

Sources for *The School For Scandal*

Sheridan's big stage successes before *The School For Scandal* (1777) were *The Rivals* and *The Duenna* (both 1775). In many ways, *The School For Scandal* is a reply or a subversion of the ideas in those plays. It's worth comparing with either of them to see how his craft of staging developed in the intervening two years.

Sheridan attached a poem, *A Portrait*, to the edition of the script of *The School For Scandal*, addressed to his mistress Mrs Crewe. Themes in the play match a number of themes in the poem.

http://www.poetry-archive.com/s/a_portrait.html

It's also very likely that Sheridan also wrote the *Ode to the Genius of Scandal*, probably shortly after writing *The School For Scandal*. If it is not by him (it was published anonymously), it reflects that the ideas expressed in the play are common to the era.

<http://wiz2.cath.vt.edu/spenser/TextRecord.php?&action=GET&textsid=37884>

The supposed behaviour of young ladies in the country echoes some of the ideas in Alexander Pope's *Epistle to Miss Blount*, written sixty years before (1717).

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=180853>

To see a roughly contemporary (1782) story of scandal (frequently either sexual or financial), but with a more French twist, compare Pierre Choderlos de Laclos' *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, reasonably faithfully adapted into the film *Dangerous Liaisons* (and less faithfully into the teen-flick *Cruel Intentions*). While much more bitter and dark, it has the same bleak wit as *The School For Scandal*, and it shows how important scandal was for the upper classes on both sides of the Channel.

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To see an earlier story of an innocent wife from the country being corrupted by town life, see William Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, written during the much more permissive Restoration era, a century before *The School For Scandal*. The play had been cleansed of its smutty material by David Garrick in 1766 (eleven years before *The School For Scandal*) as *The Country Girl*.

<http://www.bibliomania.com/0/6/274/1876/frameset.html>

The play is heavily influenced by the eighteenth century Benevolist movement. Benevolism was an offshoot of Empiricism, and was quite influenced by philosophers such as David Hume, and influenced other works of the eighteenth century such as Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*. It held that human beings were essentially good and that, unless perverted by other desires, human beings had a natural propensity to do good. Charles and Sir Oliver Surface are the main exemplars of this view in the play, but you can see this theme in others.

One of the biggest themes in the play is that of "Sentiment". French novelists of the eighteenth century, such as Antoine-François Prévost, presented stories such as *Manon Lescaut* in 1731, in which a young seminary student of noble birth gives up everything for the love of a young and beautiful courtesan. The idea that love conquers all ran through the works of British authors Samuel Richardson (in *Pamela*, 1740), Laurence Sterne (*A Sentimental Journey*, 1768) and Henry Mackenzie (*The Man of Feeling*, 1771), and was satirized by writers such as Henry Fielding, in books such as *Shamela* (1741) & *Joseph Andrews* (1742).

The eighteenth century theatre was strongly influenced by the idea of "character" or "fixed identity", which we would probably define as static or archetypal. Many earlier plays (including some by Shakespeare) had their complexities written out, so that the characters would conform to prevailing stereotypes. While the idea of reform was possible, this had to be based on an inner sense of morality that was originally obscured, rather than a complete change in lifestyle and behaviour.

Throughout the play, Sheridan gives characters Jonsonian names, which explain and reflect their archetypal "characters". This practice is named after Ben Jonson (1572-1637), as the playwright who did it most often and most consistently in his comedies, though he was following the practice of the slightly earlier George Chapman (1559-1634), or even the example of the medieval 'Morality Plays' of the late 15th Century, which have archetypal characters with names such as Good Works, Mercy, Mischief, Newguise etc.

It's also worth noting that at various points in the play, Sheridan uses "I doubt" where a modern expression would be "I am afraid that". This can be confusing to a modern audience.

PROLOGUE:

Lady Wormwood, another fictitious character, has a name based on the bitter herb, source of the hallucinogenic drink absinthe, which is mentioned in the Jewish Bible, particularly in Jeremiah 9:15:

"Therefore thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Behold, I will feed them, even this people, with wormwood, and give them water of gall to drink"

And in the New Testament, Revelation 8:11, where it probably describes the devil:

"And the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter."

Don Quixote was the hero of Miguel Cervantes' picaresque novel of 1604-14: it told of a madman who fancied himself as a knight of old, and who went off to fight fictional creatures, while everyone around him mocked him. This was one of the classics of the Spanish Golden Age of Literature, and was widely read in Sheridan's time.

The prologue also references the Second Labour of Hercules, where the mythical son of Jupiter had to kill the Lernaean Hydra, a many-headed demon who, the moment one head was cut off, many others grew up in its place. Hercules killed it by placing a flame there, thus cauterising the wound.

ACT ONE SCENE ONE:

In the earliest productions, Snake was dressed all in black, a reference to the clergyman Henry Bate, editor of *The Morning Post*, a scandal sheet of the time.

The play is fascinated by class: Lady Sneerwell is the “widow of a City knight”: her husband was a merchant, knighted for financial services. This gives her a lower social status than the wife of a man like Sir Peter Teazle, who was born to wealth and landowning, and probably also to the Surfaces, even though they have spent all their money.

As the elder brother and presumed heir to the estates, Joseph is always referred to as Mr Surface, even in stage directions. Charles, as the younger brother, is always referred to by his first name.

The use of the words “lover” and “mistress” are confusing in a play that is, by modern standards, somewhat sexless. A “lover” was a term used for someone pursuing another, rather than a sexual partner; a “mistress” was the woman being pursued. Joseph later refers to himself as Lady Teazle’s “Platonic cicisbeo” (2:2:229), meaning an admirer of a married woman. By the standards of the previous century or even of an earlier generation, where plays (and Hogarth’s satirical pictures) about adultery and sex were commonplace, the eighteenth century regarded these as matters to be kept offstage. When one considers how much of high society was engaged in (high-profile and well-known) affairs, from the Prince of Wales, through Sheridan himself, to most of the actresses and actors onstage (Frances Abington, who first played Lady Teazle, had just been revealed in *Town & Country* to be having an affair with Lord Shelburne when the play opened), it seems slightly odd to us that none of this is apparent in the plays of the period.

Most of the scandal spread by Lady Sneerwell and Mrs Candour is either of financial ruin (mostly about gentlemen) and sexual impropriety (mostly about ladies). A gentleman’s reputation was based on his ability to pay (or at least to be able to get money to repay his debts). Men who could not repay their debts (such as the unfortunate Mr Stanley elsewhere in the play) could be imprisoned until they could.

Ladies (upper and upper middle class women) who got pregnant by men who were not their husband were “ruined” (and would often be forced into prostitution), so either had to marry someone who would agree to marry them (sometimes someone below their social station) or would have to have the baby in secret and have nothing more to do with it. *Tom Jones* by Henry Fielding (1749) deals with this situation in a comic way, whereas *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens (1852) deals with the potential grief of the situation.

Sir Benjamin's disdain for publishing his poetry, and therefore making money out of it, was an opinion shared by a number of upper-class poets (and possibly Sheridan himself), including Thomas Gray, author of *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1750), one of the most popular and well-known poems of the eighteenth Century, and later Lord Byron, who, despite being one of the best-selling poets of the early nineteenth century, and despite running out of money and credit on a number of occasions, thought it beneath him to make money from his poetry.

Sheridan himself claimed to have published two things during his lifetime, the script of *The Duenna* and one political pamphlet. It is probable, though, that this was more to save money and prevent his plays being pirated, rather than a hatred of making money professionally.

Crabtree compares the poems that Sir Benjamin will write to the *Laura* poems of Petrarch (1304-74) and the *Saccharissa* poems of Edmund Waller (1606-87). Petrarch, one of the fathers of renaissance poetry, wrote a series of sonnets in the Italian style about Laura di Nuove, a married woman of his acquaintance, often seen as the epitome of the unrequited love poem. It is not clear who Laura was (and some scholars have suggested she was merely a fiction to enable him to write love poetry) but the poems she inspired were one of the major sources of renaissance humanist attitude. Various translations of his *Canzoniere* are available in English, though they are still appreciable for their beauty in Italian, even for those who don't speak the language.

<http://poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Italian/Petrarchhome.htm>

Waller's poetry is less well regarded nowadays, but at the time it was regarded on a par with Petrarch's. His *Saccharissa* was a pen-name for Lady Dorothy Sidney, later Countess of Sunderland (see separate PDF). It is interesting that Crabtree's comparisons of Sir Benjamin's poems are with poets writing about ladies who have rejected them and married someone else.

Old Jewry is a street in the City of London, commonly associated with money-lending. While by no means the only people who lent money by the late eighteenth century, Jews were still considered to be the main source of unearned income. Traditionally, Christians had been forbidden by canon law from lending money at interest, but (as the play later shows with Mr Premium) many Christians did so by this time, and profitably.

Charles is compared to the Irish Tontine, a way of paying out an annuity based on the survivors among the people who put the original money in, a slightly (to our ears) gruesome form of the lottery. In the eighteenth century, however, a number of parliaments raised money in this way.

An early draft of the play was entitled "*The Slanderers*": many of the ideas for this seem to have remained in this scene (and others).

ACT ONE SCENE TWO:

Sir Oliver is referred to as "Old Noll" in this scene and others. On one level this is just a diminutive of "Oliver", but the most famous "Old Noll" was Oliver Cromwell, the Puritan "Lord Protector" of the previous century (and the man who had King Charles I executed). The Jonsonian name suggests Sir Oliver is a Puritan, though his behaviour suggests something else.

ACT TWO SCENE ONE:

The Pantheon in Oxford Street, opened in 1772, was a fashionable ballroom and fashionable place to meet. It's now used as a branch of Marks & Spencer.

The habit of reading collected sermons as being a country pursuit is also shown in Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice*, written between 1796 and 1813. Mr Collins, the tiresome clergyman who wishes to marry Elizabeth, entertains himself, and bores the Bennet family, by reading Oldcastle's *Sermons*, a surprisingly successful book of the time.

ACT TWO SCENE TWO:

A macaroni (or maccaroni) was a fashionable young man about town in the eighteenth century with European, outrageous and possibly androgynous dress-sense. Precursors of

today's metrosexuals, they had often picked up the affected styles, including enormous wigs and random use of Latin and Italian in their English sentences, from travels in Italy. The word derives from *maccherone*, meaning an Italian fool.

Maria is presented as being a moral (or possibly sentimental) woman, still in love with Charles despite his weaknesses, and not prepared to take part in the scandal-mongering. To see a character like this turned into the protagonist in a novel, see Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (written 1812-14), where Fanny Price is presented as being the hero, despite her puritan, condemnatory and somewhat drippy behaviour. Interestingly, in that book, the two antagonists are called Maria and Mary. Very possibly Austen had *The School For Scandal* in mind when writing *Mansfield Park*.

Joseph describes his seduction of Lady Teazle as "Politics". Sheridan was shortly to become involved in parliamentary politics himself, serving as MP for Stafford from 1780, as an agent for Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, and Charles James Fox, in the Whig Party.

ACT TWO SCENE THREE:

Sir Oliver attacks prudence (being sensible) in the young. In Benevolist philosophy, prudence was seen as being the enemy of generosity. In both *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews* by Henry Fielding, key Benevolist novels, the protagonists start off innocent but slowly learn to become more prudent. In doing so, they learn the ways of the world, and become more corrupted by it. Sir Oliver is espousing the opposite position, that it is good for young people to be generous rather than prudent.

ACT THREE SCENE ONE:

Sheridan himself, at the end of his political career, was arrested and imprisoned for debt. He had been kept afloat by his earnings from the theatre. However, towards the end of his running the Drury Lane Theatre, he was notorious for not paying staff properly.

Rowley quotes Henry IV's dying speech from *Henry IV Part Two* (see separate PDF), which is addressed to Hal's brother, Thomas of Clarence, as to why he is neglecting his brother. Hal, when Prince of Wales, spends a lot of both *Henry IV* plays drinking, gambling and whoring, before reforming and becoming a noble and holy King in *Henry V*.

Just before the first performance of *The School For Scandal*, a Tory candidate for City Chamberlain, Benjamin Hopkins, attempted to have the play refused a licence to perform, as he thought that the character of Moses was a deliberate attempt to smear him (he was rumoured to have lent money at exorbitant interest to minors): his rival was the Radical Whig John Wilkes, whom Sheridan supported. It is also possible that he was based on a real Jewish moneylender, Jacob Nathan Moses, who had lent money to one of the part-owners of the Drury Lane Theatre.

There are echoes of Moses' style of speech in Shylock's speech in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (Act One Scene Three). Is Sheridan reflecting how real Jews spoke or merely writing a "typical" Jewish character?

There is a famous picture by Zoffany of the actor Robert Baddeley as Moses. He was an actor who specialised in "foreign" characters, and may well have added extra foreign-sounding lines to his part.

The Annuity Bill mentioned was being passed as *The School For Scandal* first appeared: it meant that all debts had to be registered, limited the amount that moneylenders could charge, and made it illegal to lend to a minor (a man under 21) in hope of him inheriting his father's (or in this case uncle's) estates and money. Then, as now, moneylenders found ways around the law.

ACT THREE SCENE TWO:

Sir Oliver is a number of times described as "little": he was originally played by a short actor, Richard Yates.

ACT THREE SCENE THREE:

Charles was played by the Old Etonian, William “Gentleman” Smith, who specialised in playing upper class but slightly louche individuals. There is a painting of him by John Jackson.

The song “Let the Toast Pass” was a highlight of the play, and was specially recommended on playbills as being sung by Mr Vernon, a noted singer and Drury Lane actor. The music was by Thomas Linley, Sheridan’s father-in-law, and the song featured in *The Camp*, published in 1778.

The song is freely based on *The Health to the Nut-Brown Lass* by Sir John Suckling (1609-1642) from Act Three of his play *The Goblins* (1638).

ACT FOUR SCENE ONE:

Charles compares the portraits of his ancestors to those of “the modern Raphael”, Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792), who was famous (and sometimes ridiculed) for making his portraits idealised versions of people, rather than the “realism” on which the eighteenth century prided itself. Among those painted by Reynolds were Frances Abington (the first actress to play Lady Teazle) and George Colman (who wrote the epilogue to *The School For Scandal*).

John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough (1650-1722), was the most important and successful British General before the Duke of Wellington, hero of the War of Spanish Succession, though the Battle of Malplaquet (1709) was one of the least successful of his career and almost ended his career. Although the British and Dutch won against the Savoyards under Prince Eugene and General Villars, the French fought so fiercely that casualty figures were unacceptably high for the British. Despite his subsequent victory at Mons a month later, Marlborough’s career was essentially destroyed by the pyrrhic victory at Malplaquet.

Sir Godfrey Kneller (1646-1723) was principal portrait painter to the court of King Charles I, and painted, among others, Isaac Newton, members of the Kit-Kat Club and ten “beauties”

of the court of William III. While he painted many ladies in rural landscapes, he is not known to have painted any as shepherdesses.

It is possible that the portrait of great-aunt Deborah is supposed to be a veiled reference to Queen Marie Antoinette of France, of whom a number of portraits were painted as a shepherdess or as Little Bo Peep.

The reference to “when beaux wore wigs, and the ladies their own hair” is the opposite style to 1777, when gentlemen wore their own hair powdered, and ladies wore elaborate wigs.

The reference to the MPs’ “first time they were ever bought and sold” is almost certainly ironic: then as now, politicians were well-known to take bribes; indeed, it was for some the only way they could afford to stay in parliament. Sheridan, as an MP, always prided himself on not taking bribes. He ended his parliamentary career bankrupt.

Sir Oliver is referred to as a “Nabob”. This was the title of a manager of the East India Company. Samuel Foote (1720-1777) had written a successful satirical play *The Nabob* in 1772, mocking the pretensions of the middle and working-class men who had made lots of money in India by exploiting the natives, and tried to pass themselves off as gentlemen in London, but the term was still ambiguous enough for it to be used affectionately by Charles here. In 1785, the governor-general of the East India Company, Sir Warren Hastings, was tried on charges of oppression and corruption, which changed the popular view of the nabobs. A good book to look at the behaviour of nabobs in India at around this time is *White Mughals* by William Dalrymple, which is a fascinating history book in its own right.

ACT FOUR SCENE TWO:

“Birthday clothes” were the new (and fashionable) clothes worn at the start of the Season, at the King’s birthday.

ACT FOUR SCENE THREE:

Joseph accuses Lady Teazle of having a “country education”. The idea that the country is old-fashioned and retains moral and social attitudes rejected in the city persists to this day. See Wycherley’s *The Country Wife*, for other ideas about country educations.

Joseph was described by a contemporary reviewer (Walter Sichel) as an “Iago of Comedy”. It is worth comparing his denial of Charles’ affair (which makes Sir Peter even more certain of it) with Iago’s denial of Desdemona’s affair with Cassio in *Othello* Act Three Scene Three (see separate PDF), which plants the suggestion in Othello’s mind, which was not there before.

Joseph says he is “not an absolute Joseph”, picking up on two possible stories from the Bible (see separate PDF). The first is the story of the patriarch Joseph resisting the sexual attentions of his master Potiphar’s wife, for which she has him accused of attempted rape.

The second is the story of the Virgin Mary’s husband, who accepted her child as being from the Holy Spirit, and “knew her not” till she had given birth to Jesus. Each Joseph, unlike Joseph Surface, is described as being sexually continent. How much it is deliberate that Maria is given the same name as the Virgin Mary is unclear.

There is a lot about “honour” in this scene. In the eighteenth century, a husband was responsible for his wife’s conduct, so that any reprehensible behaviour on her part would reflect on his honour as well as hers.

ACT FIVE SCENE ONE:

Avadavats are a type of Amandava Finches, a very popular exotic present in the eighteenth century. Sheridan gave his first wife some Avadavats as a present, and wrote a mock elegy when one died.

Joseph compares the pure silver ore of charity with “the sentimental French plate” that he uses. Since the annual tax on household silver had been introduced in 1756, many people had their cutlery silver-plated so they appeared to be silver without necessitating paying tax.

ACT FIVE SCENE TWO:

Duelling for “honour” was taken very seriously in the eighteenth century: Sheridan himself fought two duels. If duelling took place within the environs of London and resulted in a death, the survivor could be hanged for murder.

ACT FIVE SCENE THE LAST (SCENE THREE):

“A.B. at the Coffee-house”: messages could be left for people at post restante addresses under their initials.

Sheridan himself assured his father (in 1772) that he intended to reform in sentiments very similar to the ones suggested by Charles. It was suggested by his father that, in many ways, Sheridan was a combination of Charles and Joseph.

EPILOGUE:

The idea of an epilogue was to comment on, or even criticise, the character that one of the leading actors had played.

George Colman the elder (1732-1794), the author of the epilogue, was a prominent playwright, especially for Drury Lane. His picture was painted by Joshua Reynolds.

Sheridan is described as a “virtuous bard” because his play upholds the sanctity of marriage, and Lady Teazle, by the end, rejects scandal. But he also wears the “motley Bayes” of the foolish poet.



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