

## CHARACTERS IN THE RIVALS

### CAPTAIN JACK ABSOLUTE

Jack Absolute is the young lover who displays simple common sense. Because he loves Lydia, he is willing to cater to her weird romantic notions. He pretends to be the comparatively penniless Ensign Beverley but intends to marry her only under all proper auspices. He will not run off with Lydia: "What, and lose two-thirds of her fortune. . . . No, no, I could have brought her to that long ago." He condescends to Acres; he is tolerant of and laughs at Faulkland. He has courage but is sensible in manifestation of bravado, such as duels: He will if he must; he does not choose to. He is at a disadvantage when his initial masquerade forces him into a double-masquerade, and Sheridan intends him to look foolish. He also looks very humanly silly in the scene with his father. Sheridan obviously intends to show that Captain Absolute is his father's son: When they meet, they both justify the family name. The same temper and impatience appear again in the discovery scene in the fourth act with Lydia.

### LYDIA LANGUISH

Lydia is best understood against the background of sentimentalism. She is in love with Ensign Beverley, but much of her love is due to the mental picture she has of herself and the poor ensign in a penniless, romantic match. Jack feels that he is "by no means certain that she would take [him] with the impediment of [their] friends' consent, a regular humdrum wedding, and the reversion of a good fortune." Her own speeches prove his evaluation accurate: "I lose most of my fortune if I marry without my aunt's consent, till of age; and that is what I have determined to do, ever since I knew the penalty." She deliberately instigates a quarrel just for the pleasure of making up afterward because lovers always quarrel in sentimental novels and making up could be so much fun. When she discovers that there will be no elopement, she is sullen and quite prepared to break off her engagement. Sheridan is somewhat at the mercy of the actress who plays the part. The young miss with a set of romantic notions could, after all, be made to look completely silly; the actress must supply charm, daintiness, and budding femininity. In at least one speech, however, the playwright makes of her a healthy female with healthy female vanity. In Act III, Scene 3, she remains at the opposite side of the stage and turns away from the horrible person, for "surely nothing can be more dreadful than to be obliged to listen to the loathsome addresses." However, since Captain Absolute does not begin his loathsome addresses, she displays a human pique and becomes less and less aloof. The changes are marked by short phrases: "How unlike my Beverley"; "I wonder he don't begin"; "He seems a very negligent wooer"; and "Quite at his ease, upon my word." By this time, she is turned toward him (he is facing the *other* wall), and she has perhaps moved some distance toward him. As the change is completed, "I'll speak first."

We may rest content. All will be well. Feminine curiosity has overcome romantic posturing. Under the self-dramatization, there is a young woman with a normal vanity and a healthy ego.

### MR. FAULKLAND

Sentimental drama contains characters who dissect relationships with other people excessively, who question motives and probe agonizingly into what we might term the unconscious or subconscious. We have pointed out that sentimental behavior also included a tendency toward a degree of sympathy that bordered on self-abnegation. Characters could be so concerned with the feelings of others that they suppressed their own desires. When two people engage in this essentially masochistic activity, the result can be a stalemate comic to viewers, if possibly tragic for those involved.

Faulkland displays an interesting combination of this sentimental characteristic filtered through a personality trait that could in itself be comic. He is intensely suspicious, and while Julia says he is not jealous, he has characteristics that resemble jealousy amazingly. He suspects Julia's motives, not so much because he believes she is lying to him but rather because he feels she is lying to herself. Since he thinks of himself as a very ordinary young man, he cannot understand that Julia can be genuinely in love with him. The emotion she feels may really be gratitude, or it may in truth be a desire to

follow the wishes of her dead father, either of which she might mistake for love. Because his idea of love is completely unrealistic, his suspicions and self-denigration make him doubt her love if she can take pleasure in any of the normal pastimes of a young woman, such as company, conversation, or dancing.

An examination of Faulkland's scenes will show how Sheridan creates such a character. He uses a technique that is traditional in comedy. Every scene in which Faulkland appears is designed to highlight his ruling passion, as Sterne would have said, following Locke, or obsession, as we might term it. Faulkland figures prominently in three scenes. In the first, Act II, Scene 1, he is first contrasted with Jack Absolute; then Acres enters and as the scene proceeds we see Faulkland becoming more and more concerned that Julia has been feeling healthy, looking well, and enjoying herself in his absence. Can she really be in love and still enjoy herself? He distrusts her again when she writes to forgive him for a temperament blowup--for could she really forgive so easily? And finally he tests her with a story that is a lie.

After each of these episodes, Faulkland promises himself that he will never suspect Julia again and that he will never again cause her such pain. However, at the first occasion he reverts to his obsession. At the end of the play, it is difficult to see that there will be any permanent overthrow of the ruling passion. One would really not care to guess at the domestic state of the Faulkland family in the years that follow the fifth act of *The Rivals*.

## **JULIA MELVILLE**

Julia is not as interestingly drawn a character as Faulkland. The core of her character is indicated by her first speech to Lydia (Act I, Scene 2): "I have learned to think myself his debtor, for those imperfections which arise from the ardour of his attachment." The basic approach is sentimental, although she never becomes the completely lachrymose heroine simply because the plot--and Sheridan--do not demand it. She is closest to the characters whose trials and tribulations arouse only our sympathy.

## **BOB ACRES**

As the name implies, Acres is a variation on the bumpkin trying to become a city beau. He is awkward and good-natured. Trying to sound like a dandy, he has developed "an odd kind of a new method of swearing"; he has taken dancing lessons, but somehow his country clodhoppers do not lend themselves to eighteenth-century terpsichory. We may assume he tries to dress in the latest fashion, but he always manages to look like what he is. Since he is not yet the dapper gentleman, he has sufficient sense to be a coward when faced with the prospect of a duel. One is tempted to suspect that Sheridan drew part of the character, the novel way of swearing, from life; it is difficult to recall any forebears in literature.

## **SIR LUCIUS O'TRIGGER**

Again the name reveals the character. The stage Irishman was by this time a stock comic figure, and Sheridan had himself lived many years in Ireland. The Irishman had appeared in several plays of Farquhar's at the beginning of the century, including *The Beaux' Stratagem*, and a famous Major O'Flaherty was included in *The West Indian*, written by the arch-sentimentalist Cumberland in 1771. As a swashbuckling fortune-hunter, Sir Lucius also resembles the traditional *miles gloriosus*, or braggart soldier. Although unlike some of them, Sir Lucius is not a coward. He is willing to risk his life to make his fortune. He also has an eye for a pretty woman, so he is not prepared to marry Mrs. Malaprop for her money, a touch of kindness to the character on Sheridan's part. Sir Lucius and Acres are contrasted to increase the comic value of both to the plot.

## **SIR ANTHONY ABSOLUTE**

Sir Anthony is a positive character accustomed to having his own way, violent in temper when crossed. Obviously there is comedy in his scenes, especially when he meets with his son. Sheridan seems to take special delight in making the sly point of the resemblance between the father and son.

Inevitably they grate more strongly on each other than on anyone else. It is easy to believe that Sheridan is commenting on his own family background.

### **MRS. MALAPROP**

Mrs. Malaprop's name has become a word in the language. She has her forebears. The widow looking for yet another husband is standard in comedy; in the English literary tradition, she is best represented by Chaucer's Wife of Bath. However, Chaucer's Wife of Bath did not misuse language. For this characteristic Sheridan owed much to Mrs. Slipslop in Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* and to a character in one of his mother's plays. But Mrs. Malaprop is the most famous. To her must go the prize for her "nice derangement of epitaphs."

### **FAG**

Fag tries to be a fop, aping his betters and adopting their mannerisms and language. He would be played as affected in his clothes in slightly bad taste, his manners exaggerated. He would give the appearance, as was once said by another writer, of being "every other inch a gentleman." Sheridan has also given him one additional character trait designed to place him permanently in his class; he lies and admits he is a liar in practical affairs. To lie for one's own convenience could never be the habit of a gentleman.

### **DAVID**

Bob Acres' servant is also a typical servant of another kind; he displays practical good sense and a complete contempt for the gentleman's code of honor. He has not become the fop, as Fag is; he is still the country type.

### **LUCY**

Lydia's maid is part of a long tradition of the cunning servant. She is a go-between, a schemer, and a skillful liar. Sheridan uses her obvious shrewdness for ironic comedy. In Act I, Scene 1, Mrs. Malaprop says of her--"The girl is such a simpleton. . . . Had she been one of your artificial ones, I should never have trusted her." Immediately after, we discover that this simpleton has been the universal mischiefmaker throughout, helping everyone and betraying everyone. Actually the play could have been written about her and her activities; it would have been far more farcical depending entirely on confusion and embarrassments that would result from her machinations. Her part in the play, as it stands, is comparatively small.

### **THOMAS**

The coachman appears very briefly. It is to Sheridan's credit that he is individualized. He is obviously the most naive of all the servants.