

Plot Construction of 'The Rivals'

'The Rivals' is an artificial comedy. The plot is artificial; the situations are artificial and the whole mode of treatment is artificial. But artificiality has not crept into this play by mistake. Sheridan makes it deliberately artificial because the society in which he lived and which he portrayed in this play was itself artificial. Sheridan doesn't transcend the limits of this artificial society. He depicts what he sees on the surface of life. He is contented to describe this superficial life of the 18th century and doesn't lament if the deeper meaning of it completely eludes him.

It is this surface of the 18th Century fashionable society of London that forms the base of the plot of 'The Rivals'. The very opening scene announces the arrival of the principal characters at Bath. Within fifty lines of the play, we are made aware of the secret of the title. We come to know that Captain Absolute and his rival Ensign Beverley are one and the same person. Captain Absolute is in love with Lydia. Lydia's friend Julia is Sir Anthony's ward. Lydia is rich but she has developed a romantic craze for a lover who is destitute. She does not want a hum-drum marriage. Hence Captain Absolute has to assume the role of poorly-paid Ensign Beverley to

win her love but there is an old tough aunt, Mrs. Malaprop, in the way of the lovers.

In the next scene, we come across Lydia ^{who} quarrels with Beverley and is informed by her aunt of Sir Anthony's arrival. Intercepting a letter between Lydia and Beverley, Mrs. Malaprop decides to nip this affair in the bud. The scene reveals two more love-plots simultaneously in progress; one concerns Mrs. Malaprop who corresponds with Sir ~~Lucius~~ Lucius O'Trigger under the name of Delia while Sir Lucius believes that Delia is but the pet name of Lydia whom he really loves. But he is not the least aware that the letters he writes reach not to Lydia but to the aunt. The other love-plot is that of Julia who is being pestered by Bob Acres.

In the Second Act, Lydia's discomfiture, at Sir Anthony's arrival, is balanced by Captain Absolute's confession, revealing his identity. We are also introduced to Faulkland who learns from Bob Acres that Julia too is in Bath. The issues get complicated as the rivalry among the different lovers get complicated.

In the third Act, Captain Absolute comes to know that the bride selected by his father is no one else but Lydia herself. He calls Mrs. Malaprop who introduces him to Lydia as

Captain Absolute. To the angry Lydia, he, however, assures that he is the same Beverley. In this very Act, Sir Lucius o' Trigger proposes to challenge his rival, one Captain Absolute to a duel and advises Bob Acres to challenge Beverley.

The deception played by Absolute is discovered by Lydia and she decides to have no more to do with him. Meanwhile, ^{Both} Sir Anthony and Mrs. Malaprop are informed about the duel and they rush to the spot where Captain Absolute and Lucius are ~~to~~ drawing swords against each other, and poor Faulkland is mistaken for Beverley. This encounter, however, clears the mist.

Sir Lucius o' Trigger discovers how he has been befooled by the maid-servant, Lucy, who had been carrying his letters not to Lydia but to the Aunt. There is certainly no rivalry ~~or~~ regarding the love of this old lady who is disowned by all rivals.

Servants play a great part in the play. They introduce characters; bear messages and serve as chorus by their gossips and comment on the situations and characters.

The plot, though, complex, leads to a great deal of mirth. There are no loose ends left in the ~~to~~ end. All complications are dissolved; there are smiles on everybody's lips and fears are never allowed to roll down the cheeks.

The End

Tricks