Chapter VI

'MAN OF SENTIMENT UNMASKED':
THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL
The Rivals, discussed in the previous chapter, has "a broad, solid basis in the laughing tradition". Satire upon contemporary manners, especially on the sentimental fashion, is found in abundance in the play. "The only rival to its fame" in the theatre was staged two years later when The School for Scandal was presented at Drury Lane on 8th May, 1777. It was a sensation, and extraordinarily successful even from its first performance, unlike The Rivals, and has remained popular ever since. It was carefully prepared, and "was the product of a long gestation and involved its creator in much hard work". The newspaper critics of the day were warm in their praise. The Morning Chronicle, for instance, "admired the satire on detraction and hypocrisy ‘which are the prevailing vices of times’", and praised the play for conducting the fable well. The Morning Post admired it for its wit and elegance of the dialogue. There were, surely, severer critics too but they were hardly heard in the general applause of the day. It has often been called ‘the last great English comedy’. Whether it is or not, it is "certainly the last significant comedy of Sheridan and his age".

In the critical tradition that has grown up about The School for Scandal since Sheridan’s own times, three approaches to it may be discerned. One line of interpretation, initiated by John Pinkerton in 1785, sees the play as ‘reviving’ the style of Congreve, though the characters are weak and keep ‘blundering upon sentiment’. Charles Lamb perhaps meant more or less the same thing when he said in his famous essay, "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century" in The Essays of Elia, that ‘This comedy grew out of Congreve and Wycherley, but gathered some allays of the sentimental comedy which followed theirs’. Writing about the same time William Hazlitt took a different view of the play. He described it as "a genteel comedy", a term which connoted ‘sentimental’ or at least ‘moral’. One is reminded of Goldsmith in his attack on sentimental comedy calling it ‘genteel’. A third view holds that the play combines Congreve’s brilliant dialogue
with the plot line of Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, but that it is constrained by
the 'sentimental decorum' of the day. However, most critics seem to agree that in
*The School for Scandal*, Restoration and sentimental influences are mingled.
Bevis remarks that the play is "professedly and basically a laughing comedy but
has sentimental elements that are something of an interpretative problem".6

It may be said straightaway that *The School for Scandal* is not a
sentimental comedy and that Sheridan continues his attack against it in this play
too. As always, he "enjoys a joke at the expense of the sentimental school".7
Further, the play is something more than a simple attack on 'sentiment', narrowly
understood, and covers a wider range. But before these statements are
substantiated, the play's resemblances to Restoration comedy and the comedies
of Sheridan's own times may be briefly noted. Summing up the possible influences
on Sheridan, Bevis has justly said: "Many influences, from Plautus and Terence
to Foote and Murphy, may be discerned in Sheridan's comedy; those of the
Restoration are simply the latest ... ".8 Like most dramatists, especially writers of
comedies, Sheridan too has "drawn freely from literary tradition".9

Sheridan knew and admired the plays of Congreve which he produced in
his theatre. It is in his dialogue that he resembles this and other comic dramatists
of the late seventeenth century. Frequently Congreve's *The Way of the World* and
*The School for Scandal* are compared because of their resemblance to each
other in wit dialogue. And Sheridan's play, like Goldsmith's *She Stoops to
Conquer*, has better sustained dialogue than any other comedy of the times. But
in his work wit in general does not take the same place or have the same nature
it has in Congreve's work. For instance, Congreve gives conversational advantage
to his true wits, and he regards conversation as one of the highest arts of
civilization (e.g. *The Way of the World*). In Sheridan conversational ability is often
placed at the service of the malicious and hypocritical. The superior merit of his sympathetic characters is shown by their deeds rather than their wit. Thematically, in its preoccupation with slander, and unceasing and conversational exposure of malicious gossip, *The School for Scandal* is closer to Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer*. But that is not to say that Sheridan planned his play with Wycherley's play in mind.

That *The School for Scandal* derives from the Georgian comic tradition may be seen from its resemblances to the comedies of Sheridan's own times, notwithstanding its links with the plays of Congreve, Vanbrugh and Wycherley. Reasonably close parallels are seen between it and Arthur Murphy's *Know Your Own Mind*, which was produced a few weeks before Sheridan's play. In its satirical dimensions, Murphy's play is said to anticipate Sheridan's. In both plays "the courtships are carried on against a choral background of scandalmongering and in opposition to the intrigues of the malicious. And one of the malicious characters, Malvil, resembles Joseph Surface in personality as also in his role in the play".10 Parallels are seen between Miss Neville of Murphy's play and Maria, and between the two sets of opposed brothers. The story of the Teazles is said to approximate to the 'Bashful Constant' plot in *The Way to Keep Him*, another of Murphy's plays.11 Among the other eighteenth-century parallels, is the plot of a benevolent incognito relative (Sir Oliver Surface plot), which is found in Foote's *The Author* (1757), *The Good-Natured Man*, and *The West Indian*. The benevolent man's triumph over a hypocrite was a homely moral truth popular in the eighteenth century. So was the story (which served as the vehicle in the comedy) of "two rivals, the one dissolute but possessing the gift of charity and the other superficially decorous but in fact malignant, competing for a prize which is love and fortune".12 Fielding's novel *Tom Jones* was the most famous version of it, and the resemblance of Sheridan's play to this novel is inescapable. The 'man of feeling'
and the 'man of sentiment' are ubiquitous characters in eighteenth-century literature. Thus *The School for Scandal* is very much a Georgian mainpiece, "a child of the eighteenth-century comic tradition, not a throwback merely because it also resembles its grandparents."\(^{13}\)

To interpret the sentimental elements present in *The School for Scandal* and Sheridan's attitude to them, it is necessary to know how he uses the term 'sentiment' and its adjectival form 'sentimental' in this play. Sheridan uses them "ironically" in this play, as is clear from the opening scene itself. Lady Sneerwell, who presides over the school for scandal and trains those who come to her in the horrid art of scandalmongering, sums up Joseph Surface to Snake thus: 'I have found him out a long time since. I know him to be artful, selfish and malicious - in short a sentimental knave. While with ---- all his acquaintance, he passes for a youthful miracle of prudence, good sense, and benevolence.' (Act I, sc.1) (emphasis added). Throughout the play such 'sentimentalism', which is another name for hypocrisy and double-dealing, is set in opposition to good-nature and benevolence. Joseph's brother, Charles, in contrast, is honest, open and has a good heart and basic human benevolence. Sheridan focuses attention on episodes that illustrate the presence or absence of good nature and benevolence in his characters. He also explores their responsiveness to the distresses of others, but without being overemphatic in depicting situations of emotional intensity. As Loftis points out, Sheridan is "singularly free" from an excessive indulgence in emotion for its own sake or "a wilful exploitation of emotion,"\(^{14}\) which is very characteristic of sentimental writers.

There are several plot lines or motifs in *The School for Scandal*: the scandalmongering of the fashionable society presided over by Lady Sneerwell, the marital dissatisfaction of the Teazles, the competitive courtship of the Surface
brothers Joseph and Charles for the love of Maria, and Sir Oliver Surface's testing of the integrity of his nephews, to 'make some trial of their dispositions'. There is a view that the plot structure of the play is loose and that there is insufficient causal relationship among the different lines. For instance, it is contended that virtually all the characters of the scandal plot (Snake, Mrs. Candour, Sir Benjamin Backbite, Crabtree, and even Lady Sneerwell herself), who are of minor importance in terms of plot are given disproportionate time and that some of them accomplish nothing. Further, according to Andrew Schiller, "the scandal plot and the Teazle plot never (achieve) --- a final integration. The fact is that scandal has nothing to do with the outcome of the Teazle problem".15

In point of fact, those of Lady Sneerwell's circle are not peripheral or minor. They draw all the main characters to them at one time or another and have their harmful effect even upon those such as Maria and Sir Peter who detest scandalmongering. Maria's detestation of malicious gossip is explicit: "I'll not debate how far scandal may be allowable; but in a man --- it is always contemptible. We have pride, envy, rivalship, and a thousand motives to depreciate each other; but the male slanderer must have the cowardice of a woman before he can traduce one" (I.i). In an apprehensive and expressive aside Sir Peter, who visits Lady Sneerwell's 'school' reluctantly, tells the audience: 'Mercy on me, here is the whole set! a character dead at every word,' (II.2). That even Lady Teazle, who is wholly bred in the country, becomes enthusiastically involved in the scandal club, is proof of the infectious power of scandal to reach every kind of life. Joseph Surface is at the heart of the school as its most prominent member, and his brother Charles, though not seen anywhere near it, is a favourite topic for its members to discuss and comment upon. Though Charles makes his appearance only in Act.III, he is already a familiar figure to the audience, thanks to Lady Sneerwell and her associates. Sir Peter's prejudiced view of Charles is arrived at
by his listening too much to the scandals circulated against him. This is despite his contempt for scandalmongers. As Loftis remarks, "if the chatter of Lady Sneerwell's circle fails to advance the action, it provides information about the relationship between the brothers Surface and the Teazle family and conveys a sense of the moral environment in which they live."\(^6\)

The importance as well as the priority of the scandal scenes in the play is emphasised by Sheridan's dedicatory poem to Mrs. Crew and Garrick's "Prologue". What makes scandal dangerous is that it is spread by delighted consent, and can be both taught and learnt. The play opens with Lady Sneerwell conducting "a kind of tutorial, checking on Snake's completion of his assignments",\(^7\) feeling apparently satisfied with his performance. It ends with the defeat of scandalmongers, though for the time being only. Lady Sneerwell attracts people to her salon as to a centre of excellence in this dangerous art where they can practice and perform before experts. The scandal group, thus, provides a sort of frame within which the drama is unfolded. Sheridan's satirical laughter is mainly directed against his clearly defined targets, namely, those who illustrate the forms assumed by malicious hypocrisy. The scandal scenes in the play recur like a thematic refrain. Thus the scandal motif gives the play a thematic unity.

In \textit{The Rivals} Sheridan's attack is directed unambiguously against "The goddess of the woeful countenance/The sentimental Muse" ['Prologue']. In \textit{The School for Scandal} the attack takes a slightly different form and is aimed at the "man of sentiment", a euphemism for a hypocrite, a malicious man, and a dissembler, who conceals his true nature under falsely moral or noble sentiments. For Sheridan and for Murphy, 'sentiment' and 'sensibility' are the "cant terms of hypocrites, the verbal camouflage of malice".\(^8\) Sheridan's critique of 'sentiment' and 'the man of sentiment' in the play is projected through the Joseph-Charles
plot. This plot, which consists mainly of the rivalry between the brothers for Maria’s hand, is one of the strands—nevertheless an important one at that—in the play, and presented not in isolation but in the context and against the background of the fashionable activity of scandalmongering and maligning the reputation of people. Discrediting ‘sentimentalism’, is not the sole objective of the play. Sentimentalism is "only an ingredient in the rich source of Sheridan’s satire. He gives us the quintessence of a scandal-loving society, its brilliantly lacquered veneer, its less lovely basic substance".".

As Katherine Worth remarks, "‘Surface’, the key name in the play, is the key to its interpretation. It is a comedy about the difficulty of getting at the truth of things, the case with which people can be deluded by the false surfaces". It may not be far-fetched to suggest that the play works in its own limited way within the narrow confines of a comedy, that perennial Shakespearean theme of the dichotomy between appearance and reality, shadow and substance. Neither brother is what he seems on the surface. The rivalry between them provides a convenient frame for projecting this theme in dramatic terms. The conclusion of the play may be seen as the unmasking of the supposed man of virtue and benevolence who is actually a man of malice, and the revelation of the basic virtue of the man reputed to be dissolute and profligate.

The rivalry between the Surface brothers - and the contrast between them - is established in the opening scene of the play, significantly in the environs of the scandal college of Lady Sneerwell in the course of the conversation between her and Joseph. They are rivals for Maria, a ward of Sir Peter and an heiress. While Charles loves Maria who too loves him, Joseph is interested, by his own admission in the heiress (IV.3). In the eyes of the world, he is the man of "sentiment", "a youthful miracle of prudence, good sense, and benevolence", whereas Charles is
"the most dissipated and extravagant young fellow in the Kingdom, without friends or character" (I.1). Lady Sneerwell, however, has been able to see through Joseph for what he is: "artful, selfish and malicious - in short, a sentimental knave" (I.1). For her 'sentiment' means hypocrisy. She has no patience with his mouthing in her presence moralistic platitudes and sentiments, which he can do with great ease as if they have become second nature to him. When affecting sympathy for his brother 'notwithstanding his vices', he begins to speak sententiously - 'the man who does not share in the distresses of a brother, even though merited by his own conduct ----' she cuts him short with a cynical comment, 'O Lud! you are going to be moral, and forget that you are among friends' (I.1). With matching cynicism he says that he will keep that sentiment till he sees Sir Peter Teazle. Like one of Samuel Footo's puppets he is a sentimental machine to be turned on or off as the occasion requires. He is free with sentiments in the presence of Sir Benjamin Backbite, Mrs Candour, Crabtree, the reticent Maria, the unsuspecting Sir Peter, and the supposed Stanley whose identity he does not know as yet. For a few samples of his pietistic platitudes: 'to smile at the jest which plants a thorn in another's breast is to become a principal in the mischief' (in the presence of Maria); 'the heart that is conscious of its own integrity is ever slow to credit another's treachery' (to Sir Peter); 'he that is in distress, though a stranger, has a right to claim kindred with the wealthy' (to Stanley); 'to pity, without the power to relieve, is still more painful than to ask and be denied'. These and others illustrate what a past master of 'sentiment' is Joseph Surface.

Lady Sneerwell has no illusions about Joseph. But they choose to be in league with each other to serve mutual interests and selfish ends. Scandal is their most powerful weapon. Lady Sneerwell is in love with Charles, despite his being 'bankrupt in fortune and reputation' and therefore is anxious to thwart his love for Maria and hers for him. To serve this end she joins hands with Joseph because
rivals his brother in gaining Maria. Together they malign Charles’ reputation consistently. Between the two Joseph is the worse, because the Lady has at least the justification of passionate love for Charles.

Next to Charles, in spreading scandals against whom he has played no mean part, Sir Peter is the most affected by his perfidy and artful scheming, both hidden behind a veneer of sensibility. Taken in by his ‘surface’ of virtue and honesty, credulous Sir Peter continues to believe until as late as Act.V that "Joseph is indeed a man of sentiment and acts up to the sentiments he professes" (I.2). But as Lady Sneerwell tells Snake, the truth about him is, “with the assistance of his sentiment and hypocrisy he has brought Sir Peter entirely into his interest with regard to Maria” (I.1). However even she does not know that he does not hesitate ‘to employ his conventional art to seduce’ Lady Teazle although his sexual plans upon her do not consummate - as a part of his scheme to use his hold on her to gain Maria. Of course, Joseph is allowed to speak in a soliloquy after his awkward triangular scene with Lady Teazle and Maria in defence of himself and his motives in cultivating the Lady because he senses that his insinuation has had its effect on her:

A curious dilemma, truly, my politics may have run me into! I wanted, at first, only to ingratiate myself with Lady Teazle, that she might not be my enemy with Maria; and I have, I don’t know how, become her serious lover. Sincerely I begin to wish I had never made such a point of gaining so good a character, for it has led me into so many cursed rogueries that I doubt I shall be exposed at last (II.2).
True, Joseph is candid and ruefully admits to himself (and to the audience) his puzzlement at his finding himself Lady Teazle's 'serious lover', while he intended no more than ingratiating himself with her to further his cause with Maria.

This candour of Joseph's may be "appealing", despite the 'rogueries'. But if he really meant a fraction of his admission, there should have been some change in his conduct towards Lady Teazle or at least an expression of honest regret. Instead in the famous screen scene (Act.IV sc.3) the calculating seducer is busier than before, smoothly assuring Lady Teazle, who is vexed by the scandals spread against her by her friends and by the baseless suspicions of her husband, that there is nothing wrong of she were 'to give him reason for it': "When a husband entertains a groundless suspicion of his wife, and withdraws his confidence from her, the original compact is broken, and she owes it to the honour of her sex to endeavour to outwit him". (IV.3). It is the sudden entry of Sir Peter that saves her, who was almost likely to yield. In this scene things hot up for Joseph with the unexpected entry first of Sir Peter, whom he hides in the closet since Lady Teazle has already been hidden behind the screen, and then of Charles. Before the scene closes he is unmasked and the truth about him is revealed to the Teazles. His mask as a man of sentiment is irrevocably shattered and he stands exposed as a 'Sentimental Knave' as Lady Sneerwell described him in the opening scene. The aplomb, with which he conducts himself through one crises after another, may compel one's admiration. But it cannot hide the villainy of his intentions. It is quite characteristic of him that he follows Sir Peter out trying to mollify him, mouthing a sentiment.

In spite of being unmasked and his hypocrisy and villainy exposed, disowned and openly denounced by Sir Oliver Surface, Joseph does not admit defeat or give up hope. He refuses to capitulate. Along with Lady Sneerwell he
makes a last-ditch attempt to ruin Charles's chances with Maria by means of fabricated letters supposedly written by Charles to Lady Sneerwell contracting himself by vows and honour to her. Even this fails as Snake the witness turns against them. And Joseph "exits from the final scene exposed and humbled but still endeavouring to preserve his public persona, holding a few rags of rhetoric around him, to cover his nakedness".\(^{22}\) He cannot shed his hypocrisy even at this stage. It is uppermost as he struggles to tell a convincing story about his being 'confounded' by discovering Lady Sneerwell's treachery. This sentimental man of gravity pretends to feel a concern for his brother's safety and follows Lady Sneerwell 'lest her revengeful spirit should prompt her to injure my brother' (V.3).

Charles Surface is a much less complex character than his brother, though not simplicity itself. He seems to resemble considerably those characters of sentimental comedy whom Goldsmith some years earlier had lambasted in his "Essay on the Theatre". As Goldsmith characterises them, they are "good", "exceedingly generous", "lavish" with their money; they have abundant "sentiment and feeling" but are wanting in humour; if they have faults and foibles, not only are they to be pardoned but applauded "in consideration of the goodness of their heart, so that folly instead of being ridiculed, is commended".\(^{23}\) One may be tempted to see Charles in this mould or fit him into it, if an exception is made of 'humour' which he happens to have in abundance. A closer look at his character is necessary to see whether he is no more than an eighteenth-century stereotype criticised by Goldsmith, a mere sentimental, benevolent character. He is to be judged by what he says and does in the play, rather than by what others say about him.

Unlike his brother Joseph, who is present from the very start of the play, Charles makes his first ever personal appearance only in Act III, scene 3, when
it is half way through. That seems rather strange to keep him out of the audience’s view for such a long time, since practically everyone, especially those of Lady Sneerwell’s circle of gossip, is talking about him or discussing him. He seems to be their favourite topic, and provides the grist to their mill of fashionable talk. But for Maria who is in love with him, Rowley who has complete faith in his basic goodness, and is confident that he would mend his errant ways, and Sir Oliver Surface, his uncle, who is sympathetically disposed towards him but would like to test his integrity before coming to a conclusion about him, all the others are either prejudiced against him, such being the impact of gossip, or hostile to him, the most hostile being Joseph. The collective opinion of this circle of scandalmongers is that Charles is dissolute, bankrupt, recklessly extravagant, and totally devoid of all principles. In short, he is without character, is a disgrace to his family, and does not have any redeeming quality. His delayed appearance in the play seems to have been designed deliberately to show how influential scandalmongering can be, and also to test how susceptible the audience themselves are to the impact of loose talk, since they have only a hearsay knowledge of Charles. Therefore it becomes all the more obligatory for them to be alert and to form their own judgment on the basis of their firsthand knowledge of him, from the time of his appearance.

Charles’s very first appearance in the midst of a drinking bout in the company of his friends seems to confirm rather than contradict his reputation and the image the scandal circle has assiduously built up for him. He appears as reckless, irresponsible, and dissolute as one could be. To Mr. Premium (Sir Oliver in disguise) who is supposed to have come to lend him money he says rather bluntly:
Mr. Premium, the plain state of the matter is this: I am an extravagant young fellow who wants to borrow money; you I take to be a prudent old fellow, who has got money to lend. I am blockhead enough to give fifty per cent sooner than not have it; and you, I presume, are rogue enough to take a hundred if you can get it. Now, Sir, you see are acquainted at once, and may proceed to business without further ceremony (III.3).

He has already sold away 'a great quantity of massy old plate' and the family library too. No wonder that Sir Oliver finds his nephew's house 'the temple of dissipation' (III.2). He is further exasperated by his readiness to sell away the family portraits. Maria's love for him against odds and Rowley's loyalty and unflinching faith in his essential virtue, seem hardly equal to offset the established image of dissipation. However one would have noticed a certain frankness and plainspeaking even in his recklessness.

Charles's redemptive qualities begin to appear from the auction scene onwards. To be sure, Sir Oliver is deeply disconcerted by his nonchalant disposal of the portraits of his ancestors as well as his casual way of referring to them. But he is touched by his determined refusal to sell his uncle Oliver's portrait: 'I'll not part with poor Noll. The old fellow has been very good to me, and, egad, I'll keep his picture while I've a room to put it in' (IV.1). Notwithstanding his vanity tickled, Sir Oliver is touched by Charles's sense of gratitude and expression of feeling. That he has an unstrung purse, and an open benevolent heart which is susceptible to the distresses and woes of others, is evidenced by his sending at once a hundred pounds from out of the money got by selling the portraits, to the poor
ation, old Stanley who has applied to him for help. Rowley's words of caution cit the reply: 'poor Stanley's wants are pressing, and if you don't make haste, shall have some one call that has a better right to the money' (IV.i). It is clearly expression of his benevolent and charitable heart, and one is apt to warm to n. But the context shows that this generosity is linked with the swindling of desmen. To Charles the just rights of his creditors do not matter before the eds of the poor relation :- 'Justice is an old lame hobbling beldame, and I can't t her to keep pace with Generosity for the soul of me'. On this remark of his itherine Worth makes the following pertinent observation: "It is candid- and he generous-but are candour and generosity enough? Goldsmith had raised similar estions with Honeywood, another "extravagant fellow" (as Charles describes nself). Sheridan leaves it to the audience to decide, but he points to a possible k between Charles's obduracy over settling his debts and his faintly complacent ceptance of his self-image". Neither dramatist would endorse the imprudent id reckless benevolence of his hero.

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remark, directed against Joseph's morals, because when there was a time when Lady Teazle seemed to take a fancy for him, he did not take advantage of it. It is to be noted that Sir Peter and Lady Teazle are not offended by the remarks he has made on them, unaware of their presence in the room. Having thrown down the screen and unwittingly helped the Teazles to recognise themselves, and shattering Joseph's image as a man of sentiment, Charles "with an amused and suave urbanity" goes out leaving "the other three to sort out their problems".25

Charles shows himself as a true man of feeling, and his benevolence, however imprudent, is spontaneous and not intended to please any one in particular. He gaily eschews fine sentiments and profession of morals, and shuns consistently the gossiping and scandalmongering circle, unlike Joseph who is very much at the centre of it. When this scapgrace reforms and decides to turn a new leaf, there are no wordy expressions of contrition, no emotional and lengthy speeches for forgiveness. When Sir Peter says that Rowley always said that he would reform, he replies: "Why as to reforming, Sir Peter, I'll make no promises, and that I take to be a proof that I intend to set about it". Giving all the credit to Maria for the change in him he adds, "But here shall be my monitor-my gentle guide- Ah! can I leave the virtuous path those eyes illumine?" (V.3). Equally brief is his expression of love for Maria. Significantly, there is no taint of money in their love. Had there a been a separate scene in the play for their benefit, one could be sure that they would have exhibited the same restraint. It is characteristic of them that they do not go into ecstasies when their wishes are fulfilled. Even Charles's expression of gratitude to Rowley, who has been a sort of guardian angel to him and his advocate in an atmosphere vitiated by gossip and scandal, is very brief: "Rowley, my old friend.... I suspect that I owe you much". (V.3).
There is nothing falsely delicate about Charles. He is a very warm and lively person, his liveliness deriving not only from his charm, frankness and easy urbanity but the gusto with which conducts his profligate existence (III.3, IV.i). He prosecutes his benevolence with such animal vigour that it gets him out of trouble as well as into it. In portraying him Sheridan celebrates the good heart and the good impulse. In his robustness he resembles Tom Jones and Belcour the West Indian. With such a character the play could have become a sentimental comedy. But Sheridan avoids it "by skirting opportunities for pathetic distress, heavy moralising, of any serious attempt at reforming Charles". In the auction scene, for instance, the maudlin and sentimental possibilities of the situation are averted by Charles's unwitting flattery of Sir Oliver which comically tickles him. Therefore he cannot be a sentimental character.

However appealing the warmth of Charles's characterisation may prove, Sheridan balances his engaging and admirable qualities with serious failings that accompany them. It goes without saying that Charles is not presented as a paragon of unflawed virtue. The wisdom of his benevolence, though spontaneous and selfless, is doubted. The fruition of his love for Maria is not viewed as a reward for his benevolence, as it would have been if Sheridan were writing a sentimental comedy. Furthermore, considerable stress is laid on his profligate mode of life. Again and again, heads shake with sadness, contempt or glee over his extravagance and dissipation. Even those who are in love with him and vie with each other to win him over, Lady Sneerwell and Maria, admit to his vices (I.i, III.i, V.iii). Even Rowley, his constant defender and the play's voice of good sense talks of his 'Folly and Dissipation' (III.1), which are amply in evidence in the drinking and auction scenes. While rousing the audience's sympathy for Charles, and admiration for some of his qualities and his superiority over Joseph, Sheridan at the same time, rouses in them "a limited but significant disquiet about him".
The benevolent incognito relative, dear to many eighteenth-century comedies, finds an important place in *The School for Scandal* in the person of Sir Oliver Surface, uncle of the Surface brothers. As noted already Sir Oliver recalls at once Sir William Honeywood of *The Good-Natured Man* and Stockwell of *The West Indian* and others. Sheridan's handling of this stock character, the benevolent relative, is distinct from the handling of similar characters by Cumberland and other writers of sentimental comedies, and forms a part of his attack on sentimentalism in this play. Like his counterparts in other comedies Sir Oliver wants to test his nephews, remaining unrecognised. He is predisposed very much in favour of Charles even before he has met him, and does not want to be influenced by the malicious gossip against him: "...if Charles has done nothing false or mean, I shall compound for his extravagance" (II.3). In contrast, he has enough reservations about Joseph to express the view that he does not have "merit enough to deserve" enemies. Sir Oliver makes the most unqualified demolition of Joseph's sentiments. In sharp reaction to Sir Peter's observation that it is "edification to hear him (i.e. Joseph) converse; he professes the noblest sentiments", he says, "Oh, plague of his sentiments! If he salutes me with a scrap of morality in his mouth, I shall be sick directly". This comment of his "illuminates not only his own character but his function in the play as a kind of touchstone".

Sir Oliver is a bluff uncomplicated figure whose trial of his nephews is made rather amusing than serious. True, he is irritated almost beyond control by the ways of Charles, his extravagance, and his 'selling off' the portraits of his ancestors "like old tapestry". But yet all is forgiven, because Sir Oliver's vanity is amusingly, though unwittingly, flattered, by his nephew who refuses to sell and, hold on to 'the ill-looking little fellow over the settee'. He repeats "But he wouldn't sell my picture!" as a chant. It is his vanity that looms large here rather than
Charles's convincing demonstration of his capacity for good feeling, without any intention to impress (because he does not know who Mr. Premium really is). Sheridan, as noted already, saves the situation from becoming sentimental by making it deliberately comic. Sir Oliver's impersonation of Stanley the poor relative, surely, exposes the lack of charity and gratitude in Joseph. But it is somewhat redundant because a comprehensive judgment has already been passed on him in the screen scene.

The Teazles contribute their share to the attack on sentiment in the play, as victims of Joseph's machinations and labyrinthine hypocrisy. Both are naive and simple, and lend themselves to be trifled with by those of Lady Sneerwell's group, and exploited by Joseph to his advantage. Sir Peter is a great respecter of 'sentiments' and finds it a 'great edification', to listen to the man who 'professes the noblest sentiments'. Lady Teazle has no particular regard for Joseph's 'sentiments', and even makes a mildly ironical reference to them ('what sentiment in soliloquy now?', IV.3). But having got into the circle of Lady Sneerwell, she acquires all of its expensive and fashionable habits including scandalmongering. To be in the fashion she admits Joseph as her lover, but, as she tells him, "no further than fashion requires" (II.2). Marital dissatisfaction partly due to the great disparity of age between herself and Sir Peter, his jealousy over Charles' supposed dalliance with her which is eagerly fed by the scandalmongers, and the current fashion, all make her vulnerable to the deceitful tricks of Joseph who uses her to serve his own selfish ends and makes subtle insinuating suggestions to her. However both the Teazles are saved from further disaster by a set of unexpected circumstances in the screen scene. With Charles's putting away of the screen behind which Lady Teazle has taken refuge, the barriers between truth and falsehood, appearance and reality are removed. The truth about Joseph the man of sentiment forces itself on the Teazles. Sir Peter in particular is shocked out of
his blind faith in Joseph so that later when Rowley tends to speak in a sentimental way, he cries from his heart, "Hold, Master Rowley! if you have any regard for me, never let me hear you utter anything like a sentiment: I have had enough of them to serve the rest of my life" (V-2).

Lady Teazle is saved from compromising herself by accident, which proves yet more beneficial. For she overhears from behind the screen the conversation between Sir Peter and Joseph and discovers that her husband is as good-natured as she thought he was when he courted her, and that he voluntarily has made generous provision for her financial security, because he feels a genuine concern for her happiness. Providing substantially for his wife is Sir Peter's way of attesting his love for her. Morwood makes the perceptive observation that "Sheridan uses money as an index of character and feeling. Joseph ... is interested not in Maria but in her fortune... Charles's character is revealed largely through his attitude to money".29 Lady Teazle's repentance is genuine, because she discovers Sir Peter's love for her as well as the enormous harm she has done to herself by going after the scandalmongers. Her repentance and change of heart is not sentimental, though such reform is a characteristic of many a sentimental comedy. For one thing she has not altogether lost the moral principles that guided her in the country. The magnanimity of Sir Peter helps her to understand her folly and helps her to resolve to amend her conduct. Therefore her reform shows the growth of character in particular circumstances. Noteworthily Sheridan makes her regret and repentance brief, and free from emotional excess. Equally restrained is Sir Peter's forgiveness.

**The School for Scandal**, it should be obvious by now, is far from being a bland and sentimental fable, despite the presence of some sentimental elements. Its dramatic satire is directed against ever recurrent human malice, malignancy,
hypocrisy and the like which manifest themselves in the form of seemingly harmless enjoyable but actually dangerous scandalmongering. The play differs from other and similar attempts to attack sentimentalism in that it clearly recognises the two faces of sentiment, true and false: sentiment as a mask or camouflage for certain harmful and dangerous propensities which could make life both miserable and tragic, and sentiment as true benevolence and sensitivity to the distresses of others. Sheridan presents them within the framework of a laughing comedy, drawing largely upon the conventions and devices of the comedies of his times.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


6. Ibid., p. 221.


10. Loftis, p.94.


12. Loftis, p.96.


16. Loftis, p.86.

17. Katherine Worth, p.140.

18. Loftis, p.94.


22. Ibid.,


25. Morwood, p.82.


27. Morwood, p.73.

28. Ibid., p.73.

29. Ibid., p.75.