The third and last of Sheridan’s great comedies, *The Critic,* was produced in 1779, *The School for Scandal* meantime continuing to draw larger houses than any other play every time it was put on the stage. *The Critic* is perhaps the highest proof of Sheridan’s skill as a dramatist, for in it he has worked out, with perfect success for all time, a theme which, often as it has been attempted, no other dramatist has ever succeeded in redeeming from tedious circumstantiality and ephemeral personalities. The laughable infirmities of all classes connected with the stage, —authors, actors, patrons, and audience,—are touched off with the lightest of hands; the fun is directed, not at individuals, but at absurdities that grow out of the circum­stances of the stage as naturally and inevitably as weeds in a garden. It seems that he had accumulated notes, as his habit was, for another comedy to be called *Affectation.* Rut apparently he failed to hit upon any story that would enable him to present his various types of affectation in dramatic interaction. The similar difficulty in his satire against scandal, of finding sufficiently interesting materials for the scandal-mongers, he had surmounted with a violent effort. This other difficulty he might have surmounted too, if he had had leisure to “ sit and think ” till the happy thought came. But his energies were now called off in a different direction. His only dramatic composition during the remaining thirty-six years of his life was *Pizarro,* pro­duced in 1799—a tragedy in which he made liberal use of some of the arts ridiculed in the person of Mr Puff. He is said also to have written more of *The Stranger* than he was willing to acknowledge.

He entered parliament for Stafford in 1780. It was not a sudden ambition to shine on a wider stage after having gained the highest honours of the theatre. Ever since leaving Harrow he had dabbled a little in politics, had sketched letters in the manner of Junius, and begun an answer to Johnson’s *Taxation no Tyranny.* But he had not made any public appearance as a politician until his acquaintance with Fox led to his appearing on a West­minster platform with the great leader of opposition. Apparently he owed his election for Stafford to more substantial persuasives than the charms of his eloquence. He paid the burgesses five guineas each for the honour of representing them. It was the custom of the time. His first speech in parliament, like the first speech of a great parliamentarian of this century, between whose career and Sheridan’s there are many striking points of resemblance and contrast, was a failure. But he persevered, spoke little for a time and chiefly on financial questions, soon took a place among the best speakers in the House, and under the wing of Fox filled subordinate offices in the short-lived ministries of 1782 and 1783. He was under­secretary for foreign affairs in the Rockingham ministry, and a secretary of the treasury in the Coalition ministry. This was rapid promotion for a man who owed everything to his own talents, and yet not an excessive recognition of the services of such a speaker as he is described as having proved himself at this exciting period. In debate he had the keenest of eyes for the weak places in an opponent’s argument, and the happy art of putting them in an irresistibly ludicrous light without losing his good temper or his presence of mind. In those heated days of parlia­mentary strife he was almost the only man of mark that was never called out, and yet he had not his match in the weapon of ridicule.

The occasion that gave Sheridan a chance of rising above the reputation of an extremely effective and brilliant debater into the ranks of great parliamentary orators was the impeachment of Warren Hastings. His speeches in that proceeding were by the unanimous acknowledgment of his contemporaries among the greatest delivered in that

generation of great orators. The first was in 1787, on Burke’s proposal that Hastings should be impeached. Sheridan spoke for three hours, and the effect of his oratory was such that it was unanimously agreed to adjourn and postpone the final decision till the House should be in a calmer mood. Of this, and of his last great speech on the subject in 1794, only brief abstracts have been preserved ; but with the second, the four days’ speech in Westminster Hall, on the occasion so brilliantly described by Macaulay, posterity has been more fortunate. The reader should, however, be cautioned against accepting the version given in a collection of Sheridan’s speeches published by a friend after his death. This long passed current as a genuine specimen of Sheridan’s eloquence at its best, in spite of Moore’s protest that he had in his possession a copy of a shorthand writer’s report, and that the two did not correspond. But Gurney’s verbatim reports of the speeches on both sides at the trial were published at Sir G. Cornewall Lewis’s instigation in 1859, and from them we are able to form an idea of Sheridan’s power as an orator. There are passages here and there of gaudily figurative rhetoric, loose ornament, and decla­matory hyperbole such as form the bulk of the incorrect version; but the strong common sense, close argumentative force, and masterly presentation of telling facts enable us to understand the impression produced by the speech at the time. @@1

Sheridan’s long parliamentary career terminated in 1812. He could not help being to the last a conspicuous figure both in society and in parliament, but from the time of the break-up of the Whig party on the secession of Burke he was more or less an “independent member,” and his isolation was complete after the death of Fox. The Begum speech remained his highest oratorical achievement. By it he is fixed in the tradition of the House as one of its greatest names. But his opinions on other great questions were given with a force and eloquence worthy of his position. When Burke denounced the French Revolution, Sheridan joined with Fox in vindicating the principle of non-intervention. He maintained that the French people should be allowed to settle their constitution and manage their affairs in their own way. But when the republic was succeeded by the empire, and it became apparent that France under Napoleon would interfere with the affairs of its neighbours, he employed his eloquence in denouncing Napoleon and urging the prosecution of the war. One of his most celebrated speeches was delivered in support of strong measures against the mutineers at the Nore. When the Whigs came into power in 1806 Sheridan was appointed treasurer of the navy, but was denied the honour of admission to the cabinet. After Fox’s death he suc­ceeded his chief in the representation of Westminster, and aspired to succeed him as leader of the party, but this claim was not allowed, and thenceforward Sheridan fought for his own hand. When the prince became regent in 1811 Sheridan’s private influence with him helped to exclude the Whigs from power. For his interference on this occasion between the regent and his constitutional advisers Sheridan was severely blamed. To judge fairly as to how far he was justified in his conduct as a matter of private ethics we must take into account his previous relations with the leaders of his party, a point on which Moore, one of the disappointed placemen, is somewhat reticent. Throughout his parliamentary career Sheridan was one of the boon companions of the prince, and his champion in parliament in some dubious matters of pay­ment of debts. But he always resented any imputation

@@@1 For a comparison of the two versions of the speech and an able exposition of the qualities of Sheridan’s oratory see Mr W. Fraser Rae’s *Wilkes*, *Sheridan, and Fox,* 1874.