

The rival as an anti sentimental comedy

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The Rivals as an anti-sentimental comedy Undoubtedly Sheridan's purpose in writing "The Rivals" was to entertain the audience by making them laugh and not by making them shed tears. "The Rivals" was written as a comedy pure and simple. Though there are certainly a few sentimental scenes in this play yet they are regarded as a parody of sentimentality. The scenes between Faulkland and Julia are satire on the sentimental comedy which was in fashion in those days and against which Sheridan revolted.

A brief examination of these sentimental scenes would clearly reveal that Sheridan's intention was to poke fun at the sentimental comedy of the time. We find both Faulkland and Julia absurd. The true character of Faulkland is indicated to us by Absolute's description of him as the "most teasing, captious, incorrigible lover". Faulkland's own description of his state of mind about his beloved Julia also makes him appear absurd. He says that every hour is an occasion for him to feel alarmed on Julia's account.

If it rains, he feels afraid lest some shower should have chilled her. If the wind is sharp, he feels afraid lest a rude blast should adversely affect her health. The heat of the noon and the dews of the evening may endanger her health. All this is funny and certainly not to be taken seriously. Sheridan is here ridiculing the excessive solicitude and concern which an over-sentimental lover like Faulkland experiences when separated from his beloved. Sheridan seems to be pleading for mental equilibrium even in the case of an ardent lover.

Sheridan continues to portray Faulkland in the same satirical manner. When Acres appears and is questioned by Absolute regarding Julia's activities in the countryside, Acres replied that Julia has been enjoying herself thoroughly

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and been having a gay time. Now, a normal lover would feel extremely happy to learn this. We expect the same reaction from Faulkland because he had assured Absolute that he would feel happy “beyond measure” if he were certain that Julia was hale and hearty. But his actual reaction is quite different and greatly amuses us by its absurdity.

In both his interviews with Julia, Faulkland betrays the same absurdity. In the first interview, he complains to her of the mirth and gaiety that she has been enjoying during his absence. He wants to be loved for his own sake and for no particular reason and he also expects her love to be “fixed and ardent”. In short, his whole manner of talking to her and his soliloquy at the end of this scene reveals him in a still more comic light. The second interview again shows him a ridiculous light. He subjects Julia to a test in order to convince himself of the sincerity of her love.

The author's intention is to show the absurd length to which an over-sentimental lover can go, and the author expects us to laugh at this kind of lover. Even Julia suffers from an excessive sentimentality and she too is made to appear absurd and ridiculous for that reason. The manner in which she describes her lover to Lydia shows the kind of mentality that she has. In the two interviews with Faulkland, Julia is again overflowing with emotion. We smile at the way she behaves; we are amused by her excess of emotion; we mock at the abject surrender to her lover and her repeated attempts to make up with him.

Lydia too is an over-sentimental girl though in a different way; and she too becomes the subject of ridicule in the play. Her romantic ideas and her romantic planning appear absurd to us. She wants not the usual routine

marriage but a runaway marriage. Now all this makes us laugh at her superficiality and silliness. These absurd notions have been derived by her from the sentimental and romantic stories to which she is addicted. The collapse of her romantic hopes disappoints her greatly but amuses us a good deal.

The manner in which the other characters have been portrayed is also evidence of the anti-sentimental character of the play. Captain Absolute is a practical man and though he assumes the name and status of Ensign Beverley, he would not like to forfeit the rich dowry which Lydia will bring him. Mrs. Malaprop is a conventional, practical woman whose attitude to marriage is business-like. Sir Anthony is a practical, worldly man.

Bob Acres is a country boor with no romantic or sentimental pretensions but towards the end of the play he shows that he is more practical than anybody else by saying: "If I can't get a wife without fighting for her, by any valour, I'll live a bachelor." Then there is Sir Lucius who is absurd but not because of any sentimentality. One reason why he is absurd is because of his insistence on fighting duels. But he does not want to fight duels for the sake of any sentiment. When Sheridan himself fought a couple of duels for the sake of Miss Elizabeth Linley, there was a strong emotion behind them, but here we have a mockery of dueling and we are made to laugh at the manner in which these duels are arranged.

Irony is the very soul of Jane Austen's novels and "Pride and Prejudice" is steeped in irony of theme, situation, character and narration. Irony is the contrast between appearance and reality. As one examines "Pride and Prejudice", one is struck with the fact of the ironic significance that pride

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leads to prejudice and prejudice invites pride and both have their corresponding virtues bound up within them. Each has its virtues and each has its defects. They are contradictory and the supreme irony is that intricacy, which is much deeper, carries with it grave dangers unknown to simplicity.

This type of thematic irony runs through all of Jane Austen's novel. In "Pride and Prejudice" there is much irony of situation too, which provides a twist to the story. Mr. Darcy remarks about Elizabeth that: "tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt me..." We relish the ironical flavour of this statement much later when we reflect that the woman who was not handsome enough to dance with was really good enough to marry. He removes Bingley from Netherfield because he considers it imprudent to forge a marriage alliance with the Bennet Family, but himself ends up marrying the second Bennet sister.

Collins proposes to Elizabeth when her heart is full of Wickham and Darcy proposes to her exactly at the moment when she hates him most. Elizabeth tells Mr. Collins that she is not the type to reject the first proposal and accept the second but does exactly this when Darcy proposes a second time. The departure of the militia from Meryton was expected to put an end to Lydia's flirtations, it brings about her elopement. The Lydia-Wickham episode may seem like an insurmountable barrier between Elizabeth and Darcy, but is actually instrumental in bringing them together.

Lady Catherine, attempting to prevent their marriage only succeeds in hastening it. Irony in character is even more prominent than irony of situation. It is ironical that Elizabeth who prides herself on her perception is

quite blinded by her own prejudices and errs badly in judging intricate characters. Wickham appears suave and charming but is ironically unprincipled rouge. Darcy appears proud and haughty but ironically proves to be a true gentleman when he gets Wickham to marry Lydia by paying him. The Bingley Sisters hate the Bennets for their vulgarity but are themselves vulgar in their behaviour.

Darcy is also critical of the ill-bred Bennet Family but ironically his Aunt Catherine is equally vulgar and ill-bred. Thus, the novel abounds in irony of characters. The narrative of "Pride and Prejudice" too has an ironic tone which contributes much verbal irony. Jane Austen's ironic tone is established in the very first sentence of the novel. "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." As Dorothy Van Ghent remark, what we read in it is opposite - a single woman must be in want - of a man with a good fortune.

There is much verbal irony in the witty utterances of Mrs. Bennet. She tells Elizabeth: "Let Wickham be your man. He is pleasant fellow and would jilt you creditable ..." In the words 'pleasant fellow' is hidden a dramatic irony at the expense of Mr. Bennet, for Wickham is destined to make a considerable dent in Mr. Bennet's complacency. Jane Austen did not show any cynicism or bitterness in using her irony to draw satirical portraits of whims and follies. Rather her irony can be termed comic. It implies on her side an acknowledgement of what is wrong with people and society.

It is interesting to note that ironically, in "Pride and Prejudice", it is the villainous character Wickham and lady Catherine - who are responsible for uniting Elizabeth and Darcy. She uses irony to shake her major figures of

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their self-deception and to expose the hypocrisy and pretentiousness, absurdity and insanity of some of her minor figures. It is definitely possible to deduce from her works a scheme of moral values. Andrew II Wright rightly points out that irony in her hands is 'the instrument of a moral vision'. the rivals: comedy of manners Like typical comedy of manners, "The Rivals" has a complicated plot.

There are three love-affairs in it - the Absolute-Lydia love-affair, the Faulkland-Julia love-affair, and the Mrs. Malaprop-Sir Lucius love-affair. All these love-affairs have a parallel development, so that the interest keeps shifting from one love-affair to the other quite rapidly. Again, like a typical comedy of manner, "The Rivals" abounds in wit. We have the wit of Captain Absolute, the wit of Sir Anthony, the wit of even Sir Lucius and Acres who are otherwise the targets of the play's satire. "The Rivals" is an amusing satire on the fashionable upper-class of Sheridan's time. The scene of this play is set in Bath.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, Bath was a famous centre of fashionable life. The manner in which Fag dwells upon this life is quite amusing. The Faulkland-Julia love-affair is undoubtedly a parody of the sentimental comedy of the eighteenth century. Julia is portrayed as an excessively sentimental girl, while Faulkland is portrayed as the most whimsical and eccentric lover. Faulkland greatly amuses us by his account of the anxieties that fill his mind regarding Julia. Every hour he is alarmed on Julia's account. If it rains, if the wind is sharp, he feels afraid. All this is very funny.

Similarly, Faulkland's feeling upset on hearing about the gay life that Julia has been leading also amuses us. Julia's over-sentimentality in idealizing her lover and repeatedly forgiving his faults and silly suspicions is also funny. The portrayal of Lydia is a satire on the romantic notions which young, fashionable girls of upper-class families of the time entertained. She is fond of reading romantic novels and stories. Fed on such stories, she does not want a conventional and routine kind of wedding. When Captain Absolute's real identity is revealed to Lydia, she feels terribly disappointed at the collapse of her romantic dreams and hopes.

The manner in which she recalls her secret meetings with her lover during the cold nights of January is very amusing to us. The most amusing scenes in the play are those in which Captain Absolute comes face to face with his father, Sir Anthony. Sir Anthony is portrayed as a self-willed, dictatorial kind of father who demands implicit obedience from his son. He threatens to disinherit his son, to disown his son in case his son does not carry out his wishes. Sir Anthony in his own prime of life was a gay fellow. Sheridan also makes us laugh at some of the contemporary fashions.

When Bob Acres comes to Bath, he decides to discard his country clothes and to dress himself according to the fashion prevailing in the city. Then he tries to practice some French dancing steps and discovers to his disappointment that his are "true-born English legs" which can never learn French dancing steps. He is also fond of swearing and has developed a new way of swearing. We find him swearing, by "Gods' balls and barrels", by "God's bullets and blades", by "God's levels and aims" and so on. Then there

is a satirical treatment of dueling. The manner in which Sir Lucius instigates Acres to send a challenge to Beverley is most amusing.

Sir Lucius gives the following argument absurdly in favour of Acre's sending a challenge to Beverley: " Can a man commit a more heinous offence against another than to fall in love with the same woman? " The portrayal of Sir Lucius is also satirical. Sir Lucius is an Irishman, easily duped by the maid-servant Lucy, who tells him that the love-letters which she brings for him have been sent by the seventeen-year old niece of Mrs. Malaprop. This wrong impression ultimately leads him to challenge Captain Absolute to a duel and the manner in which Sir Lucius picks up a quarrel with Captain Absolute is itself very funny.

The portrayal of Lydia's " tough old aunt" is also satirical. We laugh at the contradiction in this elderly woman who puts restrictions on her niece, while herself falling in love with a tall Irish baronet and writing letters to him under the assumed name of Delia. Beverley's description of Mrs. Malaprop as an " old weather-beaten, she-dragon" is most amusing. One of the most striking features of " The Rivals" is witty dialogue. The manner in which Sir Anthony snubs and scolds his son for disobeying his wishes, the manner in which Captain Absolute deals with Mrs.

Malaprop, when he meets her first, Sir Lucius manner of dealing with Acres when he instructs Acres in the rules of dueling, is also witty. Humorous and farcical situations are also generally found in a comedy of manner. Captain Absolute's disguising himself as Ensign Beverley and then unmasking himself when finally he has to face Lydia in his true character are such situations. Then there are two more farcical situations. One is that in which Captain

Absolute tricks his father into believing that his is going to make up his quarrel with Lydia when his is actually going to fight a duel.

The second is when David shouts to Sir Anthony to stop Absolute because there is going to be fight, murder, bloodshed and so on. Instead of moral sentiments, Sheridan gives quick and witty dialogues, fast-moving actions with its highly comic situations and above all the absence of any serious complication or conflict. Right from the beginning to the end, the play sends the audience into peals of laughter. The criticism that elements of sentimentality have penetrated into the play is based on misunderstanding.