

Joseph Surface's Language in *The School for Scandal*

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Richard Bringsley Sheridan Composed the two masterpieces of comedies, *The Rivals* (1775), and *The School for Scandal* (1777), in the eighteenth-century British dramas. *The School for Scandal* was designed to fight with the prevailing genteel comedy. Most of the Restoration comedies, however, had now become too coarse for the increasingly refined public taste. The dramatist challenged to draw the audience back to the Restoration comedies to restore the spirit of laughter. "The intial run of *The School for Scandal* was a triumph. Audiences as well as critics were delighted, and from the first performance on 8 May until the end of the theatrical season in early June, the comedy drew full houses." ¹

The Shcool for Scandal depicts eighteenth-century upper-class people's lives. The drama has a variety of ridiculous and funny male and female scandalmongers, "who are seemingly engaged full time in the business of falsification, blackening character and blowing up rumours and wisps of gossip into full-bodied, 'circumstancial' accounts." ² They "formed, in fact, a beau monde to which all the characters related in some way." ³ They talked about poignant scandalous news in no rustic phrases, which was, so to speak one of their every-day amusements.

Gossiping was actually a kind of fashionable entertainment seen among the people of fashionable society, and Sheridan's "experience both at Bath and in London had given him an intimate acquaintance with the would-be fashionable world with its malice and tittle-tattle, its fops and its foibles." ⁴

Also, "In a full experience of the play, the satirical dialogue, and the sharply realized hypocrites who speak it, create the dominant impression."⁵ Lady Sneerwell is a leader of scandalmongers and often has a gathering. We have their lively scene:

Crabtree: But Ladies that's true have you heard the news?--
Mrs. Candour: What Sir, do you mean the Report of--
Crab.: No ma'am that's not it.--Miss Nicely is going to be married to her own Footman.
Cand.: Impossible!
Crab.: Ask Sir Benjamin.
Sir Benjamin: 'Tis very true Ma'am--everything is fix'd and the Wedding Livery bespoke.
Crab.: Yes and they *do* say there were pressing Reasons for' t.
Lady Sneerwell: Why I have heard something of this before.
(1.1)⁶

Thus Crabtree and Lady Sneerwell like to egg members on to circulate further scandals, by their hackneyed phrases "they do say" and "I have heard." These scandal scenes of the play seem to be very effective in causing the audience to laugh.

The drama is a didactic comedy that evokes laughter and satirical perception by ridiculing persons who are vain, affected, foolish, or malignant, and especially adopts a poignant dramatic satire directed against the cruel small talk of fashionable London. We are treated to a direct satirical portrait of hypocritical sensibility in the person Joseph Surface among the characters in the play.

This article is intended to show Joseph Surface's language and manner reflecting hypocrisy expressed in Sheridan's ridiculous way.

II

Joseph Surface is a member of Lady Sneerwell's scandal circle. He has a good reputation; his speech and behaviour like those of sententious and sincere gentleman, are appealing. The play introduces Joseph's reputation compared with his brother Charles through the wicked reporter Snake's speech:

here are two young men, to whom Sir Peter has acted as a kind of Guardian since their Father's death, the elder possessing the most amiable Character and universally well spoken of, the other the most dissipated and extravagant young Fellow in the Kingdom without Friends or Character--

the former an avow'd Admirer of your Ladyship, and apparently your Favourite; the latter attached to Maria, Sir Peter's ward (1.1)

Here Snake tells Lady Sneerwell about the respectful reputation of Joseph in society. Sir Peter Teazle praises his morality: "Joseph is indeed a model for the young men of the Age. He is a man of Sentiment--and acts up to the Sentiments he professes" (1.2). He appears to be sincere and good enough to make others trust him. However, Joseph's dual personality is easily sniffed out by Lady Sneerwell, leading her crew of scandalmongers, who suspects his only motive for approaching Maria is financial interest.

Snake: Now indeed--your conduct appears consistent--but how came you and Mr. Surface so confidential--
Lady Sneerwell: For our mutual interest; I have found him out a long time since--I know him to be artful selfish and malicious--in short, a Sentimental Knave.
Snake: Yes, Sir Peter vows He has not his equal in England--and above all--he praises him as a *man of Sentiment*.
Sneer.: True and with the assistance of his Sentiments and Hypocrisy he has brought him entirely into his Interest with regard to Maria. (1.1).

Like Sir Peter, Lady Sneerwell also frequently gives the word "Sentiments" to Joseph. For the lady, however, his sentiments stand with hypocrisy as in "his Sentiments and Hypocrisy." Those words reflect Joseph's appearance and nature.

Joseph's surface appearance suits his name. He seems to be pious, full of sententious statements about morality, and a man of honour. Behind this mask he is a hypocrite, completely uncharitable and, despite his instantly available moral sentiments, a nearly successful seducer of his friend's wife.

We must note that the words "Sentimental" and "Sentiment" had intellectual and moral implication in the eighteenth century. "A man of Sentiment" was a man who always acted on his "opinion or view as to what is right or agreeable." ⁷

Joseph is a man of the high-flown moral sentiment. His speech is full of such epigrams as "O Madam Punctuality is a species of constancy, a very unfashionable quality in a Lady" (4.3). Sir Peter Teazle continues until as late as Act V to believe that Joseph is a sincere moralist: "He is a man of Sentiment--well! there is nothing in the world so noble

as a man of Sentiment!" (4.3). Lady Teazle, on the contrary, is tired of his moral phase, calling him "Mr. Logick" (4.3).

His hypocrisy is well expressed in his speech and manner. On meeting Lady Sneerwell and Snake, Joseph praises the scoundrel reporter: "it is impossible for me to suspect a man of Mr. Snake's sensibility and discernment--" (1.1). After the reporter goes off, the young hypocrite criticizes him: "that Fellow hasn't Virtue enough to be faithful even to his own Villanity" (1.1). He often easily affirms to others' opinions: "Certainly, Madam," "Just so, indeed Madam," and "'Efaith 'tis very true Lady Sneerwell." Those positive responses of his in pragmatics helps him to save others' face; he can say something to lessen the possible threat.⁸ The young hypocrite pretends to cry over his brother's ruin: "aye, poor Charles! I'm sure I wish it was in my Power to be any essential Service to him--for the man who does not share in the Distresses of a Brother, even tho' merited by his own misconduct" (1.1), and also remonstrates to his friends on their criticising his brother: "This may be entertainment to you Gentlemen but you pay very little regard to the Feelings of a Brother" (1.2). He is in the habit of complimenting: "Mrs. Candour is a little talkative Everybody allows her to be the best natured and best sort of Woman" (1.1).

A hypocrite always hides his real feelings to deceive others into believing him. However he sometimes carelessly lets his hypocrisy slip "I *must* try to recover myself--and put a little Charity into my Face however" (5.1). Katharine Worth comments on Sheridan's weight to Joseph's dual personality "sentiment and hypocrisy":

We approach the truth of Joseph by an opposite route. In his case the public image is a deliberate mask which he holds in front of him to obscure his busy inner life. Ironically, we gain much closer admittance to the hidden self of the hypocrite who hides everything than we do to the open scapegrace who appears to have nothing to hide. In this paradox Sheridan's technique is seen at its most subtle.⁹

III

In this section, we will see linguistic forms reflecting

Joseph Surface's hypocrisy. He belongs to the upper class, and is supposed not to speak in low and vulgar language but to converse with other members in the society in polite and courtly-genteel terminology.

Joseph makes a polite appearance before Snake and Lady Sneerwell by greeting "My dear Lady Sneerwell--how do you do--to Day? Mr. Snake your most Obedient" (1.1) and "Sir, your very devoted" (1.1). Those phrases were the eighteenth-century formal salutations. He is constantly refined and formal in his phatic or social utterances, by which he keeps his distance from others. Those are positive politeness. Janet Holmes mentions about politeness:

Being polite means expressing respect towards the person you are talking to and avoiding offending them." and defines "politeness" as "behaviour which actively expresses positive concern for others, as well as non-imposing distancing behaviour."¹⁰

Also his adroitness at giving positive politeness, is Joseph uses courtesy titles like "sir" and "madam" in addressing his fashionable people. He consistently call Lady Teazle "my dear Lady Teazle," "Madam," "Ma'am," "your Ladyship" and "my Dear--Madam." He calls Sir Peter Teazle "my Dear Sir Peter," "Sir Peter" and "my good Sir Peter." Thus he often adds the splendid attributes "Dear" and "good." We find his trickiness with his changing modes of address in the very ridiculous risky screen scene where Joseph confusedly hides Sir Peter and his wife in his room.

Lady Teazle: [*Peeping from the screen*] Couldn't I steal off?
Surface: Keep close my Angel--
Sir Peter: [*Peeping out*] Joseph--tax him home--
Surf.: Back--my dear Friend!
Teaz.: [*Peeping*] Couldn't you Lock Sir Peter in?
Surf.: Be still--my Life.
Pet.: [*Peeping*] You're sure--the little Millener won't blab?
Surf.: In! in! my good Sir Peter--foregad--I wish I had a Key to the Door.-- (4.3)

He changes the terms of addressing such as "my angel" and "my Life" in proportion to the tension of the scene.

Joseph maintains both a respectful attitude and a posture of petition by employing some genteel humble phrases: "I beg your Pardon," "if you please," and "now oblige me." And he humbly entreats: "will you honour--me with a hearing?" (5.3) and "Do--do--pray--give my best duty and affection" (5.2).

He respects power or authority enough to avoid offending more powerful people and entreats politely.

He often pays a typical smooth, disingenuous compliment; for example, as to Snake: "Madam it is impossible for me to suspect a man of Mr. Snake's sensibility and discernment" (1.1). He has other compliments: "Ah! Mrs. Candour--if everybody had your Forbearance and Good nature!" (1.1), "a Person of your Ladyship's superior accomplishments and understanding" (1.1). Holmes mentions about compliments:

The primary function of a compliment is most obviously affective and social, rather than referential or informative. They are generally described as positively affective speech act serving to increase or consolidate the solidarity between the speaker and addressee.¹¹

Compliments are positive politeness devices of his in order for him to give a good impression to others.

The young hypocrite easily agrees to others' opinions with such modal adverbial phrases as "Certainly" and "to be sure" initially: "Certainly, Madam", "Doubtless Ma'am" "Just so, indeed Madam," "Egad that's true" and "'Efaith 'tis very true Lady Sneerwell." Those modal adverbial phrases pleonastically exaggerate the speaker's confidence. Holmes comments on agreeing: "Agreeing with others, confirming their opinions and assertions . . . is supportive and positively polite behaviour."¹²

Thus, the young fellow is consistently absorbed in impressing others favorably with his courteous language and manner. He seldom or never utters improper language frankly and unhesitatingly. Joseph's uncle Sir Oliver disguising himself as a poor gentleman, Mr. Stanley, comes to him and he converses with the old man politely to send him away smoothly.

Joseph: Sir--I beg you ten thousand Pardons--for keeping--
you a moment waiting--Mr. Stanley--I presume--
Oliver: At your Service--
Jos.: Sir--I beg you will do me the honour to sit down--
I entreat you Sir--
Oliv.: Dear Sir there's no occasion.--too civil by half!--
[aside]
Jos.: I have not the Pleasure of knowing you Mr. Stanley--
but I am extremely happy to see you look so well--you were
nearly related to my Mother--I think Mr. Stanley. (5.1)

Joseph behaves like a smooth-faced fellow. He gives some exaggerated polite expressions here: "ten thousand Pardons,"

"the honour to sit down," and "the Pleasure of knowing you." These pieces of Joseph's hackneyed polite language sound too highflown and frivolous to be appreciated. Sir Oliver is disgusted at his hypocritical politeness, returning "too civil by half." However a great confusion breaks down his polite attitude. Joseph is struggling to retrieve Lady Teazle's confidence when her husband visits him. The lady-killer is ridiculously confused and curses his servant, smoothing over the difficult situation.

Joseph: Sdeath, you Blockhead--what do you want--
Servant: I beg Pardon Sir but I thought you wouldn't chuse
Sir Peter to come up without announcing him--?
Jos.: Sir Peter--oons and the Devil--
Lady Teazle: Sir Peter! O Lud! I'm ruin'd--I'm ruin'd--
Serv.: Sir twasn't I let him in.
Teazle: O I'm undone--what will become of me now Mr.
Logick?--O mercy He's on the Stairs--I'll get behind
here--and if ever I am so imprudent again-- [*Goes behind
the Screen.*]
Jos.: Give me that--Book!-- [*Sits down--Servant pretends to
adjust his Hair.*]
Sir Peter: Aye, ever improving himself!--Mr. Surface--
Mr. Surface!--
Jos.: Oh!--my Dear Sir Peter--I beg your Pardon--[*gaping
and throwing away the Book*] I have been dozing over a
stupid Book! well--I am much obliged to you for this
Call--you haven't been here I believe since I fitted up
this Room-- Books you know are the only Things I am
a Coxcomb in. (4.3)

He gets too upset to keep speaking in a refined way. He cries out the swear-words "Sdeath, you Blockhead" and "oons and the Devil," in a flurry here and soon he tries to calm himself and change his speech into the polite one, to the visitor. After Lady Teazle happens to see Joseph getting in with Maria on his knees, he is confused: "Nay but Maria do not leave me with a Frown--by all that's honest I swear--Gad's life here's Lady Teazle. [*aside*]--you must not--no you shall not--for tho' I have the greatest Regard for Lady Teazle--" (2.2). He struggles to overcome the risky situation only to find the two women doubted him. His hypocrisy after all loses in the game.

We find Sheridan's satire on the eighteenth-century surface morality and disgusting genteelness in the fashionable society through Joseph Surface's speech and manner. The hypocrite tries to camouflage his calculating, self-interested self with polite speech and manner, but in vain.

Notes

1. John Loftis, *Sheridan and the Drama of Georgian England* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Prs., 1977) 99-100.
2. Katharine Worth, *Sheridan and Goldsmith* (Houndmills: The Macmillan Prs. Ltd., 1922) 138.
3. Worth 138.
4. Jebb, E. M., introd, *Sheridan's School for Scandal* (Oxford: Clarendon Prs., 1928) 6.
5. John Loftis 87.
6. The edition used throughout is Richard B. Sheridan, "The School for Scandal." *Sheridan's Play*, ed. Cecil Price (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Prs., 1975) 217-300.
7. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed.): *sentiment* (6. a).
8. George Yule, *Pragmatics* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Prs., 1996) 61.
9. Worth 154.
10. Janet Holmes, *Women, Men and Politeness* (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1995) 4-5.
11. Holmes 118.
12. Holmes 59.