

Sentiment and Satire in Sheridan's
The School For Scandal

Ali Ahmad Mahmoud^{*}

* Ph.D. English Language and Literature - Drama, Ain Shams University, 1971.
Assistant professor of English Literature - Drama, English Department, Kuwait University.

Abstract

This paper argues that Sheridan's play, **The School For Scandal** (1777), is distinguished by an excellent sense of humour, a sound critical and moral vision, as well as a tolerant, humane outlook. Furthermore, it differs from the best Restoration comedies in that its wit is not an end in itself, but rather an essential element in the exposition of themes and the delineation of characters. Nor is it sexually out-spoken or morally ambiguous, aspects that occasioned much severe criticism of the comedy of manners and wit in general, but are almost absent in Sheridan.

As to the charge of sentimentality that is often levelled at Sheridan's comedy, this paper attempts to acquit the play of this charge and to prove that it is distinguished by such a balance between sentiment and satire that recalls Shakespeare, Jonson and Molière.

Some critics of the eighteenth century drama have given Sheridan's **The School For Scandal** the credit of being a comic masterpiece that has almost continued to please since it was first performed in the year 1777. It is "a studied patterned work, summing up a long comic tradition" (Knight, 1965:185). Although it is not, "as so many critics have implied, entirely a miracle in the year 1777," Professor Nicoll observes, "it marks the acme of Sheridan's comic achievement" (Nicoll, 1966: 161-2). The play has been admired for elements of wit and humour recalling Congreve's, or for the diversity and ingenuity of its characterization that well divert an audience, or for systematically ridiculing a well-defined vice as in Molière's **L'Ecole des Femmes** (Loftis, 1977:78-79). The most obvious fact about the play is its life and longevity, for "No old-English comedy since Shakespeare has worn so well" (Sichel, 1980:551-2). Accounting for its popularity, Professor Brockett argues:

The School For Scandal has been more consistently popular than any other comedy in the English language. Its story, its wit, and its comic inventiveness have kept it understandable and thoroughly enjoyable to each generation (Brockett, 1969:204).

This study offers to argue that Sheridan's **The School For Scandal** is distinguished by an excellent sense of humour, a sound critical and moral vision, as well as a tolerant, humane outlook. Furthermore, it differs from the best Restoration comedies in that its wit is not an end in itself, but rather an essential element in the exposition of themes and the delineation of characters. Nor is it sexually out-spoken or morally ambiguous, aspects that occasioned much severe criticism of the comedy of manners in general and Restoration comedy in particular, but are almost absent in Sheridan's comedy. As to the charge of sentimentality that is often levelled at Sheridan's comedy, an attempt will be made to show that this element is inevitable, but well circumscribed within the boundaries of a comedy which is benign, humane, and written for the bourgeois audience of the later eighteenth century.

Analysis of the previous critical remarks on **The School For Scandal**, together with a study of the social, political, intellectual, and literary background of the Georgian comedy at the time, would make of Sheridan's play an immense dramatic success. Indeed it is an English, dramatic classic in which a highly experienced and versatile dramatist achieved a happy equilibrium between the best that Restoration comedy had cultivated and the more permanent satirical and humane aspects which recall Shakespeare, Jonson and Molière.

A summing up of the main threads of action in **The School For Scandal**, even in capsule form, is enough to point out the essential comic and humorous ingredients of the play and the satiric stance of the playwright.

Joseph Surface¹ is a member of "the school for scandal," a congregation of scandalmongers presided by Lady Sneerwell whose motivation is allegedly to avenge her

wounded dignity and injured reputation, in the early part of her life, by the envenomed tongue of slander, upon others by murdering their reputations and damaging their life. In collaboration with Surface she has contrived an intrigue against Charles, Surface's own younger brother, and Maria, Sir Peter Teazle's ward, motivated by their desire to separate the lovers and hence to get them for themselves: Charles for Lady Sneerwell who has a passion for him, and Maria's fortune for Surface.

This main string of action is further complicated by a subplot involving the marital bond of Sir Peter and Lady Teazle, his wife, originally a country-girl, and now tailoring herself for the requirements of the way of the world and its fashions. In the admirable overall structure of the play this minor complication is made plausible, and well-integrated into the main plot, by the fact that Sir Peter is also guardian to the brothers Surface. Though an opponent of the "School," resenting its malicious practice, he is victimized by its slanders in his belief that Charles is a dissipated libertine who does not deserve Maria for wife, and that Surface, the man of noble "sentiments," is a far better match for his ward.

The dénouement of the play depends on a bipartite scheme of exposition involving Sir Peter's disillusionment in his shallow judgment of the brothers Surface's real moral characters, on the one hand, and the result of a test to which these brothers are subjected by a disguised uncle of theirs, Sir Oliver, on the other. The play turns ultimately on the exposure of Joseph Surface seen in his true colour—a vicious and hypocritical libertine, caught in the act of seducing Lady Teazle and damaging the reputation of his own brother, as well as on the realization of Charles's good nature and generosity.

It is with great dramatic skill that Sheridan manages to bring these strings of action together into an integral dramatic structure marked by clarity and fluidity on the stage. At the beginning of the play the family relationship between the Teazles seems to be alienated from the Joseph-Maria-Charles intrigue, but as the action proceeds we witness them gradually brought together until plot and subplot are almost completely united and finally resolved in the exposure of hypocrisy in the great scene.

It is noteworthy that in **The School For Scandal**, focus is made from the beginning on the theme of scandal as one of the major motifs. The two long scenes opening the comedy are devoted to the presentation of scandalmongering seen in operation. Assisted by Snake, a writer and a critic at the time, Lady Sneerwell has been able to set her malicious schemes in motion to murder the reputation of others. They happily indulge in and relish the assiduous endeavours of one of their fellow-slanders, a Mrs. Clackit, who,

has been the cause of six matches being broken off, and three sons being disinherited, of four forced elopements, as many close confinements, nine separate maintenances, and two divorces; . . . (l.i.14-17)²

Reference is soon made in their dialogue to Lady Sneerwell's revengeful and scandalous schemes, and the psychological factors motivating her attitude to people

cast a grim shade on the atmosphere of this string of action. Equally serious is her relentless attempts to destroy the love between Charles and Maria, a fact that induces one to agree with one critic's remark that "the play is not to be concerned exclusively with the lighter side of human nature" (Phythian, 1965:53).

When the puzzled Snake enquires about the motives of the Lady's and Joseph Surface's endeavours, he is soon enlightened. Things are not what they seem, or what they are believed to be. It is given out that Surface is attached to Lady Sneerwell, while his real attachment is to Maria or her fortune. Likewise, Lady Sneerwell seems to be attached to Surface, but her real affections are for Charles- "that libertine,... bankrupt in fortune and reputation" (l.i.72-73). Though Snake now finds consistency in the Lady's conduct, he still wonders at their mutual confidentiality, and his curiosity is readily satisfied:

Lady Sneerwell. For our mutual interest. I have found him out a long time since, I know him to be artful, selfish, and malicious, in short, a sentimental knave (l.i. 77-79).

What is more disturbing still about the far damaging effect of the schemes of the "school" and its gossiping is the fact that Sir Peter has been taken in by the ruse of Surface's sentimental platitudes. He now vows that Mr. Surface has not his equal in England, and hence the best match for Maria. Ironically enough it will take Sir Peter to live in this illusion till his wife confesses, in the great screen scene, that this Mr. Surface has been her treacherous seducer and the enemy of Sir Peter's domestic felicity.

It arises, then, that "sentiment" and "scandal" are treated and explored simultaneously in **The School For Scandal**; apparently they are seen going in parallelism throughout the play, by the double dramatic function given to Joseph Surface, the active member of the school, whose role in the play is made prominent from the beginning. He is soon seen venting out a sentimental cliché with feigned concern for his brother Charles, declaring that: "the man who does not share in the distresses of a brother, even though merited by his own misconduct, deserves..." and Lady Sneerwell, who sees beyond his mask, gives him the retort, "O lud! You are going to be **moral**, and forget that you are among friends" (l.i. 115-16) - a statement which at once associates moralizing with sentimentalism. For Joseph is a man of masks and postures, always ready with a fine phrase, articulated gravely, with which to defend himself and deceive others. Indeed:

He tries to hide his personal interests and egotistic motives of his actions by general maxims, (Hess-Lüttich, 1982:428).

Yet his tendency to vent out moralistic platitudes to cover up for his hypocrisy seems to have become a sort of mannerism, or even a "ruling passion," with Surface, for soon after Lady Sneerwell's previous retort, he delivers one more to Maria when he remarks that, "to smile at the jest which plants a thorn in another's breast is to become a principal in the mischief" (l.i. 160-63), a satirical remark by which the dramatist makes

the character speaking it condemn himself from his own mouth. Indeed Joseph is made one "whose conversation typifies the malignity and hypocrisy which are Sheridan's satirical targets" (Loftis, 1977:87).

Closely related to Sheridan's satire on the sham sentiments of those typified by Surface, is his attack on the sentimentalism of the Georgian comedy of the later eighteenth century. Goldsmith's and Sheridan's own campaign against the sentimental, lachrymose drama of the time can be well illustrated from the dramatists' Dedications, Prologues and Epilogues to their plays, as well as from the plays themselves. One of the most interesting and pungent pieces of satire on this genre of drama is the Prologue, written by David Garrick, to Goldsmith's **She Stoops to Conquer**.

It is a mark of Sheridan's great authorial wit and humour, in **The School For Scandal**, that he equates the artificial moralistic platitudes of Surface with downright, dishonest hypocrisy. Nor is scandalmongering in the play merely a fictitious subject for comedy. The preoccupation of the play with gossip and scandal has its direct bearings on the times as certified by contemporary testimonies. From the sociological point of view, as Professor Schiller argues, preoccupation with scandal and intrigue is one of the specialized functions of a leisure class (Schiller, 1956:699).

By the time Sheridan was composing his **The Rivals**, Bath—the scene of that play—had already developed greatly into a fashionable resort. Thanks to the care of Richard Nash, then Master of Ceremonies, the city which was frequented by people of distinction, became elegant and refined, where:

Concerts, plays, and balls were frequent, circulating libraries popular, and cards and scandal filled in more of the time of the visitors who flocked to the town (Jeffares, 1967:XVI-XVII).

The dramatist's actual suffering from gossip and scandal, embodied in contemporary literature, journalism, and scandalmongering must have occasioned his severe satire included in the Prologue to **The School For Scandal**. As a young Don Quixote, "... he draws his pen, and seeks this hydra, Scandal, in its den." (Jeffares, 1967:7).

Although Lady Sneerwell's scandalous circle disappears after the opening scenes of the play and remains so until Act V, Scene ii, yet the whole central part involving the Teazles and brothers Surface is closely related to, and affected by, the theme of scandal. On the one hand, Lady Teazle is fascinated by the fashionable society inevitably dominated by scandal, gossip and intrigue, as well as by the sentimental hypocrisy of Surface. Her involvement in a supposed love affair, à la mode, with the latter, makes the audience and reader keep touch with the scandal circle in which Surface himself is an influential member and a machiavellian fellow-intriguer with Lady Sneerwell. For this sentimental knave is as much interested in the art of scandal as it would help him to disqualify his brother, Charles, as a proper match for Maria, and hence enable himself to gain the young lady and her fortune. Again there is Charles Surface whose dissipated, extravagant character provides the "school" with favourable material for its gossips.

Furthermore, Sir Peter Teazle, too, is somehow related to the circle in his capacity as Lady Teazle's jealous husband, although he is disdainful and resentful of its ridiculous, inhuman endeavours.

Certainly part of Sheridan's satiric stance to scandal and sentiment is obviously suggested by the label names given to the characters. Sneerwell is a good name for one whose only punitive pleasure is to murder reputations; Mr. Snake is more venomous than a backbiter could ever be; and Sir Benjamin Backbite, Crabtree, and Mrs. Candour are no less suggestive of the author's disgust at this congregation of malicious detractors. Nor is Joseph Surface's well-chosen name less satirical than the others. In fact it is the most sophisticatedly satirical of all, for the triumph of Surface's sentimental ruse depends on the gullibility and shallowness of a society dominated by scandal and gossip.

Another aspect of Sheridan's satiric technique is his use of some relatively sympathetic characters as castigators of folly and malice. Maria, for instance, cannot endure slanderers who depreciate each other. To her "... the male slanderer must have the cowardice of a woman before he can traduce one" (I.i. 172-3). Her good nature and decency make her declare that "... wit loses its respect with me, when I see it in company with malice" (I.i. 157-8). As to Sir Peter Teazle, true wit is more nearly allied to good nature than Lady Sneerwell and her "college" are aware of, and "... no person should be permitted to kill characters or run down reputations, but qualified old maids and disappointed widows" (II.ii. 171-3).

Thus spectators and readers are made to keep touch with the sanity and decency of normal gentlemanly manners and conduct while they witness, in amazement, the oddity and abnormality of the scandal school with its dissimulation and vanity.

Significantly, the most lashing satire in this play is directed at Joseph Surface whose exposure brings the play to its dénouement. Indeed, "Sheridan also attacked the age-old follies of dissimulation and hypocrisy which," as Professor Auburn notices, "contrast with the sentimental virtues and which go hand in hand with scandalmongering" (Auburn, 1977:140).

But since the comedy of this villain-exposure is closely related to what may be called the comedy of misalliance and readjustment, involving Sir Peter and Lady Teazle, his wife, it would be helpful and convenient to consider the latter relationship first. The relationship between an elderly husband and a much younger wife has always been a theme which renders itself easily to satirical comedy. On the surface it recalls to one's mind such misallied married couples as the Foresights in Congreve's **Love For Love**, Sir Thomas Bornwell and Lady Aretina in James Shirley's **The Lady of Pleasure**, and even the hardcastles in Goldsmith's **She Stoops to Conquer**. But Sheridan's example is more inventive than these in that it is endowed with such greater layers of ironic comedy that make it more humorous and diverting.

Ironically Sir Peter has come in the screen scene to confide to Surface his own fears that Lady Teazle has had an attachment with his brother Charles, and that he, ne-

vertheless, is desirous to please his wife and to show his deep concern for her. Thus he has had the drafts of two deeds drawn, "By one, she will enjoy eight hundred a year independent while I live; and, by the other, the bulk of my fortune after my death" (IV.iii. 217-19). In his deep distress and sincere concern, Sir Peter sees the glimpse of a petticoat (that of his wife's behind the screen), readily explained by Surface as being that of a French milliner! Upon the sudden arrival of Charles, Sir Peter, too, hides in a closet, so that two eavesdroppers are now there. Into that scene, highly charged with ironic comedy, Charles comes in to meet his brother Surface who still hopes to carry on his malicious design on the credulous Sir Peter, the design of disgracing the character of his brother and showing himself worthy of Maria. Thus he induces Charles to confess being interested in Lady Teazle - an attempt which Charles at once refutes:

But brother, do you know now that you surprise me exceedingly by naming **me** with Lady Teazle-for, faith, I alway(s) understood **you** were her favourite. (IV.iii. 33-36).

Afraid of his own exposure, and anticipating Charles's directness and plain-dealing, Surface has to inform his brother that they have been eavesdropped by Sir Peter hidden in the closet, upon which Charles brings the latter out into the scene. Unexpectedly Lady Sneerwell is announced and Surface has to leave Sir Peter and Charles together, to go himself and get rid of the lady. In a dialogue between the two men, Sheridan skilfully prepares the audience for Surface's utter exposure. Sir Peter has been only partially disabused about the brothers; he no longer suspects Charles who has acquitted himself, but he still believes that Surface "is a man of sentiment," and that "there is nothing in the world so noble as a man of sentiment" (IV.iii.393-94). The dramatic irony is so biting at this stage of the scene that the audience are eager not only to enjoy the comic justice done Surface, but also to see Sir Peter disillusioned and recovered from his gullibility. It is in character that Sir Peter should be too impatient and curious to keep Surface's secret of the supposed French milliner; he cannot resist telling Charles that Surface had a girl with him when he called. Consequently Joseph Surface enters just at the most crucial moment as Charles throws down the screen:

Charles Surface: Lady Teazle! By all that is wonderful!

Sir Peter: Lady Teazle! By all that's horrible!

(IV.iii.426-27).

Being never at a loss, Surface invents a series of lies to justify the scene, lies which the Lady discredits. The whole truth is out, everybody is now seen in his or her true colour, and the hypocritical villain is utterly unmasked to all. Yet further torment still lies in store for the hypocrite, which must have been meant by the playwright to leave no doubt as to the relentless evil of social hypocrisy. Reference has already been made to the trial to which the brothers Surface have been subjected by their uncle Sir Oliver Surface in disguise.

Just before the screen scene takes place, Sheridan subjects Charles to a test in the auction scene where Charles, rather like a typical rake of the time, indulges in drinking, merry-making, and imprudence. He unreluctantly sells the family portraits, but will

never part with that of his uncle who has been good to him-an action that proves him to be honest, grateful, and benevolent. Finally Charles acquits himself well when he shows a tendency to be humane and generous to others declaring "... while I have, by heaven, i'll give" (IV.i.97).

This acquittance of Charles, already made prominent just prior to the screen scene, succeeds in preparing the audience for focusing their attention, with greater joy and deeper dramatic irony, on what would become of the other brother who must inevitably be utterly exposed. What actually happens during the screen scene itself, as has been analysed, provides further clarification of Charles's bluntness and honesty which are sharply juxtaposed with Surface's sophistication and malice.

It is appropriate structurally that Surface's turn in his uncle's test should come immediately after the screen scene. For the "man of sentiment" has proved himself to be not only treacherous to those who have entrusted him with their secrets, but also utterly incapable of any real, charitable act to anybody. When his uncle, Sir Oliver, comes in to examine him further, disguised as Mr. Stanley, Surface shows himself incapable of bestowing "even a benevolent sentiment" on him. To give nothing to the supposed poor relation of the family, he pretends to deride the avarice of the age and almost accuses his "uncle" himself of the vice! Thus the sentimental Surface is not above vicious scandalmongering and mean dissimulation.

In considering the satirical stance of Sheridan's **The School For Scandal**, it should be noted that his delineation of the character of Joseph Surface transcends the satirical technique of many Restoration dramatists who were usually satisfied with poking fun at mere social mores or deviations from the code of gentlemanly manners and conduct acceptable at the time. So long as such satire does not transcend the contemporary to the permanent, it will remain temporary in its range and limited in its appeal. Characters such as Witwoud and Petulant, in Congreve's **The Way of The World**, for instance, are made ridiculous because they ape the fashion in their pretending to wit and gallantry-two of the prime values in that age. Similarly, Sir Fopling Flutter, in Etherege's **The Man of Mode**, justifies his name in that he is all affectations and appearance. He is ridiculous in so far as he fails to play the game of love and social politenesses as competently as a true wit does.

In contrast, Sheridan manages, in his comic masterpiece, to make his satire as much broader than that as to take for its target transgressions against domestic and Christian virtue. For Surface's vice is a real threat to matrimonial fidelity and a disgrace to brotherly affection. Thus it recalls such stringent satires as Ben Jonson's **Volpone** where the title character, the fox himself, is motivated by greed of gain and covetousness. In each of these great plays the dramatist has chosen for the subject of his satire a clear deviation from human decency and Christian morality. The difference, however, lies in the light or heavy touch of satire each dramatist found appropriate to the needs of his audience and, perhaps, to his own temperament.

A considerable portion of the gentle, but dramatically effective, satire of Sheridan lies in the way the villain, or the unsympathetic figure, unwittingly procures his own ex-

posure while he thinks he is shrewdly making for his own welfare by intriguing against others. This also applies to Volpone's and Mosca's seemingly prosperous, but actually vain, endeavours. In both cases, again, the audience finds much pleasure in witnessing that process of the trickster being ultimately tricked, or the satirist satirized which recalls to one's mind what happens in **Hamlet**.

Having been terribly disillusioned in *Surface*, and indeed in all appearances generally, Sir Peter now curses *Surface* for what his name indicates, "a hypocritical villain," the world for "a damned wicked world," and anticipates his becoming "a standing jest for all one's acquaintances" (V.ii.245-46), and subject of paragraphs in scandalous newspapers. The disillusionment of Sir Peter, and the shame and repentance of Lady Teazle, are two appropriate developments seen in the aftermath of the unmasking of *Surface* in the screen scene. Seeing his own wife in tears, and urged by Sir Oliver *Surface* and *Rowly* to be reconciled with her, good-natured Sir Peter overcomes his chagrin and plans to live with his wife as "the happiest couple in the country" (V.ii.285).

In the final scene of **The School For Scandal**, Sheridan manages to round off the theme of scandal in a real hit of lashing satire permeated by ironic comedy. Lady Sneerwell and *Surface*, in an attempt to prevent the marriage of Charles and Maria, have contrived a little plot assisted by Snake who is lavishly paid to bear witness that Charles is contracted by vows and honour to Lady Sneerwell. When Charles and Maria are brought to join hands in marriage, Snake comes in, not to put the plot into effect and prevent the marriage as designed, but with a surprise, a counterplot:

Snake. I beg your ladyship ten thousand pardons-you paid me extremely liberally for the lie in question; but I have unfortunately been offered double to speak the truth. (V.iii.206-8).

Yet the mercenary Snake, who has betrayed the president of scandalmongers for more money, will have his only honest action kept secret because he has nothing but his infamy to depend on, or he should lose every friend he has in the world! This sinister defection of Snake, sarcastic as it is, is accompanied by another severe blow directed at the scandalous college, when Lady Teazle renounces her membership of this college. It is also revealing that the comedy ends with both *Surface* and Sneerwell, together with the other slanderers, still persistent in their wrong doing and error. No repentance seems probable or possible for them, although there is an element of pathos in the lady's case: a sense of the tragedy underlying life and man's condition typical of all great comedies.

Audience and readers are made aware of this deeper layer in the character of Sneerwell when she rebukes *Surface* for having been avaricious in his roguery, and for being only interested in his attempted attachment to Maria. In retort to his boasting of his own calmness at his and the lady's exposure, she comments:

Lady Sneerwell. Because the disappointment doesn't reach you **heart**; your **interest** only attached you to Maria. Had you felt for **her** what I have for that

ungrateful libertine (Charles), neither your temper nor hypocrisy could prevent your showing the sharpness of your vexation. (V.iii. 10-14).

It is in view of the presence or absence of such a "heart that feels for others" that the characters of **The School For Scandal** seem to have been categorized into sympathetic or unsympathetic ones. Joseph Surface is a man of false sentiments and nothing reaches his heart. He has a tongue merely ready with sweet, comforting, vain words. But when it comes to a real act of benevolence he is a complete failure. The playwright makes him condemn himself from his own mouth (V.i. 126-30).

If Joseph Surface is a hypocrite in a sentimental suit, as Professor Sichel perceives, it follows that "the real sentimentalist is Charles Surface" (Sichel, 1980:556). The latter is presented throughout the play as his elder brother's foil; he has a heart that feels, and a hand ready to give as long as it has. Illustrations have been given in the foregoing pages of the behaviour of this benevolent character, especially in both the "screen scene" and the "auction scene" where he acquits himself as one capable of affection and true and noble sentiments. It is these warm feelings that help Charles to gain the satisfaction of his uncle, who, therefore, makes him master of the family house instead of his elder brother, as well as to make his peace in his match with Maria. This theme of merit-rewarded is greatly responsible for the charge of sentimentalism that has often been levelled at the play and thus at the author himself. For though sentimentalism is satirized and ridiculed, mainly in the exposure of Surface, the fact remains that some critics have accused Sheridan of being rather sentimentally indulgent in his treatment of Charles and the Teazles.

Now there is many a character of Charles Surface's stamp in the late eighteenth century comedy, such as Honeywood in Goldsmith's **The Good Natured Man**, who is so excessively and foolishly benevolent that he presses on his own beloved the courtship of another man, ironically an impostor. The difference in treatment received by these two characters, in Sheridan and in Goldsmith respectively - a bit sentimental on the one hand and satirical on the other - can be justified on the ground that Sheridan's concern is for the juxtaposition of the moralities of the brothers Surface. For just as Ben Jonson did before him Sheridan wanted to mix profit with his audience's pleasure⁶. Indeed:

The playwright's task, in Sheridan's time, was to turn the comedy of manners into a vehicle of Addisonian didacticism (Schiller, 1956:704).

The elder brother has a smooth, winning tongue, but is the incarnation of vice in Christian terms, the younger is a dissipated libertine, but the embodiment of intrinsic virtue.

Again, Charles's acquittance at the end of the play can be justified on the ground that he represents a contemporary conventional type, acceptable to and recognized by the age. "The depiction in **The School For Scandal** of a benevolent man's triumph over a hypocrite," Professor Loftis argues, "illustrates a homely moral truth that was popular in the eighteenth century" (Loftis, 1977:96).

Nor is "the truthfulness of the heart and the falseness of the tongue" merely a homely moral truth peculiar to Sheridan's and Goldsmith's age. It is indeed a leading theme usually presented as a concomitant of the theme of appearance and reality. It receives a supreme dramatic illustration, for example, in Shakespeare's **King Lear** where both Lear and Gloucester are deceived by an appearance of ingratitude in children who are truthful and loyal, whereas they take for truth mere lies sugarcoated by the smooth tongues of their false children. In the final judgment of the opposition of moralities in the brothers Surface, it can be concluded that this theme does not only embody a homely truth sanctified by the time, but it also bears on human nature in general.

Similarly, the tolerance and even the sentimentality with which the Teazles are treated can be understood and justified. In Sheridan's **The School For Scandal**, Sir Peter is made a pleasant and respectable man throughout. His much younger wife, though quarrelsome and a bit coquettish at the beginning, is nevertheless brought back to her senses after the screen scene where she has gone through a bitter experience. Her fascination with the world of fashion, scandalmongering and vanity included, is transformed into disgust with the hypocrisy and malice of that world. When she is made to repent her dallying with the world of fashion, and is reconciled with her generous husband, she finally decides to live with him happily hereafter.

It should be born in mind that the upbringing of Lady Teazle has been in the country, whereas Mrs. Foresight in Congreve's **Love For Love**, is a woman-about-town. The latter's reputation and honour are a matter of appearance beyond which lurks a lecherous, hypocritical, and coarse nature. In Lady Teazle we have almost the contrary, namely a mask of amorous fashion concealing a good nature and a virtuous character. She will not admit Joseph Surface as a lover any further than fashion requires, a mere Platonic love, which will never go beyond appearance or advances (II.ii. 245-51). And when, at the end of the screen scene, he invents a series of lies to cover up for his dishonesty and malice, Lady Teazle exposes him and disabuses her husband in a manner that sharply contrasts with Mrs. Foresight's attempt - in liaison with Scandal - to cuckold her credulous husband even in this latter's presence. Yet, in **The School For Scandal**, as Professor Nicoll sees, the sentimental flavour is hardly for a moment felt, save in the concluding lines of the drama (Nicoll, 1966:161).

No less significant is the difference between the social and intellectual milieu of the later eighteenth century comedy on the one hand, and that of the older age about 80 or 90 years earlier on the other. The audience of this older age was largely drawn from the gentry who were generally amoral people. Since the amoral court patronized both the theatre and the playwrights, the comedy of the age had itself to be amoral. Its main concern was for fine manners, and social prime values such as wit, gallantry, good-breeding and social standing, rather than for morals. There was at that time a call for inquiry and experimentalism after the restrictive conditions of Cromwell's regime (Do-brée, 1966:20). This and other factors such as the freedom acquired by women at the time resulted in a disillusioned, if not cynical, attitude to human values and social institutions as love, marriage, friendship and religion.

But toward the end of the eighteenth century, a middle class audience had already been increasing with a gradual, concomitant change in taste, spirit, and values. The new stance against the "licence" of the comedy of the age was well expressed in the severe attack made by the Rev. Jeremy Collier in 1698.⁶ This change witnessed the gradual rise of the sentimental drama of the new age-where the ultimate end was apparently moral reform. Dramatists wrote sentimental comedies or domestic tragedies, as exemplified in the work of Steele and Addison, whose writings were mainly didactic, as witness their plays, as well as contemporary journals such as the **Tatler** and the **Spectator**. Indeed, "Both Steele and Addison were conscious moralists and did not disguise their intention of improving the minds, morals, and manners of their readers" (Monk/Lipking, 1979:2153).

Although Goldsmith and Sheridan stood stoutly against this genre of drama, it should be born in mind that these dramatists had to cater for the expectations and the demands of a bourgeois audience. Thus, the offences which Sheridan had to satirize were no longer against manners or decorum, but against Christian morality and domestic virtue.

Now in the moral atmosphere of **The School For Scandal**, Joseph Surface must be condemned as an evil, and therefore ridiculous, character. His brother Charles, being essentially good, deserves to be praised and rewarded with Maria's love and her hand in marriage. Similarly thanks to his patient forbearing of his wife's temper and bad manners, and to his tender feelings and benevolence, Sir Peter wins his wife's recognition and gratitude. As to Lady Teazle herself, she is rescued from being victimized by the slippery, fashionable world; she is made to see her folly, to repent and to be forgiven. In terms of her husband's and her own deeds and conduct, marriage is conceived as what it ideally should be-an elevated, respectable and sacramental relationship between man and wife, a concept which is in keeping with the contemporary Addisonian and Johnsonian didacticism.

Professor Schiller discerns the great change in the shift of sympathy from the great heroines of Restoration comedy to modest well-poised, rather sentimental young ladies as Lady Teazle and Maria, in later eighteenth century comedy. By 1777 this critic observes that the sympathy had been reversed:

Those who were of the caste which had in the former age been glorified in the persons of Millamant and Harriet were now figured forth as Lady Sneerwell and Mrs. Candour, symbols of depravity, before whom the middle-class members of the audience sat in righteousness (Schiller, 1956:702).

It can now be concluded that in spite of the indulgence shown to the Teazles in their incompatible marriage, to Sir Peter in his indiscretion, and to Charles in his dissipated way of life, the tone of the play is satirical and the comic spirit is corrective and benign. Writing about 50 years later than the production of the play, William Hazlitt ob-

serves that wonderful balance achieved by Sheridan between sentiment and satire, a balance which gives the play its special flavour and high status in world drama:

It professes a faith in the natural goodness as well as habitual depravity of human nature. While it strips off the mask of hypocrisy, it inspires a confidence between man and man. (Hazlitt, 1967:165).

This happy equilibrium in **The School For Scandal** between sentiment and satire can also be seen in dialogue. It was observed previously that the satirical wit of Sheridan's play differs from that of the comedy of the former age in that it is not used as an end in itself, but rather as a requisite of the illustration of themes or the delineation of characters. The excellent quality of the witty dialogue of the play was the most outstanding feature that fascinated the audience who attended its opening performances, as witness the records of the time (Jeffares, 1967:142).

It has been noted previously that the most delicate and sophisticated satire in the comedy falls on Surface for his hypocritical platitudes. One of the most satirical clichés uttered by him is his apology to "poor Mr. Stanley," his own uncle Oliver in disguise, for being unable to help him, "to pity, without the power to relieve, is still more painful than to ask and be denied" (V.i.106-7). The effect of a statement like this derives from the sharp contrast between the pretended affection of Surface and both Sir Oliver's as well as the audience's awareness of its falsehood, and hence the biting irony enjoyed by both. Such satirical hits permeate the brilliant dialogue whenever the sentimental Surface is involved.

Sir Peter, who is not equipped with Lady Sneerwell's penetration into Surface's conversational "turns" and "tactics," so to speak, is still taken in by them. He thinks that Surface's good heart misleads him into judging others by himself, and out comes Surface's:

Certainly, Sir Peter, the heart that is conscious of its own integrity is ever slow to credit another's treachery (IV.iii. 168-70).

Now the telling and harsh satire embodied in this cliché, which is typical of Surface's, lies in the fact that although the speaker alienates himself from treachery and involves his innocent brother in guilt, the spectators give him the lie for being himself the real seducer of the lady, whom he has already concealed behind the screen on her husband's arrival!

It is interesting to notice that almost all the sympathetic characters of **The School For Scandal** have not much to say as witty dialogue, which contrasts with the "true-wits" of Restoration comedy, whose witty conversation was considered one of the prime values of the age. "Unlike Congreve, who gives a conversational advantage to his true wits, Sheridan shows the superior merits of his sympathetic characters by their deeds" (Loftis, 1977:91). This means that the *raison d'être* of the wit of Restoration comedy is no longer there in Sheridan's comedy, save, perhaps, in the case of Lady Teazle where

the wit is never malicious or scandalous, but good-humoured, fresh, and delightful. It follows that characters like Sneerwell and the members of her college, albeit their polished and brilliant wit, only resemble such fops and fools of Restoration comedy as Lady Wishfort, Witwoud, and Tattle, whose wit is false.

In this study an attempt has been made to prove that **The School For Scandal** is a special case in the genre of comedy. It is a distinguished play which combines the best elements of the comedy of manners and wit of the older age with the moral and aesthetic values demanded by the later eighteenth century Georgian audience. Critics may object to the ambivalence of making scandalmongering, which is an object of ridicule, an attractive though satirical subject of wit. They may also find fault with the indulgence shown to some characters involved in the juxtaposition of the brothers Surface, or in the Teazles' plot. But the fact remains that the general tone of the play is satirical, that false sentiment is so ruthlessly exposed and ridiculed, especially in Joseph Surface, that slight sentimental touches pass unnoticed. Since no deliberate attempt is made in the comedy to exploit emotion, it can be maintained that its general tendency is anti-sentimental. The well-balanced interplay of sentiment and satire gives the play a distinction of its own. And so long as there are intelligent theatre-goers and perceptive readers, **The School For Scandal** will never cease to please.

Notes

1. For the sake of brevity and clarity, the family name may stand, throughout this paper, for Joseph Surface, the elder brother of Charles.
2. This and all subsequent quotations from **The School For Scandal** are from the "Macmillan's English Classics" - New Series, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London: St. Martin's Press, 1967).
3. Goldsmith, Oliver. **She Stoops to Conquer**, ed. A.C. Ward, (London: The Heritage of Literature Series, Longman, 1979), XXXiii.
4. Shakespeare, William. **Hamlet**, ed. George Rylands, (London: New Clarendon Shakespeare, Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 143:
 Let it work;
 For 'tis the sport to have the enginer
 Hoist with his own petar: and't shall go hard
 But I will delve one yard below their mines,
 And blow them at the moon (III.iv. 205-9).
5. In the Prologue to **Volpone** (or: **The Fox**), Jonson declares:
 This we were bid to credit from our poet,
 Whose true scope, if you would know it,
 In all his poems still hath this measure:
 To mix profit with your pleasure;
6. See Collier, Jeremy, "A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage," in **Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century**, 3 Vols., ed. J.E. Spingarn (O.U.P., 1957).

Bibliography

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| Auburn, Mark S. | Sheridan's Comedies: Their Contexts and Achievements. Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1977. |
| Brockett, Oscar G. | The Theatre: An Introduction , New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969. |

-
- Dobrée, Bonamy **Restoration Comedy (1660-1720)**. London: Oxford University Press, Rep. 1966.
- Hazlitt, William **Lectures on the English Comic Writers**. London: Dent & Sons Ltd., Everyman's Library, Rep. 1967.
- Hess-Lüttich, Erest W B. "Maxims of Maliciousness: Sheridan's School For Conversation," **Poetics 12**, North-Holland Publishing Company, 1982.
- Jeffares, A. Norman (ed.). **The School For Scandal**. London: Macmillan's English Classics, 1967.
- Knight, G.W. **The Golden Labyrinth**. London: Methuen, University Paperbacks, Rep. 1965.
- Loftis, John **Sheridan and the Drama of Georgian England**. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977.
- Monk, Samuel Holt and
Lipking, Lawrence "The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century (1660-1798)," in **The Norton Anthology of English Literature**, Vol. I. New York, London: Norton, Fourth Edition, Rep. 1979.
- Nicoll, Allardyce **A History of English Drama**, Vol. III., Late Eighteenth Century Drama, (1750-1800). Cambridge: The University Press, Rep. 1966.
- Phythian, B.A. **The Rivals, The School For Scandal, and The Critic**. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965.
- Schiller, Andrew "The School For Scandal: The Restoration Unrestored," **PMLA**, lxxi (1956).
- Sichel, Walter **Sheridan: From New And Original Material**, Vol. II. London: Constable and Company, Folcroft Library Editions, 1980.
-