

The School for Scandal



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RICHARD SHERIDAN

Richard Brinsley Sheridan was born in Dublin, Ireland, but moved to England at the age of eight and never returned. He came from a literary family: his mother was also a successful playwright and novelist, while his grandfather had been a good friend of Jonathan Swift. Not long after leaving his boarding school, Sheridan moved with his family to Bath, where he fell in love with Elizabeth Linley, the famous and beautiful young singer he was to marry after fighting a series of a scandalous duels that captivated British society. In desperate need of money, he wrote his first play, [The Rivals](#), in 1775, which launched his career as a star playwright. After this, Sheridan was offered a job managing the historic Drury Lane Theater, which he went on to own. His second play, *The Duenna* appeared the following year, and his third, *The School for Scandal*, was staged in 1777 to wide acclaim. Sheridan was having an affair with the famous hostess of a social salon, Frances Crewe, to whom he dedicated the play in a long poem which is often reproduced along with the play. His wife would also go on to have an affair. Sheridan served in parliament and in a variety of governmental roles over the next thirty-two years, becoming one of the most respected orators of his time. He was always extravagant with money, however, and in 1808, when the Drury Lane Theater burned down in a fire, he was bankrupted and removed from parliament. He spent his final years hounded by his creditors.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The play takes place in 1777. The wealth that the Surface brothers vie to inherit was earned by their uncle, Sir Oliver Surface, who has spent the last sixteen years in the East Indies. These were years of growth for the East India Company, the British company that enjoyed a monopoly on trade coming from an expanding region of South and Southeast Asia, and which was likely Sir Oliver's employer. The East India Company collected taxes, in the form of money and goods, from peasants across a wide swath of this territory and shipped precious commodities like silk, tea, spices, and cotton from this region to the rest of the world. Wealthy investors in the East India Tea Company fought against efforts by the British parliament to control their activity in the East Indies. British colonialists who went in person to the East Indies often had free reign for corruption, stealing money that should have gone to the company's shareholders or to the British government in the form of taxation (not to mention the local people it was stolen from in the first place). Fantastic fortunes were generated in

this part of the world for wealthy British families like the Surfaces. The system was deeply unfair, as the taxes colonialized people paid did not support their own government, but were sent out of the country to increase British wealth. During a period of famine from 1769-1773, the British East India Company did not cease collecting taxes from the peasants, but even went so far as to increase taxes. Ten million people, or roughly one-third of the population of the region then known as Bengal, are thought to have died as a result.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Sheridan lived a century after the heyday of the Restoration comedy of manners, a period in theater history which saw the first female actors on the British stage and explored sexual themes with unprecedented openness. One of the famous plays of this period is Aphra Behn's [The Rover](#) (1677). While Sheridan's comedies were less sexually explicit than Restoration comedies of manners, he drew inspiration from these playwrights, and even staged Restoration Comedies in his capacity as manager of the Drury Lane Theatre, prompting revived interest in these works. Sheridan was also called "the modern Congreve," after William Congreve (1670-1729), the celebrated Restoration playwright of witty comedies about relationships between men and women and high-society affectation. In contrast to the bawdy works of the Restoration, Sheridan and his contemporaries wrote "genteel" comedies, which could be instructive for an audience drawn from both the middle and upper classes looking to cultivate good manners and a genteel aspect. Although these works were not sexually explicit, sexual innuendo is essential to their humor. Sheridan's comedies were also considered to be "laughing comedies," as separated from the "crying comedies" which were extremely moralistic and known to provoke tears. Later literary scholars would compare his plays to comedies of manners by Oscar Wilde, who skewered the affectations and aspirations of upper-class Britons of the 1890s in witty and satirical plays like [The Importance of Being Earnest](#) and [An Ideal Husband](#).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The School for Scandal
- **When Written:** 1777
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1777
- **Literary Period:** Georgian comedy, "New" Comedy of Manners, Genteel Comedy or Laughing Comedy
- **Genre:** Comedy
- **Setting:** London, England

- **Climax:** Lady Teazle is discovered behind the screen in Joseph Surface's room.

EXTRA CREDIT

Split Personality. Richard Brinsley Sheridan's father Thomas Sheridan said that he saw both Joseph and Charles, the characters from *The School for Scandal*, in his son's personality. "Richard had only to dip the pen in his own heart, and he had both Joseph and Charles," he was reported to have said.

Mashup. *The School for Scandal* began as two separate plays, one about a circle of gossips led by Lady Sneerwell, the other about the Teazles and their marriage.



PLOT SUMMARY

The School for Scandal begins in the dressing room of Lady Sneerwell, a wealthy widow with a penchant for plotting and spreading rumors. Lady Sneerwell has hired Snake to forge letters for her and place false stories in the gossip columns. They discuss her plot to stop Charles Surface, whom she loves, from becoming engaged to the heiress Maria. Lady Sneerwell is conspiring with Charles's older brother Joseph, who has a reputation for goodness, but is really a selfish hypocrite and liar, and who wants to marry Maria for her money. Snake departs and a group of gossipmongers, including Joseph, Mrs. Candour, Sir Benjamin Backbite, and Mr. Crabtree congregate at Lady Sneerwell's house. Maria is also there, but she rushes from the room in distress when the others gossip about Charles's enormous debts and financial misfortunes.

The next scene introduces Sir Peter Teazle and his confidante Mr. Rowley. Sir Peter has lived all his life as a bachelor, but seven months ago married a much younger woman. He and Lady Teazle fight all the time and Sir Peter is sure his wife is always to blame. He complains of the bad influence that Lady Sneerwell has on his wife. He is also upset because Maria, who is his ward, does not want to marry Joseph. Sir Peter, who served for some time as a guardian to the Surface brothers, is convinced that Joseph is an exemplary young man with strong morals, and he believes that Charles is not only badly behaved, but also bad deep down. Rowley disagrees: he thinks Charles is wild, but will grow up into a good man. Rowley delivers the news that Sir Peter's old friend Sir Oliver Surface has arrived back in England after sixteen years in the East Indies.

The second act begins with a quarrel between the Teazles in their home. Lady Teazle wants large sums of money to buy luxury goods. Sir Peter reminds her that she grew up simply and lived with none of the things she now says she needs. Lady Teazle says she remembers that boring life well. After his wife leaves, Sir Peter marvels at how attractive she is when she argues with him.

At Lady Sneerwell's the gossipmongers (now including the Teazles) are laughing at their acquaintances' appearances and misfortunes. Maria and Sir Peter find this gossip appalling, while Lady Teazle joins in with the others in making jokes at others' expenses. Away from the others, Joseph tries to convince Maria to consider him as a potential husband, but she refuses. Although she says she knows from all she has heard that Charles is not fit to marry her, she will not consider marrying his brother. Lady Teazle, who has been considering taking Joseph as a lover, enters the room to find Joseph on his knees in front of Maria. He makes an excuse and, after Lady Teazle sends Maria from the room, begins to try to seduce Lady Teazle, but she is not sure whether to trust his explanation of what she saw.

Rowley brings Sir Oliver to see Sir Peter's house. They rejoice at being reunited, and Sir Peter gives Sir Oliver his impressions of the Joseph and Charles (who are his nephews and potential heirs). Sir Oliver thinks that the description of Joseph that Sir Peter gives is too good to be true.

Sir Oliver hatches a plot to test his nephews' characters and choose an heir. When Sir Oliver left the country Charles and Joseph were too young to now remember what he looks like, and Sir Oliver plans to use this fact to test them. He plans to go to Charles disguised as a moneylender named "Mr. Premium," to see how extravagant Charles really is. To test Joseph's alleged morality, he plans to visit his older nephew in the guise of a poor relative who needs charity named "Mr. Stanley."

Rowley introduces Sir Oliver to Moses, a **Jewish** moneylender who will accompany him to see Charles, and the two men leave to call on Charles. Left alone, Sir Peter immediately gets into an argument with Maria, who says she will not obey his command to marry Joseph. Maria runs from the room and Lady Teazle enters. Sir Peter proposes that they should stop their quarrelling and his wife agrees, but when he tells her that she was always the one to start their fights in the past, they begin to fight again. Sir Peter accuses Lady Teazle of having an affair with Charles Surface, a rumor that Snake and Lady Sneerwell have been spreading. She indignantly denies this and leaves. Sir Peter is infuriated, especially because Lady Teazle never loses her temper when they fight.

Sir Oliver, pretending to be Mr. Premium, arrives with Moses at Charles's house, where Charles is drinking and playing cards with friends. Charles appeals to Mr. Premium for money, explaining that although he has sold off all his property, he expects to be the heir of the fabulously wealthy Sir Oliver. Charles suggests that Mr. Premium can collect the debt when Sir Oliver dies. Mr. Premium presses Charles for other collateral, and Charles suggests that he can sell him the **family portraits**. Inwardly, Sir Oliver is shocked at the disrespect this shows to family tradition, but he bids for the portraits in an auction. As the auction nears its end, Sir Oliver asks if Charles will sell him a specific portrait. Charles refuses, saying that it is

the portrait of his generous benefactor Sir Oliver. Touched, Sir Oliver inwardly forgives Charles for being so extravagant.

In the next scene, Lady Teazle arrives late for a date with Joseph at his house. She complains about her fights with Sir Peter, but is still unsure whether she wants to commit adultery with Joseph. Sir Peter arrives and, terrified of being discovered, Lady Teazle hides behind a screen in Joseph's room as Sir Peter makes his way up the stairs. Sir Peter confides in Joseph that he is worried his wife is having an affair with Charles, but that he plans to soon give her financial independence from him, which he hopes will ease their fights. Sir Peter begins to talk to Joseph about his desire to marry Maria, but Joseph tries to stop him, not wanting Lady Teazle to learn that he is courting Maria too. At that moment, Charles arrives. Sir Peter says he will eavesdrop on the brothers to discover the truth about Charles and his wife. Sir Peter tries to hide behind the screen, but Joseph stops him, explaining that he already has a lover hiding there. Sir Peter hides in a closet instead. Charles enters and Joseph asks him about Lady Teazle. Charles denies any involvement with Lady Teazle and begins to say that he believed Joseph and Lady Teazle were the ones having the affair. Joseph stops Charles by telling him Sir Peter is listening. Sir Peter comes out and tells Charles he is very relieved. Joseph leaves the room for a moment and Sir Peter tells Charles that his brother has a woman hidden in the room. As Joseph returns to the room, the screen is pulled down to reveal Lady Teazle. Although Joseph tries to explain Lady Teazle's presence there, Lady Teazle tells her husband the truth: she was considering having an affair with Joseph, who she now understands is a liar and hypocrite. She says that, even if she had not been discovered, she would have changed her treatment of Sir Peter after hearing how kindly he spoke about her.

Soon after the Teazles leave, Joseph is visited by Sir Oliver, who pretends to be a poor relative named Mr. Stanley. Joseph speaks politely and eloquently about charity, but he tells Mr. Stanley that he has no money to give and that the rumors that his uncle sends him large sums of money are false. Under his breath, Sir Oliver says that Charles will be his heir. After Sir Oliver leaves, Rowley arrives to tell Joseph that his uncle has returned from the Indies and that he will bring him to Joseph's house soon to see him. Joseph curses the bad timing of his uncle's arrival.

At Sir Peter's house, the gossipmongers have gathered to try to find out what really happened between the Teazles. The servant refuses them entry so they stand in an anteroom arguing about what the real story is. Some believe that Sir Peter caught Lady Teazle with Charles, while others allege that it was Joseph. They also report that Sir Peter was wounded in a duel fought with the wife-stealing Surface brother, but there is no consensus about whether swords or pistols were used in the fight. Sir Peter then walks in unharmed and shouts for the ridiculous gossips to leave his house. Rowley and Sir Oliver

arrive to tell Sir Peter to come to Joseph's house for the meeting between the Surface brothers and Sir Oliver. Rowley pleads Lady Teazle's case, saying that he spoke to her and she feels terrible for the pain and embarrassment she caused him. Upon Rowley's urging, Sir Peter decides to reconcile with Lady Teazle.

At Joseph's house, Lady Sneerwell complains that Joseph ruined her chance to disrupt Charles and Maria's engagement by getting caught pursuing Lady Teazle. Joseph tells Lady Sneerwell she may still have a chance with Charles because Snake has forged letters that suggest Charles has pledged to marry Lady Sneerwell, which should also ruin Charles's chances with Maria. Sir Oliver and Charles arrive, and Lady Sneerwell hides in the next room. The brothers wish to make a good impression on Sir Oliver and try to force the man they believe to be Mr. Premium or Mr. Stanley from the room, fearing what he will say to their uncle about their behavior.

Sir Peter, Lady Teazle, Rowley, and Maria arrive, and the Teazles reveal to the Surface brothers that the man they are throwing out of the house is their Uncle Oliver. Joseph tries to make excuses for his behavior, but Charles only apologizes for having disrespected the family by selling the portraits. Sir Oliver tells Charles he forgives him everything and Joseph that he sees through his hypocrisy. Lady Teazle suggests that Charles may also be interested in gaining Maria's forgiveness, but Maria says that she knows he is already engaged to another. Charles is dumbfounded. Lady Sneerwell emerges from hiding to claim that Charles is engaged to her, but Rowley summons Snake, who reveals that he was paid to forge letters for Lady Sneerwell, but paid double to reveal the truth to Rowley. Lady Sneerwell storms from the room in frustration and Joseph follows. The play ends with an engagement between Maria and Charles, who will be his uncle's sole heir.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Lady Teazle – Young, pretty, headstrong and intelligent, Lady Teazle is the young wife of Sir Peter Teazle. Although she was raised in the countryside, she has quickly adopted city manners, learning how the gossip mill operates from a group of high-society gossips led by Lady Sneerwell. She and Sir Peter argue all the time, often over how much money he allows her, as Lady Teazle wishes to spend huge sums on flowers, carriages, and other luxuries. Lady Teazle is considering taking Joseph Surface on as a “lover” (primarily for fashion's sake), but has not yet decided whether she wants to keep their relationship platonic.

Sir Peter Teazle – An older man with fixed habits, Sir Peter married the much younger Lady Teazle seven months before the play begins and is having trouble adapting to married life. Sir Peter believes that he is always right and is inflexible in

arguments with his wife, but he admires her skill at arguing her point and finds her even more attractive for the way she stands up to him. Sir Peter is also serving as a guardian to Maria, who is in love with Charles Surface. Sir Peter opposes their match. He is an old friend of Sir Oliver Surface's and served as a guardian for Charles and Joseph Surface. Sir Peter admires Joseph and strongly disapproves of Charles.

Lady Sneerwell – A sharp-tongued, hypocritical schemer and gossipmonger, Lady Sneerwell is the center of a group of high-society men and women who spend their time gossiping and creating scandals. Lady Sneerwell ruins reputations by submitting stories to the gossip columns and by paying others to forge incriminating letters. In love with Charles Surface, Lady Sneerwell conspires with Joseph Surface to prevent an engagement between Charles Surface and Maria, who Joseph hopes to marry for her money.

Joseph Surface / Mr. Surface – A selfish, greedy hypocrite and liar, the older Surface brother pretends to be a “man of sentiment,” but is actually a “sentimental knave.” This means that he speaks eloquently about the proper, moral way to live, but does not practice what he preaches. Instead, Joseph is conspiring with Lady Sneerwell to prevent an engagement between his brother Charles and Maria, whom he wants to marry for her money. At the same time, he is trying to seduce Lady Teazle, even though Sir Peter Teazle is one of his greatest admirers. When tested, Joseph's true character shows through, as he fails to show generosity to the poor or proper respect for family traditions.

Charles Surface – A warmhearted but hard-partying man, the younger Surface brother is known around town for his extravagance. Charles has spent all of the massive fortune he was given by his uncle Sir Oliver and is in huge quantities of debt, but he is presented as essentially moral and good at heart. Because of his qualities of loyalty, kindness, and unpretentiousness, it's suggested that he will eventually mend his ways and grow into a respectable representative of the Surface family. Charles is in love with Maria, and ultimately becomes her fiancé and the heir to Sir Oliver Surface.

Sir Oliver Surface / Mr. Premium / Mr. Stanley – The wealthy uncle of Joseph and Charles Surface. After sixteen years doing business in the East Indies (colonial India), Sir Oliver returns to London to pick one of his nephews as an heir to his enormous fortune. Seeking to learn the two young men's true characters, Sir Oliver, who is very concerned with ideas of the family honor and reputation, assumes two false identities: that of a poor relative seeking charity—“Mr. Stanley”—and of a moneylender—“Mr. Premium.” Sir Oliver has never married, and teases his good friend Sir Teazle for marrying a young wife.

Mr. Rowley – The former steward to the Surface brothers' deceased father, Mr. Rowley is a trusted confidante, advisor, and go-between for the Surface and Teazle families. He is an eminently reasonable man, and generally serves to clarify

confusion and further the action of the play. Unlike Sir Peter, Mr. Rowley sees through Joseph's hypocrisy and recognizes Charles's essential goodness.

Maria – A recently orphaned young woman, Maria is the ward of Sir Peter and thus heiress to his fortune. She is in love with Charles Surface, but is also being courted by Joseph Surface and Sir Benjamin Backbite. Maria is portrayed as being very moral and sensitive. She hates gossip in particular, and therefore finds the conversation of the gossips who congregate at Lady Sneerwell's house appalling.

Moses – An “honest Hebrew,” Moses is a **Jewish** moneylender. It is suggested that he is more scrupulous than other Jews, but his character nevertheless embodies several stereotypes about Jews prevalent in British society in the late eighteenth century. He is greedy for money, but also seeks to shift blame for the hardship caused by his enormous rates of interest onto others.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mrs. Candour – A high-society lady who spends her time spreading rumors, Mrs. Candour pretends to be good-natured and honest, but is actually just as malicious as the other gossips. Her name ironically references the word “candor,” another word for honesty.

Sir Benjamin Backbite – A young gentleman who hopes to marry Maria, Sir Benjamin spends his time spreading gossip about members of society. He is also an amateur poet and writes rhymes mocking people he knows. The word “backbite” means to say unkind things about someone who is not present.

Mr. Crabtree – A gossip who invents extremely specific details when spreading false stories, Mr. Crabtree is hoping to help his nephew Sir Benjamin woo Maria. A “crabtree” is a tree that produces only sour apples (crabapples), and so his name is a comment on this character's own sourness.

Snake – An amoral opportunist, Snake is paid by Lady Sneerwell to place false stories in the gossip columns and to forge incriminating letters.

Careless – One of Charles Surface's drinking buddies, Careless (true to his name) is even less responsible than Charles.

Mrs. Clackitt – An infamous gossipmonger who never appears in the play in person. A “clacket” is a loud noise made by striking two objects together.

Miss Nicely – An acquaintance with a good reputation who the gossipmongers say is pregnant out of wedlock and must marry her footman.

Miss Letitia Piper – A woman Crabtree says was falsely accused of giving birth to twins out of wedlock.

Miss Vermillion – An acquaintance mocked by the group of gossipmongers for the way she wears makeup. “Vermillion” is a shade of red that could be used as blush.

Mrs. Prim – An acquaintance mocked by the group of gossipmongers. To be “prim” means to be stiff and overly proper.

Mrs. Evergreen – An acquaintance mocked by the group of gossipmongers for trying to look young forever—that is, to stay “evergreen.”

Miss Simper – An acquaintance mocked by the group of gossipmongers. To “simper” is to smile in a silly or overly self-deprecating way.

Trip – Charles Surface’s servant.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



CONCEALMENT AND EXPOSURE

The School for Scandal explores how people hide and are exposed, both literally and figuratively. As characters’ true natures are unmasked, hypocrites

are seen for who they really are, while mistaken impressions and unearned reputations are corrected. Some characters, like Maria, behave morally and have a reputation for goodness, while others, like Lady Sneerwell, behave immorally and have a reputation for wickedness. But most of the other characters conceal who they really are from themselves or from others.

The play’s central characters, the Surface brothers, each have an undeserved reputation: their true nature is concealed from the world. Joseph Surface is a hypocritical moralist: he is wicked but cultivates a reputation for goodness. His brother Charles is a sincere sinner: badly behaved and reputed to be a good-for-nothing, but honest, honorable, and kind at his core. Over the course of the play, these two brothers have their true characters exposed and earn the reputations they deserve. It is no accident that the two brothers’ last name is Surface, which hints at the difference between their reputations and characters. While Joseph is good on the surface and bad deep down, Charles does not disguise his flaws, and may seem wicked, but is actually loyal, loving, and charitable. Many of the characters in the play are similarly given names that expose their main character traits.

The play exposes the concealed elements of the characters’ natures, fittingly, through literal acts of concealment and exposure. The Surface brothers’ rich old Uncle, Sir Oliver Surface, has lived in colonial India since the two boys were too young to remember him, but has sent his orphaned nephews enormous allowances. When Sir Oliver returns to England from

India, he wants to test his nephews and bring their true natures to the surface. To do this, he uses the fact that neither brother will recognize him and presents a different false persona to each nephew. In each case, the way the young man responds to his disguised uncle exposes his own true nature.

In *The School for Scandal*’s most famous scene, the screen scene, several characters’ true natures are unmasked after their physical presence hiding in a room is literally exposed. Lady Teazle visits Joseph’s house because she is considering becoming his lover. When her husband arrives to talk to Joseph about his suspicion that Lady Teazle is having an affair with Charles, Lady Teazle hides behind a screen. Next, Charles arrives at Joseph’s house, and Sir Peter hides in a closet to eavesdrop on Joseph and Charles’s conversation and to discover whether Charles is Lady Teazle’s lover. In the end, when everyone is forced from their hiding place, the scene serves not only to expose Joseph’s true character—as someone trying to steal his friend’s wife—and Charles’s true character—as someone who is true to his love for Maria and not interested in Lady Teazle—but also to expose the husband and wife to each other. To the Teazles’ surprise, they trust and love each other much more than they had realized before.

The School for Scandal is not a very serious play, however, and it does not drive its moral home by severely punishing its wicked hypocrites once it has exposed them. Instead, it is sufficient for the play’s purposes to bring the true nature of the Surface brothers to the surface and for Lady Teazle and her husband to realize their true feelings about one another.



RUMORS, WIT, AND CRUELTY

The School for Scandal focuses on a group of wealthy Londoners who entertain themselves and torment one another by spreading rumors. The play hints at how serious a ruined reputation can be, both for men and for women, and therefore how unkind it is to spread rumors, yet it also does not seek to teach a serious lesson against spreading rumors.

In the 1770s, when pre-marital sex was considered an unforgivable offense for women, and husbands whose wives had affairs were mocked and looked down on as “cuckolds,” gossip often concerned female sexuality. For men, the most disastrous rumors for their reputations (apart from their wives’ fidelity) concerned their finances: noblemen could borrow huge sums of money, but only for as long as their reputations lasted.

Ruined reputations could change the course of a life. Lady Sneerwell, the most malicious of the rumormongers, says that she became a cruel gossip after a scandal ruined her reputation when she was young. And, Mrs. Clackitt, a rumormonger who never physically appears in the play, is said to be responsible for engagements broken off, marriages ended or begun unwillingly, and men being disinherited. Yet these instances of lives ruined

by the rumor mill do not occur within the action of the play to characters that would inspire the audience's sympathy.

Instead of portraying the circle of gossips as truly destructive, the play pokes fun at the behavior of the gossips themselves. The gossips can be divided into two categories: those who gossip for fun and those who gossip to ruin other people's fortunes for their own gain.

The recreational gossips are Mrs. Candour, Sir Benjamin Backbite, and his uncle Mr. Crabtree. These characters believe that gossiping is a way of showing off wit and sophistication. They are more interested in their own ability to come up with clever jokes about the latest scandals, and seem almost unaware of the life-wrecking potential of rumors. Yet as they vie with one another to show that they know the most specific details about the latest scandal, they also become the butt of the joke themselves. The ridiculousness of these recreational gossips is displayed in the scene when they stand around Sir Peter Teazle's house speculating about whether he fought a duel with Charles or Joseph Surface, and whether he was wounded with a sword or shot with a gun. When Sir Peter Teazle walks up to them, entirely unharmed, it becomes clear how preposterous they are for arguing about the details of something that never happened.

Early in the play, Lady Teazle also joins in this group. She has married Sir Teazle and moved to London from the countryside, and she believes that to become a truly fashionable lady, she should gossip. This comes easily to her, because she is witty and intelligent and, despite having a good heart, has yet to realize how hurtful gossip can be. By the end of the play, however, she has seen firsthand how gossip can hurt her own relationship, and she foreswears scandal altogether. Her wit may be a sign of intelligence, but she is also too intelligent to continue to gossip once she has seen the destructive power of scandal.

The self-interested gossips, on the other hand, attempt to use rumors more strategically to hurt others and benefit themselves. They do not gossip *despite* the cruel effects this activity can have on others, but *because* of them—they hope to ruin other people's hopes and realize their own. Joseph and Lady Sneerwell plot to break up the relationship between Charles Surface and Maria so that Joseph can marry Maria for her fortune and Lady Sneerwell can marry Charles, whom she loves. To this end, they plot to make Sir Teazle suspect that Charles is pursuing his wife Lady Teazle, so that he will not let his ward Maria marry Charles, while at the same time leading Maria to believe that Charles is in love with Lady Sneerwell. The plots of Lady Sneerwell and Joseph are ultimately exposed, and each is left looking ridiculous, Lady Sneerwell for trying to entrap a man who did not love her, and Joseph because his hypocrisy has cost him two sources of fortune, from Maria and from his uncle. Yet the play does not suggest that there will be a true comeuppance, even for these most malicious of gossips. Instead, Joseph and Lady Sneerwell seem likely to cut their

losses and marry one another. In the end, those who spread rumors out of cruelty also become the butt of jokes when their plots fail, but they are certainly more condemned by the play than the merely witty gossips, who are ridiculed and nothing more.



THE MAN OF SENTIMENT

The School for Scandal is part of the eighteenth-century tradition of sentimentalism, but also a satire of sentimentalism's drawbacks. In the 1770s, when the play was written, society approved of the idea of the "Man of Sentiment," whose conduct guided by moral sentiments and emotions, instead of cool, calm reasoning. To be charitable, loyal, and loving to a fault were admirable qualities, and the eloquent recitation of sentiments was admired as morally edifying. In this context, to be motivated by sentiment meant to choose one's actions based on an emotional reaction caused by a strongly held moral principle.

The School for Scandal presents true sentiment as admirable, but much less poetic than it would seem. Although Joseph Surface acts like a "Man of Sentiment," he never does anything without a cold calculation of his own self-interest. His brother Charles, however, who never professes any lofty sentiments at all, is the true Man of Sentiment, who lets himself be guided by his feelings alone. When Charles hears of Mr. Stanley's plight, he is so moved by a feeling of generosity that he completely forgets his own interests. Joseph, on the other hand, only *speaks* about how important charity is to him, even saying it is painful to him to be unable to give "Mr. Stanley" any help, when in fact he feels no pity for the poor at all.

Sir Peter is a great admirer of those who speak sentimentally, but in his own life he does not allow himself to be guided by sentiment. Sir Peter admires Joseph Surface's sentimental talk, not realizing that it is all hypocrisy, and so lauds Joseph and denigrates and suspects Charles. Yet although Sir Peter adores his wife, he refuses to let this love inspire him to generosity or sweetness towards her, instead focusing on how much money she spends and whether she is the cause of their arguments. By the end of the play, Sir Peter has learned to live by the sentiments he had earlier professed to admire. Although he is being laughed at around town by those who believe his wife has had an affair, he decides to be guided by his own heart and to trust and forgive Lady Teazle—sincerely following his sentiments rather than simply admiring them in others.

The play suggests that sentiment (when it springs from moral principles) is a good guide in life, especially in romantic and family relationships. To allow oneself to be carried away by emotions prompted by innate principles of generosity and love is not always practical, but it is better than selfishly guarding one's own interests. At the same time, the play also suggests that the glorification of sentiment has led to confusion over what is really important. Many have mastered the art of

speaking sentimentally, but talk is cheap, and sentiments acted on are more valuable than sentiments professed in poetic and lofty speeches.



FAMILY HONOR AND MONEY

The School for Scandal explores the role money played in a family's reputation for the wealthy members of late eighteenth-century British high

society. Flashy displays of wealth boosted the stature of a family, and huge sums of money could be procured on loan with reference to a family name. The play examines the way this free-spending lifestyle impacts relationships between the older and younger generation and between men and women.

The ability to borrow seemingly endless amounts of money was a result of the economics of the time. Britain was leading the world into the Industrial Revolution and also expanding its colonial empire overseas. Investments in factories and railroads being built in England or in the African slave trade could make a family's fortune grow exponentially over a single generation. In the case of the Surface family, Sir Oliver Surface has been abroad in the East Indies for the last sixteen years and has become fabulously wealthy. He has, in all likelihood, participated in business exporting goods like teas, coffee, spices, and silks from British colonies to England and the rest of the world. This colonial trade occurred on extremely unequal terms: British colonialists took goods from their colonies and payed little in return, pocketing enormous profits and oppressing locals in the process.

The play is not focused on this global economic picture, though. Instead it takes the view of society at the time—associating great wealth with reputation and “honor” (however dishonorable the means of acquiring that wealth might have been)—and examines the way this fabulous wealth impacted relationships at home in England. It particularly focuses on the importance the wealthy placed on handing down their money to a young man who would respect and perpetuate the family legacy. Because of this, the Surface brothers are tested by Sir Oliver to see who has the good character he wishes to see in an heir.

In this context, it may seem strange that Sir Oliver chooses the wasteful Charles as his heir, instead of the penny-pinching Joseph, even after Charles sells the **family portraits** on the cheap to raise money. But Sir Oliver sees that Charles actually has a deeper respect for the family's honor than Joseph, who is self-interested to the core.

Charles has racked up huge debts, promising lenders that he will be able to pay them back by making reference to his family's good name and known wealth and even saying that they can collect their loans when his uncle dies. While this might seem like bad behavior, it also has the effect of increasing the Surface family's reputation for possessing great wealth. In

fact, it was probably expressly to create this reputation that Sir Oliver sent his young nephews huge sums of money in the first place. A truly aristocratic gentleman of the time was not expected to concern himself with trifles like bills, but rather to host lavish parties, support poor relatives, and remain true to his family's heritage and “honor.”

When Charles sells the family portraits at auction, his saving grace with Sir Oliver is that he refuses to sell his uncle's portrait to the broker “Premium” (Sir Oliver in disguise) out of a sentiment of loyalty to his benefactor. Later, when Charles is contrite and offers no excuses for having sold the rest of the family portraits, he shows that he knew all along that selling the rest of the family portraits was not in keeping with the family honor. His brother Joseph, on the other hand, shows no honorable family sentiment. He sells his father's house, which ought to have sentimental value to him, and might have sold it to a stranger had Charles not stepped in to buy it.

In the two brothers' dealings with “Premium” and “poor Stanley” (both of whom are actually Sir Oliver in disguise) they reveal their real family feeling or lack thereof. Poor Stanley appeals to Joseph for money and suggests that having a poor relative may reflect poorly on the family name, but Joseph gives him nothing and even goes so far as to say that he has not received the fortune from Sir Oliver that he is reputed to have. To have poor relatives in need was a kind of demerit for a family's reputation, and to deny Sir Oliver's generosity was to destroy the reputation for wealth that Sir Oliver had hoped to create by sending that money to his nephews in the first place. Charles, on the other hand, is moved by family feeling to immediately send money to Stanley once he gets some from the broker Premium, despite having many pressing debts of his own to pay. This not only shows that Charles is generous, but also that he has a grasp of the reputational importance of money: if Stanley can pay his debts because of the generosity of his relative Charles Surface, that will be a boon to the family's reputation. This, in turn, will allow Charles to continue to receive loans from moneylenders.

In the end, Charles will be able to pay off his debts, because he will both be Sir Oliver's heir and receive the dowry from the heiress Maria when he marries her. If he continues to live the extravagant life he has led as a young bachelor, he may quickly run through all of the family's money—but Sir Oliver believes that Charles's dedication to his family honor will cause him to reform his behavior. The play suggests that this is traditional and proper: Sir Oliver and his brother followed this same path from bad behavior to respectability in their youths.

The play also looks at a related dynamic between the husband and wife: Sir Peter Teazle and Lady Teazle. Having spent most of his life as a conservative bachelor, Sir Peter objects to his wife's demands for great sums of money. But, unlike the relationship between the Surface brothers and Sir Oliver, Lady Teazle is already Sir Teazle's choice to represent his family

name. She is his wife and heir. When she tells him that she should have a great deal of money to spend lavishly, she is not necessarily being greedy, but is also looking after their family's name and reputation by acting the part of a lady of fashion.

When Sir Teazle demands greater authority over his wife's spending habits, then, she says that instead of marrying her he "should have adopted her" if he wanted authority. Unlike a young ward, a wife in their society was supposed to spend exorbitantly to display the family's wealth and bring credit to its name. Midway through the play, Sir Peter changes his mind and makes arrangements for his wife to have the money she wants. This generosity convinces her of his real love and respect for her.

For both the Teazles and the Surface brothers, spending great quantities of money is a way to assert the family's stature and "honor." Since money was controlled at this time exclusively by men, allowing women and young people large allowances was also a way to show both the wealth of a family and the generosity of its patriarch.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



JEWES AND ANTI-SEMITISM

This symbol as portrayed in the play is obviously racist and morally reprehensible. Nonetheless, it exists in the play and should be analyzed. In *The School for Scandal* "Jewishness" generally represents the foreign and the morally unacceptable. Although the play's Jewish character is described as an "honest Hebrew" and is not caricatured and made to look ugly, ill-mannered, or evil, he is seen as the exception, not the rule, for the Jewish people. Generally, the play suggests, Jews are selfish and ungenerous, willing to take advantage of those in need of money by asking for huge amounts of interest. The generous behavior of the "Man of Sentiment" is contrasted to the behavior of the calculating moneylender, who only gives when he can expect to receive more in return. Mentions or portrayals of Jewishness, then, are symbolic of lifestyles and attitudes that Sheridan condemns.



HEIRLOOMS

Family heirlooms in the play signify the importance of preserving the past, especially the family's past.

For those in the older generation, the preservation of the objects they have been able to add to the trove of family possessions is an important way to make sure that they leave a trace after their death. The sale of heirlooms to strangers suggests a lack of respect for one's ancestors, and thus a

general lack of honor or morality.



QUOTES



Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Publications edition of *The School for Scandal* published in 1991.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

●● LADY SNEERWELL. Yes, my dear Snake; and I am no hypocrite to deny the satisfaction I reap from the success of my efforts. Wounded myself in the early part of my life by the envenomed tongue of slander, I confess I have since known no pleasure equal to the reducing others to the level of my own injured reputation.

SNAKE. Nothing can be more natural. But, Lady Sneerwell, there is one affair in which you have lately employed me, wherein, I confess, I am at a loss to guess your motives.

Related Characters: Lady Sneerwell, Snake (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

Lady Sneerwell is in her dressing room, consulting with Snake, a man she hires to plant false stories in the gossip columns and to forge incriminating letters. Lady Sneerwell is the leader of the group of high society gossipmongers. Unlike gossips such as Mrs. Candour or Joseph, however, she does not seek to hide the pleasure she derives from ruining other people's reputations. Nor does she pretend that gossip is merely a way to showcase her own wit and intelligence, like Sir Benjamin or Mr. Crabtree do. Instead, Lady Sneerwell freely admits that she gossips because she is bitter about the suffering inflicted on her by past rumors. Although she knows the harm that gossip can inflict on the lives of those whose reputations are ruined, she seeks revenge for what happened to her through gossip.

Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

☞ SIR PETER. When an old bachelor marries a young wife, what is he to expect? 'Tis now six months since Lady Teazle made me the happiest of men—and I have been the most miserable dog ever since! We tifted a little going to church, and fairly quarrelled before the bells had done ringing. I was more than once nearly choked with gall during the honeymoon, and had lost all comfort in life before my friends had done wishing me joy. Yet I chose with caution—a girl bred wholly in the country, who never knew luxury beyond one silk gown, nor dissipation above the annual gala of a race ball. Yet now she plays her part in all the extravagant fopperies of the fashion and the town, with as ready a grace as if she had never seen a bush or a grass-plot out of Grosvenor Square! I am sneered at by all my acquaintance, and paragraphed in the newspapers. She dissipates my fortune, and contradicts all my humours; yet, the worst of it is, I doubt I love her, or I should never bear all this. However, I'll never be weak enough to own it.

Related Characters: Sir Peter Teazle (speaker), Lady Teazle

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 10-11

Explanation and Analysis

Sir Peter is sitting by himself, reflecting on his life since he married Lady Teazle. They started arguing immediately upon marrying, and he feels a bitter regret that his moods are so dependent on hers. Up until his marriage, he was always able to make decisions perfectly independently, but now he must take his wife's opinions into account. Before his marriage, Sir Peter believed that by picking a bride who was raised outside of London and used to living a simpler lifestyle, he would avoid having to pay the huge sums on luxuries for his wife that most of his friends' wives demand. But Lady Teazle has quickly adapted to city life. She wants to have everything that her contemporaries have and more, despite Sir Peter's desire to live quietly and spend little.

Sir Peter fights with Lady Teazle over every demand for money that she makes, partially because he does not want to give up control of his money, but also because he does not want to let her know that he loves her and would do anything to make her happy. This, it seems to him, would be giving her too much power over him and would allow her to treat him with less respect. He knows that his social circle laughs at him for having married a woman so much younger than himself, and he fears that he will be mocked even more cruelly by his wife and her gossiping friends if he lets it be known that he loves her despite it all.

☞ ROWLEY. You know, Sir Peter, I have always taken the liberty to differ with you on the subject of these two young gentlemen. I only wish you may not be deceived in your opinion of the elder. For Charles, my life on't! he will retrieve his errors yet. Their worthy father, once my honoured master, was, at his years, nearly as wild a spark; yet, when he died, he did not leave a more benevolent heart to lament his loss.

SIR PETER. You are wrong, Master Rowley. On their father's death, you know, I acted as a kind of guardian to them both, till their uncle Sir Oliver's liberality gave them an early independence: of course, no person could have more opportunities of judging of their hearts, and I was never mistaken in my life. 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; but for the other, take my word for't, if he had any grain of virtue by descent, he has dissipated it with the rest of his inheritance. Ah! my old friend, Sir Oliver, will be deeply mortified when he finds how part of his bounty has been misapplied.

Related Characters: Sir Peter Teazle (speaker), Joseph Surface / Mr. Surface, Charles Surface, Sir Oliver Surface / Mr. Premium / Mr. Stanley, Mr. Rowley

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Sir Peter is complaining to Rowley that his ward Maria wishes to marry Charles Surface, instead of his choice for her, the older Surface brother Joseph. Rowley believes that Charles is a good man deep down and will outgrow his habit of drinking, gambling, and wasting his money. He thinks that Charles's bad behavior is just a wild phase, which does not reflect his true character. But Sir Peter believes that he is a perfect judge of character. He claims that Joseph presents himself morally and acts that way. Charles, on the other hand, does not present himself as a "man of sentiment"—that is, as someone who is moved by feelings of generosity, love, and loyalty to act in honorable ways. Sir Peter takes Charles's wild behavior at face value, as a sure proof that he lacks the character to carry on his family's traditions or to make proper use of the fortune that Maria will bring to a marriage.


Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

●● LADY TEAZLE. My extravagance! I'm sure I'm not more extravagant than a woman of fashion ought to be.

SIR PETER. No, no, madam, you shall throw away no more sums on such unmeaning luxury. 'Slife! to spend as much to furnish your dressingroom with flowers in winter as would suffice to turn the Pantheon into a greenhouse, and give a *fête champêtre* at Christmas.

LADY TEAZLE. And am I to blame, Sir Peter, because flowers are dear in cold weather? You should find fault with the climate, and not with me. For my part, I'm sure, I wish it was spring all the year round, and that roses grew under our feet!

Related Characters: Sir Peter Teazle, Lady Teazle (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Sir Peter and his wife Lady Teazle often argue over how much money she wants to spend. While Sir Peter has lived as a bachelor for many years and has never seen the need to show off his wealth, Lady Teazle insists that this kind flashy spending is normal for a woman in her position. He complains that she buys enough flowers to hold a *fête champêtre*, a fashionable kind of garden party, indoors during the winter. When Sir Peter points out the absurdity of her spending habits, Lady Teazle pretends that she is interested only in having flowers, but this is a dodge. In fact, Lady Teazle sees these large quantities of flowers, which will wilt and need to be replaced, as a way of displaying her wealth and proving that she is rich enough to ignore normal limitations like the weather.

Act 2, Scene 2 Quotes

●● MRS. CANDOUR. Now, I'll die, but you are so scandalous, I'll forswear your society.

LADY TEAZLE. What's the matter, Mrs. Candour?

MRS. CANDOUR. They'll not allow our friend Miss Vermillion to be handsome.

LADY SNEERWELL. O surely she is a pretty woman.

CRABTREE. I am very glad you think so, ma'am.

MRS. CANDOUR. She has a charming fresh colour.

LADY TEAZLE. Yes, when it is fresh put on.


MRS. CANDOUR. O fie! I'll swear her colour is natural: I have seen it come and go.

LADY TEAZLE. I dare swear you have, ma'am: it goes off at night, and comes again in the morning.

SIR BENJAMIN. True, ma'am, it not only comes and goes, but, what's more—egad, her maid can fetch and carry it!

MRS. CANDOUR. Ha! ha! ha! how I hate to hear you talk so! But surely now, her sister is, or was, very handsome.

Related Characters: Sir Benjamin Backbite, Mr. Crabtree, Lady Sneerwell, Lady Teazle, Mrs. Candour (speaker), Miss Vermillion

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 16-17

Explanation and Analysis

The gossipmongers are gathered at Lady Sneerwell's house to engage in the activity they love best. Each betrays a bit about their motivation for gossiping in their discussion of the unfortunate Miss Vermillion's beauty, or lack thereof. Mrs. Candour pretends not to be a gossip, portraying herself as a good-natured woman who is shocked by the negative things she hears said about her acquaintances. At the same time, she goads others on, and often cannot help herself from adding her own subtle jabs, as when she says that Miss Vermillion's sister "is, or was, very handsome." Lady Sneerwell is much more interested in ruining her acquaintances' reputations than she is in mocking their appearances, so she abstains from this kind of conversation

for the most part. Both Sir Benjamin and Lady Teazle, however, see gossip that mocks other people's physical imperfections as the most fun form of gossip. In their opinions, this kind of gossip serves to prove their own quick wit and intelligence. Mrs. Candour says that Miss Vermillion's face is naturally flushed, not augmented with cosmetics—she says that she has seen her color “come and go” when she blushes. Sir Benjamin and Lady Teazle seize on this figure of speech, each trying to outdo each other with their jokes about how cosmetics can “come and go”: makeup comes when it is applied in the morning and goes when it is washed off at night; makeup comes when the maid carries it into the room and goes when the maid carries it out.

☞ SIR PETER. Madam, madam, I beg your pardon—there's no stopping these good gentlemen's tongues. —But when I tell you, Mrs. Candour, that the lady they are abusing is a particular friend of mine, I hope you'll not take her part.



LADY SNEERWELL. Ha! ha! ha! Well said, Sir Peter! but you are a cruel creature, —too phlegmatic yourself for a jest, and too peevish to allow wit in others.

SIR PETER. Ah! madam, true wit is more nearly allied to good-nature than your ladyship is aware of.

LADY TEAZLE. True, Sir Peter: I believe they are so near akin that they can never be united.

SIR BENJAMIN. Or rather, madam, suppose them to be man and wife, because one seldom sees them together.

Related Characters: Sir Benjamin Backbite, Lady Teazle, Lady Sneerwell, Sir Peter Teazle (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 19


Explanation and Analysis

Sir Peter is visiting his neighbor Lady Sneerwell, but he disapproves of the way the gossips mock their acquaintances. He is fed up with listening to one of his good friends be mocked and expresses his disapproval to them as an eloquently stated moral sentiment. The gossips, however, use his words as an occasion to show off their wit, as well as their cynical view of morality. Lady Teazle jokes that wit and good-nature (that is, morality) are like a brother and sister: too closely related to be married. Sir Benjamin, in

a jab particularly likely to wound Sir Peter, who is sensitive about the rumors that he and Lady Teazle fight, says that wit and good-nature are like a man and wife who fight and avoid one another.

☞ JOSEPH. A curious dilemma my politics have run me into! I wanted, at first, only to ingratiate myself with Lady Teazle, that she might not be my enemy with Maria; and I have, I don't know how, become her serious lover. Sincerely I begin to wish I had never made such a point of gaining so very good a character, for it has led me into so many cursed rogueries that I doubt I shall be exposed at last.

Related Characters: Joseph Surface / Mr. Surface (speaker), Lady Teazle, Maria

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Lady Teazle, whom Joseph has been trying to seduce, finds him on his knees in front of Maria, whom he is trying to convince to marry him. After Joseph explains his behavior to Lady Teazle and is left alone, he reflects on the difficult situation he finds himself in. Lady Teazle is Sir Peter's wife and will inevitably become aware of Joseph's desire to marry Maria, who is Sir Peter's ward, if Joseph is to successfully woo the young heiress. Joseph is not in love with Lady Teazle, so his attempts to seduce her arise neither from a deep attraction to his friend Sir Peter's wife nor from his habit of trying to pursue his own self-interest. In fact, Joseph is so deceitful that he cannot always control the way he uses deceit. Although he means to manipulate people to get his own way, his habit of concealing his true motives and making flattering and beautiful-sounding speeches is even more ingrained than his selfishness. As he pursues Lady Teazle, his false persona as a man of sentiment leads him astray and ultimately puts obstacles in the way of achieving his main goal of marrying Maria. Joseph foresees that this complicated situation he has created for himself may lead to his exposure as a hypocrite and liar.

Act 2, Scene 3 Quotes

☞☞ SIR PETER. Wild!—Ah! my old friend, I grieve for your disappointment there; he's a lost young man, indeed. However, his brother will make you amends. Joseph is, indeed, what a youth should be. Everybody in the world speaks well of him.

SIR OLIVER. I am sorry to hear it; he has too good a character to be an honest fellow. Everybody speaks well of him!—Pshaw! then he has bowed as low to knaves and fools as to the honest dignity of genius and virtue.

SIR PETER. What, Sir Oliver! do you blame him for not making enemies?

SIR OLIVER. Yes, if he has merit enough to deserve them.

SIR PETER. Well, well—you'll be convinced when you know him. 'Tis edification to hear him converse; he professes the noblest sentiments.

SIR OLIVER. Oh, plague of his sentiments! If he salutes me with a scrap of morality in his mouth, I shall be sick directly. —But, however, don't mistake me, Sir Peter; I don't mean to defend Charles's errors: but, before I form my judgment of either of them, I intend to make a trial of their hearts; and my friend Rowley and I have planned something for the purpose.

Related Characters: Sir Oliver Surface / Mr. Premium / Mr. Stanley, Sir Peter Teazle (speaker), Mr. Rowley, Joseph Surface / Mr. Surface, Charles Surface

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 23-24

Explanation and Analysis

Sir Peter is telling his friend Sir Oliver his opinion of the two Surface brothers, explaining that Joseph speaks beautifully about the moral sentiments that motivate his behavior, while Charles neither makes fine speeches nor behaves as he should. Sir Oliver is not impressed when he hears about Joseph's moral speeches and the perfect reputation he has in society. He believes that actions speak louder than words, and that there is no way to act honestly without sometimes causing offense. At the same time, Charles has a reputation for being badly behaved, and there is nothing honorable in this either. Sir Oliver believes that a good man may have a bad reputation, but only a liar can have a perfect reputation.

Act 3, Scene 1 Quotes

☞☞ SIR OLIVER. Sir, I understand you have lately had great dealings with my nephew, Charles.

MOSES. Yes, Sir Oliver, I have done all I could for him; but he was ruined before he came to me for assistance.


SIR OLIVER. That was unlucky, truly; for you have had no opportunity of showing your talents.

MOSES. None at all; I hadn't the pleasure of knowing his distresses till he was some thousands worse than nothing.

SIR OLIVER. Unfortunate, indeed! —But I suppose you have done all in your power for him, honest Moses?

Related Characters: Moses, Sir Oliver Surface / Mr. Premium / Mr. Stanley (speaker), Charles Surface

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

Moses is a moneylender who has lent money to the extravagant Charles. Sir Oliver is recruiting Moses's help because he wants to understand his nephew's true character. At the time when the play was written, Jews were often caricatured as selfish moneylenders who preyed on financially irresponsible, upper-class Christians, especially young men, by giving them loans on unfavorable terms. They were thought to ask for especially high rates of interest from young men who lacked the presence of mind to refuse these bad terms, often in the hopes that their families would later bail the young men out. Sir Oliver makes a joke about this caricature, suggesting that if Charles was already deeply indebted by the time Moses met him, then Moses has been unable to do what he does best: cheat and ruin him.

Act 3, Scene 3 Quotes

☛ CHARLES. Not much, indeed; unless you have a mind to the family pictures. I have got a room full of ancestors above, and if you have a taste for paintings, egad', you shall have 'em a bargain.

SIR OLIVER. Hey! what the devil! sure, you wouldn't sell your forefathers, would you?

CHARLES. Every man of them to the best bidder.

SIR OLIVER. What! your great-uncles and aunts?



CHARLES. Ay, and my great-grandfathers and grandmothers too.



SIR OLIVER. Now I give him up. [*Aside.*] What the plague, have you no bowels for your own kindred? Odd's life, do you take me for Shylock in the play, that you would raise money of me on your own flesh and blood?

CHARLES. Nay, my little broker, don't be angry: what need you care if you have your money's worth?

SIR OLIVER. Well, I'll be the purchaser: I think I can dispose of the family canvas. Oh, I'll never forgive him this! never!

Related Characters: Charles Surface, Sir Oliver Surface / Mr. Premium / Mr. Stanley (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Sir Oliver is visiting Charles, disguised as a broker and moneylender named Mr. Premium who is interested in lending money to Charles. “Mr. Premium” has asked if there is anything that Charles can sell to him in exchange for money, but Charles tells him that he has sold all the heirlooms that he had. He finally says that he can sell Mr. Premium the family portraits. Sir Oliver is so shocked by this proposal that he forgets for a moment to stay in character as Mr. Premium. He thinks that for Charles to sell the family portraits represents a grave sin against the respect due to the Surface family name.

As Sir Oliver expresses his indignation, he refers to Shylock, a Jewish moneylender in William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. In this play, Shylock gives a loan on the

condition that if it cannot be repaid, he will ask for a pound of the indebted man’s flesh. Shylock was a potent archetype among those prejudiced against Jews. The real Mr. Premium, who is a moneylender—although he is not Jewish, but Christian—would likely have seen nothing unusual in accepting this deal from Charles. But Sir Oliver says that selling the family portraits is akin to selling “one’s flesh and blood.” He is offended by Charles’s disrespect for the Surface family and, like many in his society at the time, sees this deal as one that only a Jew would be dishonorable enough to take.

Act 4, Scene 1 Quotes

☛ CHARLES. Bravo, Careless! —Well, here’s my great-uncle, Sir Richard Raveline, a marvelous good general in his day, I assure you. He served in all the Duke of Marlborough’s wars, and got that cut over his eye at the battle of Malplaquet. —What say you, Mr. Premium? —look at him—there’s a hero! not cut out of his feathers, as your modern clipped captains are, but enveloped in wig and regimentals, as a general should be. What do you bid?


MOSES. Mr. Premium would have *you* speak.

CHARLES. Why, then, he shall have him for ten pounds, and I’m sure that’s not dear for a staff officer.

SIR OLIVER. Heaven deliver me! his famous uncle Richard for ten pounds! [*Aside.*] —Well, sir, I take him at that.

Related Characters: Moses, Sir Oliver Surface / Mr. Premium / Mr. Stanley, Charles Surface (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 41-42

Explanation and Analysis

Sir Oliver is pretending to be the broker Mr. Premium in order to learn more about his nephew Charles’s true character. Sir Oliver is looking for an heir whose values echo his own and who he believes will bring credit to the Surface family name. Charles has shocked Sir Oliver by suggesting that he will sell him the Surface family portraits in an auction. As the auction begins, Charles makes light of the proceedings, acting as if he is unconcerned by the disrespect that he is showing his ancestors by selling their portraits. At the same time, however, he shows an excellent

grasp of his family history, giving a detailed description of his ancestor's life and achievements. Although he may make light of what he is doing by selling his ancestor's portrait, he is not indifferent to the Surface family honor.

Act 4, Scene 2 Quotes

☛ MOSES. Well, sir, I think, as Sir Peter said, you have seen Mr. Charles in high glory; 'tis great pity he's so extravagant.

SIR OLIVER. True, but he would not sell my picture.

MOSES. And loves wine and women so much.

SIR OLIVER. But he would not sell my picture.

MOSES. And games so deep.

SIR OLIVER. But he would not sell my picture. —Oh, here's Rowley.

Enter Rowley.

ROWLEY. So, Sir Oliver, I find you have made a purchase—

SIR OLIVER. Yes; yes, our young rake has parted with his ancestors like old tapestry.



ROWLEY. And here has he commissioned me to re-deliver you part of the purchase-money—I mean, though, in your necessitous character of old Stanley.

MOSES. Ah! there is the pity of all; he is so damned charitable.

ROWLEY. And I left a hosier and two tailors in the hall, who, I'm sure, won't be paid, and this hundred would satisfy them.

SIR OLIVER. Well, well, I'll pay his debts, and his benevolence too.

Related Characters: Mr. Rowley, Moses, Sir Oliver Surface / Mr. Premium / Mr. Stanley (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 45-46

Explanation and Analysis

Sir Oliver, pretending to be the broker Mr. Premium, has just bought all the Surface family portraits from Charles at auction, except for one: his own. Sir Oliver is touched by

Charles's refusal to sell this portrait. As Moses gives a litany of the bad behaviors Sir Oliver has just seen his nephew engaged in, Sir Oliver focuses only on one fact: Charles's steadfast refusal to sell the portrait of the man he described as a generous benefactor to whom he owed a debt of gratitude. Sir Oliver sees that Charles does possess loyalty and gratitude after all, despite his bad behavior and his decision to sell all the other paintings.

Rowley then tells Sir Oliver that Charles has sent Rowley to give the money that he received from "Mr. Premium" to his impoverished relative "Mr. Stanley." When he hears this, Sir Oliver is even further convinced of Charles's good character and respect for the family. Although Charles is deep in debt and could be thrown out of his house any day by collection agents, he recognizes that Stanley's position is direr still. Stanley is older and has no one else to turn to, and he has already been thrown into prison for his failure to pay his debts. Charles sees it as his responsibility to help his relative before he helps himself. Sir Oliver sees this as an act of generosity and an act of respect for the family name. A relative of the rich Surfaces should not be allowed to languish in debtors' prison, and so by helping Stanley, Charles also protects his own family's reputation for wealth and noble generosity.

Act 4, Scene 3 Quotes

☛ JOSEPH. Ah! my dear madam, there is the great mistake: 'tis this very conscious innocence that is of the greatest prejudice to you. What is it makes you negligent of forms, and careless of the world's opinion? why, the consciousness of your own innocence. What makes you thoughtless in your conduct, and apt to run into a thousand little imprudences? —why, the consciousness of your own innocence. What makes you impatient of Sir Peter's temper, and outrageous at his suspicions? —why, the consciousness of your innocence.

LADY TEAZLE. 'Tis very true!

JOSEPH. Now, my dear Lady Teazle, if you would but once make a trifling *faux pas*, you can't conceive how cautious you would grow, and how ready to humour and agree with your husband.

LADY TEAZLE. Do you think so?

JOSEPH. Oh! I am sure on't; and then you would find all scandal would cease at once, for, in short, your character at present is like a person in a plethora, absolutely dying from too much health.

Related Characters: Joseph Surface / Mr. Surface, Lady Teazle (speaker), Lady Teazle, Sir Peter Teazle

Related Themes:   



Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

Lady Teazle has come to Joseph's house and is considering committing adultery with him. She complains about her husband's unjustified suspicion that she is having an affair with Charles. To seduce her, Joseph speaks in the flowery language of the "man of sentiment," but advocates for an immoral action. Joseph says the overly "innocent" Lady Teazle should commit more sins (i.e., sleep with him) because then her guilty conscience will ensure that she takes more caution and pays attention to how her actions may be interpreted by others. Joseph, in fact, takes the opposite tack: he is so cautious to conceal his true self from others that it often leads him into immoral actions for no other reason than his habit of concealing his true nature.

☝ No, sir, —she has recovered her senses, and your own arts have furnished her with the means. —Sir Peter, I do not expect you to credit me—but the tenderness you expressed for me, when I am sure you could not think I was a witness to it, has penetrated so to my heart, that had I left the place without the shame of this discovery, my future life should have spoken the sincerity of my gratitude. As for that smooth-tongued hypocrite, who would have seduced the wife of his too credulous friend, while he affected honourable addresses to his ward—I behold him now in a light so truly despicable, that I shall never again respect myself for having listened to him.

Related Characters: Lady Teazle (speaker), Maria, Sir Peter Teazle, Joseph Surface / Mr. Surface

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 56-57

Explanation and Analysis

Lady Teazle has been discovered by her husband hiding in Joseph's room. Joseph has made a very unconvincing excuse to explain her presence there, but when Sir Peter asks his wife to corroborate Joseph's story, she refuses. She says that she now sees things much more clearly—and not only because she understands that Joseph hypocritically pretended to be a friend to Sir Peter and a potential spouse to Maria while also trying to seduce Lady Teazle. For Lady

Teazle, the more significant revelation was hearing the way her husband spoke about her when he did not think she was listening. She understands that he really loves her, finds their arguments painful, and wants to do what he can to make her happy. Sir Peter had tried to conceal his love from her, in the fear that she would laugh at him and take advantage of him. Although he praised Joseph's eloquent speeches about living according to benevolent and moral sentiments, Sir Peter was afraid he would be laughed at by his wife and the world if he allowed his heart to guide him. Instead, now that Lady Teazle knows his true feelings, her own feelings for him become much clearer to her.

Act 5, Scene 1 Quotes

☝ SIR OLIVER. I was, sir —so nearly that my present poverty, I fear, may do discredit to her wealthy children, else I should not have presumed to trouble you.

JOSEPH. Dear sir, there needs no apology:—he that is in distress, though a stranger, has a right to claim kindred with the wealthy. I am sure I wish I was of that class, and had it in my power to offer you even a small relief.

SIR OLIVER. If your uncle, Sir Oliver, were here, I should have a friend.

JOSEPH. I wish he was, Sir, with all my heart: you should not want an advocate with him, believe me, sir.

SIR OLIVER. I should not need one—my distresses would recommend me. But I imagined his bounty would enable you to become the agent of his charity.

JOSEPH. My dear sir, you were strangely misinformed. Sir Oliver is a worthy man, a very worthy man; but avarice, Mr. Stanley, is the vice of age. I will tell you, my good sir, in confidence, what he has done for me has been a mere nothing; though people, I know, have thought otherwise, and, for my part, I never chose to contradict the report.

Related Characters: Sir Oliver Surface / Mr. Premium / Mr. Stanley (speaker), Joseph Surface / Mr. Surface

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 60-61

Explanation and Analysis

Sir Oliver visits Joseph and pretends to be the Surfaces' impoverished relative Mr. Stanley. "Mr. Stanley" suggests

that he would be able to get financial assistance from Sir Oliver, if he were in England, reminding Joseph that rich relatives usually help their impoverished kin. He further suggests that the Surface family's good name depends on taking care of their own in this way. Joseph continues to preach the importance of charity and to say how much he would like to help his relative in his time of trouble, but he refuses to actually give Mr. Stanley any help. He says that it is a false rumor that his uncle Sir Oliver sent him great sums of money and suggests in a smug, self-important, and moralizing tone, that his uncle has not sent him money because he has grown greedy in his old age. Sir Oliver sees that Joseph is not only ungenerous and willing to lie to avoid sharing his wealth, but he also does not care to protect the family reputation.

Act 5, Scene 2 Quotes

☛ SIR BENJAMIN. Aye, there; I told you Mr. Surface was the man.

MRS. CANDOUR. No, no, indeed; the assignation was with Charles.

LADY SNEERWELL. With Charles! You alarm me, Mrs. Candour!

MRS. CANDOUR. Yes, yes, he was the lover. Mr. Surface, to do him justice, was only the informer.

SIR BENJAMIN. Well, I'll not dispute with you, Mrs. Candour; but, be it which it may, I hope that Sir Peter's wound will not—

MRS. CANDOUR. Sir Peter's wound! Oh, mercy! I didn't hear a word of their fighting.

LADY SNEERWELL. Nor I, a syllable.

SIR BENJAMIN. No! what, no mention of the duel?

MRS. CANDOUR. Not a word.


SIR BENJAMIN. O Lord, yes, yes: they fought before they left the room.

LADY SNEERWELL. Pray, let us hear.

MRS. CANDOUR. Aye, do oblige us with the duel.

Related Characters: Mrs. Candour , Lady Sneerwell, Sir

Benjamin Backbite (speaker), Lady Teazle, Sir Peter Teazle, Charles Surface, Joseph Surface / Mr. Surface

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 63-64

Explanation and Analysis

The gossipmongers have heard that Sir Peter discovered his wife at Joseph Surface's house and suspects her of adultery. They have all swarmed the Teazle house, looking to swap information about the scandal and to show that they know more than the others. They cannot, however, agree on any of the details. Given the rumor that Charles and Lady Teazle were involved in an affair, some assume that he is the Surface brother involved. Others, with just as little real knowledge, assume that if Lady Teazle was at Joseph's home, he was the brother involved in the act of adultery. As they jockey to show their superior knowledge, the gossips further fabricate hypothetical situations (Sir Peter dueling with the guilty brother, and being injured in the duel), making themselves look ridiculous and revealing their own shallow dependence on gossip to build themselves up. Even Mrs. Candour, who usually pretends to have the best intentions, is so hungry for the scandalous news that she is more interested in hearing the story of a duel than she is concerned for Sir Peter's health and wellbeing.

☛ SIR PETER. Though, when it is known that we are reconciled, people will laugh at me ten times more.

ROWLEY. Let them laugh, and retort their malice only by showing them you are happy in spite of it.

SIR PETER. I'faith, so I will! and, if I'm not mistaken, we may yet be the happiest couple in the country.

ROWLEY. Nay, Sir Peter, he who once lays aside suspicion—

SIR PETER. Hold, Master Rowley! if you have any regard for me, never let me hear you utter anything like a sentiment: I have had enough of them to serve me the rest of my life.

Related Characters: Mr. Rowley , Sir Peter Teazle (speaker), Lady Teazle

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

Rowley is trying to convince Sir Peter to reconcile with Lady Teazle. In the past, Sir Peter has been too afraid of being laughed at to show his tenderness and love for his wife, which may have been part of the reason that she considered committing adultery. Now he is at the center of a cheating scandal and being mocked by his acquaintances. In urging Sir Peter to forgive his wife, Rowley begins to make what sounds like a moral speech. Sir Peter stops him, however, and suggests that his experience with Joseph has cured him of any admiration for those who preach morality or give speeches about “sentiment.” Instead, Sir Peter now hopes that by taking moral actions—by being honest about his feelings and forgiving his wife for her transgression—he will be much better off, and they may indeed become the “happiest couple in the country.”

behavior, he expressed the same heartfelt gratitude and affection for his uncle when he did not know that his uncle was standing in front of him as he does now.

☞ LADY SNEERWELL. The torments of shame and disappointment on you all.—

LADY TEAZLE. Hold, Lady Sneerwell,—before you go, let me thank you for the trouble you and that gentleman have taken, in writing letters from me to Charles, and answering them yourself; and let me also request you to make my respects to the scandalous college, of which you are president, and inform them, that Lady Teazle, licentiate, begs leave to return the diploma they gave her, as she leaves off practice, and kills characters no longer.


LADY SNEERWELL. You too, madam—provoking—insolent—May your husband live these fifty years!


Act 5, Scene 3 Quotes

☞ SIR OLIVER. Odd’s heart, no more can I; nor with gravity either. —Sir Peter, do you know the rogue bargained with me for all his ancestors; sold me judges and generals by the foot, and maiden aunts as cheap as broken china.

CHARLES. To be sure, Sir Oliver, I did make a little free with the family canvas, that’s the truth on’t. My ancestors may rise in judgment against me, there’s no denying it; but believe me sincere when I tell you—and upon my soul I would not say so if I was not—that if I do not appear mortified at the exposure of my follies, it is because I feel at this moment the warmest satisfaction in seeing you, my liberal benefactor.

Related Characters: Charles Surface, Sir Oliver Surface / Mr. Premium / Mr. Stanley (speaker), Sir Peter Teazle

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

Sir Oliver has revealed his identity to the Surface brothers and told them his opinion of each of their characters. While he disapproves of Charles’s selling of the family portraits, he also saw through this action to Charles’s good character. Charles’s decision to sell the paintings was not malicious or dishonest, and Sir Oliver himself recognizes that there was some humor in the way Charles sold his illustrious ancestors on the cheap. Most importantly, Charles was never concealing his own character. Despite his bad

Related Characters: Lady Teazle, Lady Sneerwell (speaker), Sir Peter Teazle, Charles Surface

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

Lady Sneerwell’s plot to force Charles to marry her has been revealed by Snake. She is enraged, embarrassed, and bitter, and tries to flee the scene. Before Lady Sneerwell can leave, however, Lady Teazle states that she has decided to leave her circle of fashionable gossipmongers. Prior to being ensnared in a scandal that threatened to hurt her husband, Lady Teazle had believed herself to be in sophisticated company and to be distinguishing herself by the wit she showed when gossiping. Lady Teazle now realizes exactly how destructive rumors can be and hopes to turn over a new leaf in her marriage, while also exiting the “school for scandal” of which Lady Sneerwell is “president.” The possibility of a new understanding between husband and wife is beyond Lady Sneerwell’s comprehension, however. She does not realize that Lady Teazle hopes to have a more harmonious marriage, and rather suggests that Lady Teazle is hoping for her husband to die and leave her a rich widow—so Lady Sneerwell’s parting “curse” to Lady Teazle actually sounds more like a blessing. Lady Teazle herself had made this same joke earlier in the play, but now she sees that such insults are neither funny nor sophisticated, but rather a sign that someone is lashing out cruelly.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

The prologue is written in rhymed couplets by an actor, playwright, producer, and theater manager named David Garrick. The prologue questions whether anyone needs any instruction in gossip and rumormongering, saying that society is completely saturated by it. Members of society read about each other in the newspaper's gossip column and laugh at their friends while becoming indignant when the gossip is about themselves. This play will then attempt to attack scandal in the same way a warrior tries to defeat a monster, although the playwright is unlikely to win in this battle.

The play's prologue introduces gossip as a nearly universal problem in the world of rich Londoners. People are hurt when rumors are spread about themselves, but still seek out gossip about their friends and acquaintances. The play will attack this practice as a vice and point out its immorality, but ultimately the playwright seems to have no real intention (or potential) to change public behavior so that people actually gossip less.



ACT 1, SCENE 1

The play begins in Lady Sneerwell's home. She is sitting at her dressing table and talking to Snake, a man she pays to insert rumors about people she knows into the gossip columns. The two discuss Lady Sneerwell's talent for ruining reputations and compare her methods to those of Mrs. Clackitt, whom they say has used gossip to ruin marriages, force couples to elope to save their reputations, and cause sons to lose their inheritances. Snake says that Lady Sneerwell is a subtler gossipmonger who concocts more believable stories. Lady Sneerwell appreciates the compliment. She says causing scandal for others brings her satisfaction, because scandal ruined her own reputation when she was young.

Lady Sneerwell is the leading gossipmonger in town, and a very malicious one too. She spreads false rumors about people because she's bitter that false rumors were spread about her, and even goes so far as to pay someone to help her ruin reputations. In the play, however, gossip is not only a sign of cruelty, but also a way to show intelligence. Lady Sneerwell is such a master gossip that she knows which details to tell people and to which people to tell them in order to make her false stories stick.



Snake then asks Lady Sneerwell to explain her motivations for a certain rumor she has asked him to spread. This rumor concerns a young woman named Maria, her guardian Sir Peter Teazle, and the two Surface brothers, who were also Sir Peter's wards for a time after their father's death. Snake says that he knows that Maria and Charles (the younger Surface brother) are in love, although Charles has a reputation for being an extravagant spender and good-for-nothing, while Lady Sneerwell and Mr. Joseph Surface, who has a good reputation, are known to be in love. Why, Snake asks Lady Sneerwell, is she trying to split up Maria and Charles, when she could just marry Joseph and be happy?

Lady Sneerwell is a master at concealing her own motives, so even those she employs to help her spread rumors sometimes do not understand her motivations. Lady Sneerwell has allowed it to be widely believed that she loves Joseph, so in the case of Maria and Charles, who are her potential in-laws if she marries Joseph, it does not make sense for her to create a scandal. If this story damages their reputations, it would also damage hers once she joined the Surface family as Joseph's wife.



Lady Sneerwell explains that she is really in love with the bankrupt big-spender Charles, not Joseph. Joseph, meanwhile, wants to marry his brother's beloved Maria (although only because she is a wealthy heiress), so he and Lady Sneerwell are plotting to break up Maria and Charles. Lady Sneerwell says that Joseph's reputation for morality is misplaced: he is selfish and malicious, which is why he is happy to conspire with her. Snake remarks that Sir Peter is completely convinced of Joseph's goodness, and Lady Sneerwell adds that Sir Peter is also prejudiced against Charles and opposes the idea of letting Maria and Charles marry.

Joseph Surface is then announced, and enters. Lady Sneerwell tells him that she has informed Snake of their plans and that they can trust Snake to keep their secret. Joseph praises Snake's trustworthiness. Lady Sneerwell asks after Maria and Charles. Joseph says he has not seen either of them, but he reports that Maria has heard some of Lady Sneerwell's rumors and has stopped meeting with Charles. Charles, meanwhile, is in so much debt that creditors are coming to seize his belongings.

Joseph says he only wishes it were in his power to help his brother, but Lady Sneerwell cuts him off, saying there is no need for him to hypocritically pretend to have pity for his brother around her and Snake. Joseph says she is right, but adds that he really will be doing a good deed by breaking up the romance between Maria and Charles. Charles, he says, could only be tamed by a woman like Lady Sneerwell.

Snake leaves and Joseph tells Lady Sneerwell that she was wrong to place her trust in him, because he has seen Snake talking to Mr. Rowley, who was Joseph's late father's steward and does not like him. Lady Sneerwell asks Joseph if he thinks Snake will betray their plots to Rowley, and Joseph says that Snake is too much of a villain to be expected to be loyal to one bad deed over another.

Maria enters, looking upset. She tells Lady Sneerwell that she slipped away from Sir Peter's house because Sir Benjamin Backbite and his uncle Crabtree were there, and she hates listening to them gossip about their friends. Joseph agrees, saying that they gossip so much that they even gossip about people they do not know. Lady Sneerwell defends Sir Benjamin, saying he is witty and a poet, but Maria says she does not like wit when it is malicious. She asks Joseph his opinion, and Joseph agrees. Lady Sneerwell says that unkindness is essential to wit, and asks Joseph if he agrees: he says he does.

Lady Sneerwell is cynical enough to believe that she can force Charles to marry her by spreading rumors about him. She sees through Joseph's hypocrisy and understands that he cares so little for his family's honor that he is willing to sabotage his brother's reputation and happiness to become personally wealthy. This flies in the face of the prevalent thinking of the time, which held that a ruined reputation for one member of the family impacted an entire family name.



Lady Sneerwell does not cultivate a reputation for goodness, but instead focuses on ruining other people's reputations. She does not think perfect concealment of her own character from other schemers is necessary. Joseph, on the other hand, flatters everyone he meets. He hopes to be considered above the fray at the same time as he fights to ruin the reputations of others.



Joseph is so used to pretending to be moral that he struggles to drop the pretense even when he is around co-conspirators. He continues to flatter Lady Sneerwell and come up with reasons why what they are doing is right and justified even after she tells him to stop.



Joseph's true character is understood by the canny Rowley, who has known him all his life. Lady Sneerwell is malicious, but not hypocritical, so she does not see the danger in telling Snake about her motives. Joseph recognizes that Snake, like himself, has no loyalty to any cause and would betray them to help himself.



Maria is an independent and moral thinker. Unlike others, who defend their indulgence in gossip by saying that it is a way to show intelligence and wittiness, Maria sees only the cruelty of the rumors and criticisms she hears. Joseph, meanwhile, agrees with both Maria and Lady Sneerwell, although their ideas contradict one another. He tries to flatter whatever person he is talking to, even if they have just heard him say the opposite.



A servant announces that Mrs. Candour's carriage has arrived. Lady Sneerwell says that Maria will like Mrs. Candour, who has a reputation for being good-natured. Maria, however, says that this is an affectation: Mrs. Candour does even more damage to people's reputations than Crabtree. Joseph says that there is nothing worse for someone's reputation than to be defended by Mrs. Candour. Mrs. Candour enters. She asks Joseph what news he's heard, and says that no one talks about anything but scandal. Mrs. Candour then asks Maria what is going on with her and Charles, and says that the town talks of nothing but his extravagant spending. Maria says she thinks people should find something better to do. Mrs. Candour agrees, but says there is no way to keep people from talking, and that she has also heard that Sir Peter and Lady Teazle have not been getting along.

Maria is indignant, but Mrs. Candour continues to gossip. Joseph says it is amazing what stories people will make up, and Maria replies that it is just as bad to repeat lies as to make them up. Mrs. Candour agrees, but says that there is nothing to be done, because people will talk. She continues to gossip about couples eloping, an unmarried woman rumored to have had a baby, and two men dueling. She concludes by saying she would never spread such rumors, and Joseph praises her restraint.

Mrs. Candour says she hates when people are attacked behind their backs, and then asks Joseph if it is true that his brother Charles is ruined. Joseph says that his brother's finances are very bad, and Mrs. Candour names four other men in similar financial straits. Charles, she says, can find consolation in the fact that he will not be the only person in his social circle in this position. Joseph agrees.

Sir Benjamin Backbite and his uncle Crabtree enter. Crabtree brags that his nephew is a wonderful poet who comes up with hilarious rhymes about his acquaintances. Lady Sneerwell asks Sir Benjamin why he never publishes his verse. Sir Benjamin explains that, since his work usually mocks people, it circulates quickly around town if he gives it to the friends of those he is mocking, and so he asks them to show it to no one. He would, however, like to publish some love poems about a certain lady, he says, indicating Maria.

Crabtree and Sir Benjamin then begin gossiping about an acquaintance named Miss Nicely whom, they say, has gotten pregnant out of wedlock and plans to marry her footman. Mrs. Candour says that this is hard to believe because Miss Nicely is such a prudent lady, and Sir Benjamin responds that that prudence shows she had something to cover up. Mrs. Candour says that those with terrible reputations do seem to get through more scandals than those without any rumors spread about them.

Mrs. Candour, like Joseph, hypocritically tries to conceal her role in spreading rumors. She does this by pretending to defend the target of a rumor or lamenting that people cannot find a better occupation for their time than gossiping, while simultaneously trying to prove her own social clout by showing off how much she knows about what is going on with members of an extended social circle. Mrs. Candour often criticizes spreading rumors while also saying that people cannot be stopped from gossiping. In this way, she seeks to create the impression that she is an outside observer of gossip, instead of a central figure in the rumor mill.



Mrs. Candour's hypocrisy is clear as she laments the prevalence of gossip while gossiping herself. Her attempt to conceal her true nature is easily seen through and makes her look foolish and lacking in self-awareness. At the same time, by praising Mrs. Candour's discretion, Joseph shows that he also is a dissembler who does not say what he means.



Mrs. Candour's hypocrisy is still on display. She seems to take pleasure not only in spreading rumors, but in spreading them about as many people as possible. The consolation she says that Charles will have is hollow, of course, as well as condescending.



Some of the gossipmongers see their behavior as justified because they show their wit and creativity through their gossip, either by transmitting rumors in the form of short poems or by coming up with funny one-liners while gossiping. They choose to believe that when a poem full of gossip circulates through town, this proves the talent of the poet, not society's interest in gossip.



The idea that those who seem blameless are the ones with the most to hide is a common explanation for hypocritical gossipmongers. In these social circles, a reputation can only be ruined once. Any later scandals that emerge about someone with an already "ruined" reputation will be less surprising, less interesting, and therefore less likely to spread.



Mrs. Candour then says that the story about Miss Nicely could, after all, just be a mistake—Crabtree says that this is true, and goes on to tell the story of Miss Letitia Piper. At a party where the difficulty of breeding sheep was being discussed, someone said that Miss Piper had a sheep that bore twins. A deaf old woman misheard this, and in no time at all, a rumor was circulating that Miss Piper had given birth to twins out of wedlock, and people were even spreading rumors about who the father was.

Crabtree turns to Joseph and asks if it is true that his uncle, Sir Oliver, is returning soon from the East Indies. Joseph says he has not heard this. Crabtree says Sir Oliver will be sad to see how badly Charles has grown up, but Joseph says he hopes no one has said anything to Sir Oliver to prejudice him against his brother. Crabtree responds that Charles, at least, has an excellent reputation among the **Jewish** moneylenders. Sir Benjamin says that despite his financial difficulties and the creditors who try to collect their money from him, Charles still gives lavish parties for his friends. Joseph says they are being insensitive in talking about his brother in front of him.

Maria finds it painful to listen to these things said about Charles. She says she feels sick and leaves. Lady Sneerwell sends Mrs. Candour to follow Maria and make sure she is all right. Lady Sneerwell says it is clear that, despite no longer seeing Charles, Maria still has feelings for him. Sir Benjamin agrees, but Crabtree encourages his nephew, telling him to follow Maria and recite his love poems to her. Sir Benjamin tells Joseph that he is sorry if he upset him, but it's well-known that his brother is in financial ruin and has had to sell everything except the **family portraits**, which, he says, are probably framed in the walls.

Sir Benjamin and Crabtree leave, still remarking on Charles as they go. Lady Sneerwell laughs at how eager they are to continue gossiping. Joseph says he thinks Lady Sneerwell must have also found it difficult to hear about Charles's difficulties. Lady Sneerwell says she fears that Maria may be too much in love with Charles to change her mind, but says that the Teazles and Maria will visit that evening, so they will be able to observe their feelings. In the meantime, she says, she will "plot mischief, and you shall study sentiment."

The gossips show how little concern they have for those whose reputations are ruined. They express no sympathy for Miss Piper, instead finding humor in how a deaf old woman unwittingly ruined a reputation. The gossips continue to seek to show their own centrality to their social circles by telling as many stories about ruined reputations as they can think of.



The Surface brothers' rich uncle has sent home large sums earned in the East Indies. As he became wealthy abroad, Sir Oliver sought to show off that wealth at home in England through his nephews—and Charles's extravagant spending habits do create the impression in society that the Surface family is very wealthy. By exceeding the amount of money his uncle sends him and borrowing from moneylenders who ask exorbitant amounts of interest, Charles has left it uncertain whether his uncle will bail him out of debt.



Pretending to be concerned about Maria, Lady Sneerwell means to make her feel worse by sending Mrs. Candour, who will be sure to repeat more gossip about Charles to Maria, to follow her. Sir Benjamin, likewise, gives an apology for gossiping about Charles that contains even more detail about the gossip. If Joseph cared about his brother or the family's reputation, this would be even more upsetting to him.



Lady Sneerwell sees herself as standing above the other gossips, who gossip for fun and to show off rather than to manipulate relationships in their own favor. She doesn't find it hard to hear about Charles's financial position because she doesn't care about Charles's reputation—only about the effect that the scandal surrounding him will have on Maria's love for him. Indeed, if Charles is financially ruined and abandoned by his uncle and Maria, he will need to marry a wealthy woman like Sneerwell to avoid going to jail. The reference to "sentiment" here also shows how Joseph manages to impress and manipulate people—by pretending he is a "man of sentiment," acting on emotions based in lofty morals. Yet the mere fact that he has to "study" sentiment shows that it is not sincere for him.



ACT 1, SCENE 2

The scene begins in Sir Peter's house. Sir Peter sits alone, lamenting the troubles in his marriage to himself. He married late in life after living for many years as a bachelor, and says he should have predicted trouble. He had thought that by marrying a woman who grew up without luxury, he would avoid having to spend huge amounts of money on his wife's fashionable purchases. But although Lady Teazle grew up in the countryside, she now acts the part of a sophisticated lady of fashion. Their marriage is discussed by society and written about in the gossip columns. Not only does she spend all his money, but she also contradicts him in everything. He would never put up with all this, he says, except that he really does love her. He says he will not let her know this, however.

Rowley arrives and asks Sir Peter how he is. Sir Peter says he is not well and never will be, as long as he is married to Lady Teazle. Rowley says that he knows Sir Peter loves his wife, although they do not get along. Sir Peter says that it is all his wife's fault—he is perfectly sweet to her and hates any form of teasing. Further, Lady Teazle is encouraged to be perverse and fight with him by the social set who spend their time at Lady Sneerwell's house.

Sir Peter says he is also upset because his ward Maria will not agree to marry the man he chooses, but is determined to wed his extravagant brother. Rowley says that he has a different opinion than Sir Peter on Charles and Joseph. Rowley says that his late master, the Surface brother's father, was also badly behaved as a young man, but grew into someone beloved for his goodness. Rowley thinks that Charles will redeem himself in the same way. Sir Peter says he has had a perfect opportunity to judge the two men, since he served as their guardian until they were given fortunes by their uncle Sir Oliver. He continues by saying that Joseph is "a man of sentiment" who speaks and acts morally. Charles, meanwhile, has wasted all his money and probably any virtue he was born with. Sir Peter feels that Sir Oliver will be unhappy to see how the money he sent Charles was wasted.

Rowley says he is sorry to hear that Sir Peter has a low opinion of Charles, because the young man's destiny will soon be determined—Sir Oliver has arrived back in England. Sir Peter is surprised and overjoyed, saying he has not seen his old friend in sixteen years. But Sir Oliver, Rowley says, has asked Rowley and Sir Peter to keep his arrival a secret. Since his nephews will not recognize him, Oliver hopes to test them and discover which one deserves to be his heir.

Sir Peter is having trouble adjusting to married life and to the impact his wife has on his happiness, wealth, and reputation. He seems to have assumed that by marrying a young woman from the country, he would be able to control her, but instead she demands that he support a lavish lifestyle. Marrying a young woman after swearing to always remain a bachelor has also drawn the attention of gossips, who wish to make fun of him. Feeling vulnerable, Sir Peter tries to conceal his true feelings from his wife from her to try to reassert the control he believes he should never have lost.



Sir Peter's monologue made it clear that he had a lot of unfounded expectations about Lady Teazle before he married. Whether this is because she concealed her true character or he failed to understand it is unclear, but it is hard to believe that Sir Peter, who hides his love for his wife, is blameless in their fights.



Rowley is a good judge of character, as he has already seen through Joseph's hypocritical posturing. His opinion counts, and his faith in Charles suggests that Charles has as undeserved a reputation for badness as Joseph has for goodness. At the same time, we can see that Sir Peter's judgment of what will be best for his family and for those under his authority is often flawed. He wants Maria to marry Joseph because he believes that Joseph is truly motivated by all the fine feelings he describes so eloquently in his conversations. Sir Peter believes himself to be an excellent judge of character, but he is easily taken in by hypocrites.



Sir Oliver wishes to leave a huge fortune to the nephew he believes will carry on the family's legacy in the future, rather than dividing the fortune into two smaller chunks. He knows that if his nephews were to know that he was coming, they would try to make the best possible impression on him, in effect concealing their true natures from him.



Sir Peter says to Rowley that Sir Oliver will tease him for having married, since they used to make fun of married men and Sir Oliver stuck to his pledge to never marry. Sir Peter says he must prepare for Sir Oliver's arrival now, but asks Rowley not to tell Sir Oliver that he and Lady Teazle ever fight. Rowley says he will not breathe a word, but Lady Teazle and Sir Peter will need to keep from arguing in front of Sir Oliver to keep their disagreements a secret. Sir Peter says Rowley is right, but that this is clearly impossible.

Sir Peter once again seeks to hide his true situation: this time he wants to conceal his marital regrets from his old friend Sir Oliver. Sir Peter believes that he can keep things from others, but that other people's motivations and characters are transparent to him.



ACT 2, SCENE 1

Sir Peter and Lady Teazle are at home, quarreling as usual. Lady Teazle says she should have her own way in everything, and that she knows that fashionable London women are accountable to no one. When Sir Peter asks if it is not right for him to have some authority over her, she retorts that he should have adopted her if he wanted authority, since he is old enough. He says that although unkind remarks like that one may make him unhappy, he will still not let her spend all his money extravagantly. She says she only spends what a woman of fashion is expected to.

Sir Peter has never had a family and is used to choosing exactly what his money is spent on. He went into his marriage believing he would be able to direct his wife's activities and interests, but now that she is married to a wealthy Londoner, Lady Teazle is keen to fit in among the other members of London high society. She claims that spending extravagantly is what is expected of her by society, and that Sir Peter should adjust his expectations accordingly.



Sir Peter says that to make such demands she must have forgotten the way she was brought up. Lady Teazle, however, says she remembers very well the boring things she had to do before she married him. Sir Peter says he is glad she remembers her simple life, which should make her require fewer fancy possessions now. Sir Peter complains that she wants to have three different kinds of carriages, and says, "I have made you a woman of fashion, of fortune, of rank; in short, I have made you *my wife*." Lady Teazle jokes that all that is left for him to "make her" is his widow. She also says he should want his wife to spend money, because this is what she must do to be a fashionable woman of taste. Sir Peter says she was not a woman of taste when he met her, and Lady Teazle quips that she obviously cannot claim to have good taste, since she married *him*.

Lady Teazle is witty but harsh as she spars with Sir Peter, reflecting the influence of the circle of gossipmongers with whom she has been spending her time, as well as her own intelligence and confidence. She continues to emphasize that the luxury items that she wants to buy are for Sir Peter's reputation as much as they are for hers, but he seems not to understand this. Lady Teazle will likely be her husband's primary heir, and since he is far older than she is, the issue of her eventual inheritance of his fortune also hangs over their discussions of money.



Lady Teazle then says she is off to Lady Sneerwell's house. Sir Peter says that he disapproves of his wife spending her time with a group of rumormongers. Lady Teazle counters that Lady Sneerwell's social set is made up of people with wealth and high social rank. She says that she has learned their ways, but only speaks ill of people in good humor, and hopes that others will not spread rumors about her maliciously.

Lady Teazle continues to stand by her choices, on the grounds that she is spending time with people from high society. She sees herself as a pupil in this "school for scandal," learning to laugh at people's flaws and missteps. Still, she is not cruel or motivated to spread rumors about everyone, and naively hopes that her new friends share her benevolent motives.



Lady Teazle departs, reminding Sir Peter that he promised to come to Lady Sneerwell's, too. Left alone, Sir Peter says that he has failed to exert any control over his wife, but he finds it very satisfying to quarrel with her. Although he cannot make her love him, he does find her charming and attractive when she contradicts and teases him.

Although Sir Peter has complained about how Lady Teazle's demands have changed since their marriage, it is clear that he admires her ability to stand her ground against him in an argument, and finds her teasing attractive.



ACT 2, SCENE 2

Lady Sneerwell, Mrs. Candour, Crabtree, Sir Benjamin Backbite, and Joseph Surface are drinking tea at Lady Sneerwell's home. Maria and Lady Teazle arrive, and Lady Sneerwell tells Maria to play cards with Joseph. Maria says she does not like cards, but will do as Lady Sneerwell says. Lady Teazle is surprised that Joseph does not take the opportunity of speaking to her before her husband joins the party.

Lady Sneerwell wants to give Joseph time with Maria in the hopes that he can win her over. Lady Teazle's surprise at Joseph's decision to spend time with Maria instead of her suggests that she is not aware that Joseph wishes to marry Maria, and also that she thinks Joseph is interested in her.



Lady Teazle joins the group's conversation. Mrs. Candour is saying that her friend Miss Vermilion is beautiful, but Lady Teazle suggests that this is just makeup. Mrs. Candour says Miss Vermilion's sister Mrs. Evergreen "is, or was, very handsome." The others begin to mock her, saying she is fifty-six and wears so much makeup that you cannot see her face, while another acquaintance's face looks young though her body looks old. Mrs. Candour then asks the group's opinion of Miss Simper. Sir Benjamin says she has pretty teeth, and Lady Teazle says this must be why she never shuts her mouth. Lady Teazle compares Miss Simper to Mrs. Prim, who has lost her teeth and speaks with her mouth tightly shut to hide this.

When the gossips are not describing sex out of wedlock or young men's extravagant spending habits, they often make fun of people's appearances. They are especially keen to mock the attempts of older women to look young and attractive. In each exchange, one of the gossips pretends to believe a female acquaintance is beautiful, and then the other gossips tear the woman down. Although they take pleasure in their banter, it is crueler than it is witty (especially in a society that values women primarily for their appearance).



Sir Peter arrives and, seeing that the entire group of gossipmongers is present, immediately concludes that they have been saying terrible things about people they know. The gossips continue to tear people apart, with Mrs. Candour pretending to defend the victims while egging the others on. Sir Peter sticks up for one of their targets and Lady Sneerwell accuses him of being cruel for not allowing them to enjoy their jokes. Sir Peter remarks that "true wit is more nearly allied to good nature" than Lady Sneerwell realizes. The others joke about this: Sir Benjamin says wit and good nature are like a man and wife, so one hardly ever sees them together. Lady Teazle says that Sir Peter would make the spreading of rumors illegal if it were up to him, and he agrees. Mrs. Candour asks if he would ban people from reporting what they hear, and he says he would. A servant then approaches Sir Peter with a message, and he departs.

The gossips feel that cruelty is essential to wit. All jokes, they feel, must come at someone's expense. While the gossips' attitude is callous to those they attack, it is also true that Sir Peter, like Maria before him, shows far less wit than Lady Teazle or the poetically inclined Sir Benjamin. The gossips compete to come up with the funniest insult, which can make them appear shallow and preoccupied with unimportant topics, but it also shows a few of them to be quite witty. Sir Peter continues to show his desire to control everyone and everything, even things completely outside of his control like private conversations.



The entire party leaves the room except for Maria and Joseph. Joseph says he can tell that Maria is not having a good time, and she says that she never enjoys watching people laugh at others' imperfections and misfortunes. If that is wit, she says, she would rather be dull. Joseph says the gossips do not actually mean to be cruel, and appear worse than they are. Maria says that this makes their conduct even worse. Joseph agrees that it is worse to spread gossip for no reason than to do so to seek revenge.

Joseph says that Maria worries about everyone's feelings except his. She says she wishes he would not try to woo her again. Joseph replies that she would not be so closed to his proposal and opposed to Sir Peter's wishes if she weren't still in love with Charles. Maria says that no matter what she feels for Charles, seeing that Joseph no longer cares about him won't help her give Charles up.

Joseph kneels in front of Maria to beg her not to leave him on such a bad note, when Lady Teazle enters. Joseph quickly changes what he is saying, confusing Maria, whom Lady Teazle sends into the other room. Lady Teazle asks Joseph what was going on between him and Maria. Joseph explains that Maria suspects the romance between him and Lady Teazle, and threatened to tell Sir Peter. Suspicious, Lady Teazle asks if Joseph always kneels when trying to be convincing. Joseph says he wanted to impress Maria with this dramatic pose, and then changes the subject.

Joseph asks Lady Teazle if she will come to look at his library, as she has promised. She replies that she will not come and sees him as a "cicisbeo": a man who acts like the lover of a married woman, but is not necessarily sexually intimate with her. They decide to rejoin the rest of the party, but Lady Teazle leaves the room first, so that no one will see them together and suspect their intimacy. Left alone, Joseph reflects that he had only meant to gain Lady Teazle's support for his courtship of Maria, but instead ended up becoming her "lover." He says that maintaining a reputation for having a good character has led him to manipulate and trick so many people that he fears he will soon be caught in a lie.

Maria finds unkind and immoral behavior unacceptable. As he acts the part of the "man of sentiment," Joseph also condemns immoral behavior, but because he has no strong convictions, he often contradicts his own eloquent pronouncements immediately after he makes them.



Maria sees Joseph's attempt to woo her as an act of disloyalty to his brother Charles. She does not tell Joseph outright that she thinks this behavior betrays a lack of the fine feelings associated with the "man of sentiment," but she suggests that she thinks Charles would be more loyal than Joseph is being.



Joseph wants to show Maria the sincerity of his feelings for her by falling to his knees in a dramatic gesture of passion and sentiment. He is interrupted by Lady Teazle, who knows nothing of his pursuit of Maria, and whom he has also been pursuing. Joseph then tries to conceal his courtship of Maria from Lady Teazle, but this certainly comes at the expense of the impression he was trying to create with Maria.



Joseph's habit of flattering everyone he meets and concealing his true thoughts about them has led him to this juncture, and he fears that his entire false persona as a "man of sentiment" could come crashing down as a result of having told too many lies. Still, although he has no true passion for Lady Teazle, Joseph still hopes to seduce her, despite the possible troubles this will cause for his courtship of Maria. This shows him to be interested in deception and manipulation for their own sake, not only as a means to an end.



ACT 2, SCENE 3

Sir Oliver and Rowley are at Sir Peter's house, waiting for Sir Peter to come in. Sir Oliver laughs at Sir Peter for having married a young woman from the countryside after swearing to always remain a bachelor, then asks Rowley about Sir Peter's negative feelings towards Charles. Rowley explains that Sir Peter is prejudiced against Charles partially because of rumors spread by gossipmongers that Charles and Lady Teazle are having an affair. Rowley believes that if Lady Teazle has feelings for one of the brothers, it is Joseph, not Charles. Sir Oliver says he will not let himself be prejudiced against Charles by rumors and will judge for himself. Rowley says he believes Sir Oliver will approve of Charles's honesty and good-nature. Sir Oliver recalls that he and his brother were wild as young men, but grew into good men. Rowley predicts the same will happen to Charles.

Sir Peter enters and he and Sir Oliver greet each other warmly. Sir Oliver is about to mock Sir Peter for marrying, but Rowley warns him off. Sir Oliver asks after Charles, and Sir Peter says that Charles is a lost cause, but Joseph is exactly as a young man should be and is well spoken of by everyone. Sir Oliver says that he thinks anyone without any enemies must not be honest. Sir Peter says Sir Oliver will see when he meets Joseph, who speaks eloquently about sentiment and morality. Sir Oliver says he does not like it when people moralize, but he also doesn't mean to defend Charles for all his mistakes. Instead, he plans to test the two brothers and learn their real characters. The three men go to drink a bottle of wine and talk over this plan. As they leave the room, Sir Oliver says he does not like to see too much prudence in young men, as he thinks a bit of wildness is good for their growth.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

Sir Peter, Sir Oliver, and Rowley sit in Sir Peter's house and discuss how Sir Oliver can test his nephews' characters. Rowley says that he knows that Mr. Stanley, a relative of the Surface brothers on their mother's side, has fallen into ruin and been thrown into debtor's prison. He has written to both brothers to ask for their help paying his debts, but while Joseph has only vaguely promised to help in the future if he can, Charles is currently trying to raise money for him.

Although Sir Peter looks down on the gossips, he still places faith in the rumors he hears. He knows that there are rumors that he and his wife do not get along, which is true, and rumors that Charles is extravagant with his money and in a great deal of debt, which is also true. He has thus concluded that the rumors about his wife and Charles may be true as well. Rowley is a better judge of character than Sir Peter, and he is equally concerned with the happiness and prosperity of both the Surface and Teazle families. He hopes that Sir Oliver will see through the gossip to understand the Surface brothers' true characters.



Sir Peter believes that Joseph's eloquence on moral topics and his reputation for morality are a testament to his good character. Sir Oliver believes that what a person says and what other people say about them are conclusive proof of that person's good character. Indeed, Sir Oliver feels that a perfect reputation and remarkable eloquence may be a sign that something is being concealed. To be sincere is sometimes to cause offense, especially, he suggests, in a young man. Sir Oliver makes it his goal to discover whether the Surface brothers' reputations conceal their true characters or reveal them.



Testing how each Surface brother responds to a poor relative will allow Sir Oliver to understand if they are moved by pity to act generously. Because Mr. Stanley is related to the Surfaces, how hard they try to alleviate his poverty will also be a measure of how much they care for the family's reputation.



Rowley says he will tell the two brothers that Stanley has been given permission to leave prison to ask for their help in person. Since Joseph and Charles have never met Stanley and do not remember Sir Oliver, Sir Oliver can pretend to be Stanley and judge the Surface brothers' characters based on how they treat their impoverished relative. Rowley predicts that Sir Oliver will find Charles to be generous despite all his extravagant spending, but Sir Peter scoffs at this, saying there is no point in generosity if one has nothing to give.

Rowley tells Sir Peter and Sir Oliver that he has also arranged for them to meet with a **Jewish** moneylender, Moses, who can give them a sense of Charles's financial position. Rowley says that Moses has "done everything in his power to bring your nephew to a proper sense of his extravagance." Rowley adds that they can trust Moses to tell them the truth, because Moses understands he will never get the money he lent Charles back without Sir Oliver's help. Additionally, Rowley says he plans to show Sir Peter that he is mistaken in his suspicions about Charles and Lady Teazle by bringing in Snake, whom he has caught forging letters. Sir Peter dismisses this.

Moses enters. Sir Oliver says he hears that Moses has done business with his nephew, and Moses says he has, but Charles was ruined before he ever turned to him. Sir Oliver says this meant Moses "had no opportunity of showing your **talents**." Moses tells them that he plans on introducing Charles to a broker named "Mr. Premium" who may lend Charles money. Sir Peter suggests that, since Charles has never met Mr. Premium, Sir Oliver can pretend to be the broker and get a sense of his nephew's character in this way. Sir Oliver likes this idea and says he will go afterwards to visit Joseph in the guise of Mr. Stanley. Rowley says that this may not show Charles in the best light, but agrees.

Sir Oliver asks how he will be able to pass for a **Jew**, but Moses replies that Mr. Premium is Christian. Sir Oliver says that is a shame, and then asks if he is too well dressed to be a moneylender. The others tell him that Charles would not suspect anything even if "Mr. Premium" arrived in a fancy carriage, so long as he asks for huge amounts of interest: at least forty or fifty percent, and as much as double, if Charles seems desperate. Sir Peter suggests that Mr. Premium should complain to Charles about the Annuity Bill, a bill then passing through Parliament which made it illegal to lend money on an annuity to those under 21. Moses and Sir Oliver leave to go see Charles.

Rowley knows that this will be a test that Joseph is likely to fail and Charles to pass. Sir Peter only belittles Charles's ability to help anyone given the extent of his debts, but does not comment on whether Joseph will be generous. Sir Peter has also refused to give family members money that he can afford to part with: this is often the reason that he fights with Lady Teazle.



The Jewish moneylender is portrayed as believing in principles that stand in opposition to those Sir Oliver hopes to see in an heir. The moneylender has little respect for the Surface's family name, and does not care that his own name and religion are associated with greed. Rowley suggests that Moses has shown Charles his own extravagance by charging exorbitant interest rates. This debt will test the family name, as Charles will only be able to pay them off with Sir Oliver's assistance.



Sir Oliver suggests that Moses's talent, and the talent of Jews in general, is for ruining young people financially by getting them to sign onto loans that have terms that are impossible to fulfill. Sir Peter, who is prejudiced against Charles, suggests that Sir Oliver take the guise of Mr. Premium so that he can see Charles at his worst. Now Sir Oliver will be able to test the two brothers' reputations: Joseph's reputation for fine moral sentiments and Charles's reputation for unthinking extravagance.



High society gentlemen like Sir Oliver prefer to see themselves as very different from Jewish moneylenders like Moses, so the knowledge that Mr. Premium is Christian makes him uncomfortable. Yet as a colonial trader in the East Indies, Sir Oliver's methods for making money likely involved a great deal of exploitation and much less regulation than the Jewish moneylenders who were demonized throughout British society at the time—but the play, of course, does not address this double standard.



Rowley leaves to fetch Snake and Sir Peter says to himself that he hopes there is no affair between Charles and Lady Teazle. He plans to speak to Joseph about his suspicions. Maria approaches and Sir Peter asks her if she has changed her mind about marrying Joseph, and she says there is no one she would rather marry less. Sir Peter says he can see that Maria is attracted to Charles's wickedness. Maria contradicts this, saying she has been convinced that Charles is unworthy of her, but still pities him and will never marry his brother. Sir Peter says that, as her guardian, he can force her to marry Joseph. Maria says she will not let him force her to be miserable and runs from the room.

Lady Teazle enters and Sir Peter says to himself that he would be happy if he "could tease her into loving me, though but a little!" Lady Teazle asks Sir Peter to be good-humored and give her two hundred pounds. He exclaims at this, but says that if she is sweet to him, he will refuse her nothing. He also says that he plans to give her an independent source of money, but hopes they will stop fighting. She agrees, so long as he admits that he became tired of fighting before she did. In the future, he says, they will compete to see who is nicest to the other. They reminisce and each says the other is acting as he or she did during their courtship. Sir Peter remembers her kindness to him, and she agrees, saying she always stuck up for him when her acquaintances made fun of him.

Sir Peter continues to tell Lady Teazle they will never fight again, but then adds that *she* always starts their fights. They begin to argue, and she says that she never should have married him. He says she had never been proposed to by such a rich man, and Lady Teazle says that she refused someone who would have been a better match—because he has recently broken his neck and died. Enraged, Sir Peter says that he now believes the reports about her and Charles. Lady Teazle says she will not listen to these groundless accusations. Sir Peter says they should divorce, and Lady Teazle says that, if divorced, they will be very happy. Then, laughing, she leaves. Sir Peter is enraged, and even more so because Lady Teazle did not lose her temper.

ACT 3, SCENE 2

Sir Oliver, pretending to be "Mr. Premium," arrives at Charles's house with Moses. While Charles's servant Trip is telling Charles that he has a visitor, Sir Oliver recognizes that the house used to belong to his brother. Moses tells him that Joseph sold the house and all its contents to Charles, and that Sir Peter thought this to be an extravagant act by Charles. Sir Oliver says it was more contemptible on Joseph's part to have sold the house and other **heirlooms**.

Sir Peter believes he is looking out for Maria's best interest, but is instead threatening to force her to marry the man who is trying to seduce his own wife. Maria has heard things about Charles that she feels make him an ineligible match for her, although she does not specify which rumors have convinced her of this. Still, she does not trust Joseph. The fact that Joseph is courting her despite her relationship with his brother Charles reveals to her, as it does not to Sir Peter, that his moral compass is skewed.



Sir Peter wants to stop fighting with his wife and be able to express his love for her. Their fights are generally about how much money he will give her and about who is in the right—and Sir Peter has now begun to come around to his wife's demand that he give her the money she wants, but she has yet to change her teasing attitude towards him. She does not yet realize that by conceding to her demands for greater financial freedom he is trying to show her his love and appreciation, instead seeing his offer of money as another tactic in their marital power struggle.



Reacting to Lady Teazle's continued teasing, Sir Peter cannot resist reasserting his belief that she is always in the wrong. When, in response, she hints that she would be happier if he were dead and she had inherited his money, he jumps to the conclusion that this cruel suggestion is proof of the rumors circulating about her infidelity. She then becomes even more indignant at the false allegation that she is doing something to dishonor their family and continues to make cruel jokes at his expense.



Sir Oliver is interested in signs that the family's heritage has sentimental value for his nephews. Joseph would have sold his father's house even though he did not need the money, which suggests greediness or indifference to family history and reputation. Charles, however, bought his father's house from his brother, despite being short on money.



Trip returns and says Charles has asked them to wait. Sir Oliver, pretending to be “Mr. Premium,” asks Trip whether he likes working for Charles. Trip says he does: although he often gets paid late, he also takes his master’s cast-off clothing. Trip consults with Moses about getting a loan from him, offering to use clothing he expects to get from Charles in the future as collateral. Sir Oliver is shocked that a servant would presume to ask for a loan in the same way a member of the upper class does.

Sir Oliver believes that there should be a sharp difference between members of high society like himself and those of the lower classes. He thinks that part of the Surface reputation should be to assert this difference, and feels that Charles’s servant’s behavior shows that Charles is not enforcing these distinctions.



ACT 3, SCENE 3

In another room of Charles Surface’s house, a group of young men are laughing and drinking. Charles drinks and urges others to do so, saying he never loses at cards when he drinks, or, rather, never cares that he is losing. He says drinking is how one knows if one loves a woman: a man can drink twelve glasses of wine, each one to toast a different woman, and whomever he thinks of once he is drunk is the woman he loves. Charles’s friend Careless asks him who he really loves, and Charles answers “Maria,” but refuses to give her surname. The group of men sings a song celebrating women in all their diversity.

Although he is one of the play’s central characters, Charles has only been discussed by other characters up to this point. In his first appearance on the stage, he carouses with other young men, as he is reputed to do. He talks lightheartedly about losing money and a variety of women. But in the end, he says that he loves only one woman and, in a show of respect to her, refuses to identify her specifically to his drinking buddies.



Trip enters and Charles says he must excuse himself to talk to a **Jew** and a broker who have come to see him. The others urge him to have the visitors come in. Careless says that perhaps if the moneylenders drink wine they will become more moral, but Charles warns that wine will only bring out their natural bad qualities. Trip escorts Moses and Sir Oliver (who is pretending to be Mr. Premium) in. Careless and the other men in the party try to force the moneylenders to drink large quantities of wine, but Charles tells his friends that they should not mistreat these strangers. The gentlemen leave Charles with the moneylenders to play dice in the next room.

Charles’s friends want to have fun at the expense of the moneylenders by getting them drunk and bullying them. They see Jewish moneylenders, who make money in a way their society considers dishonorable, as an easy target for mockery—but Charles stops them. This may reflect his general good-naturedness and sense that all strangers deserve respectful treatment when they are guests in one’s home, or the fact that Charles needs money and cannot afford to get a reputation for abusing those who lend to him.



Moses begins to make an elaborate introduction between “Mr. Premium” and Charles, but Charles cuts him off. He quickly summarizes the situation: he is an extravagant young man who is willing to pay fifty percent interest if he can borrow money, and Mr. Premium is a man with money to lend, who will try to get double his money interest. Mr. Premium says that he can see Charles is “not a man of many compliments” and Charles agrees. Mr. Premium says he likes him the better for it.

Sir Oliver values how Charles states the situation frankly without trying to sugarcoat it or manipulate the moneylender to get better terms. Oliver sees this as a sign of honesty that befits the family name. It also leads him to believe that Charles’s true character is not concealed, but rather openly displayed.



“Mr. Premium” asks Charles what possessions he has that he can offer as collateral. He learns that Charles has already sold all his land and livestock. Charles asks Mr. Premium if he knows of his wealthy uncle, explaining that he expects to inherit everything from Sir Oliver. Charles says if Mr. Premium gives him a loan, he can collect his money when Sir Oliver dies and leaves Charles his fortune. Charles adds that he would, however, be sad to hear that anything had happened to his generous uncle.

Mr. Premium says that these are not good terms. Charles asks Mr. Premium if he worries that Sir Oliver will live too long, and assures him his uncle is a sick man. Mr. Premium breaks into nervous laughter at this. He asks about other **heirlooms** Charles might be able to sell—silver plates, a valuable library. Charles says all of this is long gone, and then offers to sell his family portraits. Horrified by this proposition, Sir Oliver almost forgets to pretend to be Mr. Premium. Charles summons Careless to help auction off the many portraits of his ancestors. Charles notices that Mr. Premium seems upset, and asks affectionately if he is all right. Sir Oliver regains his composure and laughs, assuring Charles that he thinks it is hilarious “to sell one’s family by auction.”

ACT 4, SCENE 1

The auction of the **family portraits** is conducted in the picture room in Charles’s house. Charles asks Careless to serve as the auctioneer and, laughing, gives him a rolled-up parchment of the family tree to use as a hammer. Charles first displays a portrait of his great-uncle and gives him a detailed description of the man’s prominence. Mr. Premium asks what he wants for it, and Charles says ten pounds. To himself, Sir Oliver marvels angrily that Charles wants to sell “his famous uncle Richard for ten pounds.” Charles then sells six other portraits of illustrious relatives.

Charles proposes that the remaining family portraits be sold wholesale for three hundred pounds. “Mr. Premium” agrees, but points out one portrait that Charles has always passed over. Charles explains that that is the portrait of his uncle, Sir Oliver, and says he is too grateful to his uncle to sell his portrait. Sir Oliver offers Charles large sums for the portrait, but Charles refuses every offer. Sir Oliver says to himself that he forgives Charles everything. Deeply touched, Sir Oliver writes Charles a check for even more than they agreed on and leaves with Moses. Charles asks that Mr. Premium make sure the paintings are handled carefully when they are picked up.

Sir Oliver is getting a very good sense of Charles’s character. Charles is an open book. He has received huge sums of money from Sir Oliver and is trying to raise even more money by referencing his uncle’s likely plan to leave him his fortune. It remains to be seen whether Sir Oliver will see Charles’s straightforward attitude as presumptuous or as justified pride in his family ties.



Sir Oliver struggles to conceal his true feelings and continue to stick to the role he has assumed as Mr. Premium. He is uncomfortable at Charles’s suggestion that he will not live for much longer and finds it difficult to pretend that he wants his own death to come speedily, even though this would be to the benefit of Mr. Premium. He finds Charles’s offer to sell him the family portraits more upsetting still. Charles further shows his good character, however, by noticing Mr. Premium’s discomfort and asking if he is all right.



Charles is breaking a taboo against disrespecting his family history and seems to relish it, laughing at the irony of selling these family relics while using the family tree as an auction hammer. At the same time, his detailed knowledge of the lives and achievements of the ancestors whose portraits he is selling reflects interest in, and respect for, his family’s history.



Despite selling family heirlooms, Charles shows that he is moved to take a stand by exactly the honorable sentiment of gratitude that his uncle hopes to find in an heir. He also shows that he cares about the portraits (and likely hopes to buy them back when he has more money) when he asks Premium to handle them with care. Charles has given no eloquent speeches, but even in the act of disrespecting heirlooms his behavior shows that he values his family heritage.



Rowley approaches and Careless leaves the room, first telling Charles not to let his father's old steward persuade him to pay his debts with the money received from Mr. Premium. Rowley enters and Charles instructs him to bring a hundred pounds immediately to old Stanley. Rowley tries to dissuade him, saying he is in too much debt himself to be generous, but Charles refuses to listen, saying Rowley must hurry before a debt-collector comes and takes the money he wants to send his impoverished relative, then goes to join his friends in the other room to play cards.

Despite the bad influence of Careless, who urges Charles to spend all the money from Premium on parties, Charles's first impulse is to send money to Mr. Stanley. With this impractical gesture, he shows himself to be the true man of sentiment. His first priority is to generously help a struggling family member, his second priority is to have fun hosting parties, and his last consideration is to pay off his massive debts.



ACT 4, SCENE 2

In the parlor in Charles's home, Moses says to Sir Oliver that it is a shame Charles is so extravagant, but all Sir Oliver cares about is that Charles refused to sell his portrait. Rowley enters and says that he has brought money that Charles wanted to send to old Stanley, but which should really go to pay off his creditors. Sir Oliver says to use the money to pay off Charles's debt. Trip enters and apologizes for not showing them out, then pulls Moses aside to consult on getting a loan from him. Sir Oliver and Rowley marvel at how times have changed: in the old days a servant certainly never tried to raise money in this way.

Sir Oliver has gotten two proofs of Charles's true character. First, he recognizes Charles's gratitude towards himself in his nephew's refusal to sell his portrait. Second, he learns of Charles's generosity towards impoverished family members in his decision to send money straight to Mr. Stanley. These two actions show Charles's loyalty towards those who help him and to those who need his help, and a special sense of duty to help family members.



ACT 4, SCENE 3

In the library at Joseph Surface's house, Joseph is waiting for Lady Teazle, who is late. Joseph reflects to himself that Sir Peter does not suspect him of having an affair with his wife, but he hopes he will not lose Maria as a result of this affair with Lady Teazle. The servant tells him that Lady Teazle has arrived and then goes to let her in. Joseph reflects that he cannot let Lady Teazle know that he hopes to marry Maria until he feels like she is more in love with him and under his control.

Joseph is so used to concealing his true self that it does not occur to him to end his affair with Lady Teazle and confess his hopes to marry Maria. Instead he speculates that he may be better able to manipulate Lady Teazle once they have been sexually intimate, which reflects his cynical attitude towards relationships and romance in general.



Lady Teazle enters and sees Joseph looking serious. She complains that Sir Peter is ill natured and jealous of Charles. She says she wishes that Sir Peter would allow Maria and Charles to marry, because he would stop suspecting Lady Teazle and Charles of having an affair then. To himself, Joseph says he hopes this doesn't happen, but agrees with Lady Teazle aloud, adding that Lady Teazle would stop suspecting Joseph of having any interest in Maria if Maria and Charles were married. Lady Teazle says she believes him.

Joseph continues to lie to Lady Teazle and conceal his intention to marry Maria. Lady Teazle, who does not realize Joseph's true character, likely believes his excuses about the scene she witnessed between him and Maria, because she thinks it would be disloyal for Joseph to try to marry a woman who loves his brother and whom his brother loves.



Lady Teazle begins to complain that her friend Lady Sneerwell spreads rumors about her, which makes Sir Peter even more suspicious. The worst part, she says, is that she is perfectly innocent and deserves none of it. Joseph says that the only solution to the problem—that is, of Sir Peter suspecting Lady Teazle of betraying him for no reason—is for her to betray him in reality. He goes on to say that it is because she knows herself to be innocent that she is careless about making sure nothing she does could cause suspicion—she is “dying from too much health.” Lady Teazle says that this is a very odd doctrine, but Joseph counters that she only finds his logic questionable because she is still not used to London high-society. She says she would be more likely to be convinced to start an affair by Sir Peter’s ill-natured treatment of her than by Joseph’s logic.

Just as Joseph reaches to take Lady Teazle’s hand, the servant walks in to tell him that Sir Peter has arrived. Both Joseph and Lady Teazle panic: they can hear Sir Peter climbing the stairs to the room. Lady Teazle hides behind a screen. Joseph pretends to be dozing over a book as Sir Peter enters. Sir Peter approves of Joseph always trying to educate and improve himself. Sir Peter says he wants to talk to Joseph about a sensitive subject: he is very unhappy with Lady Teazle, who does not love him, and whom he suspects is having an affair. Joseph pretends to be shocked.

Sir Peter tells Joseph he believes that Charles and Lady Teazle are lovers. Joseph expresses disbelief, and Sir Peter replies that Joseph’s morality may make it hard for him imagine other people’s bad behavior. Joseph agrees, but says he thinks Lady Teazle would be unlikely to be unfaithful. Sir Peter says she could have been attracted to the handsome, lively Charles and that the difference in their ages may make it impossible for Lady Teazle to love him. He says that everyone will laugh at him for marrying a much younger woman, if it comes out that Lady Teazle is having an affair. Joseph says he disowns his brother if he sees proof of an affair with Lady Teazle. Sir Peter praises Joseph’s sentiments.

Sir Peter says to Joseph that he wishes to make sure that he gives Lady Teazle no cause to be upset with him. He shows Joseph two drafts of the financial arrangements he is making for Lady Teazle. He has determined to give her eight hundred pounds a year and most of his money upon his death. Joseph tells Sir Peter that this is very generous, but says to himself that he hopes this will not decrease his own influence over Lady Teazle.

Lady Teazle has enjoyed participating in the rumor mill so long as it allowed her to exercise her wit and intelligence, but now she begins to resent its cruelty and effect on her marriage. Joseph frames arguments in lofty terms that give them an air of morality. But now, as he advocates for Lady Teazle to commit adultery, the difference between the content of his speech and the language he uses strikes her. It is by advocating that Lady Teazle sleep with him—thereby doing something she will need to lie about and conceal—that Joseph begins to expose his own true character to her.



As this famous scene of multiple concealments begins, Lady Teazle hides behind the screen to avoid being exposed in an act of impropriety in front of her husband. But she will now be able to eavesdrop on the conversation, which will mean that both Sir Peter and Joseph’s true selves will be exposed to her. She sees how Joseph assumes an air of morality in front of the man whose wife he is trying to steal, and hears her husband’s sincere sorrow at their marital troubles.



Sir Peter lives in terror of being the butt of people’s jokes. He takes rumors seriously, although he should know how many of them are baseless. From the jokes Lady Teazle makes and the rumors he knows are circulating, he has concluded that it is true that Lady Teazle does not love him because of the difference in their ages. Joseph, meanwhile, shows no discomfort as he hypocritically expresses shock and disbelief at the idea that Lady Teazle and Charles are having an affair.



Sir Peter has come to realize that Lady Teazle is right about her claim on his money. He may have lived more prudently as a bachelor, but a rich man’s wife is expected to be able to live in luxury. Joseph thinks that hearing this will likely change Lady Teazle’s feelings about her husband, thus diminishing his own potential to seduce her.



Sir Peter begins to talk about Joseph's hope to marry Maria. Joseph tries to stop Sir Peter, saying that he does not want to selfishly talk about himself when Sir Peter's happiness in his marriage is at stake. Sir Peter continues, though, saying that he wishes Joseph would allow him to tell Lady Teazle about Joseph's hope to marry Maria, because he thinks she would help them to arrange it.

A servant enters and announces that Charles has come to see Joseph. Joseph orders the servant to tell Charles he is out, but Sir Peter says he wants Charles to come up. He says he will hide in the room and listen to the brothers' conversation while Joseph asks Charles about Lady Teazle. Reluctantly, Joseph agrees. Sir Peter is about to step behind the screen when he spots the bottom of a woman's dress. Joseph explains that a young French hat-maker was in his room on a romantic tryst, and that she hid behind the screen when Sir Peter arrived unexpectedly. Sir Peter teases Joseph for secretly being a ladies' man, and then hides in a closet. Lady Teazle peeks her head out and asks if there is any way she can escape, but Joseph urges her back. Then Sir Peter peeks his head out, telling Joseph to be sure to get an answer from Charles. Lady Teazle pokes her head out again, and then Sir Peter again.

Charles enters. He says he had heard Sir Peter was with Joseph, and asks where he has gone. Joseph says Sir Peter avoided him because he believes that Lady Teazle and Charles are having an affair. Charles laughs at this idea, saying it sounds like Sir Peter has discovered what it is like to have a young wife. Joseph tells Charles to be serious, and Charles says that he never considered pursuing Lady Teazle. At one time, he says, it seemed to him that she might be interested in him, but he is attached to Maria. Charles says that he would never deliberately do something dishonorable, but if a pretty woman with a husband old enough to be her father were to throw herself at him, he would need "to borrow a little of your morality."

Charles says he is surprised that Joseph would think that he and Lady Teazle are having an affair, because Charles believed that Lady Teazle prefers Joseph. Joseph tries to hush Charles, but Charles mentions that he has seen Joseph and Lady Teazle exchange significant glances and even found them alone together. In a panic, Joseph whispers to Charles that Sir Peter has overheard everything they have been saying. Over Joseph's objections, Charles then pulls Sir Peter from the closet. Sir Peter shakes Charles's hand, saying he no longer suspects him, and tells Charles not to be mad at Joseph for participating in Sir Peter's scheme to spy on him. Sir Peter believes that Charles's suggestions that Joseph and Lady Teazle have feelings for one another were just a joke.

To keep his own secret, Joseph pretends to care only about Sir Peter, but he cannot keep Lady Teazle from overhearing the truth that Joseph is pursuing Maria and her simultaneously. She also hears how he uses his lofty sentimental speeches to try to keep Sir Peter from revealing this secret in her hearing.



Sir Peter plans to conceal himself from view so that he can listen as the truth about his wife and Charles is exposed. While trying to find a hiding place, he learns that someone else is hiding in the room. Despite this revelation, Sir Peter does not wonder what else Joseph may be hiding, and takes him at his word that the skirt belongs to a seamstress. As the two spouses take turns poking their heads out of their hiding places, the precariousness of the situation is emphasized in a comic way. The truth about both Surface brothers' reputations is going to be exposed, and the truth about the Teazles' marriage seems unlikely to stay hidden for long.



Joseph begins by taking a tone of moral superiority with his brother, chiding Charles for acting in such a way that honorable people like Sir Peter avoid him. Charles responds lightheartedly, exactly like someone with nothing to hide. Charles suggests that he sees through his brother's feigned morality, when he raises the question of what he might do if Lady Teazle were to try to seduce him. To "borrow" Joseph's morality might mean to reject a woman seeking to commit adultery with him, or it could mean to sleep with the woman and conceal it, taking a page out of Joseph's book.



Even without Sir Peter discovering Lady Teazle, there is a danger that Joseph's own behavior around Lady Teazle while in the presence of other will get back to Sir Peter. Charles does not pay attention to rumors, but trusts his own impressions, showing that, like Rowley, he is a good judge of character who understands Joseph to be a hypocrite. Charles dislikes it when things are disguised: just as he spoke plainly to "Mr. Premium," he now insists on talking directly to Sir Peter.



The servant enters and tells Joseph that someone has come to see him. Joseph tries to persuade Charles and Sir Peter to come downstairs with him, but Charles says he wants to spend some time alone with Sir Peter. Joseph says he will go send this visitor away, and whispers to Sir Peter not to mention the hidden French girl to Charles. Sir Peter promises. Left alone, Sir Peter tells Charles that he should emulate his brother. Charles says that Joseph is too prudish to be emulated. Sir Peter cannot resist the prank, and, greatly amused, tells Charles that Joseph has a lover hidden in the room behind the screen. Just as Joseph reenters the room, Charles pulls down the screen, revealing Lady Teazle.

Charles and Sir Peter exclaim in surprise. Charles asks Joseph, Sir Peter, and Lady Teazle what is going on, but no one answers him. Charles then leaves, first chiding Joseph for giving Sir Peter cause for worry, and repeating Sir Peter's words that "there's nothing in the world so noble as a man of sentiment!" back to him.

After an awkward silence, Joseph stammers that he can explain everything. Sir Peter tells him to do so. Joseph gives a convoluted explanation, suggesting that Lady Teazle came to his house so that he could explain to her that he wanted to marry Maria without making Sir Peter jealous. Sir Peter sarcastically calls this a clear explanation, and then asks Lady Teazle if she will vouch for it. Lady Teazle denounces Joseph as a hypocrite, saying there is not a word of truth in what he said. She tells Sir Peter that she came to listen to Joseph try to seduce her, although she had not yet decided whether or not to be seduced.

Joseph objects, but Lady Teazle goes on. She says that, although she cannot expect Sir Peter to trust her now, she was very touched by the tender way he talked about her to Joseph, and, even if she had not been discovered, she would have treated him differently from now on. She concludes by saying that Joseph is despicable for having tried to seduce his too-trusting friend's wife while also trying to marry his ward (Maria), and then leaves the room. Joseph tries to object again by giving a speech about morality, but Sir Peter ignores him.

Charles dislikes concealment, and just as he pulled Sir Peter out of the closet, he now insists on seeing who is hidden behind the screen. Because he is open and honest about his own flaws, the consequences of this exposure do not occur to him. Sir Peter, on the other hand, is used to concealing his true feelings and motives – especially from his wife – and would have respected Joseph's demand that he leave the woman behind the screen undisturbed.



Charles did not mean to expose his brother's immorality, but now that he has, he cannot help but gloat that the brother whose moral example he has been told to follow has been hypocritically hiding his true behavior all along.



The fact that Lady Teazle is alone with Joseph in his home without her husband's knowledge would have been seen as proof of an affair between the two. Joseph has been caught red-handed, but still refuses to confess. He never admits to wrongdoing no matter how obvious it is that he has committed it. Lady Teazle's explanation is honest, but it remains to be seen whether her husband will believe her and forgive her.



Lady Teazle tells her husband that though was she exposed in the act of considering committing adultery, his true feelings for her were also revealed when she heard him talk about the pain their arguments cause him and his intention to give her financial independence. Her manner has changed completely: she no longer teases him and sees that he deserves more respect.



ACT 5, SCENE 1

In Joseph's library, "Mr. Stanley" has arrived to visit Joseph, and Joseph complains to himself that he is in no mood to listen to other people's problems after being caught with Lady Teazle by Sir Peter. He feels sure that he now has no chance of marrying Maria. As Sir Oliver and Rowley enter, Joseph leaves the room. Sir Oliver is offended that it seems as if Joseph is avoiding them. Rowley says that he knows Joseph talks about being charitable, but he has never seen him act charitably. Rowley leaves so that Sir Oliver can pretend to be Mr. Stanley uninterrupted, but says that after he sees "Mr. Stanley" leave, he will return immediately to announce to Joseph that Sir Oliver has come back from the Indies, and then will meet Sir Oliver at Sir Peter's after that.

Joseph enters and makes exaggeratedly polite excuses for keeping Mr. Stanley waiting. Mr. Stanley says he has decided to come to ask Joseph and Charles for money because he fears that his poverty may discredit the family's reputation for wealth. Joseph denies that he is wealthy. Mr. Stanley says that he is sure that if Sir Oliver were here, he would help him. Joseph tells Mr. Stanley that contrary to public opinion, his uncle has given him almost nothing, so he cannot help him. Under his breath, Sir Oliver angrily remarks at this ingratitude.

Joseph goes on to say how much money he has given to help his brother with his debts. Sir Oliver does not believe this. "Mr. Stanley" says that he sees that Joseph cannot help him, and they say goodbye to one another with elaborate shows of politeness. Sir Oliver whispers to himself that Charles will be his heir, and leaves. Joseph says to himself that a reputation for charity has the unfortunate effect of drawing those who need charity, but he uses sentimental speeches instead of real money in these situations.

Rowley then enters and gives Joseph a note saying that Sir Oliver has arrived in London. Joseph asks his servant to stop Mr. Stanley if he has not yet gone, but Rowley says that Mr. Stanley is out of reach. Rowley tells Joseph that he will bring Sir Oliver and Charles to his house in fifteen minutes, and then departs. Joseph curses his bad luck that Sir Oliver should arrive at this moment.

Sir Oliver plans to assume the disguise of a poor relative in need of charity to determine for himself whether Joseph's good reputation is warranted. Joseph is upset after being caught with Lady Teazle, and he slips out of the room to try to compose himself, conceal his true feelings of bitterness and disappointment, and get into the mood to play his usual feigned role as a moral man. Recognizing that Joseph pretends not to have seen him and avoids him, Sir Oliver sees the first hint that Joseph does not act in a straightforward or honest manner.



Joseph pretends to want to help his poor relative out of deep feelings of generosity, but to be unable to give him anything because he has nothing to give. Sir Oliver not only sees through this lie, he sees it as a discredit to the Surface family name and an act of ingratitude for all that he has given Joseph in the past. Joseph is neither generous nor concerned with the family reputation.



Having just proved how little he truly cares for his family's reputation by denying his uncle's generosity to him, Joseph now pretends that he is only unable to help Mr. Stanley because he has been so personally generous to his wasteful, extravagant brother. This lie only further hurts the Surface family reputation by referring to Charles's debts.



Joseph fears that "Mr. Stanley" will reveal to Sir Oliver Joseph's claim that it was a mere rumor that his uncle had sent him great sums of money. Realizing his reputation with his rich uncle might be at stake, he now wants to give Stanley as much money as he needs.



ACT 5, SCENE 2

Mrs. Candour is at Sir Peter's door, attempting to convince the maid to let her in to visit Lady Teazle, whom she says must be very upset and need moral support. The maid leaves and Mrs. Candour complains to herself that she does not know exactly what happened, but wants to get it printed in the gossip pages. Sir Benjamin arrives and they begin to talk over the scandal. Sir Benjamin believes that Sir Peter discovered Lady Teazle with Joseph Surface, but Mrs. Candour insists that the affair was with Charles. Lady Sneerwell arrives and expresses pity for Lady Teazle, then immediately launches into a discussion of her shortcomings. Lady Sneerwell, like Sir Benjamin, believes that Lady Teazle was caught with Joseph, but is alarmed to hear from Mrs. Candour that she was caught with Charles.

Sir Benjamin says he is not sure which brother was involved, but he does hope that Sir Peter's wound will heal. The two ladies had not heard that a duel took place. Sir Benjamin tells them that Sir Peter and one of the Surface brothers fought a duel with swords. Crabtree enters and immediately contradicts his nephew, saying that the duel was fought with pistols. Crabtree and Sir Benjamin argue over how Sir Peter was wounded. It emerges that Crabtree, like Mrs. Candour, believes that Lady Teazle was found with Charles, not Joseph. They all argue, and Crabtree gives an extremely detailed account of what happened and how Sir Peter was wounded. Lady Sneerwell realizes that they do not really know what happened and leaves, hoping to find out the truth.

Mrs. Candour, Sir Benjamin, and Mr. Crabtree see Sir Oliver approach. They conclude that he is Sir Peter's doctor and ask him how the patient is recovering from his wounds. Sir Oliver expresses shock at their preposterous questions as the gossips jockey to give their account of what happened. Sir Peter enters then and Sir Oliver jokes that he is just in time to stop a rumor about his death from being spread. The gossipmongers tell Sir Peter that they are relieved to see that he was not injured in a duel, and that they pity him for his misfortune. Sir Peter yells at the three gossips and kicks them out of his house.

Rowley arrives at Sir Peter's. He and Sir Oliver tell Sir Peter that they have seen both Charles and Joseph, and Sir Oliver agrees with Sir Peter's assessment: Joseph is "a man of sentiment" and practices what he preaches. Sir Peter sees that they have heard what happened to him and are laughing at him. Rowley says that he ran into Lady Teazle and she asked him to plead her case to Sir Peter. Sir Peter asks if they really know everything that happened. They say they do, and all three laugh, but Sir Peter gets upset and says he never wants to see anyone he knows again. Rowley coaxes Sir Peter not to pay attention to what people he does not respect say about him.

Word is out about the scene that occurred between the Teazles at Joseph Surface's house, but the details are hazy. The gossips, all of whom treated Lady Teazle like a friend, show no loyalty towards her, only a desire to prove that they are the best informed about her presumed downfall. Lady Sneerwell had spread the rumor that Charles and Lady Teazle are lovers herself, but did not know that Joseph was pursuing Lady Teazle at the same time he pursued Maria. She is alarmed to hear that it might actually turn out to be true that Charles, whom she loves, is involved with Lady Teazle.



Knowing the details about the latest scandal is a way for these members of high society to prove that they have a wide social network, full of well-informed friends. To prove their knowledge, the gossips even invent details that can be easily disproven, like a duel. The gossips each cling to their own version of the story, arguing with one another about hypothetical events in a ridiculous fashion. They no longer seem superior to the people they cruelly mock, but confused and insecure about their place in the world as they try to prove their social standing by fabricating stories.



Sir Oliver is once again taken for someone he is not, although this time he does not have to assume a false identity. Instead, the gossips, who will make up details of a story to suit their own purposes, assign him a false identity on the spot. When his identity is revealed, the ridiculous way that the gossips make up false stories to make themselves seem important is also exposed.



Sir Peter has learned that he is not always right in his judgments of other people. Words are often deceptive: Joseph's moral speeches and the rumors spread about Charles's character led Sir Peter to misjudge the Surface brothers. The revelation of Joseph's bad character also demonstrated to Sir Peter that Rowley may be a wiser man than he is. Rowley believes that Lady Teazle is worth trusting and that the scandalmongers are worth ignoring, and Sir Peter now listens to Rowley's opinion.



Sir Oliver says that he must now go to Joseph's, where he will tell the Surface brothers his true identity. Rowley and Sir Peter promise to meet him there. Sir Peter looks into the other room, where he sees Lady Teazle crying. Rowley urges him to go to her. Sir Peter says that people will laugh at him even more when they find out that he has forgiven her. Rowley encourages him to have revenge against gossipmongers by being happy, and Sir Peter agrees.

Lady Teazle and Sir Peter must now apply to their marriage what they have learned about themselves and each other from their experience with Joseph. Lady Teazle saw that she had underestimated her husband's love for her, and seeing his wife so upset at having hurt and embarrassed him, Sir Peter sees a new side of the witty, mocking Lady Teazle. Thus the "scandal" that might have torn them apart only brings them closer together.



ACT 5, SCENE 3

In Joseph's library, Lady Sneerwell is criticizing Joseph for spoiling their plot. She believes that Sir Peter will now support Charles and Maria's marriage. Joseph is less upset, but Lady Sneerwell says that this is because he does not really love Maria, whereas she truly loves Charles. Lady Sneerwell says that Joseph ruined everything by going too far: he should have stuck to tricking Sir Peter into thinking he was a man of sentiment and stealing his brother's beloved, but he crossed the line by trying to seduce Lady Teazle as well. Joseph says he is sorry, but he thinks there is still hope. He says that, if Snake can still be trusted, he will help them. Snake has been asked to swear that Charles is engaged to Lady Sneerwell and to produce forged letters as proof.

Lady Sneerwell criticizes Joseph for having taken on too many "projects" and ruining their plan to sabotage Charles and Maria's engagement. But the two rumormongers have one more trick up their sleeve: they will try to prove that Charles has been carrying on a hidden correspondence with Lady Sneerwell, and has proposed to her. This kind of secret correspondence would, of course, be very unlike Charles, who takes pride in his own openness and honesty, but the rumormongers are so used to dealing with duplicitous people that they think this plot might work.



There is a knock at the door. Joseph says it must be his uncle, Sir Oliver, and tells Lady Sneerwell to wait in the next room. Lady Sneerwell tells him to make sure that his uncle doesn't discover his true character, and Joseph replies that he is sure Sir Peter will be too embarrassed to tell Sir Oliver what happened and that he will soon discover the best way to manipulate his uncle.

Joseph believes that Sir Peter, like himself, will never admit to anything that makes him look bad and will instead conceal his true emotional state and opinions from others. Sir Peter, however, has learned that concealment can stand in the way of a good marriage and the clearheaded judgment of others.



Sir Oliver enters and, recognizing him as "Mr. Stanley," Joseph tells him he must leave immediately. "Mr. Stanley" says that he has heard that Sir Oliver will soon arrive, and although Sir Oliver has not been generous with his nephew, Stanley wants to ask for his charity. Mr. Stanley refuses to leave, and Joseph is calling for the servant to drag him from the house when Charles arrives. Charles asks why Joseph is treating his broker "Mr. Premium" so roughly. The two brothers argue over the identity of the man, while trying to forcibly remove him from the house before Sir Oliver arrives.

As the brothers try to get rid of Mr. Stanley/Mr. Premium before their uncle arrives, the wisdom of Sir Oliver's plan to test his nephews' true characters before revealing his own identity becomes apparent. He was right that Joseph and Charles would try to keep him from learning anything negative about them. Joseph wants to prevent Sir Oliver from hearing that he told Mr. Stanley he had not received money from his uncle, while Charles hopes to prevent him from learning that he sold the family portraits.



Sir Peter, Lady Teazle, Maria, and Rowley arrive. Sir Peter says he is glad that he arrived in time to save Sir Oliver from being knocked down. Joseph and Charles realize Sir Oliver's identity and are stunned. Sir Oliver says that he has discovered Joseph's true character and finds him an ungrateful, ungenerous liar. Sir Peter and Lady Teazle agree. Charles says to himself that he is sure to be judged harshly for selling the **family portraits**, especially if his brother gets such treatment.

Charles knows that he showed inadequate respect for his family by selling the portraits, and does not know that Sir Oliver has revealed much more serious character flaws in Joseph. Used to having his character judged harshly, especially in comparison to his brother, Charles does not imagine that his uncle will see things any differently.



Sir Oliver then begins to give his impression of Charles, but Joseph interrupts him, saying he wishes to explain himself. Sir Oliver will not listen to Joseph's attempted explanation, but asks Charles if he too believes he can justify his behavior. Charles tells his uncle that he cannot. Sir Oliver says he cannot be angry at Charles, and laughs at how cheaply Charles sold the **heirlooms**. Charles says how happy he is to see his uncle, and Sir Oliver says he forgives him his bad behavior.

Everyone can now see through Joseph's sentimental speeches, and so his attempt to make excuses only makes him look worse. His unwillingness to admit to his bad behavior and apologize is the final strike against his character. Charles, on the other hand, shows that he knows what he did was wrong, which gives his uncle the opportunity to forgive him.



Lady Teazle says that she believes Charles is even more anxious to make up with Maria than with his uncle. Maria does not speak at first, but then says that she is glad to hear Charles is happy—though she knows that he loves someone else. Sir Peter and Charles exclaim in confusion, but Maria says that Charles and Lady Sneerwell know the truth. Joseph then opens the door to allow Lady Sneerwell to enter. She says that Charles has put her in an indelicate situation, and Joseph says that he can produce proof to support what Maria believes: that Charles and Lady Sneerwell are engaged. Sir Peter says he can guess that Joseph hopes to call on Snake, and asks Mr. Rowley to bring in Snake.

Joseph and Lady Sneerwell have convinced Maria that Charles is engaged to Lady Sneerwell, but it is rather farfetched for them to believe that they will be able to force Charles to actually marry Lady Sneerwell just because he promised to do so in a series of forged letters. Joseph, who once thought he could force Lady Teazle to help him marry Maria after he had slept with her, once again overestimates the power of lies to force people to act as he wants them to.



Snake enters and apologizes to Lady Sneerwell: he says that although she paid him well to lie and forge letters, Rowley offered him double her price to tell the truth. As Lady Sneerwell storms from the room, Lady Teazle confronts her, saying she knows that Lady Sneerwell started the false rumor about her affair with Charles, and that she wants nothing more to do with the group of gossipmongers. Joseph says he is shocked and appalled to hear that Lady Sneerwell paid Snake to trick them, but he must follow her and make sure she does not try to take revenge on Charles. Sir Oliver yells after Joseph that he should marry Lady Sneerwell if he can. Snake leaves, asking that they promise not to tell anyone that he told the truth because lying and cheating is how he earns a living.

Even after Snake reveals the last part of Joseph and Lady Sneerwell's scheme, Joseph still will not admit to his own immorality or wrongdoing. Instead of trying to make excuses to his family, he sees that his last chance to increase his fortune is to marry Lady Sneerwell, so he sets off in pursuit of her. Lady Teazle, meanwhile, is disenchanted with the gossips. Not only have they been cruel to her, but they no longer seem like an impressive clique of sharp-tongued and witty socialites. Instead, they have all made fools of themselves by trying and failing to manipulate others.



Everyone congratulates Maria and Charles on being able to marry now. Sir Peter says he hopes that Maria and Charles will live as happily as he and Lady Teazle intend to. Charles thanks Rowley for supporting him, and Rowley says that he will feel he has been repaid if Charles mends his ways. Charles says that he will not promise anything, but that this is also proof that he will sincerely try to be a better man. The play ends with a verse recited by Charles. He says that he will be inspired to better himself by marrying Maria.

Charles has shown that when it counts he is motivated by feelings of loyalty, generosity, and love. He affirms that Rowley was right to see through his bad behavior and understand that he is actually a principled man. Married to Maria and as Sir Oliver's heir, his wealth will increase enormously, but he pledges to be worthy of this investment in his future.



EPILOGUE

Lady Teazle returns to the stage to recite the epilogue. It is written in rhyming couplets, and each line has ten syllables (iambic pentameter). In the verse, Lady Teazle complains about the way the play ends for her character. She says that she is too young, pretty, and full of life to have to go and be quiet and moral in the countryside with her boring, older husband. She wants to be beautifully dressed and to socialize, play cards, and enjoy London. She says that she told this to the play's author, and he joked that she ought to act in a tragedy about this fate. Lady Teazle says that the playwright told her that she was lucky to have had her storyline end so well, and to have the curtain go down at a moment when she seemed virtuous and could not mess things up again, as real people can.

Lady Teazle, like Charles, has resolved to treat her husband kindly and respectfully and to give up socializing with the gossips. This means that she will not ruin her reputation any further. The play does not characterize this as a perfectly happy ending, however, and in this odd turn at the end it suggests that to suppress young people's wild and excessive behaviors before they grow old is a shame. Although a ruined reputation can have serious consequences, the play suggests that it might be worth risking the consequences to enjoy the pleasures of high society.





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