

opinion of "The School for Scandal" than M. Taine.

An earlier critic, Villemain, who edited a close translation of the play for the series of foreign masterpieces, declared it to be one of the most amusing and most wittily-comic plays which can anywhere be seen, and he hit upon one of its undoubted merits when he pointed out that its "wit is so radically comic that it can be translated, which, as all know, is the most perilous trial for wit possible."

The Germans were not behind the French in the enjoyment of "The School for Scandal." Schröder, the actor and author, went from Vienna to England—no small journey a hundred years ago—expressly for the purpose of seeing it acted. He understood English well, and attended every performance of the piece while he was in England. On his return to Vienna, he produced an adaptation—for it is such, and not a translation, though the spirit of the original is well preserved—which has held the German stage ever since. Macready records himself as having seen in Venice an Italian version of the play—that by Carpani, probably—which could hardly have followed the original as closely as was to be desired, but the strength of the situations and the contrast of the characters would always carry the piece through in any language and in spite of any alterations. There are doubtless versions of "The School for Scandal"—translations or adaptations—in many other languages. It may be noted that the *Athenæum* has recently announced the due celebration of the hundredth anniversary of its original performance by the production of a Dutch version at the Hague.

VII.

A Dr. Watkins, who, in 1816, published an unnecessary biography of Sheridan, saw fit to insinuate therein that Sheridan was not the real author of "The School for Scandal," but that it was the composition of a young lady, daughter of a merchant in Thames street, who had left it with Sheridan for his judgment as a manager, "soon after which the fair writer, who was then in a state of decline, went to Bristol Hor-Wells, where she died."

Pope will know the type to which this Dr. Watkins belonged ("with him most authors steal their works or buy; Garth did not write his own 'Dispensary'"); and the story which Pope, as if by anticipation, crippled, Moore readily brought to ground by the publication of the earlier and inchoate suggestions from which Sheridan finally formed the finished play. With the evidence of these growing and gathering fragments before us, we can trace the inception of the idea, and the slow accretion by which it got rounded at last into its present complex symmetry. Moore fills page after page of his "Life of Sheridan" with extracts from the notes and drafts of two distinct plays—one containing the machinery of the scandalous college, to have been called possibly "The Slandereers," and the other setting before us the *Tartuffs* and the *Surfaces*. This latter was, perhaps, the two-act comedy which Sheridan announced to Mr. Linley, in 1775, as being in preparation for the stage. The gradual amalgamation of these two distinct plots, the growth of the happy thought of using the malevolent title-tattle of the first play as a background to set off the intrigues of the second, can be clearly traced in the extracts given by Moore. In the eyes of some small critics this revelation of Sheridan's laborious method of working, this exhibition of the chips of his workshop, has had a lowering effect on their opinion of Sheridan's ability. It is, perhaps, his own fault, for he affected laziness, and sought the reputation of an off-hand wit. But "The School for Scandal" is obviously not a spontaneous improvisation. It is not labored, for its author had the art to conceal art, but its symmetrical smoothness and perfect polish cost great labor. It did not spring full armed from the brain of Jove. Jove was a god, and mere mortals must cudgel their poor brains long years to bring forth wisdom. No masterpiece was ever dashed off hurriedly. The power of hard work and the willingness to take pains are among the attributes of highest genius. Balzac had them: he spent the whole of one long winter night on a single sentence. So had Sheridan: he told Ridgway, to whom he had sold the copyright of this very play, and who asked him for the manuscript again and again in vain, that he had been for nineteen years endeavoring to satisfy himself with the style of "The School for Scandal," but had not yet succeeded. A diamond of the first water, like this, is worth careful cutting—and even the chips are of value. Those given to the world by Moore are curious in themselves, independent of their use in disproving the charge of literary larceny preferred by Dr. Watkins.

Since the publication of these extracts, those who seek to discredit Sheridan's originality have shifted their ground, and content themselves with drawing attention to the singular similarity of *Joseph* and *Charles* to *Tom Jones* and *Blifil*. They also remark upon the likeness of the scandal-scene to the satirical episode of "Le Misanthrope," and on the likeness of *Joseph Surface* to *Tartuffe*. M. Taine, who seems sometimes to speak slightly of Sheridan, puts this accusation into most effective shape: "Sheridan took two characters from Fielding, *Blifil* and *Tom Jones*, two plays of Molière, 'Le Misanthrope' and 'Tartuffe,' and from his puissant materials, condensed with admirable cleverness, he has constructed the most brilliant firework imaginable."

A glance at the play itself will show this to be a most exaggerated statement. The use of Molière and Fielding is far slighter than alleged, and at most to what does it all amount? But little more than the outline and faint coloring of two characters and of a very few incidents. While the play could not exist without them, they are far from the most important. *Lady Teazle* and *Sir Peter*, the screen-scene and the auction-scene—these are what made the success of "The School for Scandal," and not what it may have derived from Fielding and Molière. Nor is this borrowing at all as extensive. *Joseph* is a hypocrite—so is *Tartuffe*, so is *Blifil*; but there are hypocrites and hypocrites, and the resemblance can scarcely be stretched much farther. The rather rustic and—if the word may be risked—vulgar *Tom Jones* is as unlike as may be to that light and easy gentleman. Yet it seems probable that Sheridan found in "Tom Jones" the first idea of the contrasted brothers of "The School for Scandal." Boaden has even seen the embryonic suggestion of the fall of the screen in the dropping of the rug in *Molly Seagrim's* room, discovering the philosopher *Squire*. Now, Sheridan had a marvelous power of assimilation. He extended a ready welcome to all floating seeds of thought, and in his fertile brain they would speedily spring up, bringing forth the best they could. But to evolve from the petty discomfiture of *Squire* the almost unequalled effect of the screen-scene—to see in the one the germs of the other—were a task worthy even of Sheridan's quick eye. (1) The indebtedness to Molière is even less than to Fielding. We may put on one side Sheridan's ignorance of French—for, in Colley Cibber's "Non-Juror," or in Bickerstaff's "Hypocrite," he could find Molière's *Tartuffe*, and the scandal-loving *Citizens* of "Le Misanthrope" he might trace in Wycherley's "Plain-Dealer." If Sheridan borrowed from Molière—an indictment difficult of proof—he was only following in the footsteps of his father, whose sole play, "Captain O'Blunder," is based on "Monsieur de Pourceaugnac." But Sheridan's indebtedness to Molière is barely visible. It is almost as slight, indeed, as the borrowing from "The School for Scandal" of which Madame de Girardin was guilty for her little comedy, "Lady Tartuffe." In any case, Sheridan's indebtedness is less to "Le Misanthrope" than to "Tartuffe"—and even here there is little resemblance beyond the generic likeness of all hypocrites. This resemblance, such as it is, the French adapters of "The School for Scandal" close to emphasize by calling their version, as has already been noted, the "Tartuffe des Meurs."

Although Sheridan is in general original in incident, he unhesitatingly made use of any happy phrases or effective locations which struck his fancy in the course of his readings. He willingly distilled the perfume from a predecessor's flower, or cut and set the gem an earlier writer may have brought to light. Witty himself, he could boldly conquer and annex the wit of others, sure to increase its value by his orderly government. *Sir Peter Teazle* does not hesitate to say, "A character dead at every word, I suppose!" because, for instance, there is in Pope's "Rape of the Lock"—

"At every word a reputation dies."

In like manner, the suggestion of the much-admired song in "The School for Scandal" is to be found in Sir John Suckling's play, "The Goblins." This can perhaps be justified on the ground that the rich can borrow with impunity; or, deeming with his patrimony, Sheridan may have felt that, taking it he was but come into his own again: as Molière said, "Je prends mon bien où je le trouve." In the preface to the "Rivals," however, Sheridan has chosen to meet the charge of plagiarism. "Faded ideas," he said, "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." It is a curious coincidence that this very passage is quoted by Burgoyne to explain his accidental adoption, in "The Heiress," of an image of Ariosto's and Rousseau's, which Byron did not scruple to use again in his monody on Sheridan himself:

"Sighing that Nature formed but one such man,
And broke the die—in moulding Sheridan."

VIII.

In "The School for Scandal" the construction, the ordering of the scenes, the development of the elaborate plot, is much better than in the comedies of any of Sheridan's contemporaries. A play in those days need not reveal a complete and self-contained plot. Great laxity of episode was not only permitted, but almost praised; and that Sheridan, with a subject which lent itself so readily to digression, should have limited himself as he did, show his exact appreciation of the source of dramatic effect. But it must be confessed that the construction of "The School for Scandal," when measured by our modern standards, seems a little loose—a little diffuse, perhaps. It shows the welding of the two distinct plots. There can hardly be seen in it the ruling of a dominant idea, subordinating all the parts to the effect of the whole. But, although the two original motives have

(1) It is to be remarked that, in spite of Fielding's comparative failure as a dramatist, his great novel had already furnished Colman with the idea of his "Jealous Wife." In France, where the novel was a great favorite, two consecutive five-act comedies had been cut out of it for the Comédie Française, besides a ballet for the Opéra. Let us imagine, if happily we can, "Tom Jones" (sic!) as a ballet!

been united mechanically, although they have not flowed and fused together in the hot spurt of homogenous inspiration, the joining has been so carefully concealed, and the whole structure has been overlaid with so much wit, that few people after seeing the play would care to complain. The wit is ceaseless; and wit like Sheridan's would cover sins of construction far greater than those of "The School for Scandal." It is "steeped in the very brine of conceit, and sparkles like salt in the fire."

In his conception of character Sheridan is a wit rather than a humorist. He creates character by a distinctly intellectual process; he does not bring it forth out of the depths, as it were, of his own being. His humor—fine and dry as it is—is the humor of the wit. He has little or none of the rich and juicy, nay, almost oily humor of Falstaff, for instance. His wit is the wit of common-sense, like Jerrold's or Sydney Smith's; it is not wit informed with imagination, like Shakespeare's wit. But this is only to say again that Sheridan is not one of the few world-wide and all-embracing geniuses. He is one of those almost equally few who in their own line, limited though it may be, are unsurpassed. It has been said that poets—among whom dramatists are entitled to stand—may be divided into three classes: those who can say one thing in one way; those who can say one thing in many ways—even these are far fewer than they would be generally reckoned; and those who can say many things in many ways—these are the chosen few, the scant half-dozen who hold the highest peak of Parnassus. In the front rank of the second class stands Sheridan. The thing he has to say is wit—and of this in all its forms he is master. His wit in general has a metallic smartness and a crystalline coldness; it rarely lifts us from the real to the ideal; and yet the whole comedy is in one sense at least, idealized; it bears, in fact, the resemblance to real life that a well-cut diamond has to a drop of water.

Yet, the play is not wholly cold. Sheridan's wit could be genial as well as icy—of which there could be no better proof than the success with which he has enlisted our sympathies for the characters of his comedy. *Sir Peter Teazle* is an old fool, who has married a young wife; but we are all glad when we see a prospect of his future happiness. *Lady Teazle* is flighty and foolish; and yet we cannot help but like her. *Charles* we all wish well; and as for *Joseph*, we feel from the first so sure of his ultimate discomfiture, that we are ready to let him off with the light punishment of exposure. There are, it is true, here and there blemishes to be detected on the general surface, an occasional hardness of feeling, an apparent lack, at times, of taste and delicacy—for instance, the blood-thirsty way in which the scandal-mongers pounce on their prey, the almost brutal expression by *Lady Teazle* of her willingness to be a widow, the ironical speech of *Charles* after the fall of the screen; but these are perhaps more the fault of the age than of the author. That Sheridan's wit ran away with him is greatly to be regretted. That in the course of his constant polishing of the play he should not have seen these blots is only another instance of the blindness with which an author is at times afflicted when he dwells long on one work.

IX.

The great defect of "The School for Scandal"—the one thing which shows the difference between a comic writer of the type of Sheridan and a great dramatist like Shakespeare—is the unvarying wit of the characters. And not only are the characters all witty, but they all talk alike. Their wit is Sheridan's wit, which is very good wit indeed; but it is Sheridan's own, and not *Sir Peter Teazle's*, or *Buckbitch's*, or *Careless's*, or *Lady Sincerwell's*. It is one man in his time playing many parts. It is the one voice always; though the hands be the hands of Esau, the voice is the voice of Jacob. And this quick wit and ready repartee are not confined to the ladies and gentlemen; the master is no better off than the man, and *Careless* airs the same wit as *Charles*. As Sheridan said in "The Critic," he was "not for making slavish distinctions in a free country, and giving all the fine language to the upper sort of people." Now, no doubt the characters do all talk too well; the comedy would be far less entertaining if they did not. The stage is not life, and it is not meant to be; it has certain conventions on the acceptance of which hangs its existence; a mere transcript of ordinary talk would be insufferable. We meet bores enough in the world—let the theatre, at least, be free from them; and, therefore, conversation is necessary, and selection and a heightening and brightening of talk. No doubt Sheridan pushed this license to the utmost limit—at times even beyond it—but in consequence his comedy, if a little less artistic in the reading, is far more lively in the acting. It has been said that in Shakespeare we find not the language we would use in the situations, but the language we should wish to use—that we should talk so if we could. We cannot all of us be as witty as the characters of "The School for Scandal," but who of us would not be if he could!

Wit of this kind is not to be had without labor. Because Sheridan sometimes borrowed, it does not follow that he was incapable of originating; or, because he always prepared when possible, that he was incapable of impromptu. But he believed in doing his best on all occasions. If caught unawares, his natural wit was ready; if, however, he had time for pre-

paration, he spared no pains. He grudged no labor. He was willing to beat and hammer again and again—to file, and polish, and adjust, and oil, until the delicate machinery ran smoothly, and to the satisfaction even of his fastidious eye. As he himself said in two lines of "Clio's Protest," published in 1771—a couplet often credited to Rogers—

"You write with ease, to show your breeding,
But easy writing's curst hard reading."

"The School for Scandal" was not easy writing then, and it is not hard reading now. Not content with a wealth of wit alone—for he did not hold with the old maxim which says that jests, like salt, should be used sparingly—he salted with a lavish hand, and his plays have perhaps been preserved to us by this Attic salt—he sought the utmost refinement of language. An accomplished speaker himself, he smoothed every sentence until it ran trippingly on the tongue. His dialogue is easy to speak as his songs are easy to sing. To add in any way to the lustre and brilliance of the slightest sentence of "The School for Scandal," to burnish a bit of dialogue, or brighten a soliloquy, could never cost Sheridan, lazy though he was, too much labor. "This kind of writing," as M. Taine says, "artificial and condensed as the satires of La Bruyère, is like a cut vial, into which the author has distilled, without reservation, all his reflections, his reading, his understanding." That this is true of Sheridan is obvious. In "The School for Scandal" he has done the best he could; he put into it all he had in him; it is the complete expression of his genius: beyond it he could not go.

Michael Kelly, hearing that Sheridan had told the queen he had a new comedy in preparation, said to him, "You will never write again. You are afraid to write."—"I am afraid?" asked Sheridan; "and of whom?" And Kelly retorted quickly, "You are afraid of the author of 'The School for Scandal.'"

THE GLEANER.

THERE are twelve miles of shelving for the books in the British Museum.

No Polish landowner in Russia is allowed to entertain more than five guests in his house at a time.

DR. SCHLIEMANN says that the extent of ancient Troy, as encompassed by its walls, is but very small, and that it cannot possibly have contained more than four thousand or five thousand inhabitants.

THE largest contributor to the British revenue, and the man for whom Sir Stafford Northcote ought to feel the most unbounded affection, is Mr. Bass. His firm pays just about 1,000/ for every working day of the year—over 300,000/ per annum. In fact, it is Bass & Co. who find the Chancellor of the Exchequer with this year's surplus.

It is said to be a fact in the history of silver production that wherever in any part of the world silver mines have been worked, they are worked now, unless arrested for some explainable cause. The mines of the Andes have been worked for three centuries, those of old Spain from the Middle Ages, and are in working condition now. In Hungary the same mines worked by the Romans before the birth of Christ still yield their steady increase. Those of Freiberg in Saxony, worked from the eleventh century, know no diminution.

MUSICAL AND DRAMATIC.

MR. TENNYSON, it is said, proposes to write another historical drama.

MRS. MARY CLEMMER says the new play by Mark Twain and Bret Harte is too full of bad puns and "talkee talkee."

MR. SIMS REEVES has obtained splendid terms for Australia. £20,000—"ten thousand down"—and expenses, for one hundred concerts. The proximate departure of the favourite vocalist surrounds with peculiar interest the brief season of English Opera which will presently be inaugurated at the Haymarket by him and a specially-engaged company.

HERR RIETZ, the Costa of Berlin, was a short time back rehearsing the *Meistersinger*, one of Wagner's masterpieces, when, after going through pages and pages of discordant noise, he reached the song of "Walter." He at once stopped the orchestra, with the observation, "Gentlemen, this sounds like music, so there must be something wrong."

A VERY droll yet business-like arrangement exists with respect to presents of jewellery made to artists by the Emperor of Russia. The singer or dancer may keep the glittering baubles if he or she chooses; but, if preference is given to solid pudding over shining stone, the trinkets may be taken confidentially to the Treasury of the St. Petersburg Hermitage, where the jewels are exchanged for cash, a moderate commission being charged for the transaction.

DION BOUICAULT tells this story of a brother actor: "A great many years ago, longer than I like to remember, I went to Philadelphia to try one of my pieces, 'Jessie Brown,' at one of the theatres. A small actor was cast for a very small part, that of *Achmet*, I believe. He had only six lines to speak, and he took the stage and spoke them like a tragedian. I called him down and said, 'Here, young man, you're not playing *Othello*.' 'I know I ain't,' he replied, 'but I will some day'—and then walked off muttering something about punching my head. His prediction has come true. That bad *Achmet* but good *Othello*, was John McCullough."

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