Self Gratification and Unity in The School for Scandal

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Behind Sheridan’s play, *The School for Scandal*, rests a history of convention and forms already accepted in the theatrical world. In the tradition of a Comedy of Manners, Sheridan is mocking the society that he is a part of. He takes the foibles of human beings and turns them into fictional characters in order to provide a mirror for the society that he sees as licentious and focused on scandal. The whole point of the Comedies of Manners is to put down accepted norms and build up new ones for the betterment of society. For Sheridan, the accepted form in the dramatical cannon was a play of sentiments, but instead of following that he turns his play around and abuses the characters of sentiment and rewards those characters who are honest. However, these characters, Charles and Lady Teazle, follow a code of honesty less strictly attuned to the whole truth, but more of an honesty with omissions. They do not spout hypocritical sentiments but they are not being completely honest in their reasons for reformation. Sheridan uses Charles and Lady Teazle in order to promote a new model of society wherein self-gratification is the determining feature, as opposed to the old form of hypocritical sentiments. On a side note, these same characters also boycott the fracturing element of scandal in their quests for self-gratification and hold up the idea of unity in family life instead.

I realize that the ideas of self-gratification and unity should not really fit together, however in this case, I think they complement one another utterly. The only way in which Charles and Lady Teazle can receive the money that will gratify them is by reforming their personal lives and holding true to the bonds of familial good. Lady Teazle, for example, has to
give up the school for scandal and remain completely faithful to her husband, Sir Peter. In order to impress his Uncle Oliver, and thus attain his fortune, Charles is going to marry and devote himself to his wife and to his benefactor. In both their cases the urge for self-gratification, namely monetary gain, can only be accomplished by their show of dedication to family life.

In order to prove my belief that they act solely out of an urge for self-gratification I would like to turn now to the play itself. For each character, Charles and Lady Teazle, my doubts about the complete honesty of their actions was raised in the scenes where they play an integral role. The scene where Charles’ true nature shows through clearest is in the Auction Scene and Lady Teazle is revealed best in the Screen Scene.

In the Auction Scene, Charles sells off his family’s portraits in order to raise capital for himself. He has already proved himself degenerate by selling off the books and silver and in this, the final act of his desecration of family unity, he is committing the deed that will forever sever him from his Uncle’s good will. The evidence for how Sir Oliver is disillusioned by his nephew and views the selling of the family canvases as the last straw occurs on page 39: “Oh, I’ll never forgive him this! Never!” In this quote Sir Oliver’s patience with the profligate Charles snaps and Oliver vows with these words of anger that he will never name Charles his heir. However, circumstances arise to change his mind soon after when Charles refuses to sell his (Oliver’s) picture. The fact that Charles will not sell the portrait of Oliver is a key point to the understanding of his character. Charles’ refusal to sell could be interpreted in two ways: an actual love of the old man or a fear that the old man will come back and disinherit him for his disrespect. The idea that Charles could love somebody he never appears to have met is ludicrous, and as such, the fear theory has a lot more credibility to it. Even a dog knows that it is
not wise to bite the hand that feeds it, and so Charles too can be seen as afraid to take that final step in selling off the painting of the man that has been his main benefactor.

Although the point most people take away after reading the screen scene is that Charles cannot be all that bad if he will not sell Oliver’s picture, I believe that such is not the case. In accordance with that I would say that the main image that comes across after the reading of this scene is less Charles’ goodness and more a combination of his act of self-preservation and Oliver’s vanity. Charles’s refusal to sell the picture comes about because of his pursuit of the hope that Oliver will really come back, announce him the prodigal son, and immediately bequeath to Charles all his fortune. And Oliver’s decision that Charles is the prodigal is due to his own vanity in the belief that Charles really loves him because he would not sell the picture.

After all, moments before Oliver vowed to never forgive Charles, but now he proclaims, “I forgive him everything!” (43). Oliver’s sudden reversal of thought is solely attributable to the flattery his vanity is receiving, and which in turn causes him to be willing to overlook all of Charles’ reckless behaviors.

Even in the very next instance when Charles writes a check to Stanley for one hundred pounds, the generosity of his impulse is downplayed, and the recklessness of it is emphasized. This rushing forward without thought is apparent in Rowley’s exhortations to Charles to think about his action first, “Yet, Charles, believe me, one hour’s reflection—‘ (45). Even more importantly, the last sight the viewer has of Charles is his call of “and now for hazard” (45). This line merely serves to further portray Charles’ profligate nature of not thinking first, gambling, woman, and enjoying wine with his cronies. Any goodness in his actions is eclipsed by his own nature of indulgence and high-flying fun.
This idea of Charles’ goodness leads me to restate that although Charles is certainly not “good” by our own modern standards, he is definitely an improvement on his brother Joseph, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the Screen Scene. Looking at the Screen Scene also means a chance to explore the character of Lady Teazle and her value system.

In the Screen Scene, Joseph is hiding everybody from one another in a futile effort to keep all his plots separate and it is Charles, the new character emerging in opposition to Joseph, who comes in and destroys the previous holder of public good will. Joseph, as the character of sentiments, is the one who the theater going public had come to realize as the “hero.” However, in Sheridan’s play the character of sentiments is actually a hypocrite and an “anti-hero.” In the scene as soon as Charles enters the room, one instinctively realizes that the sentimental character’s reign is about to come to an end. The reckless, forthrightness of Charles’ character cannot allow secrets, and so when he learns there is a woman hiding in the room his immediate reaction is, “’Slife, let’s unveil her!” (55). A secondary, but equally important, reason for Charles’ desire to throw down the screen is because he wants the gratification of seeing that his morality spewing brother has the same basic urges as normal men. Moments previously Charles had said to Sir Peter that Joseph “is too moral by half—and so apprehensive of his good name, as he calls it, that I suppose he would as soon let a priest into his house as a girl” (55). Thus it is, that when given a chance to gratify himself in having a laugh at his brother’s expense, Charles does not hesitate a moment in flinging down the screen. Charles emerges as the new “hero” in the dramatic form simply because he wants his self-gratifying actions to be observed by all whereas Joseph tries to hide all his attempts at achieving pleasure. Charles tears down the screen that Joseph has been trying so hard to erect and in that action he reveals himself as the new “hero,” because he brings the lies to light. In his own rise, Charles turns the old hero of
sentiments into the “anti-hero,” and this all comes about because of the self-gratifying principles that he follows in his life.

Turning to Lady Teazle’s part in the Screen Scene, I would argue that she too is obviously acting out of a desire to further her own position when she refuses to back up Joseph’s story. She has, after all, just heard her husband say that he is going to leave her all his money and give her an independent settlement while she is still living. There is no way she would think to jeopardize that sure thing by siding with Joseph who can offer her nothing, especially since she has also heard that Joseph plans on marrying Maria. Lady Teazle’s whole occupation in life has been, as the play tell us, an effort to better her own position in society. First Lady Teazle married Sir Peter in order to escape a life in the country and then she was going to have an affair with Joseph in order to fit in better with the scandalous school. Everything Lady Teazle does is based on the idea of self-gratification. In the act of reforming and devoting herself to Sir Peter, she follows, as she has all along, the option that will give her the most in return. As another character reforming in opposition to the values of the society headed by Lady Sneerwell, Lady Teazle, like Charles, is promoting the idea that one should follow the path which will lead to the most personal gain. Lady Teazle is also different from the scandalous school because she replaces the spread of rumors and the break up of the family structure with the ideals of privacy and family unity. She is going to give up scandal mongering and all association with the fast set in order to become the perfect, attentive wife.

And yet, the reader must question for how long Charles and Lady Teazle will follow through with their present courses. At the end when Sir Peter outlines their new life together he repeats an idea which he had said earlier and which they quickly deviated from. For on page 30, Sir Peter said, “and we shall now be the happiest couple—” and then on page 75, he echoes the
same sentiment when he says, “And may you live as happily together as Lady Teazle and I intend to do!” The first time that Sir Peter expressed this idea, he and Lazy Teazle fell to bickering again two lines later, which is why one must raise serious doubts as to how long they will remain “happy” this time around. The idea that they will soon fall out of sorts with one another is given further justice if one looks at page 74. Lady Teazle tells Lady Sneerwell to take her name out of the ranks of the scandalous school, and in parting Lady Sneerwell replies, “May your husband live these fifty years!” Lady Sneerwell is implying that she hopes Lady Teazle will be cursed by the presence of a live husband for a good long time. Following this is a conversation between Lady Teazle and her husband that proves she is not as devoted to the new happy image of them as she is pretending to be.

Sir Peter: Oons! What a fury!
Lady Teazle: A malicious creature, indeed!
Sir Peter: Hey! Not for her last wish?
Lady Teazle: Oh no! (74)

Lady Teazle could be joking when she refers to Lady Teazle as “malicious,” but it is also possible that she is being entirely serious. In the case that she is being serious, then Lady Teazle cannot be as resigned to the happy marriage as she appears since she is implying that she hopes Sir Peter will not live another fifty years. It all depends on how the line is read. Also just the fact that Sir Peter is questioning the motives behind Lady Teazle’s comments is a sign that he does not really trust her as of yet.

Nowhere is the fact that Sir Peter shouldn’t trust Lady Teazle’s motives more evident than in the epilogue. In the epilogue Lady Teazle’s character comes out and says that she is sorry to lose the company of the society that she so enjoyed being a part of. “I must deplore/That the gay dream of dissipation’s o’er” (77). I believe that Lady Teazle has not resigned herself totally to the loss of all her self-gratifying pleasures. Perhaps she plans on waiting for Sir
Peter’s death so that she can return to the extravagances of gay London, but maybe her urge to fulfill her wants will cause her to break away from Sir Peter again. Lady Teazle has begun the mirage of being Sir Peter’s devoted spouse out of the impulse to ingratiate herself with the man who controls the purse strings, but it is likely she will continue with the charade only as long as she continues to get what she wants out of it.

The same goes for Charles, in that he will remain a reformed character for only so long as he feels like it. At the end of the play he says, “Why, as to reforming, Sir Peter, I’ll make no promises, and that I take to be proof that I intend to set about it” (75). Although, Charles is suggesting that he is going to reform, he is not going to make any promises about the success of the endeavor. Even with Maria as his “gentle guide” (75), or perhaps especially because of her, one doubts the ease of Charles’ reform. Maria is a surface character with no strong will or defining characteristics, the idea that she will be able to keep a man like Charles from doing whatever he likes is laughable. She is, after all, a “gentle guide” and her gentility will not help her in keeping Charles to a straight and narrow path.

The play comes down to the fact that Charles and Lady Teazle acting on their impulses and their need for money are the new “heroes.” It is their qualities that one should favor in society in contrast to the old forms of sentiments and lies. Sheridan’s new model of society, then, is promoting a world in which people are at least true to themselves and act in a fashion that shows their own drives for self-gratification. In the age this play was written, “Surface and Depth” is the distinguishing feature, and to look at The School for Scandal in these terms shows that everyone presents a surface to the world at large. The surface that they project however is almost invariably a lie or a front for deeper machinations, and it is this depth of activity in the human being that is of the most interest. Instead of just looking at the surfaces of characters, like
Joseph’s sentiments or Charles’ and Lady Teazle’s surface reformations, Sheridan is challenging his age to examine the depths within themselves and see what they are hiding, what they really want, and what they really believe in.
List of Works Cited