

The “Daily Jangle” between a Rich Old Husband and his Fashionable Young Wife

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Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* has many central characters, and Lady Teazle and her husband Sir Peter are major players. It is worth mentioning that Sheridan moved to Bath in 1771 at the age of 19. Bath is famous for pleasure in different forms including beautiful ladies. Women and men meet there from all over England. “All kinds of people, men and women” go to bath; “notable and notorieties, quacks, members of Parliament, rakes, duchesses, usurers, brokers, bishops and gossips” (Sherwin 65) also visit Bath, and each one has own purpose of the visit. Sheridan is also attracted to this fashionable city, so his plays convey much fashionable attitudes. An example of the most fashionable young woman in Sheridan's plays is Lady Teazle. Lady Teazle came from countryside, but after her marriage to a rich older man, she becomes a maniac of fashion of London. Thus, Lady Teazle and her husband engage in several witty disputes. J. L. Styan reports:

Sheridan's object is to give us a magnified, preposterous portrait of how quarrels may come and go in married life. In particular, he wishes to pass comment on the marriage of a young lady who has tasted the freedom of town life and an older gentleman who is rather too set in his ways adequately to compromise with her demands. (155-56)

After six months of their marriage, Sir Peter appears complaining about his marriage to a young woman: “When an old bachelor marries a young wife, what is he to expect?” (1.2.[1]). He believes that his quarrels with his wife are because of his age that is why he calls himself “the miserablest dog” (1.2.[3]). In his reply to Rowley's question whether he is happy with his wife or not, Sir Peter confirms, “very bad, Master Rowley, very bad. I meet with nothing but crosses and vexations” (1.2.[18-19]). Rowley reassures him, “Sir Peter, you love her, notwithstanding your tempers don't exactly agree” (1.2.[25-26]). Nevertheless, Sir Peter goes further in his complaining by affirming that he has done his best to please her, but his efforts are in vain:

“But faults is entirely hers, Master Rowley. I am myself the sweetest-tempered man alive and hate a teasing temper – and so I tell her a hundred times a day” (1.2.[27-29]). In one of their witty disputes, Sir Peter reminds his wife of her birthplace and she reminds him of his age.

SIR PETER. ... ‘Tis evident you never cared a pin for me and I was a madman to marry you – a pert, rural coquette, that had refused half the honest squires in the neighbourhood!

LADY TEAZLE. And I am sure I was a fool to marry you – an old dangling bachelor, who was single at fifty only because he never could meet with anyone who would have him. (3.1.[240-45])

He also complains of her to his friend Joseph. He tells him that he believes “the difference of our ages makes it very improbable that she should have any very great affection for me” (4.3.[158-59]). In fact, he commits an error by telling Joseph. Joseph is a sentimental hypocrite, so he exploits the misunderstanding between Sir Peter and Lady Teazle to render himself as the fashionable lover to her.

One can argue that if Sir Peter feels uncomfortable with her, he can simply divorce her or at least he can sue her. In truth, he wants to sue her, yet people may hold him responsible because he has married a young woman. He admits, “if she were to be frail, and I were to make it public, why, the town would only laugh at me - the foolish old bachelor who had married a girl” (4.3.[160-62]). Thus, he has nothing to do except nagging about her behaviour. Therefore, most of the audiences are in the side of Lady Teazle; it is because Sir Peter actually starts nagging in many ways, and it is he who starts the quarrel. Unfortunately, he misunderstands his wife as he misjudges Charles and prefers Joseph. Logically, he should not complain after marrying her especially at this stage of his age. If he feels he is an old man, he should not marry her from the beginning. He should keep his promise with Sir Oliver when they decided that they should never marry at all. Sir Oliver “has been steady to his text” (1.2.[75]) while Sir Peter marries a young woman. To win her heart, he should be more aware of how to deal with a young woman. He should not think about her extravagance because he has not got children, so his money will go to her sooner or later. Therefore, it is better to leave her enjoying her time while he is still alive. In addition to Sir Peter’s unceasing grumbles about his wife, he scolds her of her past life. He considers his marriage to her as a kind of favour because he has dragged her out of the gutter to become one of the wealthiest women in the society. It is true that she might be born to a poverty-stricken family, but she is now his wife, so it is illogical and irrational to remind her of her past days. As a normal reaction towards his unceasing complaint, she candidly requests him to divorce her.

At times, Sir Peter complains of Lady Teazle, at other times, he praises her. In one of his soliloquies, he is pleased of her rude behavior. He confesses:

I have gained much by my intended expostulations. Yet with what a charming air she contradicts everything I say, and how pleasingly she shows her contempt of my authority! Well, though I can’t make her love me, there is a great satisfaction in quarreling with her, and I think she never appears to such advantage as when she is doing everything on her power to plague me. (2.1.[104-09])

Nevertheless, Sir Peter and his wife start flattering each other. Lady Teazle tells him, "I assure you, Sir Peter, good nature becomes you" (3.1.[195]). Her husband also tells her that she is a "kind and attentive" (3.1.[201]), so he assures her that they "shall certainly now be the happiest couple" (3.1.[210]). Unfortunately, after a short time of compliment, they again indulge in reproaching each other, and everyone thinks that he has the right. This indicates to their volatile moods. Sir Peter wants her to be obedient, and she wants him to provide her with money to be able to cope with the fashion of the city. Actually, the husband and wife are of different attitudes. Sir Peter feels troublesome because of her temper, and she is unhappy because of his nagging. He accuses her of extravagance and she accuses him of stinginess. He is worried about his wealth, and she is worried about her fashion. He wants to control her behaviour and she wants to practise her fashion out of his authority. He praises Joseph as "a man of sentiment," and she praises Lady Sneerwell and her group as "people of rank and fortune, and remarkably tenacious of reputation" (2.1.[85-6]).

Nevertheless, Sir Peter is a man of a good nature, and Lady Teazle is a woman of wit. These two positive traits can never be available in one person according to Lady Sneerwell. A person might have got a true-witty trait or a good-natured trait. In her talk to her group, to Joseph and to Maria, Lady Sneerwell avers, "there's no possibility of being witty without a little ill nature. The malice of a good thing is the barb that makes it stick" (1.1.[156-58]). Then, she argues with Sir Peter about wit and good nature.

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

LADY SNEERWELL. True, Sir Peter, I believe they are so near akin that *they can never be united*. (2.2.[158-61])

According to Lady Sneerwell true wit and good nature can never exist in the same individual. She however directs her speech to Sir Peter and his wife. To take into account Lady Sneerwell's division, it seems that Sir Peter is a good-natured character while his wife is a true-witty character; that is why she beautifully reacts against anything she does not like.

Sheridan is a keen observer for what is going around him. He has criticized the irrational behaviors and the overkill of the lifestyle of the upper classes of that time. In this regard, Fiskin acknowledges Sheridan's satire and notes that:

Satire is everywhere in Sheridan's plays. It is inherent in plot, character, and lines. Satire may encompass many kinds of material, many attitudes, and many different degrees of intensity. It can be as vicious as Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* or Jonson's *Volpone*, or it can be more subtle, as in Jane Austen. ... Sheridan's satire is gentle, but we find it everywhere. His satire attacks people, hypocrisy, and the sentimentalism which was both a cultural norm and a literary convention. (17)

Lady Teazle is an example of the young fashionable lady in Sheridan's time. Her confrontation with her husband is because of her love for fashion. She tries to imitate the upper-class ladies despite she has come from a countryside. To be fashionable lady, she spends money extravagantly without thinking about the extreme efforts of her husband in gaining that money. He has left no stone unturned to gather money; unfortunately, she spends it in her fashion.

Paradoxically, she seeks money from her husband without amending her temper to suit him. It is only after their marriage, she regards him an unfashionable man. If she regards herself a fashionable woman, she should choose her fashionable husband from the beginning. Fashion is not how to practise and how to use the accessories and equipment of life, but it is also a kind of choosing a fashionable husband. However, she does not care of marrying a fashionable husband, but when she becomes a wife, she has changed her life to suit the fashion of the city which Sir Peter does not like. Her obsession of the fashion can best be seen in her response to her husband when she says, "...I know very well that women of fashion in London are accountable to nobody after they are married" (2.1.[5-6]). She also threatens him, "to be sure: if you wanted authority over me, you should have adopted me and not married me. I am sure you were old enough" (2.1.[9-11]).

However, she needs money to be able to practise fashion, yet her husband cannot tolerate to see his wealth is going to finish in her fashion. So, he sorrowfully warns her, "though my life may be made unhappy by your temper, I'll not be ruined by your extravagance" (2.1.[13-14]). Her repartee comes as it is expected. She replies, "My extravagance! I'm sure I'm not more extravagant than a woman of fashion ought to be" (2.1.[15-16]). Hence, Lady Teazle considers her practice of fashion a kind of freedom especially in a city like London, the city of fashion. In contrast, Lady Teazle's excessive fashion can be forgiven at the time of listening to her intelligent repartee, self-defense and her well-made excuses. Her repartees are attractive and produced in a beautiful sophisticated way that is why audiences like her more than her husband. Actually, Lady Teazle is the main source for Sheridan's wit. Thus, the play will be tedious, if it does not contain Lady Teazle's "daily jangle" with her husband (2.2.[80]). In one of her "daily jangle", she asks him to blame winter for spending money instead of blaming her. She thinks winter is the main reason for spending much money in purchasing flowers to decorate her dressing room. However, her reply conveys too much wit. She says:

Lord, Sir Peter, am I to blame because flowers are dear in cold weather? You should find fault with the climate and not with me. For my part, I am sure I wish it was spring all the year round and that roses grew under our feet! (2.1.[22-5])

At any rate, to practise fashion in rational and logical way is acceptable, but fashion does not mean to have a new lover. In short, her craving for fashion guides her to commit such errors just like her extravagance, her ill-treatment towards her husband, her relation with the scandalous group, and her relation with Joseph.

Her relation with the scandalous group especially with Lady Sneerwell is questionable, yet this relation will not be discussed here because it is not a matter of study. What is important here is her reaction to the slanderers' gossips towards her husband. Once when she is in Lady Sneerwell's house, she cheers to hear slanderers fabricating stories about her husband. Both the husband and wife are there, but Sir Peter leaves Lady Sneerwell's house while his wife remains there. He is sure that the scandalmongers will bombard him with heavy backbiting after his departure. He certifies, "I leave my character behind me" (2.2.[192]). His guess is soon justified. As soon as he departs, Sir Benjamin takes the opportunity to tell Lady Teazle "that lord of yours is a strange being. I could tell you some stories of him would make you laugh

heartily, if he was not your husband" (2.2.[194-95]). Lady Teazle replies, "Oh, pray don't mind that. Come, do let's hear them" (2.2.[196]). Her reaction and her readiness to hear the rumour about her husband let Sir Peter get some sympathizers. As her husband is sure that Lady Sneerwell and her group are going to fabricate stories about him, she also believes the same. She tells Joseph when she meets him in his library, "there's my friend Lady Sneerwell has circulated I don't know how many scandalous tales of me, and all without any foundation too - that's what vexes me" (4.3.[34-36]).

She nags about Lady Sneerwell, but she continues to keep pace with her. It is only at the end of the play, she confesses of the negative consequence of her relation with Lady Sneerwell. She angrily addresses 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. (5.3.[191-97])

In addition to her relation with Lady Sneerwell and her bad conduct with her husband, she commits a big error at the time of considering Joseph a lover for his sentiment. According to her, fashion is not only what to dress and how to dress, but it is also how to behave and how many friends she has got. To be a woman of fashion, she has to visit her friends at any time even if those friends are notorious. She considers her relation with a young man a kind of fashion although she is married. In fact, she sees in Joseph some fashionable qualities which are not available in Sir Peter. Joseph is young, hypocrite, coquet, and sentimental figure, so he is able to attract her attention. Sir Peter is, on the other hand, a reasonable person who does not fool anyone. He tries his best to satisfy her by all means, yet he is not a young sentimental hypocrite. In fact, she only admires Joseph as a kind of fashion but not for serious love. She tells him, "you know I admit you as a lover no farther than fashion sanctions" (2.2.[241]). Joseph replies, "True - a mere Platonic cicisbeo - what every wife is entitled to" (2.2.[242-43]). His reply implies that the woman of London should have a relation with a man out of the married life, and this is what he intends to benefit of. He exploits her emotional weakness to satisfy his lust. So, he is not only a hypocrite, but he is also a wicked person.

To achieve his wicked goal, he invites her to visit him. Before her arrival, he orders one of his servants to draw the screen for fearing of being seen by a parasitical person. This is a proof of his wickedness and sinister intention. Thomas Moore states:

Joseph, at the commencement of the scene, desires his servant to draw the screen before the window, because his opposite neighbor is a maiden lady of so anxious a temper; yet, afterwards, by placing Lady Teazle between the screen and the window, he enables this inquisitive lady to indulge her curiosity at leisure. It might be said, indeed, that Joseph, with the alternative of exposure to either the husband or neighbor, chooses the lesser evil; but the oversight hardly requires a defence. (250)

He has waits anxiously for Lady Teazle. When she enters and sees him lost in his contemplation, she remarks, "What! Sentiment in soliloquy now?" (4.3.[18]). Noticeably, his ill-nature and wicked contemplation are regarded by Lady Teazle as a kind of sentiment. She is actually deceived by his appearance and sweet words, and it does not come to her mind that he is preparing wicked surprise. Actually, there is no end to Joseph's deception. He exploits Lady Teazle's love for fashion to direct her to the point he likes. He describes her lateness as "a very unfashionable quality in a lady" (4.3.[21-22]) in responding to her apology for being late. By praising her fashion, Joseph wishes to attract her attention and to pave the way to what is coming next. Indeed, Lady Teazle is overjoyed to hear such praising words because she has never used to hear alluring words from her husband as she hears from Joseph. When she becomes torpid of his sweet speech, he incites her to commit adultery as a normal reaction against her husband's suspicion of being in relation with Charles. He instigates her:

my dear lady Teazle, 'tis your own fault if you suffer it. When a husband entertains a groundless suspicion of his wife and withdraws his confidence from her, the original compact is broken, and she owes it to the honour of her sex to endeavor to outwit him. (4.3.[46-49])

Lady Teazle does not object, and she does not show him a kind of unwillingness. Unbelievably, she is convinced to commit adultery, so she reacts, "Indeed! So that if he suspects me without cause, it follows that the best way of curing his jealousy is to give him reason for it?" (4.3.[50-52]). Then she decides to "part with my virtue to preserve my reputation" (4.3.[77-78]). He is pleased of her readiness to commit adultery, and considers it a kind of her honour. Lady Teazle knows well the great value of honour that is why she replies, "Don't you think we may as well leave Honor out of the argument?" (4.3.[89-90]). She is really amazed how he talks about honour while he tries his best to convince her to abandon her honour by committing adultery. However, she realizes his wicked personality when she is listening to his discussion with her husband from behind the screen. Joseph tries to find an excuse to discharge himself at the time of discovering Lady Teazle, yet Lady Teazle cannot keep silent more, so she bursts to call him, "Hypocrite." She reveals the truth that she "came, seduced by his insidious arguments, at least to listen to his pretended passion" (4.3.[416-17]). Then she adds that she does not believe such a "smooth-tongued hypocrite who would have seduced the wife of his too credulous friend, while he affected honourable addresses to his ward." She concludes, "behold him now in a light so truly despicable that I shall never again respect myself for having listened to him" (4.3.[427-31]).

At the end, Sir Peter reconciles Lady Teazle and determines to "be the happiest couple in the country" (5.2.[258]). The epilogue, which is spoken by Lady Teazle, emphasizes their reconciliation. In this epilogue which is written by George Colman, Lady Teazle promises her husband to dedicate her life in serving him. She says, "Bend all my cares, my studies, and my vows, To one old rusty weathercock, my spouse" (lines [3-14]).

In sum, Sir Peter commits a mistake because he does not give his time to his wife. He is the guardian of Maria, the overseer of Charles and Joseph, the friends of Sir Oliver, the employer of Rowley, the visitor of Lady Sneerwell, and the husband of Teazle. He is in short "a nexus for all of them

within the world of the play” (Jordan 32). Surely, if he spends his time with his wife, she will feel overwhelmed by his constant love and compassion, then she will never fall into the trap of fashion, scandal and Joseph’s sentiment. To keep her out of these, he should, at least, educate her about all the activities that she did not learn at home such as gossip, visiting, clothes, city life, fashion, etc. Unfortunately, he is too busy about others’ affairs, so his wife becomes easy prey to the fashion of the city, to Lady Sneerwell’s gossip and to Joseph’s sentiment. Therefore, Sir Peter is the one who should be blamed. As he is always wrong in his judgment of the brothers, he is also wrong in his dealing with his wife.

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