

IMPORTANCE OF MONEY IN MARRIAGE: A CASE STUDY OF SHERIDAN'S PLAY THE RIVALS

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Abstract

The theme of marriage in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's plays depends more on the value of money than on the value of love. In his play *The Rivals*, value of money becomes a salient theme and surpasses the theme of love even if Sheridan tries frequently to show love. Money plays an essential part in this play and its importance lies in determining the marriage whether positively or negatively. However, the play reflects the importance of money in the eighteenth century society where people were divided into three primary classes: the aristocrats, the bourgeoisie and the peasants.

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A Short Introduction to Sheridan's Life

Richard Brinsley Sheridan, a man of fashion and society, was born in 1751 in Dublin, Ireland. His parents moved to England when he was seven. He was sent to Harrow School and remained there from 1762 to 1768. Thomas Moore states Sheridan's time at Harrow School:

At Harrow, Richard was remarkable only as a very idle, careless, but, at the same time, engaging boy, who contrived to win the affection, and even admiration of the whole school, both masters and pupils, by the mere charm of his frank and genial manners, and by the occasional gleams of superior intellect, which broke through all the indolence and indifference of his character. (4-5)

Sheridan was unhappy at Harrow School for he did not have enough money, so he lived at Harrow as "the son of a poor player" (Gibbs 24).

It is worth mentioning that Sheridan moved to Bath in 1771 at the age of 20 along with his father who moved to Bath for economic reasons. Bath was famous for pleasure in different forms including beautiful ladies. Women and men met there from all over England. "All kinds of people, men and women ... notable and notorieties, quacks, members of Parliament, rakes, duchesses, usurers, brokers, bishops and gossips" (Sherwin 65) had paid visits to Bath, and each one had own purpose of the visit. Sheridan was also attracted to this fashionable city, so his plays convey much fashionable attitudes. In Bath, Sheridan became acquainted with the family of Thomas Linley and had a good relation with their daughter, Elizabeth Linley.

Elizabeth Ann Linley was a sixteen years old accomplished singer. She was being harassed by many young admirers (Glasgow 71).¹ Mathews for example threatened to kill her and then kill himself if she did not marry him. Therefore, Elizabeth decided to commit suicide. Glasgow says, "She would say her prayers and commend her unquiet soul to God" (78). However, she was saved by Sheridan. Then they decided to elope to France in 1772 when Sheridan was 21. Elizabeth gained notoriety for her elopement. Alice Glasgow writes:

The breath of scandal had never before blown across Elizabeth's path; now she was surrounded by a miasma of the foulest and most lurid lies.... Worst of all, the

¹ For a further discussion of this topic, see Glasgow 70-72.

playwright Foote grasped the opportunity afforded by the moment and produced a comedy called *The Maid of Bath*. (71)

When the couples came back, they got married officially. As a result of the marriage, Sheridan was challenged to a duel with Mathew in 1772, and in the second duel, he was seriously wounded. This story and his near death stimulated him to depict his adventures in his first comedy, *The Rivals*. Miriam Gabriel and Paul Mueschke state:

Other critics suggest that *The Rivals* reflects Sheridan's own experience. According to this view, Captain Absolute's pursuit of Lydia Languish was suggested by Sheridan's courtship of Miss Linley, and the duel scene by his own combats with Matthews. While it is true that there are close parallels between the facts of Sheridan's own experience and events as they now stand recorded in *The Rivals*; it is equally true that to write successful comedy, a dramatist must assume a disinterested attitude toward his own an experience. (237)

After the duel, the couples were separated under the pressure of both families, yet they got married again on 13 April 1774. Sheridan's father was in Ireland at the time of wedding and was so angry to hear of his son's marriage (Glasgow 105). The parents of the new couples were very displeased for the marriage since every family considered the other inappropriate.

Sheridan suffered due to poverty especially at the beginning and at the end of his life. Before becoming a well known dramatist, he once wrote to his father revealing indirectly to him his financial difficulties: "I beg you will not judge of my attention to the improvement of my hand-writing by this letter, as I am out of the way of a better pen" (Thomas Moore 34). The early years of Sheridan were marked by debts. He spent his time in gala parties and playing games. Alice Glasgow summarizes the critical situation of Sheridan:

The never-ending game between Sheridan and his creditors had started. The young people gave parties, to which an increasing number of the Great World came. Bills came, too, and these Richard tore across, or tucked out of sight somewhere in his crowded desk; sometimes he used their backs to scribble verses. (107)

Indeed, Sheridan was in need of money after his marriage, so he "...turned to journalism and playwrighting" (LeFanu, *Betsy Sheridan's Journal* 3). Brander Matthews avers, "Sheridan had to live on his wit; and he wrote his plays to make money by its display" (68).

Sheridan's major plays were all written when he was in his twenties. So, he had spent his life as a playwright and a parliamentary politician, yet he was lucky enough to spend 32 of his 64 years in Parliament. In his early twenties, he became the most successful writer of comedy. Oscar James Campbell introduces Sheridan as "The situation was thus ready for a man who could write high comedy with wit and brilliance..." (xiv). In 1775, his comedy *The Rivals* was produced at the Covent Garden Theatre. The first performance on January 28 was unsuccessful. The second revised version of the play was completely successful and was ranked as one of Britain's most famous comedies. Anne Parker mentions that *The Rivals* "dramatizes the excesses of the sentimental way" (12).

At the time of staging his first play, *The Rivals*, his financial condition became more stable. In this play, he presents his own sufferings in the field of love and in the field of money. So, this play is considered to be a true copy of Sheridan's life. However, "the success of his plays took him half-wittingly into his father's footsteps in the theatre" (LeFanu, *Betsy Sheridan's Journal* 3). Drury Lane Theatre became the constant source of Sheridan income.² Meanwhile, he could not save the Drury Lane Theatre from financial ruin because he was "altogether careless; invited into society by those who were delighted with his gaiety and his talent, he plunged into expenses for entertaining others, which very rapidly absorbed large sums of money..." (Sigmond 90).

Between the time of production of the play *The School for Scandal* and the time of his work in the Parliament, he led a comfortable life without any shortage of money. In 1812, Sheridan failed to be re-elected in the Parliament and then he suffered from poverty. Sheridan faced serious financial difficulties and was arrested for not paying the debt in August 1813. It was his wealthy friend Samuel Whitbread who paid the debt. He started drinking heavily and then his health was seriously affected. Thus, he was unable to handle the diseases and the

² Lewis Gibbs confirms, "He [Sheridan] depended on the theatre: it was his only source of income and his only means of raising money." For more information, see Gibbs 124-25.

problems that surrounded him from all sides.³ By the end, his work as a politician or a dramatist had nearly stopped. Then, he died in severe poverty on July 7, 1816. Donald Brook states:

He died on July 7th, 1816, and was buried in Westminster Abbey. It is said that just before he was put into his coffin a stranger rushed into the apartment in which he was lying in state, and formally arrested the dead man on behalf of a money-lender for a debt of five hundred pounds. Lord Sidmouth and George Canning paid the money between them. (*The Romance of the English Theatre* 98)

Money and Marriage

All the conflicts in Sheridan's plays are because of money. In *The School for Scandal*, Charles and Maria do not meet until nearly the end of the play, and their love is just a talk of other characters. Even when they meet, they do not talk about love, and the reason of their sufferings is fortune. Also, the marriage of Sir Peter and Lady Teazle revolves about the issue of money.

In *The Rivals*, the plot of Absolute and Lydia is centered about money. This play starts by discussing fortune and ends when Absolute and Lydia celebrate their marriage by combining their fortunes. Absolute and his father are aristocrats with lands while Lydia and her aunt are heirs to a businessman. It seems that the correlation between different classes in Sheridan's time has taken its importance. John Loftis writes, "The old antagonism between citizen and gentry had long since outworn its usefulness as a subject for comedy, and Sheridan knew it" (51).

At the very beginning of the play, Thomas, the coachman of Sir Anthony, asks Fag about Absolute's beloved woman - whether she is rich or not! Absolute is known for his richness, so the servants would like to know the financial position of his future wife too. Their inquiry is a precursor to what is really going on in the society where the rich women are only for rich men. Fag assures him that she is a rich baronet with an income worth 3000 pounds a year. He adds:

Why, I believe she owns half the stocks! ... she could pay the national debt as easily as I could my washerwoman! She has a lap-dog that eats out of gold - she feeds her parrot with small pearls, - and all her thread-papers are made of bank-notes. (*Rivals*.1.1.[46-50])

³ For further information, see Glasgow 200.

This forms to be excellent evidence to prove that money was a dominant obsession at the time of Sheridan and forms one of the salient themes of this play. The talk of Fag and Thomas about the richness of Lydia proves the idea that if she is not rich, the rich Captain Absolute would not marry her. For her richness, Absolute pretends to be Beverley. Actually, it is ridiculous to find Absolute changing his appearance to suit the taste of Lydia who is dreaming of a half-paid lover. Absolute who changes his appearance in order to marry a rich woman and Lydia's dream of a romantic poor husband are purposely generated in the play in order to ridicule the misery of life and make the readers feel at the same time that they can do whatever they like when they are rich.

Therefore, money plays a very pivotal role in this play. No one of the characters of the play wants to be poor except the romantic Lydia. Remarkably, she is obsessed with romance and wants to imitate them in her love with Beverley. In the meantime, she never remarks about her hatred of money. It seems that everyone in the play seems to be enticed with the world of money, which becomes a dynamic engine of the society, while Lydia is busy with her romances.

It is also exciting to see Lydia Languish wanting to marry a half-paid soldier in order to live a romantic life. It can be called as a life of extreme excitement of poverty! One may also argue that she decides to marry a poor man because she has lot of money and lives in luxury. On the other hand, it can be said that she wants to try the other misery of life which she has hasn't experienced. If she would have been a poor character, she would have dreamt to marry a rich gallant lover. This is what Sheridan wants to say that people belonging to a higher class have got everything they need. So, marrying a poor man becomes a kind of fantasy in order to enjoy or experience the life in poverty and the thrill of the feelings of others.

Therefore, it can be said that *The Rivals* is a comedy which has been designed in a way to expose such manners in the society. The careless men and women are concentrating on earthly means to satisfy their own desires. They are looking for adventurous life as to spend their money carelessly in silly flirtation and frivolous intrigues. They do not care of their wealth since they do not shed sweat in gaining it or because they have just easily inherited it. Some others want to leave their wealth to try and enjoy another life called poverty. Surely, when they are at the brim of poverty, they come back with strong desire to maintain their money and sometimes to plunder weak citizens in order to grow their money even on the account of those impressed people.

Julia the ideal character affirms the fact that the rich one is only for the rich one and she amazingly asks Lydia: “Lydia, you tell me he is but an ensign, and you have thirty thousand pounds!” (*Rivals*.1.2.[77-78]). This inquiry is from Julia, who is known of her realistic and sober personality, and it is not from anyone else. If Julia thinks of money in this way, then others will surely adore it. So, there is no meaning in Lydia’s romantic whim and in her pretence of leaving her fortune. Furthermore, Mrs. Malaprop refuses to marry Lydia to a pauper. She dreams to marry her to a rich one. When Sir Anthony - the baronet visits her, she complains about Lydia’s decision to marry none except Beverley, though he is poor. She ironically points to Lydia and says, “There, Sir Anthony, there sits the deliberate simpleton, who wants to disgrace her family, and lavish herself on a fellow not worth a shilling!” (*Rivals*.1.2.[143-45]). In fact, Mrs. Malaprop’s talk revolves around the disgrace of the family. She thinks that the family will be disgraced only when Lydia marries a poor man. She does not think about the other manly qualities that the fiancé of Lydia should have. It seems that the rich people have lived in a closed circuit, and it will be a shameful act if they marry a man belonging to a poor class. So, Mrs. Malaprop compels her niece to abide by the norm of the society. Even now days, some of the gentry do not prefer be married to a person from underclass despite we live in the 21st Century.

On this subject, Mrs. Malaprop is completely against Lydia’s marriage to a poor man. She is ready to marry her to Acres although he is a stupid or to Absolute but never to Beverley. Therefore, she has cancelled her promise for Acres to marry him Lydia at the time when Captain Absolute comes to betroth her. The target of refusing both Beverley and Acres is because she wants to marry her niece to the richest one. Earnestly, Mrs. Malaprop zests to marry him Lydia in order to jump to aristocracy. She knows well that Absolute is a Captain in army and an heir of a rich baronet father.

O’Trigger in his turn wants to marry Lydia for her wealth, but he fails at the end. The apparent reason of his failure is because his letters have been sent to Mrs. Malaprop instead of Lydia. Actually, he fails to marry Lydia since he is not as rich as Absolute. Therefore, he is not allowed even to contact her.

Sheridan’s ancestors were known for their aristocratic status. Therefore, Sheridan intends to say that everyone should marry his/her appropriate match, which means that rich people should marry rich people and vice versa. On the other hand, Sheridan’s sufferings due to

shortage of money during his marriage to Linley has affected his writings. Therefore, the marriages in this play do not include a successful marriage between a pauper and a rich one.

Regarding the marriage of Faulkland and Julia, they are neither rich nor poor. They are equal, so they succeed in their marriage in spite of the many obstacles that they face. To shed more light on this issue, Absolute does not think of Julia as a wife despite being his relative. She too does not consider him as a husband because they are financially at different levels. He considers her as a sister, and she considers him an appropriate husband for Lydia. In this case, there might be a question as to why he runs to marry Lydia though Julia is more realistic and attractive girl? The answer lies in the fact of Julia's money and not on how much moral value she has imbibed.

In addition, Lydia dreams of eloping and to leave her property as it happens in romances, but Absolute in the disguise of Beverley refuses her offer, assuming that if she elopes, she will lose her fortune. Also, Absolute refuses Faulkland's suggestion to elope. He tells him, "What, and lose two thirds of her fortune? You forget that, my friend. No, no, I could have brought her to that long ago" (*Rivals.2.1.[62-63]*). Even when Absolute is in a critical situation especially when Lydia discovers his real personality, he remains thinking about her wealth. He reassures her that her wealth will be under her disposal after her marriage instead of her romances. He then tells her that he is looking for a lawyer to help them to get her fortune and to quicken the formalities: "come, come, we must lay aside some of our romance – a little wealth and comfort may be endured after all. And for your fortune, the lawyers shall make such settlement" (*Rivals.4.2.[164-67]*). This is regarded as a proof in which it shows that Absolute thinks too much about Lydia's wealth.

In the same field, all characters praise and talk about Lydia's wealth. For that, Sir Anthony, Absolute's father, has taken a remarkable decision that Absolute should marry the woman he has chosen even if she is the ugliest woman. He fiercely declares:

The lady shall be as ugly as I choose: she shall have a hump on each shoulder; she shall be as crooked as the Crescent; her one eye shall roll like the bull's in Cox's museum; she shall have a skin like a mummy, and the beard of a Jew – she shall be all this, sirrah! – Yet I'll make you ogle her all day, and sit up all night to write sonnets on her beauty. (*Rivals.2.1.[490-95]*)

The father indeed wants to marry his son to a woman who has lot of wealth. So, he threatens of disowning and disinheriting him if he does not marry the girl whom he chooses. Then, he encourages his son by saying that he will get two fortunes: his inheritance and Lydia's fortune; otherwise, he will lose both. He frankly tells his son that the wealth he is looking for will come with Lydia: "Yes, Jack, the independence I was talking of is by a marriage - the fortune is saddled with a wife" (*Rivals.2.1.[347-50]*). Also, he openly advises him to have both - wealth and a wife, which can be got through marriage. He regards Lydia as cattle of the landed property; to take the property, it means to take the cattle, which are a part of it. Anthony advises his son, "If you have the estate, you must take it with the live stock on it, as it stands" (*Rivlas.2.1.[356-57]*). Absolute refuses his father's choice for the reason that he himself has found a rich lady. He does not know that his father has chosen Lydia, the same girl whom he loves.

On the whole, both the father and the son are searching for the wealthy girl and have fortunately found her, she is Lydia. This indicates their similar minds, the minds which always think about money. At the time when the father feels he cannot convince his son, he gives him the last chance to rethink, time span of six and a half hours. Otherwise, Absolute will be punished severely. Absolute has to think wisely over this matter before taking the decision which could be destructive. During this time, he has to choose wealth or poverty. Sir Anthony warns him:

Yet take care – the patience of a saint may be overcome at last! – but mark! I give you six hours and a half to consider of this: if you then agree, without any condition, to do everything on earth that I choose, why – confound you! I may in time forgive you – if not, zounds! don't enter the same hemisphere with me! don't dare to breathe the same air, or use the same light with me; but get an atmosphere and a sun of your own! I'll strip you of your commission; I'll lodge a five-and-threepence in the hands of trustees, and you shall live on the interest. I'll disown you, I'll disinherit you, I'll unget you! And damn me, if ever I call you Jack again! (*Rivals.2.1.[416-26]*)

Absolute now becomes sure enough that his father has chosen Lydia but tries to pretend to obey his father and respecting his choice by marrying the lady whom he has chosen. Paradoxically, this means that he is also ready to marry an ugly-looking woman for the sake of money. This can

be best understood in his approval to his father when he tells him, “I am come, sir, to acknowledge my error, and to submit entirely to your will” (*Rivals*.3.1.[21-22]). Then, he ironically inquires, “Which is to be mine, sir, the niece or the aunt?” (*Rivals*.3.1.[64]). Even though, he is joking by saying this statement, it can be also understood as a tacit approval to marry Mrs. Malaprop since both of them are rich. Indisputably, he repeats the same speech of his father regarding the ugliest lady which indicates his readiness to marry any lady for the sake of wealth. He states:

Sir, I repeat it if I please you in this affair, 'tis all I desire. Not that I think a woman the worse for being handsome; but, sir, if you please to recollect, you before hinted something about a hump or two, one eye, and a few more graces of that kind. Now, without being very nice, I own I should rather choose a wife of mine to have the usual number of limbs, and a limited quantity of back; and though *one* eye may be very agreeable, yet as the prejudice has always run in favour of *two*, I would not wish to affect a singularity in that article. (*Rivals*.3.1.[79-87])

Then for the second time, he asks his father whether he is going to marry Lydia or Mrs. Malaprop. He wonders:

If you should think of addressing Miss Languish yourself, I suppose you would have me marry the aunt; or if you should change your mind, and take the old lady – 'tis the same to me – I'll marry the niece. (*Rivals*.3.1.[92-95])

At the end of the play, when Absolute is about to celebrate his marriage with Lydia, Sir Anthony announces his marriage to Mrs. Malaprop although there was no love noticed between them. This is a proof that both the father and the son seek money. To choose the same woman for Absolute, then to marry the aunt to the father and her niece to Absolute mean that Anthony as well as his son are running after wealth.

The debate between Sir Anthony and his son takes our attention to Gabin's speech. Rosalind J. Gabin believes that “Humor construes ‘reality’ inversely, for it sees the real as the direct opposite of the ideal on which its gaze is firmly fixed” (35). Sheridan obviously intends to render Sir Anthony and his son Absolute in strikingly dramatic way. Sir Anthony is a man of humour but a tyrannical father. He appear in a good mood with Mrs. Malaprop but in ill humour

with his son. Thus, he does not expect any refusal from his son. Fag describes him as “hasty in everything; or it would not be Sir Anthony Absolute” (*Rivals*.1.1.[14]). However, both the father and the son indulge in a minor dispute and each one of them wants to pass his opinion on the other. Strikingly, these two obstinate characters are so kind with other people, and they are only hardheaded with each other. By this, Sheridan may deliberately intend to portray his own life with his father through the relationship between Absolute and his father. Thomas Moore describes Sheridan’s father as “The father, you know, was a wrong-headed, whimsical man, and, perhaps, his scanty circumstances were one of the reasons which prevented him from sending Richard to the University” (9).

To contemplate the way of Absolute’s marriage, one can infer that the marriages during those days were built around the interest of money and not on love. It is strange enough to notice that nearly the entire conversation in the play concerning Lydia revolves around her wealth and not on her love with Absolute. Therefore, if Beverley were a different character and not Absolute himself, Lydia would marry Absolute for one reason or the other. But Sheridan intelligently alters Beverley into Absolute at the right time or, one can say, merges both characters in one. By this act, he controls the prospects and satisfies the two desires. If Sheridan would have made Beverley another character, surely Beverley and Absolute would confront each other, and Lydia inevitably would choose the richest one. This is what really happens at the end of the play. All critical issues have been solved, and Absolute and Lydia have crowned their victory by marriage along with both their fortunes. This is indeed the theme of the play to get wealth by the way of marriage.

To sum up, Sheridan is so intelligent to discuss marriage in *The Rivals* in a way where love triumphs at the end, but the reality is that Sheridan deliberately scatters the concept of money in all parts of the play. The play opens with two servants discuss about a rich lady Lydia and the incomparable baronet Absolute and ends with the integration of their property.

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