

1. Divine Mrs Malaprop

Malapropism, in which the dramatist makes creative capital out of the ignorant verbal usage of the ignorant or the pretentious, has a long history on the English stage. Shakespeare's most famous exponent of malapropism is the over-promoted Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*, though the self-aggrandising Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Mistress Quickly, the brothel-keeper who mourns Falstaff in *Henry V*, are often more creative. Sheridan's Mrs Malaprop, is not, therefore, an original creation, but, like so much of his work, the consummation of two hundred years of dramatic history. Some scholars have even argued that the germ of the character lies in Mrs Tryfort ('Try-for-it', i.e. *le mot juste*) in *A Journey to Bath*, a manuscript play by Sheridan's mother, Frances, which certainly anticipates Malaprop's 'contagious countries'. Yet the very extensiveness of the lexicographic territory she mis-maps distinguishes her in degree, if not in kind, from all her forebears. She tramples over the contemporary tourist-industry: 'you have no more feeling than one of the Derbyshire putrefactions' [those limestone formations known as the 'Wonders of the Peak']; over Hamlet: 'an eye, like March, to threaten at command – a Station, like Harry Mercury, new – Something about kissing – on a Hill' [Hamlet's encomium on his father in 3:4]; over psychiatry: 'it gives me the hydrostatics to such a degree'; prophecy [?] 'we will not anticipate the past'; evidence: the 'perpendiculars'; and (I think) beards and painters: 'thou barbarous Vandyke'. Mrs Malaprop differs from production to production more than any other character in the play. The tradition is to make her vulgar (studied ignorance is thus responsible for her mangling of meanings) and elderly; but she works just as well if she is an under-educated social-climber, with youth (or what passes for youth in eighteenth century Bath – her niece, Lydia, is just seventeen) still on her side. In short she can be a portentous establishment figure, or an insecure but ambitious outsider. I once read a review of a production of the play which complained that a particular actress was too young and beautiful to play the role. But the part as Sheridan wrote it lacks clear specification about age and appearance. This is because Mrs Malaprop is conceived at a linguistic rather than a literary level: her mistakes about words are the most significant aspect of her.

All this gives her something in common with Dickens characters, like Mrs Gamp, who live in a world of linguistic fantasy whose purpose is to feed her fertile ego with good references; characters who convince their fans that their fantasy worlds have more substance than the prosaic details of everyday life. Orwell argues that Mrs Harris, an alleged former employer of Mrs Gamp 'who does not exist', is more 'real' than the characters of most novelists. Mrs Malaprop's language, like Mrs Gamp's, seems to operate in a sealed linguistic world, ultimately about and responsible only to itself. In this it seems to me to anticipate not only Dickens, but the Victorian nonsense writing to which his inspiration is linked. Top-notch Malaprop phrases such as the 'pine-apple of politeness' (teased out from Jack's reference to an 'Orange-Tree') and 'a nice derangement of epitaphs' seem close to the hard-core nonsense of Edward Lear. Possibly another Anglo-Irish writer, and another Victorian, Oscar Wilde, was thinking of Mrs Malaprop when he created Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. For Lady Bracknell is another

arbitrary centre of linguistic power, who can be portrayed at a variety of ages, and who may simultaneously seem to satirise the society of which she seems faintly to be a part, yet also to transcend it by dint of her glowing absurdity. Critics who look straightforwardly for satire of eighteenth century society in Mrs Malaprop will, however, be disappointed. Max Beerbohm, perhaps the greatest of all English caricaturists and literary satirists, was so, and concluded as a result her linguistic coinages were artless, arbitrary and meaningless. 'If I spoke of her botanical, vernal humour I should not expect anyone to be amused, and it vexes me to think that Sheridan expected people to be amused by such devices.' It is his loss.

2. 'Women Guide the Plot'

Despite Faulkland's hypersensitivity and Mrs Malaprop's linguistic 'hydrostatics', *The Rivals* is also a play concerned with the robust and practical aspects of the marriage market. As A.N. Kaul writes, 'Sheridan is concerned with nothing less than the problem of a woman's freedom in a society that looks upon women as property and upon marriage as a business transaction'; what Lydia terms 'a mere Smithfield bargain' [after Smithfield, the London meat-market]. Julia was given the teasing lines from the 'Epilogue', which argue: Man's social happiness all rests on us: Through all the drama – whether d-n'd or not – Love gilds the scene and women guide the plot. Julia, as played by Mrs Bulkely, was the star of early performances. Despite the obvious subordination of her healthy inner life to Faulkland's cranky one, or possibly even because of it, she was the most evenkeeled character in the play, and in the best position to draw attention to this sub-text of gender politics as the final curtain fell. Lydia's moral authority is less strongly signposted than Julia's, though she does a good deal more than the former in terms of 'guiding the plot'. In some ways she is a tougher, more self-confident version of Jane Austen's Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*, stuffed with sentimental fiction, and not caring very much how she mixes her dreams and desires up with waking reality. Hazlitt thinks her the quintessential product of an eighteenth century boarding-school, a clever girl who has been forcefeeding herself for years on hedonistic nonsense.

Yet she is much more certain what she wants than Julia, and much more determined to wring concessions out of her lover, Captain Absolute, than Julia is able to get change out of the narcissistic Faulkland. Her desire to marry someone beneath her has both the charm of romance and the authority of democracy about it; though no-one else takes her progressive political spirit very seriously (after all, an Ensign - now Second Lieutenant - is only one rank beneath a Captain) she does, even to the point of cultivating a feisty 'hoydenesque' demeanour, which contrasts interestingly with Julia's more mannered and sophisticated modes of speech. Jack, for all his man-of-the-world pragmatism, thinks the world of her imagination ('devilish romantic, and very absurd of course') and is happy to perform the sentimental equivalent of *Labours of Hercules* for its sake: How often have I stole forth, in the coldest night in January, and found him in the garden, stuck like a dripping statue! – There would he kneel to me in the snow, and sneeze and cough so pathetically! He shivering with cold, and I with apprehension! And while the

freezing blast numb'd our joints, how warmly would he press me to pity his flame, and glow with mutual ardour!- Ah, Julia! That was something like being in love.

The woman's world of *The Rivals* is thus a sophisticated one, here exploring a chaste manifestation of sexual sadism that would not have been unfamiliar, a few years later, to another 'sentimental' writer, the Marquis de Sade. Both girls are literate, articulate and, despite some surface turbulence initiated by their male lovers, reliable human beings. Sir Anthony's view of the circulating library ('an ever-green tree of diabolical knowledge') is too daft to deserve rational consideration, attracting only the garbling concurrence of Mrs Malaprop. Neither he- nor she-dragon has any effect on female education in the play. Both want words to mean more than the dictionary says (for example, Sir Anthony's absurdly hyperbolic warning to his son 'don't enter the same hemisphere with me'), so they end up meaning nothing ('I'll unget you!').

Lydia's view of words, and books, is altogether more rational. She has some of the best of the new sentimental novels by Sterne and Mackenzie, and some of the most lurid (*The Tears of Sensibility*), mixed with Ovid's more earthy writings on love and sex. She also keeps a stock of sermons and theological works ('Addressed to a Young Lady') on-hand to deceive prying chaperones. Her reading of the *Letters of Lord Chesterfield* is presumably to teach her about, or maybe even to teach her, worldly wisdom and hypocrisy. Dr Johnson said the book recommended 'the manners of a dancing master' and the 'morals of a whore.' Lydia is a young woman to be reckoned with, her feistiness and resourcefulness a taste of things to come.