

The Rivals

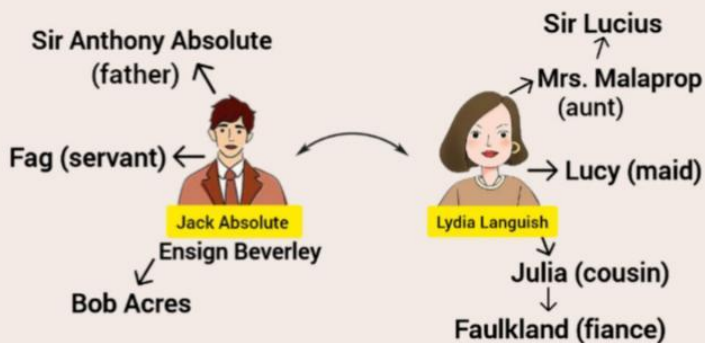
Richard Brinsley Sheridan

Comedy of Manners

With Notes



The Rivals



Background, Themes,
Summary, Symbols & Analysis

Richard Brinsley Sheridan

Introduction

The Rivals by Richard Brinsley Sheridan is a classic comedy of manners that takes place in the fashionable town of Bath, England, during the eighteenth century. Filled with witty dialogue, false identities, and romantic entanglements, the play follows the lives of a colorful cast of characters as they navigate the complexities of love, social status, and personal identity. Through its clever satire and humorous plot twists, “The Rivals” offers a

captivating glimpse into the absurdities of 18th-century society while exploring timeless themes of love, rivalry, and the pursuit of happiness.

Brief Biography of Sheridan

Richard Brinsley Sheridan was born on October 30, 1751 in Dublin, Ireland, but was brought to England at the age of eight and never went back. He was educated at a British boarding school. He came from a literary family: his father was an actor, his mother was also a successful playwright and novelist, while his grandfather had been a good friend of Jonathan Swift. After leaving the school, Sheridan moved with his family to Bath, where he fell in love with Elizabeth Linley, the beautiful young singer. Their relationship became the inspiration for some of his later works. Sheridan's most famous plays include "*The Rivals*" (1775) and "*The School for Scandal*" (1777), both are classic comedies of manners. Because of his great works, Sheridan got a job managing the famous Drury Lane Theater, which he later owned. In addition to his theatrical career, Sheridan also served as a Member of Parliament (MP) for many years. In 1808, when the Drury Lane Theater burned down in a fire, he was bankrupted and removed from parliament. Sheridan faced financial difficulties in his final years of life.

The Rivals: Background

The Rivals by Richard Brinsley Sheridan is set during a period known as the Georgian era, specifically in the town of Bath, England. The Georgian era (1714-1830) named after the Hanoverian kings George I, George II, George III and George IV, a time marked by significant social and political changes in England. *The Rivals* satirizes social conventions, including the importance of status, arranged marriages, and the pretentiousness of the wealthy elite.

The Rivals: Summary

Two servants, **Fag** and **Thomas**, meet in Bath. Thomas tells Fag that **Sir Anthony Absolute**, Fag's former master, suddenly brought his whole household to town. Fag teases Thomas, saying he now works for **Ensign Beverley**, who is actually Sir Anthony's son **Jack** in disguise. Jack is pretending to be an Ensign Beverley to woo Lydia Languish, a wealthy heiress.

In **Lydia's** room, she and her maid **Lucy** discuss novels. Lydia's cousin **Julia** just arrived in Bath with her guardian Sir Anthony. Lydia tells Julia she's in love with **Ensign Beverley**, but her aunt **Mrs. Malaprop** disapproves. Mrs. Malaprop is secretly writing love letters to an Irish baronet, **Sir Lucius**. Julia is shocked that Lydia would marry a poor ensign and give up her fortune. Lydia mocks Julia's fiancé Faulkland's jealousy, but Julia defends him, saying his love makes him act that way.

Sir Anthony and Mrs. Malaprop scold Lydia for liking Ensign Beverley. They want Lydia to marry Jack Absolute, but Lydia refuses. They plan how to make Lydia and Jack accept the match. After Sir Anthony leaves, Mrs. Malaprop worries about Lydia. She asks Lucy if she told Lydia about the love letters, but Lucy denies it. Mrs. Malaprop gives Lucy another letter for Sir Lucius. Alone, Lucy reflects on how she profits from delivering letters for lovers. She revealed Lydia and Jack's affair to Mrs. Malaprop and made Sir Lucius think he's writing to Lydia instead of Mrs. Malaprop.

In Jack's room, Jack and Fag plan to hide Jack's courtship of Lydia from Sir Anthony. **Faulkland** enters and urges Jack to ask Mrs. Malaprop and his father for Lydia's hand in marriage. Jack worries Lydia won't accept him once she knows he's wealthy. Faulkland is in a bad mood because he worries about Julia when they're apart. Jack reveals Julia is in Bath and convinces Faulkland to stay. Acres tells them Julia is well, but Faulkland storms out jealous.

Acres, unaware of Jack's courtship of Lydia, talks about trying to court Lydia. Sir Anthony arrives and wants Jack to marry someone to make his fortune. Jack refuses, saying he's in love already. Sir Anthony curses him and leaves.

Lucy tells Fag that his master, Jack, has a new rival: Captain Absolute. Fag hurries to tell Jack that the woman he loves and the woman his father wants him to marry are the same person.

Jack sees his father on the street and makes up with him. Jack promises to marry any woman his father chooses, even if she's old or ugly. Sir Anthony is upset that Jack doesn't care if his future wife is beautiful.

Julia finds Faulkland at her lodgings. He doubts her love for him and she runs off crying.

Jack visits Mrs. Malaprop. They read a letter from Jack (posing as Absolute) mocking Mrs. Malaprop's language. Jack asks to meet Lydia, and Mrs. Malaprop calls her down. Lydia is shocked to see Jack and he explains his disguise to see her. Mrs. Malaprop misinterprets their conversation and sends Lydia away.

Sir Lucius convinces Bob Acres to challenge Beverley (Captain Absolute) to a duel over Lydia. David, Acres' servant, tries to dissuade him, but Acres is determined. Absolute arrives, and Acres asks him to deliver the challenge letter to Beverley.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Malaprop praises Absolute to Lydia, who believes she's talking about Beverley. Lydia won't look at Absolute and wonders why her aunt doesn't recognize him. Absolute pretends to be nervous and eventually reveals his true identity to Lydia. Lydia is furious and rejects him. Absolute and Mrs. Malaprop leave, disappointed.

Absolute is challenged to a duel by Sir Lucius for unknown reasons. Faulkland agrees to be Absolute's second. Faulkland receives a letter from Julia, pardoning him for his behavior, but he feels guilty for not asking for forgiveness himself. Faulkland tells

Julia he must flee England, pretending he killed someone in a duel. Julia agrees to elope with him, but Faulkland admits he lied about the duel. Julia is angry and refuses to marry him.

Later, Lydia tells Julia about Absolute's deception, but Julia already knew. Lydia reminisces about her time with Beverley, and Julia begs her not to ruin her chance at happiness. Fag enters and tells them about the upcoming duel involving Absolute, Faulkland, Sir Lucius, and Acres. They rush off to stop it.

On King's-Mead-Fields, Acres and Sir Lucius wait for their opponents. Acres starts losing courage. Faulkland and Absolute arrive, but Sir Lucius mistakes Faulkland for Beverley. Absolute confesses he was pretending to be Beverley and offers to fight Acres instead. Acres refuses to fight, and Sir Lucius calls him a coward. Sir Lucius and Absolute start fighting. The others arrive, demanding an explanation. Mrs. Malaprop confesses she wrote a love letter to Sir Lucius. Lydia says she loves Absolute. Sir Lucius shows a love letter from Delia, but Lydia denies writing it. Mrs. Malaprop admits she wrote it. Sir Lucius gives up on marrying Mrs. Malaprop and renounces his claim on Lydia. Sir Anthony advises Julia to marry Faulkland, promising he'll improve after they wed. Acres promises to throw a party for the engaged couples.

The Rivals: Title Significance

The title "The Rivals" is significant because it refers to the characters who compete or contend with each other for various reasons throughout the play. For example, Jack Absolute vs. Bob Acres are rivals for the affection of Lydia Languish. Both men vie for Lydia's love, leading to comedic misunderstandings and conflicts, including a duel between them.

Captain Jack Absolute's dual identity creates a rivalry within himself as he struggles to navigate his love for Lydia while also obeying his father's wishes for him to marry for financial gain.

Lydia is a romantic idealist who desires love over wealth or social status, setting her in opposition to the societal norms and expectations of her aunt, Mrs. Malaprop, and other characters.

Mrs. Malaprop's frequent malapropisms highlight her rivalry with language itself, as she consistently misuses words in her attempts to appear educated and sophisticated.

The Rivals: Themes

Love and Courtship

The Rivals by Richard Brinsley Sheridan delves into the complexities of love and courtship, particularly focusing on the obstacles that arise in romantic relationships. Characters like **Lydia Languish** and **Captain Absolute** navigate issues of love versus

social status, while others, like Mrs. Malaprop and Sir Anthony Absolute, have their own ideas about suitable matches.

Social Class and Status

A prominent theme in the play is the importance of social class and status in 18th-century society. The characters' interactions are often determined by their perceived social standing, leading to misunderstandings, miscommunications, and attempts to maintain or elevate one's social position.

Appearance vs. Reality

Sheridan explores the theme of appearance vs. reality, particularly through the use of false identities and disguises. Characters like **Captain Absolute** and **Faulkland** adopt disguises to pursue their romantic interests, leading to humorous and ironic situations where appearances are deceiving. They pretend to be people they are not, often by affecting to be more intelligent than they truly are.

Gender Roles

The Rivals also touches on gender roles and expectations in 18th-century society. Characters like **Lydia** Languish challenge traditional gender roles by asserting their independence and

agency in matters of love and marriage, while others, like **Mrs. Malaprop**, adhere more closely to societal expectations.

The Rivals: Symbols

The Duel: The duel between Jack Absolute and Bob Acres symbolizes masculine honor and pride. It reflects the societal expectation of men to defend their honor through dueling.

The Love Letters: Lydia Languish's love letters symbolize her romantic idealism and desire for a passionate, unconventional love affair.

The Malapropisms: Mrs. Malaprop's frequent misuse of words, known as malapropisms, serves as a symbol of her desire to appear educated and sophisticated.

The Setting: Bath: The town of Bath serves as a symbolic backdrop for the play, representing the fashionable society of the 18th century. Bath was known for its social scene, reflecting the characters' preoccupation with status, appearance, and societal norms.

These symbols contribute to the thematic richness of "The Rivals," highlighting themes of love, appearance versus reality, societal expectations, and the absurdity of rigid social conventions.

The Rivals: Conclusion

In conclusion, "The Rivals" by Richard Brinsley Sheridan is a timeless comedy that explores themes of love, mistaken identity, social class, and human folly. Through its witty dialogue, intricate plot, and memorable characters, the play entertains audiences while offering insightful commentary on the absurdities of 18th-century society. As the various rivalries and misunderstandings are resolved, the characters learn valuable lessons about the true nature of love and the importance of honesty and self-awareness.