

Richard Brinsley Sheridan

The death in 1816 of the libertarian Richard Brinsley Sheridan may have cheated the bailiffs, but as “the process of transforming him into a colourful, fabulous, and essentially harmless genius” began, he was securely delivered into the hands of an astonishingly welcoming aristocracy. Though Sheridan has himself disdained most of the privileges offered him by princes, his coffin was shuffled into Westminster Abbey by a large group of princes and peers, and safely lodged away from his political colleagues in Poet’s Corner (right beside Richard Cumberland, a writer he lampooned in his scurrilous play, *The Critic*).

The fact that he spent his life supporting dangerous causes – and championed several notorious insurrectionists – is scarcely remembered. Scarcely celebrated is his lifelong refusal to accept that being the son of an actor, an actor himself, a theatre manager, and a writer of several plays and one successful opera, should be any bar to high public position and respectability. Unrecited are his fiery, eloquent parliamentary speeches in favour of reform and liberty, Catholic emancipation and universal human rights. For Sheridan, the theatre was one arena of political discussion, and his success as a playwright was a means to a political end; it is unsurprising, given the disappointment of politics in England after the French revolution, and the miserable regency and rule of his one-time friend George IV, that Sheridan was very quickly after death transformed into a sort of superficial wit, a rake, “theatrical” and insubstantial, almost a throwback to the restoration.

Sheridan was complicated: a role-playing chameleon in practice, he was dedicated to clear-sighted sincerity. A Protestant Irishman who sought justice for the Roman Catholic Irish peasantry, a radical democrat who held some fairly rotting seats in parliament, a loyal British subject who would have brought down the monarchy given a chance, Sheridan did nothing the easy way. He was a demanding (and rewarding) friend (and lover), who lost his most powerful friends along the way, alienated a pair of remarkable wives (one of them the inspiration and part-creator of *The Duenna*), and maintained a life of some style while he was at the same time in fear of incarceration for debt at least, and treason at worst.

On the night *The Duenna* opened in November 1775, however, this complex genius looked set to inherit all. Four nights before, his wife Elizabeth bore him a son, named Thomas for both his grandfathers. Elizabeth’s fame had brought him position, and a measure of respectability; their work with her family on the opera, and the birth of this son, had somewhat reconciled the Linleys to the loss of Elizabeth, and the loss of her income. Sheridan’s father was back on stage at Covent Garden, and one of his mother Frances Sheridan’s plays was about to be restaged by Garrick at Drury Lane. Sheridan was about to take up negotiations to take over from Garrick the lease of that theatre, to revive his own works and those of his esteemed Congreve. *The Duenna* itself was acclaimed for “boldly rescuing the stage from that state of lethargy and melancholy madness” induced by worthy tragedies, and it ran for an unprecedented 75 nights at Covent Garden.



“Richard Brinsley Sheridan MP, 1751–1816” Oil on canvas by Joshua Reynolds.

Courtesy of the Palace of Westminster Collection

His triumph with *The Duenna*, at least, we remember tonight. Maybe we find his political brilliance hard to recall because the theatre of politics is now so different. Can you imagine a Sheridan in opposition now, jousting with Hastings and rattling Pitt, scrutinising his idealistic colleagues and exhorting dullards to liberality? What poets might now succeed in parliament? Answers in one short email, please...

JAMES CONWAY

1. Fintan O’Toole, *A Traitor’s Kiss: the life of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, 1751-1816* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997). This short note owes much to O’Toole’s fine book, which presents a suitably complex picture of an Irish man hitherto perceived as “a colourful flaw in the pattern of public life in 18th-century England”. If he were not busy chronicling the grand follies of recent Irish history, he would have written a better note than this one.