

SHERIDAN'S CONSCIOUS ARTISTRY

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE

TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

BY

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DENTON, TEXAS

DECEMBER 1996

With love and gratitude for
Tommy
because of his unwavering support
and with fondness and appreciation for
Dr. William E. Tanner
because of his unerring guidance

ABSTRACT

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Eighteenth-century playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan employed rhetorical strategies to enlighten and entertain. Sheridan's mimetic, innovative artistry engages audiences in a revival of wit and simultaneously uncovers society's hypocrisies. This thesis analyzes Sheridan's artistic application of these rhetorical devices in *The Rivals* and, specifically, in the dialogue of the play's character, Mrs. Malaprop. The erudition of Sheridan scholars develops insight into Sheridan's life, genius, and society, and evidence of Sheridan's artistry as the result of family influence and celebrated authors is included.

Sheridan achieved a reputation for a humorous wit and a sharp perception of society's ills. He also accomplished public influence through political success. Although Sheridan was unable to find happiness in his personal life and was powerless to remain the political darling of a fickle public, he died having successfully earned a place in literary history renowned for his artistic, influential, and enduring comedy.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Richard Brinsley Sheridan¹ emerged from a colorful, intricately woven tapestry of theater history, literary genius, and political acumen. Remarking on Sheridan's heritage, Laura C. Holloway opines, "the Sheridans have been as rare a family as can be found in the literary biography of any country." She continues, "For three hundred years, and for eight generations in direct descent, they have been distinguished in authorship" (363). Born on October 30, 1751, in Dublin to Thomas and Frances Chamberlaine Sheridan, Richard evidenced a prodigious literary talent by the time he was eighteen (Rae 59). Sheridan's father, Thomas Sheridan—actor, theater manager, educator, and rhetorician—enjoyed the hope of fame, fortune, and fecundity for his creative and bright son. Nevertheless, the sanguine young Irishman gained a reputation for neglecting all but classical studies as he charmed his way through school, endearing himself to schoolmates and instructors (Darlington 36). Mrs. Thomas Sheridan—Frances—influenced her son through her success as a playwright, such influence bearing fruit in Sheridan's never-ending romance with the language of the theater. Sheridan's initial endeavor as a playwright was a collaborative effort while he was a schoolboy at Harrow with a school chum of a play entitled *Jupiter*, which was never finished, but which was sold for a sum of £200 (Oliphant 17).

¹ Richard Brinsley Sheridan will be referred to as Sheridan hereafter.

Thomas Sheridan, Sheridan's father, achieved acclaim in early adulthood as a classical actor, later gained notoriety for his controversial management of the Theater Royal in Dublin, and by mid-life enjoyed a reputation as a "fertile writer and a most enthusiastic educational reformer" (Rae 34). In spite of his father's fame and intellectual accomplishments, Sheridan formed a bond with his playwright mother. It was from her literary endeavors that Sheridan's destiny took shape. In this regard, Alice Glasgow comments in her biography of Sheridan, "from the very first the theater strummed in young Richard's blood. Not his father's theater, a lifeless world of inflection and stilted gesture, but his mother's, where people were created and situations were tailored to their measure" (40).

Frances Chamberlaine Sheridan was born in Ireland in 1724 to Dr. Philip Chamberlaine, Archdeacon of Glendalough, "an eccentric character who disliked literary ladies and was unwilling to have his daughter taught to read or write" (Russell 196). Ironically, Mrs. Sheridan achieved a reputation at an early age as a prolific and successful author and playwright. Little biographical information exists on Mrs. Sheridan; however, her granddaughter Alicia Lefanu in her *Memoirs of Mrs. Frances Sheridan* (1824) notes that Frances' brothers taught her, among other subjects, Latin and botany; and by the time she was fifteen she had written her first romantic novel, *Eugenia and Adelaide*, later adapted for the stage by Lefanu (Russell 196). Four years later she published a pamphlet and poem in defense of her future husband's activities involving a controversy at the Theater Royal in Dublin. Her most ambitious and notable work, a novel entitled *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Biddulph*, afforded her international credibility and was praised by the *London Monthly Review* in April, 1761, as

“greatly superior to most of the productions of her brother novelists” (qtd. by Holloway 361).

One of her last works, a series of morality tales, *The History of Nourjahad*, was pronounced by Dr. Samuel Johnson to be her best work (Holloway 361).

But it was her plays which appealed to Sheridan and from which he drew life and language for his own dramatic and comedic characters. *The Discovery* (1763) a multiplotted hit comedy in which famed actor David Garrick played the principal role and her husband Thomas Sheridan acted the second, established her credibility as a playwright; *The Dupe* (1764) written initially as a vehicle for her husband but ultimately performed by George Colman enjoyed one performance which was apparently sabotaged by the on-stage antics of one of the actresses, thereby ensuring the play’s failure; and *A Journey to Bath*, an artful and lively character study, was penned while she was near death and was rejected by Garrick, who at that time controlled the Drury Lane Theater. Mrs. Sheridan unsuccessfully attempted to refute Garrick’s chief objections to this, her final and unfinished play, in a letter to him, but he remained implacable and would not allow the play to be produced. It remained in manuscript (now in the British Library) until 1902 when it was first published by W. Fraser Rae (Russell, 201). However, the play was produced years after her death and provided Sheridan with prototypes for some of the characters in his most produced play, *The Rivals* (Hogan and Beasley 22).

Frances Sheridan died in 1766 at the family’s home in Blois, France, when Sheridan was fifteen, and he “was so shocked by what had happened to his brave and clever mother”

(Glasgow 44) that life became increasingly unbearable and schoolwork nearly impossible for young Sheridan. He returned to school for at least another two “monotonous” years (Glasgow 45) until 1769 when Thomas Sheridan moved his family to London, “the hub of the universe” (48) and brought Sheridan home from school where he and his brother, Charles, explored the city tirelessly. Although Sheridan continued to grieve over his mother’s death, it was during his wanderings among the city folk of London that characters began to emerge in his mind. Types that he recognized from his studies became individuals. Those individuals then peopled his plays. As Aristotle asserts, begin with a type and arrive at an individual. Regarding Sheridan’s images of the townspeople Margaret Oliphant speculates that “they were all about in those lively streets, Mrs. Malaprop deranging her epitaphs, and Sir Lucius with his pistols always ready, . . . and Lydia Languish ransack[ing] the circulating libraries” (15). Because Sheridan’s models existed in the shadows of playwrights who came before him and who were extended in his re-creation, Oliphant is wrong in her assertions.

Although Sheridan wrote the most popular plays of his era, the question of how far his own talent would have taken him *sans* his mother’s keen craft and influence on her son remains unanswered. Fortunately for play-goers of the eighteenth century and for twentieth-century aficionados, Sheridan provides theater lovers of all generations a bouquet of linguistic character studies in full bloom in spite of or because of the seeds sown by his mother (and others) who had nurtured and cultivated language play into a company “to instruct and delight” according to Horace’s dictum.

Sheridan continued to delight and instruct throughout his lifetime, many times borrowing from various sources. By the time the last of his great plays was produced—“a perfect satire” (Glasgow 132) called *The Critic* (1779)—Sheridan’s strategy of appropriating and integrating work of other clever writers, classical or otherwise, were common knowledge: “People are always discovering that Sheridan’s plots are not original, that his characters and situations are ‘stock’” (Holloway 133). It was Sheridan’s wit, social acumen, and sometimes brash vocality which perked up the itching ears of audiences and which proved to be enough scratch to forgive the author for his purloining peccadilloes. Sheridan’s way with words achieved for him so much successful notoriety, he began to dream of bigger and better ways to use his fluent quill and quipage for the furtherance of his social views: “He yearned to sit among the politicians; the songs and the jests of the nation interested him no longer, since he was eager now to pass upon its laws” (Holloway 133,134). When Parliament convened in October, 1780, Richard Brinsley Sheridan first represented his country as a “New Whig” *cum* “Liberal”—a tag applied in part because of his advocacy of education and greater freedom for women (142).

Although the finale of Sheridan’s story is marred by his eventual fall from political grace and financial ruin, as a matter of history it becomes nothing more than a footnote in light of his unrivaled linguistic *métier*. The wit, humor, satire, sentimentality, and humanity of Sheridan’s plays epitomize cogent theater not only for eighteenth-century audiences, but also for all of those who have laughed since.

CHAPTER 2

PATTERNS AND MIMESIS

Sheridan's remarkable play, *The Rivals*, echoes at least three of Frances Sheridan's works. These echoes of language play reverberate with linguistic brilliance and establish dramatic presence of subtle social manners. Also, this play renews dialogue of wit, reminiscent of restoration comedy. The rhetorical strategies used in these instances reduplicate the originals in Sheridan's echoes. In their introduction to *The Plays of Frances Sheridan*, Robert Hogan and Jerry C. Beasley conclude that "A chief glory of Richard Brinsley Sheridan's three great comic plays (*The Rivals* [1775], *The School for Scandal* [1777], and *The Critic* [1779]) is a consciousness of language that is comic by its divergence from a civilized norm." Sheridan's artistic synthesis excels contemporaries: "Among dramatists of the time, perhaps only Fielding and Goldsmith approached Dick Sheridan in the consummate use of quirky, mangled language." They recognize that Sheridan's artistry surpasses the debt he owes to his mother's works, "But much more than a hint of this same gift was there in the comedies of his mother." To support this claim, they assert that, "... two of the greatest comedies of the period, *The Rivals* and *The School for Scandal*, owe more than a little to *The Discovery*" (24). This recognition justifies a study of Sheridan's conscious artistry, of Sheridan's ability to enlarge, to rearrange, and to create anew from his well of inspiration.

Specifically, Sheridan employs the same style of language in the characters of Sir Anthony and Jack Absolute in *The Rivals* as Frances Sheridan initiated in the creation of Sir

Harry and Lady Flutter and Lord Medway from *The Discovery*. Discourse on the manner in which a young gentleman should speak to his young wife, for example, is a how-to lesson in language in the craft of styling silly, specious characters. After Sir Harry spends an evening out with his friends, neglecting his wife Lady Flutter, he asks Lord Medway how to deal with Lady Flutter. Sir Harry applies Lord Medway's instruction the next morning when Lady Flutter calls her husband to task regarding his behavior.

LADY FLUTTER. And so, Sir Harry, I suppose you think, with those airs,
to carry off your behaviour to me this morning, do you?

SIR HARRY. Ye gods, ye gave to me a wife, Out of your grace and
favour—‘ [He walks about.]

LADY FLUTTER. But I can tell you, Sir, I won't bear such treatment,
to be drawn off and on like your glove.

SIR HARRY. Are you speaking to me, Ma'am?

LADY FLUTTER. To whom else should I speak?

SIR HARRY. I protest I did not know you were in the room, child.

LADY FLUTTER. Oh ridiculous affectation—Child! I'll assure you.

SIR HARRY. [Aside.] Oh now it begins to work, if I can but keep cool.

(2.1)

Sheridan learned this lesson completely as he demonstrates in *The Rivals*. In 2.1, Sir Anthony surprises his son, Jack, with an announcement of beneficence. Sir Anthony responds to Jack's

gushing gratitude by informing him of the condition attached to the inheritance—marriage. Sir Anthony answers Jack’s alarmed acknowledgment:

SIR ANTHONY. Aye, a wife—why; did not I mention her before?

ABSOLUTE. Not a word of her, Sir.

SIR ANTHONY. Odd so!—I mustn’t forget her tho’.—Yes, Jack, the independence I was talking of is by a marriage—the fortune is saddled with wife—but I suppose that makes no difference.

ABSOLUTE. Sir! Sir!—you amaze me!

SIR ANTHONY. Why—what the d—l’s the matter with the fool? Just now you were all gratitude and duty.

ABSOLUTE. I was, Sir,—you talked to me of independence and a fortune, but not a word of a wife. (2.1.320-29)

The foregoing passage between father and son also establishes for Sheridan a pattern of rhetoric beyond mere imitation of his mother’s work and expands his own social interpretation of reality. Through the humor of opposites, Sheridan’s audiences grasp what is real in the exchange between the characters and not just what is apparent. Sir Anthony is apparently affording his son an independent lifestyle. However, he is simultaneously binding him, attaching a condition to the gift; the condition is marriage, a dependent state and mutually exclusive of the independence Sir Anthony seems to be offering. To understand better this rhetorical strategy, Rosalind J. Gabin elaborates on this type of multi-layered humor. She notes that “Successful humor, firmly rooted in specific social circumstance and in highly

conventional language structures so that its audience recognizes effortlessly its target and its terms, gives us a snapshot of ‘reality’ (here signifying socially accepted ‘proper’ views of a situation) but, as in an old camera, the image is upside down or, as in the photo’s negative, inside out or backwards.” She believes that, “Humor construes ‘reality’ inversely, for it sees the real as the direct opposite of the ideal, on which its gaze is firmly fixed” (35). The dialogue of opposites between Sir Anthony and his son delightfully exemplifies Gabin’s assertion and illustrates *synoeciosis* or an expanded oxymoron. When Sir Anthony speaks of independence through marriage, Sheridan’s rhetorical strategy is as comically effective to audiences at the close of the twentieth century as it was when first performed.

James Morwood in his book on Sheridan’s life and works notes another of Sheridan’s characters in *The Rivals* as having first been developed by Frances Sheridan. Morwood offers evidence that “The name and refined nature of Faulkland . . . are taken from his mother’s novel, *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*” (36). Sheridan contrasts the good sense of Captain Absolute against the excesses of Faulkland and thereby refines and expands the pattern of pretension versus reality first set out by his mother. Frances Sheridan’s use of her characters’ linguistic idiosyncrasies serve as a printed guide for her son’s end product, much like a dot-to-dot activity page in a child’s coloring book. Sheridan connects the dots with masterful lines of the language of hypocrisy balanced by humanity and colors in his own remarkable characters using the lively hues of “collisions and contrasts of characters” (Campbell xxv).

Undoubtedly Sheridan's preeminent linguistic gift to the eighteenth-century stage unfolds in the character of Mrs. Malaprop, who lends her name to the effective strategy used by many including Shakespeare. So many similarities are noted between Frances Sheridan's Mrs. Tryfort (*A Journey to Bath*) and Mrs. Malaprop (*The Rivals*) that ignoring his mother's influence—conscious or otherwise—would be an egregious oversight. To catalog or classify similarities, on the other hand, might result in a claim of plagiarism. But to explain the rhetorical strategies employed opens a window to the innovations in Sheridan's conscious artistry. Certainly Sheridan's appropriation of Mrs. Tryfort, whose character and dialogue of malapropism most obviously evidences the dramatic "type" who professes to know so much, but knows so little, yet holds the sympathy of the audience, must be acknowledged.

The audience laughs at malapropisms and other language play because the playwright positions selected strategies within a particular context. Through deliberately positioning these devices, the playwright causes the audience to laugh and in the laughter creates a reciprocal energy between the text (or lines delivered by the actor) and the audience. Kristina Minister in her discussion of perception in the semiotic function of performance and the relationship between performer and audience avers that "Because the percepts of interpretation performance are always modified by the mental imagery of audience members, the performance of literature is characterized by a perceptual ratio between the conventions used and the perceptions of the audience" (1). Sheridan as conjurer underscores the adept manipulations of language and character, hallmarks of his comedy.

Before Frances Sheridan ever penned *Bath*, and certainly long before Richard Sheridan donned the playwright's mantle, malapropism was familiar language play to the Sheridan family because of their reading of literature and Sheridan's attitude toward it. In his comedy *Much Ado about Nothing*, Shakespeare employed the same strategy of language play, malapropism, in the development of the play's character Dogberry; and throughout William Congreve's *The Way of the World*, muddle-mouthed Lady Wishfort exemplifies similar characteristics. Within the Sheridan household, malapropisms provided a constant source of fun for the family because Sheridan's father, Thomas, an obsessive protector of the English language, was a notorious stickler for proper grammar and had gained more than a modicum of fame for his *Dictionary*; therefore, Mrs. Tryfort and Mrs. Malaprop "could well owe their conception to his lexicographical pursuits" as well as to mother's and son's acute appreciation and emulation of literature's most skillful practitioners (Morwood 36).

Frances Sheridan imprints the pattern of quiet, mocking humor of the English and their pretensions and hypocrisies, their vanities and deceits in a setting of the socially agreeable climate of Bath in *A Journey to Bath*. The Sheridans themselves had experienced life in Bath, and it was there that Sheridan had fallen in love and fought a duel, an event on which Sheridan bases a similar confrontation as an element of the climax in *The Rivals*. About Mrs. Sheridan's craft of characterization, Hogan and Beasley observe, "To the character roles, Frances attached peculiarities of language that are both neatly apt and finely comic" (28). Though they do not say so, the individuality of the language is sufficient so that each character possesses an idiolect. A successful playwright famous for her comic fluency in *The Discovery*, Frances Sheridan

paints her characters' attitudes and personalities with a rainbow of semantics, honing her artistry through a many-hued portrayal of the men and women populating *A Journey to Bath*—portraits visible to Sheridan's adoring eye which reflect the mimetic patterning in his own work, especially *The Rivals*.

In *A Journey to Bath*, Frances Sheridan presents a variety of character types, many of whose similarities are unmistakably perceptible in the personalities of Sheridan's *Rivals*: first, Frances Sheridan serves up two "urbanely plausible" villains (Hogan and Beasley 28), Lord Stewkly and Lady Filmot, who are both determined to make financially rewarding marriage.

LADY FILMOT. I protest I *liked* you vastly; but for *love*, oh lud! A woman, who at sixteen, consented to a match of interest, is not very likely at almost double that age, to be a slave to softer passions.

LORD STEWKLY. That circumstance might have convinced me that your heart was never capable of tenderness: So fine a woman, with your understanding and education, to sacrifice herself in the bloom of youth for money!

LADY FILMOT. —Come come my lord, take my word for it, we are both now much better qualified to see, and to promote our mutual interests, than when we were foolish enough to be fond of each other.—Your business is to marry a fortune.—so is mine. (1.2)

Both Mrs. Sheridan and her son appreciated the pragmatic as well as the romantic motivation of material well-being; so, Sheridan's Julia and Jack express parallel sentiments

regarding money, a significant albeit secondary force which motivates their scheming.

Although true love rules Julia's heart, her mind is firmly rooted in practicality. To Lydia's willingness to marry and lose her fortune, Julia responds, "Nay, this is caprice!" (1.2.83).

Similarly, when Jack (who desires Lydia) is confronted with Faulkland's impetuous plan to run away with Lydia (thereby forfeiting her inheritance), Jack retorts, "What, and lose two thirds of her fortune?" (2.1.89).

Mrs. Sheridan epitomizes the hypocrites (another character type) in the role of Mrs. Surface, a lodginghouse keeper in Bath with whom some of the other characters reside. Through flattery and tale-bearing Mrs. Surface attempts to remain in everyone's good graces so as to further her own ends. However, as her name would suggest, the force of Mrs. Surface's charactonym reveals no depth of character and instigates confusion through the "language of hypocrisy" (Hogan and Beasley 28).

MRS. SURFACE. But my dear Sir where are you going in such haste?

STAPLETON. To look for another lodging.

MRS. SURFACE. Marry heaven forbid! I'd rather lose every lodger in my house than you.

STAPLETON. Your house! Why your house is like a fair.

MRS. SURFACE. I know it my good Sir, I know it, and it grieves me to the very heart.

STAPLETON. [Aside.] A cajoling baggage. [Exit Stapleton.]

MRS. SURFACE. Good morning to you, good Sir, and a pleasant walk to

you dear Sir—A peevish Cur, but I had rather have him than an empty room. (1.1)

Likewise, the servant Lucy (*Rivals* not *Bath*) makes a career of dissembling, gossip, and miscommunication. Mark S. Auburn describes Lucy as “a hypocrite and the only character in the play who is motivated solely by selfishness—in her case, avarice” (47). Auburn describes Lucy as one of the “principal idiosyncratic characters [who] have fairly tangential roles in the plot,” and at the end of the first act she is alone and lists aloud the damage she has done through tale-bearing and the money she has conned.

LUCY. Ha! Ha! Ha!—So, my dear *simplicity*, let me give you a little respite—[*altering her manner*—let girls in my station be as fond as they please of appearing expert, and knowing in their trusts;—commend me to a mask of *silliness*, and a pair of sharp eyes for my own interest under it!—Let me see to what account I have turn’d my *simplicity* lately— [looks at paper]. For *abetting Miss Lydia Languish in a design of running away with an Ensign!—in money—sundry times—twelve pound twelve—gowns, five—hats, ruffles, caps, etc., etc.,—numberless!—From the said Ensign, within this last month, six guineas and a half.—About a quarter’s pay!—Item, from Mrs. Malaprop, for betraying the young people to her—when I found matters were likely to be discovered—two guineas, and a black paduasoy.—Item, from Mr. Acres, for carrying divers letters—which I never deliver’d—two guineas, and a pair of buckles.—Item, from Sir Lucius O’Trigger—three crowns—two gold*

pocket-pieces—and a silver smuff-box!—Well done, *Simplicity!*—.

(2.1.266-81)

Next, Mrs. Sheridan contrasts the personalities of two brothers, Sir Jeremy Bull and Sir Jonathan Bull through their dialogue (*Bath*); the egotistical and verbose Sir Jeremy loudly opines at length on any given topic and pronounces edicts in an obscure fashion, rarely acknowledging his true sentiments. In contrast to Sir Jeremy is the cheerful Sir Jonathan who converses in a simple, straightforward manner, and his friendly and open nature evidences his credibility.

SIR JEREMY. But instead of that, you want irretrievably to mix the
blood with the puddle of the City.

SIR JONATHAN. Don't abuse the City, brother, I don't know what we
should do without it.

SIR JEREMY. I don't, the City may have its use; but don't let us confound
all order, all distinction, and fancy trade's people are upon a footing with
legislators. I have no object in view for myself (they have thought proper to
leave *me* out), but I own it would please me to reflect, that my posterity,
even in the collateral line, were to be guardians of the liberty of their country,
instead of being doomed to the drudgery of making money.

SIR JONATHAN. Don't abuse money neither, brother. I can assure you it is
a very good thing.

SIR JEREMY. It appears so to *you* no doubt, who have been used to buy and

sell, and thank the people that you gained by; but I who have been brought up with a Spirit of independence, would sooner be reduced to eat my own shoe leather, than be obliged to e'er a man alive.

SIR JONATHAN. I don't understand such fine-spun notions, not I.

SIR JONATHAN. Have you anything more to say to me, for I have a good deal of business to do.

SIR JEREMY. The old way! When ever *I* was disposed to inform you a little, *you* had always business; haven't I known you, rather than miss your hour of going to Change, refuse to hear me repeat a speech on which perhaps the welfare of the whole nation depended?

SIR JONATHAN [*Hastily.*] You don't want to speak a speech now brother, do you? (1.4).

Sheridan integrates the foppish foibles and pretension of Sir Jeremy with the sympathetic sprightliness and agreeable temperament of Sir Jonathan into the *Rivals*' character Bob Acres, producing an audience friendly, farcical character. Sheridan brilliantly unites Bob Acres' pretensions, foppishness, and likability in one twinkling discussion of swearing in the second act.

ABSOLUTE. Spoke like a man—but pray, Bob, I observe you have got an odd kind of a new method of swearing—

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 Pallus! 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! Ha! ‘tis genteel, isn’t it? (2.1.257-69).

Finally, the most significant kindred character borrowed from his mother’s play is Mrs. Malaprop, a linguistic twin to Frances Sheridan’s Mrs. Tryfort. According to Hogan and Beasley, Sheridan was so inspired by Mrs. Tryfort that he lifted dialogue straight from the text. They proffer that Frances Sheridan employs “such an ingenious misapplication of words that Dick Sheridan later simply appropriated her best *mal mots* and burnished them a bit” (28).

MRS. TRYFORT. Why if I find myself tolerably well; but I am so low every morning, ha ha ha, I protest I use almost an ounce of salvolatile constantly in my tea—your ladyship I suppose will be there, and Lady Bell, and Lord Stewkly.—To be sure he is one of *the* best bred, most polite, good humour’d charming men living! And takes as much pains to teach my Lucy, and make her illiterate, as if he were actually her master. (2.2)

Dr. Chamberlaine’s vociferous sentiments against the education of women, motivated perhaps from a jealous guardianship of his own impressive scholarship, forced his daughter Frances to obtain through secretive methods what proved to be quality learning in the arts and sciences.

Frances also married a true man of letters, and she herself manifested a powerful literary talent. The display of her magnitude of linguistic and authorial abilities influenced Sheridan to the point of imitation. This veneration of his mother, coupled with the profound respect of the language by a father willing to educate all of his children, influenced Sheridan's writing. His comedies illustrate this influence because they defy the popular convention of his contemporaries and campaign for the benefits of educating women. *Betsy Sheridan's Journal: Letters from Sheridan's Sister* offers the eighteenth-century historian an opportunity to evaluate the language of Sheridan's well educated sister whose "spontaneous language" and socio-historical comment parallel Sheridan's own (van Ostade 237). This regard for education and his adoption of social commentary through comedy attest that Sheridan emulates of one of the most significant patterns his mother instilled in him through her writing—an appreciation for and devotion to non-discriminatory schooling.

MRS. MALAPROP. You thought, Miss! –I don't know any business you have to think at all—thought does not become a young woman. The point we would request of you is that you will promise to forget this fellow—to illiterate him, I say, quite from your memory. (1.2.151-54)

In the foregoing excerpts from the two plays, when both characters misuse the word *illiterate*, both authors engage in the rhetorical strategy of *anathimeria* or using one part of speech for another. Frances Sheridan's Mrs. Tryfort employs the term as an adjective. In her elliptical dialogue which omits *to be* or *seem* before "illiterate," she means the exact opposite, e.g., to have Lucy become "literate." To generate the comedy, the playwright here adds a

syllable to the beginning of the word, exercising the device of prosthesis. Mrs. Malaprop, on the other hand, wields words which sound similar but which have no relation to the correct word. In this diatribe she uses “illiterate” as a verb and means “obliterate.” Sheridan’s *acyrologia* or *malapropism* ignites humor by causing the audience to feel superior to Mrs. Malaprop because of this character’s obvious misunderstanding of her own speech, thereby evoking laughter from the audience. In this way, Sheridan formulates a conscious artistry.

Further comparisons between Mrs. Tryfort and Mrs. Malaprop establish Sheridan’s mimetic intentions and his facility for amplification.

MRS. TRYFORT. Oh in everything ma’am he is a progeny! A perfect progeny, Lady Filmot! (2.2)

MRS. MALAPROP. Observe me, Sir Anthony.—I would by no means with a daughter of mine to be a progeny of learning. (1.2.203-04)

In both of these instances of *malapropism*, the speakers mean “prodigy.” This passage of dialogue in scene 2 spoken by Mrs. Malaprop contains a plethora of malapropisms. Only the deliberate misuse of the word *progeny* which Sheridan “lifted” from his mother’s play is under consideration at this point. (A more thorough analysis of Mrs. Malaprop’s speeches illustrating Sheridan’s brilliant control of language follows in a later chapter.)

In Frances Sheridan’s play, *A Journey to Bath*, Mrs. Tryfort here wants to compliment Lucy’s teacher, Mr. Edward. Mrs. Sheridan evidences irony in the continuation of this speech when Mrs. Tryfort says of Edward, “In the first place he is a most prodigious wit.” She

verbalizes a form of the correct word in the adjectival use of “prodigy” – “prodigious.”

Sheridan expands the language play of Mrs. Malaprop’s use of “progeny” one level further than that of his mother. In her denunciation of the schooling of young ladies, Mrs. Malaprop declares her aversion to Lydia’s becoming a masterful scholar, meaning skillfully educated as Mrs. Tryfort expresses about Mr. Edward. Sheridan invokes a double entendre when he substitutes *progeny* in the literal sense (an offspring) for *daughter* in the logical understanding of Mrs. Malaprop’s statement, “a daughter of mine to be a progeny of learning,” which means “a daughter of mine to be a *daughter* of learning.” This extended comic dimension invites the audience’s awareness that Mrs. Malaprop would mold Lydia in her own unwitting, pretentious image, a subconscious desire Mrs. Malaprop unknowingly shares about herself throughout the play. To reinforce this peccadillo, Sheridan employs synonymous verbiage in Mrs. Malaprop’s conversation as follows:

MRS. MALAPROP. –But, Sir Anthony, I would send her at nine years old to
a boarding-school, in order to learn a little ingenuity and artifice. –Then, Sir,
she should have a supercilious knowledge in accounts; –and as she grew
up, I would have her instructed in geometry, that she might know something
of the contagious countries. (1.2.208-13)

Sheridan adopts the exchange on “artifice” and “contagious countries” directly from Frances Sheridan’s Mrs. Tryfort, but once again heightens the effect and humor by adding or layering another linguistic feature to the dialogue.

MRS. TRYFORT. Oh I’ll infallibly go, and so shall you too, Miss Lucy. I

suppose this is my Lord Stewkly's thought, he is so ingenious and full of artifices. (2.3)

MRS. TRYFORT. But my lord Stewkly is so embellished, Mrs. Surface!

Nobody can be embellished that has not been abroad you must know. Oh if you were to hear him describe contagious countries as I have done. It would astonish you. He is a perfect map of geography. (2.3)

With regard to the phrases "ingenious and full of artifices" uttered by Mrs. Tryfort and "ingenuity and artifice" spoken by Mrs. Malaprop, again mother and son manipulate the language dissimilarly. In the first play by Frances Sheridan, Mrs. Tryfort correctly describes Stewkly's shrewdness and trickery by allowing that he is "ingenious and full of artifices." Borrowing from his mother, Sheridan conjoins truth and malapropism in the similar phrase, "ingenuity and artifice," by superimposing the truth of Mrs. Malaprop's statement on her misuse of the phrase in which she wishes for her niece an educated cleverness. Sheridan's *hypallage* (a humorous changing of application of words) affords a doubly comical effect. In truth, Mrs. Malaprop, unaware that she is artificial and mistakenly thinks herself to be clever, unrelentingly endeavors to have her niece become accomplished in the practice of feminine wiles throughout the play; but in the context of her speech, she pretentiously attempts to declare the modicum benefits of artful conversation to Sir Anthony, unaware that she reveals to the audience her own artifice—Sheridan's unflagging comedic provision. In this instance, Sheridan has extended and expanded his borrowing to prolong a comic effect.

When Frances Sheridan introduced “contagious countries” out of the mouth of Mrs. Tryfort, it is certainly no mystery that Sheridan thought the malapropism for “contiguous” just too good to pass up. And why not? Not only had the great Garrick nixed the production of Mrs. Sheridan’s play, and it would not be published until long after her death, but simply too much literary bounty had survived apparently ignored and forgotten. Additionally, the chances of Sheridan’s having heard these lines within familial verbal intercourse seems likely. Mrs. Malaprop’s utterance of “contagious countries” remains one of her most memorable and beloved lines though it might be rivaled by her confusion of “geometry” with “geography.”

The compositional formation delineating scenes and characters which Frances Sheridan cast throughout her literary career was indelibly etched in Sheridan’s psyche and is reflected in his masterful plays. Audiences can be grateful that Sheridan’s imitation extends his mother’s ingenious, comical approach to societal commentary and that he adds dimension to the tapestry of his unique product weaving his plays with the bold, colorful linguistic threads of his characters’ personalities through their dialogue. Despite Sheridan’s unlikely claim in his preface to *The Rivals* that he had not been influenced by the work of other playwrights, the evidence offered here which spotlights Sheridan’s terpsichorean rhetoric, a style that spins and flows, lectures and tickles, and continues to delight audiences regardless of his vernacular’s origins, reflects the images of literary models dancing in the shadows of the wings.

CHAPTER 3

ADAPTATION AND INNOVATION

Sheridan's academic accomplishment rests upon the breadth and depth of his familiarity with classical literature. His inevitable plunge into a career of play writing at the age of twenty-three with *The Rivals* was the natural segue from passive literary exposure—during his school years and the opulent literary environment in which he thrived at home—to his own initial creative experience. That creative experience included a somewhat cavalier disposition toward the wellspring of material from other important writers, contemporary authors as well as Renaissance classicists, such as Shakespeare; Restoration playwrights such as Dryden and Congreve; and some of his Georgian predecessors, among them Oliver Goldsmith and David Garrick. Sheridan treated the revered literature of his countrymen as treasure from mentors, material from which to select the choicest bits on which he would enlarge and expand, cut and codify, or otherwise develop into his brand of theatrical semiotics. Accordingly, in the introductory paragraph of her discussion regarding Sheridan's comedy, Anne Parker asserts that Sheridan cannot be accurately identified as an imitator of any one playwright's style. Rather, he deserves recognition for developing individualistic Georgian comedy and for reshaping sparkling humor with the familiar flint of well-worn work. Though Parker theorizes that "the Georgian period had its own view of comedy, and, in its own way, developed the laughing tradition," she does not credit Sheridan with as much importance as he deserves in its development even though she admits that Sheridan's contribution to Georgian comedy

overshadows all others: “At his best, he adapted the conventions of the past to his own comic ends” (10).

Sheridan’s comedy, primarily satirical burlesque, depends upon the audience’s familiarity with the theater’s modes of comedy, tragedy, and sentiment—past and present—in order to create the humor. Sheridan scholar A. N. Kaul in his work *The Action of English Comedy* (qtd. by Loftis 6) complains that Sheridan is a “backward-looking” dramatist. To this comment, John Loftis, in *Sheridan and the Drama of Georgian England*, responds by stating, “He [Sheridan] was indeed ‘a backward-looking dramatist’: any writer of literary burlesque must be. Burlesque sustains itself on its satirical targets.” He continues to refute would-be Sheridan critics: “Many of the difficulties spectators or readers of the comedies experience in evaluating them would disappear if they recognized that Sheridan was above all a master of burlesque” (6).

Although Sheridan was not unique in his methodology, he adapts and enlarges the comic theory of preceding and contemporary playwrights. For instance, he far excels Oliver Goldsmith who also formulated “laughing” satirical comedies about codes of social behavior and sentimentality through the employment of restoration clichés and early comedy-of-manners theatrics. Oscar James Campbell opines that Goldsmith was unable to escape the demands of tears and sentiment from his audiences. Campbell asserts “However, artificial sentiment, tender hearts, and virtuous tears were too firmly entrenched to be blown out of the playhouses even by so strong a breath of fresh air as that in the wake of *She Stoops to Conquer*.” He introduces Sheridan to the scene by stating “The situation was thus ready for a man who could write high

comedy with wit and brilliance, when Sheridan began his short dramatic career” (xiv).

Campbell comments on Sheridan’s playwriting superiority when he states “Sheridan was well fitted to give the English drama of his time the thing it most needed—a commanding tradition of pure comedy” (xxiii). Because this treatment of sentimentality was so frequently included in the works of mid-to-late eighteenth-century playwrights, it became the accepted convention of wit and stage comedy or the “Georgian idiom.” Loftis explains that Sheridan “took promising dramatic materials” and reworked them in his own idiom, which for all his Restoration borrowings was a Georgian idiom.” Loftis maintains, “If he imitated dramatists of the preceding century, he did so . . . with such audacity and ingenuity of execution that the conventionality, far from being a liability, becomes in its allusiveness a source of delight” (43).

In his biography of Sheridan, James Morwood also agrees, “Sheridan borrowed from many sources but, with his abundant verve and humour, he made what he borrowed his own.” He notes Sheridan’s considerable debt to Shakespeare for much of the success of *The Rivals*: “Few plays can be more deep-dyed in Shakespearean colours than this one. The verbal echoes, whether conscious, semi-conscious or unconscious, are numerous” (37). Several of the characters’ dialogues in *The Rivals* are lifted directly from the works of Shakespeare, including *Twelfth Night*, *Henry VIII*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, but Sheridan’s beloved Mrs. Malaprop delivers the most memorable lines of all of the Bard’s work in her defense of Captain Absolute to Lydia when she misquotes *Hamlet* (3.4.56-59):

MRS. MALAPROP. 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. (4.2.13-17)

Both Shakespeare’s Dogberry (*Much Ado about Nothing*) and Sheridan’s Mrs. Malaprop reveal threads of miscommunication and misunderstanding when these authors weave comical language into the characters’ lines. These lines make the speakers’ characteristics transparent to the audience because the laughter which results from the comical language causes the audience to understand the characters’ unintentional hypocrisy. The following passage illustrates Dogberry pontificating as a civic official:

DOGBERRY. You are thought here to be the most senseless and fit man for the constable of the watch; therefore bear you the lantern. This is your charge: you shall comprehend all vagrom men; you are to bid any man stand, in the prince’s name. (3.3.23-27)

Another revelation from their comical language surfaces during the antics caused by miscommunication and misunderstanding among characters. Shakespeare’s character says “senseless” for “sensible,” “comprehend” for “apprehend,” and “vagrom” for “vagrant.” In the fifth act, Dogberry through blunderous speech clarifies the hateful misunderstanding perpetrated by Don John. Dogberry tells Don Pedro:

DOGBERRY. Marry, sir, they have committed false report; moreover, they

have spoken untruths; secondarily, they are slanders; sixth and lastly, they have belied a lady; thirdly, they have verified unjust things; and, to conclude, they are lying knaves. (5.1.219-24)

Shakespeare's audience cannot miss Dogberry's earnest compulsion to convict the guilty and ensure that justice prevails even though his words hilariously tumble from his lips duplicated and disordered. Dogberry employs six phrases all meaning "liar": "committed false report," "spoken untruths," "slanders" (meaning "slanderers"), "belied a lady," "verified unjust things," and "are lying knaves." By listing the atrocities out of numerical order, Shakespeare clinches the comedy.

Similarly, Sheridan's Mrs. Malaprop exposes her vanity and ignorance while she concerns herself with the appearance of linguistic perfection:

MRS. MALAPROP. There, Sir! An attack upon my language! What do you think of that?—an aspersion upon my parts of speech! Was ever such a brute! Sure if I reprehend any thing in this world, it is the use of my oracular tongue, and a nice derangement of epitaphs! (3.3.62-65)

Sheridan employs anantapodoton (the omission of a correlative clause) when Mrs. Malaprop claims "parts of speech" as a possession rather than including a phrase meaning the *use* or *misuse* of parts of speech. The audience laughs at the inference that grammar could be one of Mrs. Malaprop's appendages. "Reprehend" in the context of her dialogue is substituted for "comprehend," and "derangement" connotes the opposite improper placement of her "epigrams," not "epitaphs." Sheridan brilliantly confirms Mrs. Malaprop's critic's

assessment through her own voice when she says, “it is the use of my oracular tongue,” thereby illustrating the inappropriate description of her tongue. Mrs. Malaprop does not regard herself as a prophet, but rather believes herself to be “oratorical.” Because “oracular” may be perceived in at least five distinct connotations (prophetic, authoritative, grave, metaphorical, and portentous) and because Mrs. Malaprop unwittingly and actually functions throughout the play by each and several of those definitions, Sheridan extraordinarily reverses Shakespeare’s comedic rhetoric of heaping six ways to say the same thing, when he (Sheridan) interjects one word with multiple meanings—and Mrs. Malaprop is as ignorant of what she is truly revealing as Dogberry is. Once again the audience is treated to humor, not just of the moment, but humor which continues to reveal itself upon contemplation and remembrance.

Mrs. Malaprop’s garbled and misapplied conversations provide Sheridan (as Dogberry’s did in *Much Ado*) with the theme of miscommunication, mistrust, and false information. Morwood asserts, “The shifting quicksands of Mrs. Malaprop’s vocabulary have a delightful appropriateness to a world in which the channels of direct communication are so repeatedly blocked” (44).

Sheridan parallels Shakespeare’s contrast in *The Rivals* as in *Much Ado* of two sets of lovers. In both plays, the minor pairs serve as foils to accentuate the differences between the couples and to further the authors’ social commentary, character development, and plot line. Sheridan, like Shakespeare, employs the devices of overhearings (fundamental to the process of miscommunication and eventual clarification) and masks, or roles, that the characters play with one another. In their commentary on *Much Ado*, editors Hardin Craig and David Bevington

write that “The masks, or roles, that the characters are incessantly playing toward one another are for the most part defensive and inimical to mutual understanding.” They wonder, “How can they [masks] be dispelled?” To this question, they reply “It is the search for candor and self-awareness in relationships with others, the quest for a transforming inner reality beneath conventional outward appearances, that provides the ‘journey’ in this play” (530). Such a delightful assessment of Shakespeare’s work could well be cut and pasted into any introduction to *The Rivals*. Sheridan’s obvious insight into the games people play matches Shakespeare’s psychological finesse. What better touchstone could Sheridan model for lighthearted expression of the reorganization of personality than such a master playwright?

Sheridan also creates a genre of comedy that appeals to the ages, emulating Shakespeare’s “combative wit and swift colloquial prose” (Craig 530). In his call on the spirit of the Bard, Sheridan taps into the same awareness of the flaws and fallacies of humankind. Not only did this mirroring of the peculiarities of personalities succeed in drawing audiences during the Renaissance, but the local eighteenth-century citizenry also recognized Sheridan’s dialogue for its amusingly “Bathetic” qualities.

Regardless of the identifiable Shakespearean elements in *The Rivals*, Sheridan’s personality and voice permeate his play. Elements of Sheridan’s life seep through the dialogue of every character. Sheridan confesses his obsession with money and his awareness of the real world’s cold imperative through conversations such as the one between Lydia and Beverley (Absolute):

LYDIA. Will you then, Beverley, consent to forfeit that portion of my paltry wealth?—that burthen on the wings of love?

ABSOLUTE. O come to me—rich only thus—in loveliness—Bring no portion to me but thy love—‘twill be generous in you, Lydia—for well you know, it is the only dower your poor Beverley can repay.

LYDIA. How persuasive are his words! -- how charming will poverty be with him! (3.3.136-42)

Education of women supplies the play with an expression of Sheridan’s value of moral judgment and common sense. This secondary theme unobtrusively exposes the misconception that educated women are dangerous through Sheridan’s comic exposure of the ridiculous when Sir Anthony exclaims, “Had I a thousand daughters, by Heaven! I’d as soon have them taught the black-art as their alphabet!” (1.2.186-88). Sheridan’s disdain for arranged marriages insinuates itself through the language of silly, self-aggrandizement denoting the unfitness of Mrs. Malaprop to determine her niece’s future. Sheridan pricks at the complacency of his peers concerning the era’s convention, and his play reflects Shakespeare’s attitude toward parental betrothals in *Much Ado*, as Beatrice opines:

BEATRICE. Yes, faith; it is my cousin’s duty to make curtsy and say ‘Father, as it please you.’ But yet for all that, cousin, let him be a handsome fellow, or else make another curtsy and say ‘Father, as it please me.’ (2.1.55-59)

Sheridan manifests his Shakespearean gleanings throughout *The Rivals* through character interaction and their perceptions of love and society; similarity in scenes such as

Acres writing his challenge to Beverley and Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Viola in *Twelfth Night*; and, of course, word play. Sheridan immersed himself from youth in a study of Shakespeare, and his conscious efforts to emulate the Bard and impress eighteenth-century audiences with Shakespearean delights are integrated into Sheridan's recipe for humor serving up, as Morwood believes, "a great Shakespearean feast of languages" (38).

If Sheridan's linguistic inspiration includes Shakespearean sources, then it follows that in his exposure to the best the Restoration period had to offer, he would aspire to pattern his work from that generation's most notable playwrights. In his preface to *The Rivals*, Sheridan defends his inexperience and reaffirms the originality of his play while admitting to remnants of influence from by-gone comedy writers. After reassuring the audience that "for as my first wish in attempting a Play, was to avoid every appearance of plagiarism," he allows a debt to the genius of others. He states, "—Faded ideas float in the fancy like half-forgotten dreams; and the imagination in its fullest enjoyments becomes suspicious of its offspring, and doubts whether it has created or adopted" (Price 6). Similarly, Loftis comments, "The resemblances of *The Rivals* to Congreve's comedies, as to other seventeenth-century comedies, are of the generalized kind that derive from a shared literary tradition" (49). But the tradition of pure comedy, the hallmark of Restoration theater, had lost its appeal for eighteenth-century audiences, critics, and playwrights.

In the introduction to his edition of *Chief Plays of Goldsmith and Sheridan*, James Oscar Campbell writes that sentimental comedy of Sheridan's day "set the standards of excellence" and "was a species of drama almost devoid of laughter. It was named comedy only

because it had a so-called happy ending” (v). He goes on to define sentimental comedy within the parameters of the authors’ effectiveness “to elevate the mind and upon the pathos of touching situations to start tears of tenderness and pity.” Furthermore, “The plays now seem a mixture of strained loftiness and easy tears.” He continues, “The entire dramatic type was founded on the belief that man is innately good and that he can be softened into virtue through tears which are made to flow from contemplation of undeserved suffering” (v-vi). And while audiences enjoyed a cathartic and morally edifying theater experience, comedy for the sake of laughter, developed at the expense of those to the manor born and made popular during the Restoration, was now considered vulgar and common. Campbell reasons, “Partisans of sentimental comedy professed to believe it a much nobler form of art than pure comedy” (vi). Writers, critics, and theater-goers of Sheridan’s day accepted the eighteenth-century dictum, and only those comedies which professed to instruct the audience through the characters’ victory over human weakness enjoyed any degree of success. Campbell quotes playwright Hugh Kelly’s philosophy as it is voiced through one of his characters in his 1773 play *School for Wives*, ““A good comedy,” he concludes, ‘is a capital effort of genius, and should, therefore, be directed to the noblest purposes’” (vi). Not only had Restoration comedy lacked any redeeming social value, but it had been written for the sole purpose of poking fun at the landed gentry and high society. Campbell reports that eighteenth-century audiences had become disenchanted with the reproduction of artificial social life. What had been the comedy of manners, a witty creation of “the humorous exhibition of persons in fashionable Society,” was viewed by Sheridan’s contemporaries as meaningless to the common population. Campbell

declares, "When this particular world of fashion disappeared, as it did about the year 1700, the comedy dependent upon it immediately languished." He concludes, "Its unpopularity was rendered doubly sure because Restoration social manners were deeply tinged with immorality and licentiousness, which became distasteful to succeeding generations of play-goers" (vii). Eighteenth-century writers who campaigned for pure comedy while subjugated to the tyranny of theatrical moralism were challenged to engender humor fit for the masses but which also contained "constructive principle" (vii). Campbell elucidates further on the dilemma of the eighteenth-century playwrights, "This aspect of comedy of manners outlasted the type, so that writers of pure comedy from that time forward have felt that their first duty was to write smart dialogue." Additionally, "Flourishes of wit, however, are not stuff out of which the substance of comedies can be made, so that this obligation to contrive witty speech, being felt as primary, lay often as a pall on the invention of the authors" (vii).

Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Campbell asserts, "was well fitted to give the English drama of his time the thing it most needed—a commanding tradition of pure comedy" (xxiii). Sheridan's genius lay in his adaptation of high society antics to the middle-class English who think of themselves as belonging to the upper crust. Campbell states, "The men and women of *The Rivals* . . . all regard themselves as being in society, yet they reflect the situation at Bath in that they are all intruders in the polite world. No one of them is to the manor born. Each one is somewhat under the strain of his social efforts." He concludes, "Each one poses in his own way and each affects an elegance not native to him" (xxiii). By mirroring the Restoration's comedy of manners in the faces of everyday people, Sheridan supplies eighteenth-century

audiences with a hilarious look at hypocrisy and pretense and treats them to a renewal of brilliant linguistic wit not enjoyed since the turn of the century. Regarding the circumstances of Sheridan's life which influence his work, Richard W. Bevis compares Sheridan to Goldsmith, a middle-aged playwright who suffered from financial struggles. Bevis explains, "Sheridan began young, romantic, ambitious." He elaborates, "The result was a modified comedy of wit, slightly brittle and more receptive to the artificialities of the manners tradition than was Goldsmith's comedy of humours and nature. With Sheridan we are back in the drawing-room" (228). Sheridan constructs the eighteenth-century theater to celebrate laughter in lieu of erecting an entertainment temple to induce tears.

While certain characters in *The Rivals* parallel those in Congreve's *The Way of the World*, Sheridan draws from personal experience and casts a comedic eye on his peers' works as well. Specifically, his Lydia Languish provides a blend of the three influences on Sheridan. First, her problems with the older generation, her aunt Mrs. Malaprop, are similar to Sheridan's wife Elizabeth Linley's conflicts with her father; next like Congreve's Millamant of *The Way of the World*, Lydia would stand to lose her fortune if she marries improperly; finally, she reflects Colman's character Polly Honeycombe in that Polly's ruination has come about because of the circulating library, a fear Mrs. Malaprop has for Lydia. Though an important likeness to Lydia Languish is evident from the eighteenth-century play *Polly Honeycombe*, George Colman's 1760 afterpiece, Colman's characterizations are not entirely original either. His characterizations resemble a much older comedy. Loftis explains, "Yet Colman as well as

Sheridan drew on a satirical tradition as old as Cervantes's *Don Quixote*; we cannot feel assurance that Sheridan drew on Colman rather than the shared tradition . . ." (49).

The adaptation of a shared tradition of comedy in Sheridan's work from Cervantes and Shakespeare through Congreve and Colman is only the beginning of the joy unleashed in Sheridan's masterful plays. His unparalleled development of laughing comedy focuses on uncovering the artifice and identifying it. For Sheridan, the artifice is sentimentality, and his plays offer audiences a cure for the blues. Anne Parker writes, "Sheridan's plays reflect folly and seek to mend it. More than that, like the Restoration comedies of the past, his plays deal with artifice, though in Sheridan's case the artifice is the sentimental pose." She continues, "Comedy for Sheridan has a corrective function, directed not just at folly, which takes many forms, but also at sentimental excess" (10). Sheridan assumes the role of peacemaker between the conflicting forms of comedy and strives "to create a balance between mirth and sentiment." Parker defines this balance as "absolute sense," or "common sense tempered by mirth and softened by good nature" (10). As Mark S. Auburn points out, common sense is an integral part of the eighteenth-century idiom (125). Neither does Sheridan spare the audience the roguish side of his characters and unabashedly declares in his Prologue to *The Rivals* that they are flesh and blood.

The sentimental Muse!—Her emblems view

The Pilgrim's progress, and a sprig of rue!

View her—too chaste to look like flesh and blood—

Primly portray'd on emblematic wood! (23-26)

By supplying his characters with the duality of human nature, Sheridan walks the fine line between the camps of Restoration comedy and the sentimentality of his day and remains loyal to his sense of comedic social reform. *The Rivals* remains Sheridan's innovative effort in the development of absolute sense and "dramatizes the excesses of the sentimental way" (Parker 12).

A prime example of Sheridan's gentle prod at sentimentality is *The Rivals*' character Faulkland. In his excessive (supposed) concern for his love Julia's well-being, Faulkland gushes out his fears for her health to Absolute:

ABSOLUTE. But for Heaven's sake! What grounds for apprehension can your whimsical brain conjure up at present?

FAULKLAND. What grounds for apprehension did you say? Heavens! Are there not a thousand! I fear for her spirits—her health—her life. —My absence may fret her; her anxiety for my return, her fears for me, may oppress her gentle temper. And for her health—does not every hour bring me cause to be alarmed? If it rains, some shower may even have chilled her delicate frame!—If the wind be keen, some rude blast may have affected her! The heat of noon, the dews of the evening, may endanger the life of her, for whom only I value mine. O! Jack, when delicate and feeling souls are separated, there is not a feature in the sky,

not a movement of the elements; not an aspiration of the breeze, but
 hints some cause for a lover's apprehension!

ABSOLUTE. Aye, but we may choose whether we will take the hint or not—

So then, Faulkland, if you were convinced that Julia were well and in
 spirits, you would be entirely content.

FAULKLAND. I should be happy beyond measure—I am anxious only for
 that.

ABSOLUTE. Then to cure your anxiety at once—Miss Melville is in perfect
 health, and is at this moment in Bath.

FAULKLAND. Nay Jack—don't trifle with me.

ABSOLUTE. She is arrived here with my father within this hour.

FAULKLAND. Can you be serious? (2.1.81-102)

Absolute begins to see through Faulkland's discourse to his real desire—to have Julia pining
 away for him to the point of illness. In the same scene, Acres arrives and joins in their
 conversation.

FAULKLAND. I have not seen Miss Melville yet, Sir—I hope she
 enjoyed full health and spirits in Devonshire?

ACRES. Never knew her better in my life, Sir,—never better.—Odd's
 Blushes and Blooms! She has been as healthy as the German Spa.

FAULKLAND. Indeed!—I did hear that she had been a little indisposed.

ACRES. False, false, Sir—only said to vex you: quite the reverse I assure you.

FAULKLAND. There, Jack, you see she has the advantage of me; I had almost fretted myself ill.

ABSOLUTE. Now are you angry with your mistress for not having been sick.

FAULKLAND. No, no, you misunderstand me:—yet surely a little trifling indisposition is not an unnatural consequence of absence from those we love.—Now confess—isn't there something unkind in this violent, robust, unfeeling health?

ABSOLUTE. O, it was very unkind of her to be well in your absence to be sure! (2.2.134-47)

Even though Faulkland fails to comprehend the irony and falsity of his language, Sheridan's audience laughs at Faulkland's implication that the banner of true love would be Julia's wasting away for want of him.

Not only does Sheridan subject the delicate sensibilities of his characters to his satirical wit, but he also exposes and ridicules “the aspects of sentimentalism that lead to folly” and the excesses of personality evidenced in all of Sheridan's characters in the play. Mrs. Malaprop and Bob Acres represent Sheridan's insight into the foibles of pretension—Mrs. Malaprop's “oracular tongue” (noted previously), Bob Acres' swearing in order to bolster his own courage, Sir Anthony Absolute's “penchant to be ‘hasty in every thing,’” and Lydia's ridiculous

and fantastic romantic notions (Parker 13-14). Sheridan's innovative style reaches another level of comic effectiveness as Sheridan creates a rivalry between the best of wit and contemporary sentimentalism. As his characters realize their own absurdities and the indulgences of each other, they rescue one another from tragedy, and Sheridan's audience is allowed to weep in compassion with the characters' epiphanies. Parker concludes her premise that Sheridan exploits wit and sentiment simultaneously in his play with a comment on the play's climax. She remarks, "in *The Rivals* the duel becomes an effective comic device . . . [it] exemplifies the basic rivalry between the sentimental and the witty modes, and the dangers to which both are subject" (18). By the end of the play, the characters are justly rewarded, the audience and critics are left with their sense of morality intact, loyalty to their nobler desires is reaffirmed, and humor has been restored to sentimental Georgian comedy. Thus, Sheridan's able use of conscious artistry to combine the wit of by-gone literary eras with the sentiment forced on Georgian drama reinforces Sheridan's preeminence as the eighteenth-century's artful innovative adapter of comedy.

CHAPTER 4

RHETORIC AND RIVALRY

Rhetoricians like Sheridan found themselves on the outbound express of the fast and powerful Restoration-inspired age of wit. David Bowman asserts that rhetorical studies in the eighteenth century became tiresome and that writers were encouraged to limit their literary linguistic forays. He explains that “the labels [rhetorical terms] themselves are of little importance, and sources of exasperation to eighteenth-century schoolboys, but the compositional skill they represent is of considerable value in studying the plays, poems, and prose of English literature written between the beginning of Elizabeth’s reign and the end of the eighteenth century.” He continues by positioning Sheridan’s plays within the literary tradition between Wilson and Wordsworth “—between Thomas Wilson’s *Art of English Poesie* (1560) and the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) which called for an end to rhetorical excesses . . . so Sheridan’s plays . . . come at the end of this rhetorical tradition and are a fitting tribute to it” (31).² Sheridan’s work exemplifies the best and brightest of the rhetorical writers of his century. He further elucidates regarding *The Rivals*: “*The Rivals* has left English comedy an unusually large number of fine characters. A great part of their characterization comes from the comparative brilliance or ineptness of their rhetoric” (31). Characterization, merely one aspect of Sheridan’s play, offers a look

² Bowman is probably referring to Thomas Wilson’s *Arte of Rhetorique* first published in 1553, revised in 1560, rather than *The Art of Poesie* which is not attributed to Wilson. In the *Arte of Rhetorique*, the point of excess is clear.

at the breadth and depth of Sheridan's linguistic venue, a look imperative to the historical, as well as the literary, assessment of the age. On the historical importance of a linguistic evaluation of any literary effort, Colin McCabe writes for the *Oxford Literary Review* that "there is little doubt that our ability to read is dependent on a knowledge of changes in meaning, syntax and phonology and that our ability to analyze is dependent on the possibility of using grammatical and prosodic categories to articulate the literary effects that turn on them" (70). The "effects" of a rhetorical and linguistic study of *The Rivals* are the serendipitous discovery of a multi-layered play, full of not only complex characterization but also social comment. Sheridan gently reprimands sentimental writers as well.

Sheridan culminates every element of his linguistic and semiotic repertoire in the voice of Mrs. Malaprop. Through her harlequinade dialogue with the play's characters and her pregnant signals to the audience, Sheridan repeatedly underscores the strata of rivalry made apparent in such manipulative wordplay.

Although the play's title *The Rivals* initially indicates the romantic enterprise between the leading lovers (Lydia and Captain Absolute [who masquerades as Ensign Beverley]), the rivalry between the play's secondary couple (Julia and Faulkland), and shadows of types (Sir Lucius O'Trigger and Ensign Beverley for Lydia), Sheridan further exploits the generational struggles between Mrs. Malaprop and her niece Lydia and Sir Anthony and Captain Absolute. Sheridan evidences his rhetorical humor in a double-pronged satiric norm: first, the subtle satire of wit versus sentimentality comprise the play's

burlesque element; then, the satire attacks the underlying social theme of the education of women, considered an unpopular trend of Sheridan's day.

Although Sheridan's dialogue employs over seventy different tropes and schemes (31), the remainder of this chapter considers selected strategies only and does not purport an exhaustive study of Malaprop's dialogue from a rhetorical perspective, but it includes in these selections the effect of Mrs. Malaprop's dialogue upon the play's characters and possible interpretations by her audience. Examples chosen here illustrate his two-pronged satiric norm and his genius at writing dialogue.

Sheridan's Horatian efforts to instruct and delight enable the audience to identify and understand the effectiveness of his wit and social comment within the dialogue. Through Sheridan's employment of a multitude of rhetorical devices, the audience gains insight into themselves while they enjoy and appreciate the reverberating humor echoing throughout the dialogue. A number of these devices are reviewed herein beginning with *acyrologia*, meaning simply the substitution of an inexact or illogical word. Because of Sheridan's absolute mastery of this device in his plays—especially in Mrs. Malaprop's dialogue—the term “*malapropism*” was born and is commonly used to identify that particular rhetorical term in lieu of *acyrologia*. Because Mrs. Malaprop's dialogue is under consideration here, *malapropism* is the device Sheridan uses most often and will be given primary consideration herein. Sheridan often incorporates more than one device into a single passage. *Adianoeta*, an expression that has an obvious meaning as well as a veiled one beneath, provides Sheridan with the means to express more than one message to the

audience without bluntness, and is noted frequently here. Sheridan's employment of *antiphrasis*, or the irony which occurs from substituting a correct word with one of opposite meaning, is also considered from selected passages. Other rhetorical elements which occur in fewer instances throughout Mrs. Malaprop's dialogue are also evaluated in the following discussion. Included in the list are *catachresis*, a far-fetched metaphor; *enallage*, substituting one case, person, gender, number, tense, mood, part of speech for another (*anthymeria*, substituting one part of speech for another falls into this type of word play); *bathos*, an emotional appeal that invokes laughter; *hypallage*, an awkward word change; *prosthesis*, adding to the beginning of a word; *epenthesis*, adding a sound to the middle of a word; *syncope*, removing sound from the middle of a word; *bomphiologia*, bombastic speech; *oxymoron*, an ironic and foolish paradox often generating humor; *synoeciosis*, also a use of irony through paradox by bringing together humor through an expanded *oxymoron*; and *paronomasia*, a playing on the sound of words.

The classification begins with *malapropism*, his most frequently used strategy. Often, Sheridan layers the dialogue with two or more strategies (illustrations under consideration appear in **bold**).

In her efforts to eradicate Ensign Beverley from Lydia's mind, Mrs. Malaprop advises her niece:

MRS. MALAPROP. The point we would request of you is that you will promise to forget this fellow—to **illiterate** him, I say, quite from your memory. (1.2.205-07)

In addition to the *malapropism*, in which “illiterate” echoes “obliterate,” Sheridan employs two secondary devices: *prosthesis*, in which the first syllable is changed and thereby the meaning; and *enallage* or *anthimeria*, substituting one part of speech for another. In this case the adjective “illiterate” becomes a verb. Because of the overtone of “illiterate,” Sheridan’s choice exemplifies not only the malapropism but also spotlights Mrs. Malaprop’s uneducated status as well.

A few lines farther, Lydia argues with her aunt by denying that she is guilty of misbehaving. Mrs. Malaprop responds:

MRS. MALAPROP. Now don’t attempt to **extirpate** yourself from the matter; you know I have proof **controvertible** of it. (1.2.222-23)

Ironically, Mrs. Malaprop utters here the word she needs in her ardor for Lydia to forget Beverley, “extirpate,” which means “obliterate.” But in this passage, “extirpate” becomes a *malapropism* for “extricate.” Mrs. Malaprop’s proof “controvertible” in reality is “incontrovertible,” thereby modeling *antiphrasis* and *prosthesis*. Sheridan demonstrates Mrs. Malaprop’s inappropriate use of language—the knowledge of which she believes is so important—and illustrates his innovative, humorous word play. His strategy causes the audience to loop previous dialogue into a process that resembles the harmonies from overtones in chords of a Beethoven scherzo.

Mrs. Malaprop and Sir Anthony discuss the education of women in the first act. To Sir Anthony’s avowal that he would not have a woman formally educated, Mrs. Malaprop responds to Sir Anthony. He has just reproved Lydia for reading novels.

MRS. MALAPROP. Nay, nay, Sir Anthony, you are an absolute
misanthropy. (1.2.255-54)

With the use of one word, Sheridan demonstrates three rhetorical devices: *malapropism*, *anthimeria*, and *antiphrasis*. When Mrs. Malaprop says “misanthropy,” her meaning is “philanthropist,” a benevolent person. She understands that the word she wants to express this idea contains “anthrop,” but she chooses a word that expresses the antithesis of her desired word; thus *antiphrasis* occurs. A “misanthrope” hates and distrusts all people. “Misanthropy” is the condition of hating and distrusting all people. *Anthimeria* is the shift of the function of the word—from misanthrope (a person) to misanthropy (a condition). Sheridan’s choice allows the audience to infer more in this passage than mere word play, however. After the first hearing of “misanthrope,” its reverberations cause the audience to realize that any person willing to have black magic taught to his daughter rather than have her properly educated truly distrusts and hates all people. But Mrs. Malaprop’s character is so humorous that the audience laughs through the manipulation.

Mrs. Malaprop and Sir Anthony warm to their topic.

MRS. MALAPROP. —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. (1.2.299-305)

The *malapropism* “reprehend” instead of “comprehend” also conveys the hidden meaning, or *adianoeta*, of Mrs. Malaprop’s loathing of education for young women—an idea Mrs. Malaprop finds reprehensible. This underlying meaning reinforces the ridiculousness of Mrs. Malaprop and her notions. Sheridan also employs the device of *prosthesis* by changing the first syllable of “reprehend” to ensure a new meaning of “comprehend.” Mrs. Malaprop ends her diatribe by claiming that nothing she has said is in excess. Rather than “superfluous,” she says “superstitious.” Once again, she inadvertently announces a fear, the unfounded fear—or superstition—that an educated woman ruins her chances of true happiness. Sheridan veils his meaning to allow the audience to discover it and helps them to accept his notion that society should rethink its educational policies.

Mrs. Malaprop continues her conversation with Sir Anthony uttering another malapropism.

MRS. MALAPROP. Aye, and the properest way, o’ my conscience!
—nothing is so **conciliating** to young people as severity.—Well, Sir
Anthony, I shall give Mr. Acres his discharge, and prepare Lydia to
receive your son’s **invocations**:—and I hope you will represent her to
the Captain as an object not altogether **illegible**. (1.2.330-36)

Through the voice of Mrs. Malaprop, Sheridan packs this short speech with a humorous peek at the conflict between the well-intentioned older generation and their charges. Sir Anthony and Mrs. Malaprop agree that some type of force is required to maintain control of the younger generation. Mrs. Malaprop mis-speaks of its effectiveness when she uses

the word *conciliating* to mean “convincing.” With regard to Mrs. Malaprop’s eye on the Captain for Lydia, the idea of Lydia’s receiving his “invocations” rather than “invitations” effects humor. The Captain surely will invoke Lydia’s sentiment; however, the initial purpose is invitation. What Mrs. Malaprop hopes the Captain will invoke allows the audience to decide what is funny. Her last remark illustrates Sheridan’s fecund rhetorical devices which mark humor. Mrs. Malaprop hopes that the Captain will not find Lydia ineligible, but by saying “illegible,” which literally means “unreadable,” Mrs. Malaprop unknowingly expresses a truthful desire.

Next, Mrs. Malaprop introduces her own interests:

MRS. MALAPROP. Well, at any rate I shall be glad to get her from under my **intuition**.—She has somehow discovered my partiality for Sir Lucius O’Trigger—Sure Lucy can’t have betray’d me!—No, the girl is such a simpleton I should have made her confess it.—Lucy!—Lucy—
[Calls] Had she been one of your **artificial** ones I should never have trusted her. (1.2.345-51)

Sheridan has Mrs. Malaprop coin the *malapropism* “intuition” to express the dual notion of influence and institution. She struggles throughout the play with her own emotional rivalry of responsibility to her niece and the strain of such responsibility. As the multi-faceted emotional distress works on her mind, Mrs. Malaprop verbalizes her fears. She does so in such a way that, rather than the audience weeping and worrying with her, the audience laughs at her situation. Here Sheridan uses *bathos*. As Mrs. Malaprop calls for her serving

girl Lucy, she affords the audience her impression of the girl. Although Lucy presents herself as a simpleton, she is far from it. A conniving and deceitful girl motivated only by self-interest, she has fooled Mrs. Malaprop. Sheridan extends his humor in this passage by applying *adianoeta* to the term “artificial” which clues the audience to the truth of Lucy’s nature and allows Mrs. Malaprop to voice one of her classic malapropisms. Instead of “artifice,” Mrs. Malaprop unknowingly supports the audience’s perception of irony by characterizing Lucy as artificial. A few lines following, Mrs. Malaprop threatens Lucy should the girl expose the secret of Mrs. Malaprop’s heart, her desire for Sir Lucius.

MRS. MALAPROP. So, come to me presently, and I’ll give you another letter to Sir Lucius.—But mind Lucy—if you ever betray what you are entrusted with—(unless it be other people’s secrets to me) you forfeit my **malevolence** forever:—and your being a simpleton shall be no excuse for your **locality**. (1.2.362-67)

In the foregoing passage, Sheridan employs *antiphrasis* when Mrs. Malaprop ineffectually warns Lucy of losing Mrs. Malaprop’s “malevolence” forever. Mrs. Malaprop considers herself to be benevolent toward Lucy, and that benevolence is what she is threatening to withdraw. Sheridan’s final word in Mrs. Malaprop’s entreaty—“locality”—could rhetorically be considered an example of *paronomasia*, or a playing on the sound of words. Mrs. Malaprop implies that Lucy’s apparent backwardness would be no excuse for talking out of turn—in a word, “vocality.”

As Mrs. Malaprop resumes in the third act, her **malapropisms** continue.

MRS. MALAPROP. Your being Sir Anthony's son, Captain, would itself be a sufficient **accommodation**:—but from the **ingenuity** of your appearance, I am convinced you deserve the character here given of you. (3.3.1-4)

Lydia's aunt at the opening of this scene gushes to Captain Absolute. She guarantees acceptance of the Captain simply because his station as the son of Sir Anthony recommends it. Rather than use the word "recommendation," she says, "accommodation." Within this brief greeting, Mrs. Malaprop speaks of the Captain's "ingenuity" of appearance. If the audience infers the usual meaning of ingenuity within this context, her implied compliment makes no sense. Certainly she does not mean that the Captain has cleverly contrived his appearance, but rather she means that his appearance is open and sincere, ingenuous. From this understanding, humor strikes again when Sheridan's *anthimeria* substitutes "appearance" for "appearing." Mrs. Malaprop, delighted that he has appeared, believes appearance indicates good character. Once the audience confirms Mrs. Malaprop's behavior toward the Captain, Sheridan's comedic stroke becomes evident.

Sheridan next takes a little swipe at the insincere conventions of contemporary femininity as Mrs. Malaprop continues.

MRS. MALAPROP. Sir, you do me infinite honour!—I beg, Captain, you'll be seated.—[Sit]—Ah! Few gentlemen now a days know how to value the **ineffectual** qualities in a woman! (3.3.11-14)

Sheridan, aware of the vain pretensions of female poseurs, reveals these traits to his audiences through Mrs. Malaprop. Verbally clicking her tongue at the lack of respect shown for femininity, she probably means “effeminate” when she says “ineffectual.” Her qualities were, indeed, ineffectual, as she reveals what might have been better shielded. Her self-unawareness provides a source of humor easily discernible by audiences. Sheridan’s subtlety of language strikes at the heart of semiotic intercourse with the audience with his use of the term “ineffectual.” If the audience initially perceives that Mrs. Malaprop intended to use the term “effeminate,” then there is humor not only because of the malapropism, “ineffectual,” but also because “effeminate” is an unflattering description of femininity. And once the audience becomes aware of overtones—that Mrs. Malaprop actually means “feminine”—Sheridan scores a humorous triple-play against posturing females by brilliantly linking one *malapropism* to a double usage of *adianoeta*.

Mrs. Malaprop continues her effusive praise of Captain Absolute:

MRS. MALAPROP. Sir—you overpower me with good breeding.—

He is the very **Pine-apple of politeness!**— (3.3.24-25)

In her efforts to impress the Captain with her word power (as she has been impressed by the very fact of who he is), Mrs. Malaprop uses a far-fetched metaphor, “pineapple of politeness,” to compare the Captain to someone who is the “apple” of the eye, Sir Anthony’s son. Sheridan’s employment of this strategy, *catechresis*, produces an immediate comedic response, especially when paired with the possible *syncope* of “pinnacle.”

The conversation between Captain Absolute and Mrs. Malaprop continues:

MRS. MALAPROP. You are very good, and very considerate,
 Captain.—I am sure I have done everything in my power since I
 exploded the affair! Long ago I laid my positive **conjunction** on her
 never to think on the fellow again;—I have since laid Sir Anthony’s
preposition before her;—but, I’m sorry to say, she seems resolved
 to decline every particle that I **enjoin** her. (3.3.27-39)

In this bit of dialogue, Mrs. Malaprop’s *malapropisms* include “conjunction” for “injunction,” “preposition” for “proposition,” and “enjoin” for “conjoin.” The wit of the *malapropisms* is clear, but the subtler, rhetorical humor is evidenced in Sheridan’s strategy of *prosthesis* in which the first syllables of the words are substituted with incorrect ones. The remainder of the words stays intact and meaningful.

She responds to Captain Absolute:

MRS. MALAPROP. It gives me the **hydrostatics** to such a degree!—
 I thought she had **persisted** from corresponding with him; but behold
 this very day I have **interceded** another letter from the fellow! I believe
 I have it in my pocket. (3.3.41-45)

In her overly-dramatic style, Mrs. Malaprop insists that she becomes hysterical, or experiences histrionics, when she considers the idea of Lydia’s affair with the Ensign. She expresses this state of mind by stating that it gives her “hydrostatics,” a *malapropism* which implies emotionally charged waterworks and which bears the truth of the pressure and

balance of water. Sheridan teases the audience with the whispered possibility that Mrs. Malaprop could be unbalanced thereby gouging his current day audience with their fixation on feminine deportment. Next, Mrs. Malaprop announces that she thought Lydia had “persisted” rather than “desisted” from corresponding with Ensign Beverley, an example of Sheridan’s use of *prosthesis* and *adianoeta*. Indeed Lydia had persisted, an example of *antiphrasis*. Finally, Mrs. Malaprop states that she had “interceded” a letter between the lovers instead of “intercepted.” Sheridan employs *syncope* in this instance to change Mrs. Malaprop’s message.

Mrs. Malaprop continues to lament the stubbornness of her niece in her famous *malapropism*: “She’s as headstrong as an **allegory** on the banks of the Nile.” Once again, Sheridan offers the audience multi-dimensional humor by substituting “allegory” for “alligator”; thus the substitution conjures up the vision of a stubborn Egyptian alligator (3.3.230-31).

Mrs. Malaprop forges for herself a reputation throughout the play of boisterous commentary and misapplied terminology. Further *malapropisms* appear in the last act of the play.

MRS. MALAPROP. So! So! Here’s fine work!—here’s fine suicide,
paracide, and **salivation** going on in fields! And Sir Anthony not to
 be found to prevent the **antistrophe**! (5.1.215-18).

Upon discovery of the impending duels, Mrs. Malaprop fears the worst. She worries for David’s father Squire Bob Acres and is afraid he will be killed—for David that would mean

“patricide” or the killing of one’s father, not “paracide.” Of course, it is not David who is a part of the duel; therefore, even though his father is killed, David is not the person doing the killing. This inaccuracy adds another dimension of humor to Mrs. Malaprop’s *malapropism*. Mrs. Malaprop reasons that if someone dies, then someone lives—or is saved—thus, “salvation,” pronounced by Mrs. Malaprop as “salivation.” Sheridan’s entwined rhetorical devices are *malapropism* and *epenthesis* (inserting a syllable internally which changes its meaning). Mrs. Malaprop uses the rhetorical term “antistrophe” to mean “catastrophe,” which would have been an appropriate term had she consistently ended her statements with the same word. When Julia asks Mrs. Malaprop why she is upset, Mrs. Malaprop responds with, “That gentleman can tell you—‘twas he **enveloped** the affair to me” (5.1.221-22). Sheridan’s humor is strained at this point as Mrs. Malaprop tells Julia that Fag “developed” the scenario for her and utters “enveloped” instead. Later in the same scene as she is relating the plans for the upcoming duel, she indicates that Fag “can tell you the “perpendiculars,” a *malapropism* for “particulars” (5.1.237). At first, Mrs. Malaprop is unwilling to go out to stop the duel and states, “O fie—it would be very **inelegant** in us:—we should only **participate** things” (5.1.270-71). Her *malapropisms* are “inelegant” meaning “indelicate,” and “participate” for “exacerbate.” Upon being told that Sir Lucius O’Trigger (whom she secretly loves) is participating in the event, she will not be kept from going and accuses Lydia of having no feelings in his regard. She says, “Why, how you stand, girl! You have no more feeling than one of the **Derbyshire Putrefactions!**” (5.2.280). Derbyshire is famous for its fossils, and Mrs. Malaprop means

“petrifications.” In this instance, Sheridan hints to the audience the idea of distaste for the long dead and petrified.

By the fourth act, Mrs. Malaprop is determined to convince Lydia of Captain Absolute’s qualities and discourage her from the pursuit of Ensign Beverley. In a speech to Lydia she proclaims:

MRS. MALAPROP. 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. (4.2.11-20)

Within this brief explosion of praise for Captain Absolute, Sheridan allows Mrs. Malaprop to run amuck in malapropistic purple prose. Admiration pours from her in a stream of confused adoration and bombards the audience with humor—exemplifying Sheridan’s use of *bomphiologia*. Sheridan employs the strategy of *anthimeria* when Mrs. Malaprop says of the Captain that he is full of “adulation.” She does not claim that he is guilty of self-aggrandizement, but that he is worthy of adulation. She extols his physiognomy for being “grammatical,” an attribute not associated with the description of a person’s countenance but an example of the rhetorical application of *hypallage*. As she attempts to convince

Lydia of the Captain's god-like aura, Mrs. Malaprop breaks into a ludicrous imitation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in which Hamlet describes the king's god-like qualities.

HAMLET. 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 heaven-kissing hill. (3.4.56-59)

Hamlet speaks of Hyperion's curls while Mrs. Malaprop conjures up "Hesperian" curls, an *oxymoron* in that Hyperion was the father of the sun god while Hesperos conceived the evening star. Hyperion rules the east and Hesperos claims the western world. Sheridan's play on opposites literally implies the difference between day and night. The expanded oxymoron, or *synoeciosis*, continues. Hamlet likens the king's presence to the face of the highest god, Jove, while Mrs. Malaprop substitutes "Job," the endurer of all human suffering at the hands of Satan. Sheridan's *malapropisms*, *hypallage*, and *synoeciosis* are sustained as Mrs. Malaprop changes Hamlet's "An eye like Mars, to threaten and command," to "An eye, like March, to threaten at command!" Mars, the god of war, made threats and gave commands. March, the month, only promises turbulent weather from the force of nature. Mrs. Malaprop's likeness to Hamlet's speech completely falls apart in the last two lines of her dramatic delivery. She misses entirely the symbolism of the messenger god, Mercury, and his position as a light-giver from a high hill, but rather she equates Captain Absolute's rank to someone "like Harry Mercury," new at his post and who did some kissing on a hill. Although Mrs. Malaprop understands that praise is being delivered

in the Shakespearean scene, she is endeavoring to match that praise for Captain Absolute. Her garbled mis-quote renders comedy by equating Captain Absolute with Jove (her “Job”).

As Mrs. Malaprop reconciles the events which have taken place between Lydia and Captain Absolute (Ensign Beverley), she says to Sir Anthony:

MRS. MALAPROP. Well, Sir Anthony, since you desire it, we will not
anticipate the past; —so mind; young people—our **retrospection**
will now be all to the future. (4.2.177-180)

Sheridan formulates a humor of reversion, or *antithesis*, in Mrs. Malaprop’s speech. Her views about regarding the past and the future are in reverse. The past should be in retrospect, and the future should be anticipated. Because Sheridan patterns his social comments through word play, it is reasonable to speculate that Sheridan is reminding the audience of the wit and humor of past drama and is trusting his audiences to recognize his obligation and to engage in the dynamic process of discovering humor from his reformulation and invention. Similarly, Mrs. Malaprop confuses her expressions about the past when she states, “Nay, no **delusions** to the past.” (5.3.211). On the surface, the audience perceives the malapropism to mean “allusion” as in briefly mentioning something from the past. Sheridan allows the audience to glimpse the superficial meaning before recognizing the sophisticated literary allusion. Allusion in a literary sense refers to work that is known to writer and reader, or audience, alike. Once again, Sheridan focuses on literary history. His linguistic strategy is circular in effect because Sheridan returns the

audience to their initial encounter with Mrs. Malaprop, who inadvertently warns the audience about becoming deluded by the past. Sheridan reminds the audience to respect and employ the finest elements of past literary efforts, but avoid total conformity out of unenlightened loyalty to it.

As the drama unfolds and the dénouement occurs, Lydia is disappointed that there will be no elopement and thereby throws Mrs. Malaprop into a state of confusion. She states, “I’m quite **analys’d**, for my part!” (4.2.277). Like Sir Anthony, Mrs. Malaprop is astonished and perplexed. Sheridan takes the opportunity to remind the audience that, indeed, Mrs. Malaprop has been exposed throughout the play.

Sheridan exercises his rhetorical skill in *The Rivals* through the voice of every character. Each rhetorical device unveils some emotion of the character, some trait of personality, as well as Sheridan’s own perspectives. Each exercise of linguistic manipulation pulls the audience into a stream of language and an opportunity to re-see reality, ever changing, as one might when viewing the banks while moving with the stream.

Sheridan’s designs for his life’s work did not focus or end with the theater. Play writing for him was merely a means to an end. Sheridan made it no secret that he ultimately wanted broader and more powerful control in English society. R. Crompton Rhodes writes, “When Parliament was dissolved in 1780, Sheridan determined to enter the House of Commons” (88). Concerning the advent of Sheridan’s political success Rhodes quotes Thomas Creevey’s notes regarding Sheridan’s forthcoming election, ““he [Sheridan] stole away by himself to speculate upon those prospects of distinguishing himself which

had been opened to him,’ “it was then ‘the happiest moment of his life’” (qtd. in Rhodes: 90). Political favor deserted Sheridan eventually, and he fell from the heights of influence and fortune and died a pauper.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan, whose talents were nurtured by his accomplished family, learned to use those talents to entertain and to enlighten. His reputation, the regard for which he yearned throughout his lifetime, remains solid a century later—indeed it ever increases. Samuel Johnson remarked that Sheridan “who has written the two best comedies of the age is surely a considerable man.” Sheridan’s conscious artistry made his writing the finest example of eighteenth-century drama, and the conscious artistry of those plays reflect the talent of this considerable man.

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