

## *Shakespearean Intertextuality in "The Rivals"*

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores Shakespearean intertextuality in *The Rivals* (1775), a comedy by the British playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan. This play witnesses characters parallel to those in Shakespeare's plays including *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Measure for Measure*, *Twelfth Night*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Through intertextual connections with sources or analogues found in Shakespeare's works, Sheridan elaborates on the themes and characterization in *The Rivals* and increased dramatic tension. By drawing on the theories proposed by Linda Hutcheon concerning intertextuality and adaptation, this paper addresses *The Rivals* in relation to its applications of different literary forms, such as allusion, quotation, translation, and parody.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Sheridan, *The Rivals*, Linda Hutcheon, intertextuality, adaptation

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## Introduction

In the first chapter of *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon explains the relationship between sources and adapting works by emphasizing the “repetition with variation” and “the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise” (4). Hutcheon believes that the process of adaptation is characterized by three features: “an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works,” “a creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging,” and “an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work” (8). According to Hutcheon, known adaptations set up audience expectations through a set of norms that guide our encounter with the adapting work we are experiencing (121). In addition, adaptation may involve a number of variables, including the demands of form, the individual adapter, the particular audience, and the contexts of reception and creation (Hutcheon 142). Like the source, the new work is influenced by “a context—a time and a place, a society and a culture” (142). This paper will compare the contexts surrounding *The Rivals* and its Shakespearean sources or analogues.

Sheridan's first play, *The Rivals* is set in Bath. Captain Jack Absolute, son of Sir Anthony Absolute, is in love with Lydia Languish, the niece of Mrs. Malaprop. As Lydia prefers a poor soldier, Jack disguises himself as Ensign Beverley, but Lydia will lose half her fortune if she marries without her aunt's consent. Mrs. Malaprop accepts a proposal from Sir Anthony for a match between Jack and Lydia, but Jack is afraid of revealing his deception to Lydia. Bob Acres, also Lydia's suitor, is provoked by the furious Irishman Sir Lucius O'Trigger to carry a challenge to Beverley. Deluded into thinking that love letters for him from Mrs Malaprop are from Lydia, Sir Lucius also challenges Beverley. When Acres finds that Beverley is his friend Jack, he declines the duel. Sir Lucius also clarifies his misunderstanding at the arrival of Mrs. Malaprop. Lydia forgives Jack though he shatters her hopes of a romantic elopement.

Several characters in Sheridan's *The Rivals* are “parallel characters” to those in Shakespeare's plays. Sir Lucius O'Trigger is a foreigner as ill-tempered as Dr Caius, a French physician in Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Shallow comments on Dr. Caius's brutal aggressiveness, saying that, even though he has “lived fourscore years and upward,” he has “never heard a man of [Dr. Caius's] place, gravity and learning so wide of his own respect” (3.1.52-54). Unable to control his emotion, Caius calls Evans a jackanapes, a term of contempt for someone of a lesser social class: “You, jacknape, give-a this letter to Sir Hugh. . . . I will cut his throat in de Park, and I will teach a scurvy jackanape priest to meddle or make” (1.4.95-96). Later, he declares his attempt to kill Evans for his advances on Anne: “[b]y Gar, me vill kill de priest, for he speak for a jackanapes to Anne Page” (2.3.71-72). Also, he insults him directly: “By Gar, you are de coward, de jackdog, john-ape” (3.1.72).

In *The Rivals*, Lucy's behavior resembles that of Mistress Quickly in Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as a double-crosser, deceiving different people for her own profit. In scene 2 of *The Rivals*, Lucy delivers a soliloquy:

Lucy. So---I shall have another Rival to add to my mistress's list---Captain Absolute.---However, I shall not enter his name till my purse has received notice in form. Poor Acres is dismissed!---Well, I have done him a last friendly office, in letting him know that Beverley was here before him.---Sir Lucius is generally more punctual, when he expects to hear from his dear Dalia , as he calls her: ---I wonder he's not here!---I have a little scruple of conscience from this deceit; tho' I should not be paid so well, if my hero knew that Delia was near fifty, and her own mistress.---I could not have thought he would have been so nice, when there's a golden egg in the case, as to care whether he has it from a pullet or an old hen! (33)

Similarly, Mistress Quickly, house-keeper to Dr Caius, acts as go-between for the three suitors of Anne Page: Doctor Caius, Slender, and Fenton, and encourages all of them.

In *The Rivals*, noted for her aptitude in misapplying words, Mrs. Malaprop delivers speech riddled with malapropism. The term comes from the French *mal à propos*, meaning “inappropriately.” Mrs. Malaprop’s comically inaccurate use of long words has given the word “malapropism” to the English language. Her attempts at learned speech include a reference to another character as “the very pine-apple of politeness,” instead of “pinnacle”; another as “headstrong as an allegory on the banks of the Nile,” instead of “alligator.” In fact, malapropism is commonly used comedic device in Shakespeare's plays, especially among the buffoons who frequently mistake meanings of their words. The constable Dogberry in Shakespeare’s *Much Ado about Nothing* (c.1598) is a precursor of Mrs. Malaprop in his gift for misapplying words. In Shakespeare’s play, Don John averts Claudio's marriage by arranging for him to see Hero apparently wooed by his friend Borachio on her balcony, but it is actually her maid Margaret in disguise. The plot by Don John and Borachio is unmasked by Dogberry and Verges, the local constables. Dogberry questions Borachio and Conrad, and tries to inform Leonato of Don Juan’s plot to discredit Leonato's daughter Hero. Preoccupied with the arrangements for the wedding, however, Leonato was impatient with Dogberry’s wordy preliminaries, and sends him away. Dogberry's mangling of language and labored witticisms prevent him from using words effectively enough to mount a defense against slander. When Leonato tells him: "Neighbours, you are tedious" (17), as Sheldon P. Zitner has noted, Dogberry "mistakes the word [tedious] for a compliment." His responses indicate that he is confusing "tedious" with the word "copious" (Walls 200-202), or “fluent.”

Dogberry It pleases your worship to say so, but we are the poor Duke's officers. But truly, for mine own part, if I were as tedious as a king I could find in my heart to bestow it all of your worship. (18-21)

Later, Dogberry delivers a further flow of time-wasting verbiage, saying: "Yea, an 'twere a thousand pound more than 'tis, for I hear as good exclamation on your worship as of any man in the city, and though I be but a poor man, I am glad to hear it" (22-26). As such, Dogberry embodies the character of gentle pathos as well as hilarious comedy. This distinguishes him from Sheridan's portrayal of Mrs. Malaprop.

Other similar characters of malapropism include Elbow in *Measure for Measure*, Mistress Quickly in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*. In *Measure for Measure*, the constable Elbow brings in two prisoners, Pompey the pimp and Froth, a client of Mistress Overdone's. Elbow calls the villains "benefactors" instead of "malefactors." Attempting to "protest" on his wife's behalf, he states that he "detests" his wife. Though Angelo and Escalus attempt to understand why Elbow has arrested these men, Elbow fails to clarify the incident. The scene erupts into chaos when Elbow hears Pompey calling his wife "respected" and mistakes the word as "suspected." His incomprehensible story is so confusing that Angelo leaves in exasperation, and Escalus releases all the men.

Sheridan's play also concerns the love-affair of the stubborn and jealous Faulkland with Julia. Faulkland is as melancholy as Duke Orsino in *Twelfth Night*, who is in love with Olivia, but she rejects the duke's suit. *The Rivals* also quotes a speech in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*: "If music be the food of love" (I. i. 1). Furthermore, Sheridan's Bob Acres is as bragging and cowardly as Sir Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night*. A foolish knight and a rejected suitor of Olivia, Sir Andrew becomes jealous because Olivia favors Viola/Cesario over himself. Sir Toby urges him to challenge "Cesario" to a duel. Terrified by the idea of a duel, he reluctantly agrees to write a taunting letter to Cesario. Yet both knights finally gave up their claims.

Sheridan's debt to Shakespeare's *1 Henry IV* can be seen in Sir Lucius O'Trigger's character with similar martial fervor of Hotspur, and in an argument resembling Falstaff's speech on honor. Falstaff deflates honor by depicting it as failing to repair wounds and deaths, and advocates self-preservation even through the dishonor of counterfeiting death on the battlefield (Ardolino 89-90). In Act IV, Scene i of *The Rivals*, David, Bob Acres's wise servant, ridicules the duel of honor to dissuade his cowardly master from risking his life. The name of David in Sheridan's play ironically alludes to David's battle with Goliath in the Bible; the victory of the champion of the God of Israel over the enemies of God's helpless people. In 1772 Sheridan fought a duel of honor, in which he was seriously wounded, and this is perhaps why he, through David's speech, reiterates Falstaff's comments on honor.

## **Conclusion**

Based on Linda Hutcheon's theories in relation to adaptation, this paper investigates Shakespearean parallels in *The Rivals* and comes up with three findings. First, the intertextual impacts may result in new or hybrid signification. Second, the new signification may influence the achievement of the comic effects. Third, the playwright's life experiences may influence his applications of the Shakespearean tradition.

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