Chapter -VII

'THE SISTER MUSES' IN SHERIDAN'S AFTERPIECE  THE CRITIC
Written as an afterpiece, though rather long for this purpose, *The Critic; or A Tragedy Rehearsed* was produced by Sheridan at Drury Lane in October 1779, as a pendant to *Hamlet*, the main fare of the evening. It is regarded not only as Sheridan's last important contribution to the laughing tradition of drama, but that it "ended a twenty-year boom in comedy".\(^1\) It is a stage burlesque, entertaining, vivacious, funny, witty, farcical and satirical. It demonstrates once again that Sheridan is a master of burlesque. The inspiration for writing *The Critic* came to him from two sources, literary and political, both relating mainly to current developments in the country. In Sheridan's handling, there is a difference between these two aspects. In burlesquing the current conventions and practices in drama he implicitly raises certain recurrent issues, though his immediate targets of attack are the comedy and tragedy of his times. The political issues raised and made fun of are mainly topical.

For the purposes of the present study, which is concerned with Sheridan's attack on sentimentalism and sentimental comedy in his plays, the political aspect of *The Critic* is of secondary importance. Therefore it may be briefly referred to first. Sheridan was always interested in politics, and it is well known that after writing *The Critic*, he virtually left the theatre to become an active politician and member of parliament. It was his general conviction that it was better to keep politics out of the theatre. He is reported to have said in a speech in the House of Commons, that 'he deemed a theatre no fit place for politics'.\(^2\) But in *The Critic* perhaps he felt it obligatory to accommodate politics because the political situation in the country in 1779 was critical. There were widespread fears of an imminent invasion of England by the joint fleets of Spain and France. An Armada spirit was abroad. The theatres reacted to the political situation. In June at Sadler's Wells was presented "a very successful patriotic piece on the Armada theme, *The Prophesy, or Queen Elizabeth at Tilbury*".\(^3\) However by October the scare had
subsided, and the people were inclined to laugh at their earlier patriotic excesses. Once again the theatres responded to the situation. Covent Garden satirised the panic of the summer with a farce called Plymouth in an Uproar on 20th October. Ten days later the rival theatre Drury Lane, matching the mood of the moment, staged Sheridan’s The Critic. Puff’s tragedy, The Spanish Armada, which is rehearsed in Acts II and III in The Critic is "a comically misconceived conglomeration of romantic love and patriotic excess". Patriotic bombast is laughed at without undermining patriotic feelings, and along with it with equal gusto literary bombast too is ridiculed through the rehearsal of Puff’s play.⁴

Though The Critic was born of political and theatrical consciousness, it seems likely that "as first conceived the play was simply a satire upon certain tendencies in the theatrical tradition of the later eighteenth century".⁵ The "Prologue" by Sheridan’s friend Hon. Richard Fitzpatrick has little politics as such in it except the politics of the theatre. More particularly, it gives the impression that the play is about the rival claims of the ‘sister Muses’ of Tragedy and Comedy. Act One is mainly preoccupied with comedy and Acts Two and Three with tragedy. Within its brief compass the "Prologue" compares Restoration drama and Georgian drama. This fact supports the view that Sheridan’s original intention was literary rather than political in writing The Critic. It has been surmised that "it was Covent Garden’s farce Plymouth in an Uproar that encouraged him to extend the play"⁶ to include the rehearsal of Puff’s tragedy, The Spanish Armada, combining thereby both literary and political interests.

"Stage burlesques, often in the form of mock rehearsals, had been popular since the Renaissance".⁷ The literary ancestry of The Critic is traced back to Francis Beaumont’s The Knight of the Burning Pestle (1608). But it was the Duke of Buckingham’s The Rehearsal (1671), in which John Dryden is ridiculed
in the person of John Bayes at a rehearsal of his laughable heroic play, "that provided Sheridan and his predecessors with their most influential model". The "Prologue" to The Critic directly refers to 'Villiers' (i.e. Buckingham) who criticised what 'Dryden writ'. There were other forbears to Sheridan's play, the better-known among them being Fielding's Tom Thumb or The Tragedy of Tragedies (1730), Garrick's A Peep Behind the Curtain, "in which a ridiculous comic opera is guyed", and the elder George Colman's New Brooms! (1776). Sheridan seems to have, according to V.C.Clinton-Baddeley, 'helped himself deliberately to everything of value in the burlesque tradition'. In Pope's poem An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot Loftis sees "the most illuminating antecedent of The Critic--- in non-dramatic literature". "Like the poem, the play is a famous and influential writer's satirical commentary on the difficulties of his position, including a defense of himself against detractors, and it is an exposition of his convictions of his art."  

The Critic is a series of incidents rather than a play with an organised plot. It might even seem that it is two plays rather than one: Act I in which chiefly Sir Fretful Plagiary is made fun of, forming a little comedy in itself, and Acts II and III in which Puff's tragedy The Spanish Armada is rehearsed forming a second play. But in actual fact, together they constitute one whole in that the vigorous and pervading spirit of burlesque operating throughout on contemporary drama, tired old dramatic conventions and practices, stale set-pieces of authors and actors' cliches, holds all the parts and scenes of the play together.

"The play provides", as Bevis points out, "abundant satire of sentimental conventions". However, Sheridan's ridiculing of sentimental comedy is largely limited to Act I, which is directed against comedy. His main target of attack in The Critic is post-Restoration tragedy "whose absurdities from the leading question to the lingering stage death are brilliantly parodied". Act I opens with the Dangles
at breakfast, reading newspapers. "The domestic world, so familiar on the stage to eighteenth-century audiences, especially with a bickering husband and wife, reaches out by means of the newspapers they are reading to the political and theatrical world beyond."¹³ Dangle hates all politics except theatrical politics. He claims to be a connoisseur of the theatre. Actually he is a pathetic theatrical hanger-on. Mrs. Dangle who naively accepts the alarmist hysteria created by newspapers, reproves him for it as well as his lack of patriotism. She even taunts him that he has no business to 'affect the character of a critic' while everyone knows him to be no more than a theatrical 'Quidnunc, and a mock Maecenas' (that is, a gossip and a false patron of arts). Further, if the French were to land the next day, his first question to them would be 'whether they had brought a theatrical troop with them' (¹.i). This caustic remark hits at once at his want of patriotism as well as the French theatre which influenced English sentimental drama of the century.

With the arrival of Mr. Sneer the general conversation becomes particular, includes observations on the nature of comedy and for a time focuses on 'genteel comedy'. In fact his conversation with the Dangles pricks 'genteel comedy' (written in 'the true sentimental'), the 'school of morality', the social problem play, and even the prudish, 'bungling reformation' of Vanbrugh and Congreve that Sheridan himself had performed.¹⁴ Sneer has brought with him 'two pieces', one of them written by a 'person of consequence', 'a genteel comedy', 'the true sentimental, and nothing ridiculous in it from the beginning to the end', and the other written by a particular friend of Sneer's, also 'a comedy on a very new plan, replete with wit and mirth, yet of a most serious moral' (Act I.1). He wants Dangle to exert his influence on the managers of the playhouses to accept one of them. These two plays may be taken as referring in general to the whole genre of sentimental comedy which had taken the place of the laughing wit of Resotation comedy. The
issue had already been raised in the "Prologue" to the play by Fitzpatrick. He contends that the comedy of the previous century, in spite of all its merits had its 'failings' and it used 'sometimes in mirthful moments' 'a style too flippant' to be acceptable to 'female modesty'. Therefore it needed reform. However, the reformation undertaken 'in our pious, and far chaster times' 'to extremes has run'. As a result Thalia the muse of comedy, 'once so ill-behaved and rude, / Reformed, is now become an arrant prude; / Retailing nightly to the Yawning pit / The purest morals, undefiled by wit'. Patently, Fitzpatrick has in mind sentimental comedy. It may be assumed that his regret that the reaction against the permissiveness of Restoration comedy has been rather excessive is shared by Sheridan too. In conversation he is said to have blamed himself for spoiling Vanbrugh's play The Relapse by bowdlerising it.15 In The Critic he has a dig even at himself, when Dangle, sharply reacting against the view of sneer that at least in 'the two houses in the capital' the conversation is 'always moral', is made to say that the worst change is in the debilitating 'nicety of the audience': 'No double-entendre, no smart innuendo admitted; even Vanbrugh and Congreve obliged to undergo a bungling reformation!' (I.i).

The occasion for discussing sentimental comedy, however briefly, is provided as noted already, by Sneer's bringing with him two plays for Dangle's recommendation. As his name itself hints, Sneer is no respecter of persons or their views and is in fact contemptuous of almost everyone. He is somewhat of a 'humour' character. He seems to seek Dangle's views about the plays he has brought with him more to amuse himself than accept them. His sardonic attitude is apparent in his agreeing with both Mrs. Dangle and Dangle who hold opposed views about sentimental comedy. Mrs. Dangle, who is no friend of the stage, however has no objection to 'pieces' if 'some edification' can be got from them, as from sentimental comedies. Endorsing her view and elaborating further on it
Sneer says: ‘the theatre, in proper hands, might certainly be made the school of morality; but now, I am sorry to say it, people seem to go there principally for their entertainment!’ (l. i). This remark is clearly an echo of what Sir George Winworth says in Hugh Kelly’s *False Delicacy* (1768). It is significant that it is Sneer who echoes it, who obviously is laughing up his sleeve at Mrs. Dangle and her views. Sneer’s echoing Winworth’s summary remark, as Loftis observes, “may be taken as an objection to a theory of comedy made popular by Steele early in the century.”

Not suspecting that Sneer is actually amused by her views, Mrs. Dangle assumes that he is supporting her, and goes on to deplore that the theatrical managers provide mere ‘entertainment’ rather than ‘morality’ in their fare. When Dangle, who claims to be a critic, condemns this view of comedy and protests against ‘the nicety of the audience’ and the hypocritical moralisation of the plays, Sneer agrees with him too, amused as before, and likens the prudence of the audience to ‘the artificial bashfulness of a courtesan’. How shaky and uncertain Dangle’s judgment of comedy is revealed when he readily approves of the other comedy brought by Sneer ‘written on a new plan’ replete with wit and mirth, yet of a most serious ‘moral!’. This comedy, which is called *The Reformed Housebreaker*, seems to combine mirth and humour with the reform motif characteristic of sentimental comedy. There is something more to it too. Sneer says that this particular friend of his who authored this new comedy has also ‘discovered that the follies and foibles of society are subjects unworthy the notice of the comic muse, who should be taught to stoop only to the greater vices and blacker crimes of humanity - gibbeting capital offences in five acts’ and that ‘petty larcenies’ are better left to two-act plays (that is, afterpieces) (l. i). In this statement one may detect Sheridan’s total disapproval not only of introducing tragic or potentially tragic elements into comedy, but also of disregarding follies and foibles
of society which have always provided the stuff of comedy. Goldsmith would have endorsed Sheridan's protest, as he too was opposed to the confounding of genres.

Sheridan, just a little later in the same scene, again laughingly expresses his disapproval of the mixing up of genres, through Sir Fretful Plagiary, who is introduced to the scene shortly. When it is suggested to him by Sneer that he could have sent his tragedy to Drury Lane where it might have been better cast, Sir Fretful expresses the fear that the manager of that theatre who is himself a playwright may steal thoughts from his play and make them his own. What is more, 'a dexterous plagiarist may do anything. Why, sir, for aught I know, he might take out some of the best things in my tragedy, and put them into his own comedy' (1.i). Sheridan here is not only recalling the charges of plagiarism brought against him frequently, but is conveying his objection to the mixing up of genres, which was a familiar practice of the writers of sentimental comedies. Goldsmith too was opposed to such mixing up of genres. In The Critic, he makes fun of the comedy of woeful countenance in general rather than single out any particular comedy for attack. In ridiculing them, he is indirectly defending his own practice as a writer of comedies.

Again in Act III scene 1, in which the rehearsal of Puff's tragedy The Spanish Armada continues, Sheridan seizes another opportunity to ridicule yet another tired dramatic device of sentimental comedies. Puff has an underplot for his tragedy, which, by his own admission, ends 'as happy as a farce', but has 'as little connection with the main-plot as possible'. He takes pride that in the sub-plot the Justice and the two clownish constables 'talk in as high a style as the first hero among them', because he does not believe in 'making slavish distinctions, and giving all the fine language to the upper sort of people'. (III.1) Characteristically, Dangle admires Puff for it. One may recall the Bailiffs' scene in Goldsmith's The
Good-Natured Man which was found fault with because it was 'low'; and therefore improper in drama. Sheridan's mockery is however, more particularly directed in the sub-plot against the stock device of mistaken relationships, recognition and reunion resorted to by many a sentimental dramatist. In this farcical scene the Justice and his Lady recognise in Tom Jenkins, the young prisoner, their long lost son. The prisoner however believes that he is an orphan, and knows nothing about his parentage except that he has heard that his father was a 'fishmonger' and dwelt in 'Rochester'. This slender piece of information is enough to clinch the issue, and there is an ecstatically joyous reunion. It is rendered thus in the play:

Justice : No orphan, nor without a friend art thou-I am thy father; here's thy mother; there Thy uncle-this thy first cousin, and those are all your near relations!

Lady : O ecstasy of bliss!

Son : O most unlook'd for happiness!

Justice : O wonderful event! [They faint alternately in each other's arms] (III.ii).

Stanley Ayling points out that "Here Sheridan (is) mocking quite explicitly a passage in Richard Cumberland's The West Indian."17

In fact, Richard Cumberland is one of the specific targets of Sheridan's satire in The Critic. He is the prototype for Sir Fretful Plagiary. Cumberland was Goldsmith's target too, and he had defended sentimental comedies against Goldsmith's attack. Sheridan himself "admitted" that the portrait of Sir Fretful Plagiary was "based on the dramatist and critic, Richard Cumberland, who had abused him in the St. James's Chronicle."18 And the audience had no difficulty
in identifying Sir Fretful with Cumberland. The actor William Parsons, who played the part, seems to have dressed like Cumberland and imitated his mannerisms and facial expressions, thereby thwarting Sheridan's "apparent intention to avoid a blunt attack on Cumberland." Notwithstanding the autobiographical element and the personalised satire in it, Sir Fretful's portrait is generalised enough to be applied to "the envious author of any period or even to Sheridan himself." Some five years earlier Goldsmith too in his "Retaliation" had caricatured Cumberland, but his attack was directed specifically against Cumberland the writer of the weeping sentimental comedies. But Sheridan directs his attack on the writer of tragedies rather than of comedies, but for the only recognisable reference to *The West Indian* in Act III as noted above.

Sir Fretful becomes an easy prey for Dangle and Sneer, and the humour directed against him is indeed destructive. For a sample from Sneer's devastating comments on him: "--- you are so unlucky as not to have the skill even to steal with taste--- so that the body of your work is a composition of dregs and sentiments - like a bad tavern's wine---- In your more serious efforts --- your bombast would be less intolerable, if the thoughts were ever suited to the expression; but the homeliness of the sentiment stares through the fantastic encumbrance of its fine language, like a clown in one of the new uniforms. (1.i). Before the end of Act I scene one, Sir Fretful is allowed to disappear. It is the historical tragedy, *The Spanish Armada* or *The Tragedy Rehearsed* of the richly preposterous Puff, author - producer, that is rehearsed. It provides the main substance of the burlesque. As Morwood remarks, "The play's most striking critical moment is--- its sustained attack on Puff's inflated and contrived tragedy." Puff's explanation to Dangle and Sneer of the oddities of the tragedy rehearsed are "a masterly triumph of fooling."
One would have expected Sheridan to make Sir Fretful rather than Puff the author of the parodied tragedy. But it is "plausible", as Loftis thinks, that Sheridan assigned the authorship of *The Spanish Armada* to Puff "to avoid excessive resemblance between (Sir Fretful) and Cumberland." In fact, however, Cumberland is not forgotten. Sheridan's audience would have seen at once the resemblance between Puff's *The Spanish Armada* and Cumberland's tragedy *The Battle of Hastings* which had been staged at Drury Lane in 1778. Morwood has remarked, "while *The Spanish Armada* satirizes all inflated and unnatural writing, Cumberland's tragedy of 1778, *The Battle of Hastings* is its immediate target. Like Puff's play, it sets grand romantic passions against a background of national crisis and puts a grotesquely elevated diction into the mouths of its characters." Puff's defence of the numerous love scenes in his play is intended to make fun of such scenes in Cumberland's play and also to mock at the discrepancy between a play's title and its subject matter.

The spirit of criticism pervades the entire play *The Critic*, and is not restricted to any one character. The play itself is the critic. "An expose of the pretentions and inflated, the distorted and unnatural, it presents a reductio ad absurdum of bogus exaggeration, false emotion and absurd affectation", says Morwood of the play. It performs this function not only with regard to the inflated and contrived tragedies of the kind burlesqued in *The Spanish Armada* but also those sentimental comedies which are guilty of similar inflation, distortion and absurd exaggeration of emotions.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


4. Ibid., pp.x-xi.

5. Ibid., p.xi.

6. Ibid., p.xiv.


8. Ibid., p.108.


10. Loftis, p.103.


12. Ibid., p.233.


23. Loftis, p.112.

24. Morwood, p.98.

25. Ibid., p.95.