desire to enjoy the confused spectacle his deception has created. Sheridan created Absolute as a stand-in for himself in the hopes of improving his reputation in society. Absolute's behavior is exemplary, while Acres and Sir Lucius, who represent Captain Mathews in each of the two duels he fought with Sheridan, are both ungentlemanly, either out of an excess of interest in duels or a lack of the courage required to fight.

Sir Anthony, David, Mrs. Malaprop, Lydia and Julia arrive, with David yelling for Sir Anthony to halt the combatants. Sir Anthony demands to know how Absolute got involved in a duel. Absolute says Sir Lucius called him out without explanation, to which Sir Lucius responds that Absolute insulted his honor.

The families of combatants were often eager to intercede to try to prevent their loved ones from being hurt or killed. In this instance, there is no way to get to the bottom of the cause of the duel and resolve the issue peacefully, however, because Sir Lucius never explained what the issue was in the first place.

Mrs. Malaprop interjects that all this dueling talk is inappropriate conversation for ladies: it is terrifying Lydia. Absolute asks if Lydia is terrified that he will *not* be killed. Mrs. Malaprop urges Lydia to speak, but before she can respond Sir Lucius says he can explain Lydia's silence. Lydia interrupts him to ask what he means. Addressing her as "Delia," Sir Lucius says they must not trifle any longer, and Lydia agrees, pledging her love for Absolute. Absolute is overjoyed: he begs Sir Lucius's pardon for unintentionally insulting him, but says he will fight against any man who questions his claim to Lydia's love.

Once again Mrs. Malaprop refers to the proper role of women, but in this case the audience would have accepted what she said as reasonable, because she is asserting women's role as a pacifying influence on men. Absolute then prioritizes his happy life ahead with Lydia over the senseless duel, once again showing a gentlemanly ability to rise above a petty squabble. Sir Lucius, meanwhile, still believes that Lydia was writing to him as "Delia." It also seems that her fear for Absolute's life has made Lydia realize that she truly does love him.

Acres gives up any claim to Lydia, saying he would rather remain a bachelor than fight for a woman. But Sir Lucius persists, saying that he wonders if Lydia will deny her own handwriting and pulls out letters written to him by "Delia." Mrs. Malaprop tries to interject, but Sir Lucius tells her not to interfere and asks Lydia if she is Delia. She says she is not. Mrs. Malaprop then confesses that *she* is Delia. Sir Lucius greets this news with scorn, saying he is unsure whether Mrs. Malaprop or Lucy was the author of the trick against him, but adding that he forfeits his claim to any lady. Absolute facetiously suggests that maybe Acres would like to marry Mrs. Malaprop, but Acres declines. Sir Anthony consoles a distraught Mrs. Malaprop.

The final false identity is revealed, but Lucy is nowhere in sight to face the consequences of her deception. Sir Lucius, however, was primed to be deceived, reading what he wanted into the letters, and hardly seems to deserve our pity. Acres and Sir Lucius take the news that they have lost Lydia well, reflecting the lightness with which the comedy treats the consequences of deception.

Julia observes how dejected Faulkland seems and begins to soften towards him. Faulkland asks for her forgiveness, saying he does not deserve it. Julia forgives him. Sir Anthony comes forward and says that, although he was Julia's guardian, he never interfered in Julia's affairs before. However, as it seems to him that Faulkland's faults arise from his passion for Julia, they should be married at once, and Faulkland's behavior will improve.

Julia, the paragon of female virtue, now forgives Faulkland for his trick. Sir Anthony, who has been overly involved in his son's love life, has never in the play done anything to help Julia (though he's supposedly her ward), reflecting his greater interest in the love affair of her son, whom he seems to wish to live vicariously through. He now gives an optimistic prognosis for Julia and Faulkland's marriage.

Sir Lucius wishes the couples good luck and Acres promises to put together a party for them. Sir Anthony announces that the single men should drink a toast to the young couples and to an eventual husband for Mrs. Malaprop. Faulkland congratulates Absolute that Lydia came to her senses and reformed her own romantic inclinations, just as he has been reformed by Julia's love. Absolute responds that the only difference is that Faulkland always created reasons for himself to be miserable, while he...but Lydia cuts him off, teasingly, saying that she was always the cause of his misery, but now they can all be happy. Julia makes the play's last speech: saying that to preserve their current happiness for the rest of their lives they should all try to be virtuous, so that they will not fall out of love with one another in their old age, when their beauty has faded.

This moralistic ending seems a bit out of place with the light tone of the rest of the play. Julia's call for everyone to be virtuous and appreciate their spouse's virtue and not just their beauty would not have been in keeping with Sheridan's personal behavior, but it was in keeping with his ambition to join the ranks of the "best" gentlemen in England. This moral to the story may not quite fit the play, but it does conform to the expectation of the time that art have a moral purpose, and serve to show the play's author as a defender of his society's values.

EPILOGUE

The actress playing Julia speaks the epilogue. It is written in rhyming couplets with ten syllables per line. The playwright, she reports, wanted the play to have a moral, but to her the moral is clear: it is that men's happiness rests with women. This is true whether the man lives in the city or country, is a politician, peasant, sailor, soldier, or a widower remembering his wife. But those who judge cautiously understand that there is more to love than beauty, and men should appreciate level-headed, knowledgeable women who can guide and advise them.

The epilogue is another instance of Sheridan's attempt to curry favor with the traditional moral authorities of his time. It also shows that he saw the best way to assert his conservative moral values was to show that he believed in the importance of women playing what was thought to be their proper role: to guide and help men in everything, be it a duel or merely day-to-day life.

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