

Educational Association

The Rivals: Irish Wit and the Cult of Sentiment

A Lecture by Dr. Richard Moore

Berwick Voluntary Centre, Tweed Street

2nd November 2018, 10 am to 1 pm



The Rivals was Sheridan's first play. It was roundly vilified for its length, its bawdiness and for the character of Sir Lucius O'Trigger. The actor, Lee, after being hit with an apple during the performance, stopped and addressed the audience, asking "By the pow'rs, is it *personal*? — is it me, or the matter?" Apparently, it was both. Nonetheless, after revisions the play became a triumphant success. In this session we shall examine the wit, the skill of construction and the satirical targets. We shall also peek into the incredible volatile world of 18th century theatre with its riots, its duels, its one-legged drunken impresarios, occasional murders and – not least – its iron railing meant to protect the actors from the audience.

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Sheridan was really driven to playwriting by his insistence that his wife Eliza must give up her profitable career as a singer. *The Rivals* – written when he was 23 – was meant to rescue them financially. Sheridan had over the years written and published essays and poems, but never before had he undertaken such an ambitious project.

The play was first performed at Covent Garden, on the 17th of January, 1775. Its initial failure depressed Sheridan but his response in a written Preface was a model of tact. Among other things he apologized for any impression that *O’Trigger* was intended as an insult to Ireland. Rewritten and with a new actor, Clinch, in the *O’Trigger* role, the play reopened on 28 January to significant acclaim. It then became a favourite of the royal family, receiving five command performances in ten years. It was also George Washington’s favourite play.

The piece is set in Bath, a town legendary for conspicuous consumption and an ideal setting for a range of eccentric and opinionated characters. The satirically treated romantic plot centres on the two young lovers, Lydia Languish and Jack Absolute, the latter pretending to be poor in response to Lydia’s fashionably whimsical conceptions of true romantic love.

Apart from Jack and Lydia, the most famous character is Mrs. Malaprop, a satirical treatment of the would-be educated woman whose antecedents we shall discuss. The other main satirical target is the Cult of Sentiment. This has no single source, but one key event was an account of the murder of Martha Ray, opera-singer and mistress of the Earl of Sandwich, by a young soldier and church minister. It was a late eighteenth-century sensation, detailed in *Love and Madness: A Story Too True*. The book is presented as the tale of a tortured sensibility driven to madness. It was in fact a compilation by Herbert Croft, a young Essex gentleman and lawyer, who spent most of his life trying to be a man of letters.

The other key interest (apart from the fabulous jokes) lies in the Sheridan family. Sheridan’s father was a great man of the theatre and an exponent of the fashionable interest in Oratory. During the session we shall both see play-excerpts and have a good look at the family background.

The cost of the lecture is £9 including refreshments. All are welcome and no previous knowledge is assumed.

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(*The Rivals*)