The Art of Visiting in Sheridan’s *The School for Scandal*

Writing in 2002, Christopher Heyl noted that a significant structural change occurred within English society just around the beginning of the eighteenth century, with the redevelopment of London following the Great Fire of 1666 facilitating this by removing the idea of communal spaces from the concept of housing and instead promoting ‘new ideas about privacy’ by ‘cocooning off families’ into houses which, though terraced, were very much enclosed spaces, with high walls creating gardens at the rear of properties further cementing the idea of each house as an individual, self-contained unit.1 Karen Harvey has remarked that ‘During the eighteenth century, all manner of things come to be explicitly separated through the shifting categories of “public” and “private”’, 2 and certainly this would seem to be reflected through the dual separation, not just of the internal domestic sphere from the external public sphere, but also through a further distinction established between the ‘rooms inhabited by members of the family and rooms which could be made accessible to visitors’. 3 Shakespeare may have felt able to say at the start of the seventeenth century that ‘All the world’s a stage’, 4 but this was nothing to the elaborate layers of theatricality that were developing around the concept of sociability in the eighteenth century. For just as the possession of a private domestic space signified a certain degree of class status, so too was refined interior décor, together with a proliferation of material possessions, a means of establishing social standing and of facilitating self-expression; or, as Amanda Vickery so succinctly expresses it, ‘Display of self and surroundings was the alpha and omega of visiting’, 5 thus providing an effective background against which the strictly regulated performance of visiting could be enacted. It is by no means insignificant that it was during this period, too, when ‘portraiture became virtually the English art’, 6 with artists overburdened with the demand for portraits, and with the display of such images in rooms to which visitors would have access thus emphasising not only the family’s wealth, but also their respectability through the assemblage of a crowd of ancestors. In the mid-eighteenth century, for instance, the Swiss Baron Louis-Francois Guiger and his English wife Matilda Cleveland, the drawing room is covered with images of various family members, including the Baron’s father and his great-uncle & aunt from whom the his family had inherited the Chateau (photograph on handout).

Obliquely representing an appropriate sense of family pride and respectability derived through traceable ancestry, it is upon this concept that Richard Brinsley Sheridan draws so notably in his superb comedy *The School for Scandal*, when Charles Surface, the younger (and apparently more profligate) of the two rival brothers around whom the narrative centres, attempts to sell off the family portraits in order to raise money. Disguised as a moneylender, Charles’s uncle Sir Oliver Surface is horrified at the idea that his nephew is willing to ‘raise

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3 Christoph Heyl, ‘We Are Not At Home’, p. 22
money of me on your own flesh and blood, thus commencing an anthropomorphism of the portraits that continues through the next scene to great comedic effect, as references to the paintings become synonymous with allusions to the individual family members depicted: when Charles observes of a painting of two Members of Parliament that it is ‘extraordinary’ that it is ‘the first time they were ever bought and sold’ (School, 4.1.68-70), this could either be interpreted as a gibe at respectability, or else as a mocking allusion to political corruption, with the joke being that now they are being sold, rather than simply having their political influence ‘bought’. To some extent, therefore, this actually contributes towards the ultimate depiction of Charles’s character as the antithesis of his brother’s superficiality and ostentatiously artificial ‘noblest sentiments’ (School, 2.3.63-4), for rather than the social charade symbolised by the gallery of family portraits, Charles favours the demonstration of true sincerity in his decision to retain the portrait of the one individual for whom he maintains a true admiration and regard, his uncle Oliver Surface.

Perhaps even more striking within this scene, however, is the manner in which Sheridan exploits the essential theatricality of the whole process of visiting through the fact that not only Oliver Surface’s true sentiments with regard to the picture sale are concealed, but also his whole identity, thus reflecting the broader social concealment of emotion, and therefore character, that formed an essential element of the eighteenth century ritual of visiting. Conduct books from the period are very keen to warn their readers of the function of ceremonious visitors as ‘Spies upon your Conduct’, who ‘have no other Wifh than to repreffent you to your Difadvantage’. Significantly, however, a distinction appears to be made between the visits of those who are particular friends, and those whose ‘Visits are only of Fafhion’. Indeed, it is this idea of popular opinion, or ‘the town’ as a separate entity void of empathy and interested only in fault-finding that Sheridan really experiments with in The School for Scandal, largely by isolating this faction and compartmentalising them into the eponymous ‘School’, and which are exemplified by Mrs. Candour, Sir Benjamin Backbite, and their companions, including, at least at the start of the play, Lady Teazle herself.

Exploring this idea, an anonymous poem from 1705 entitled ‘The Ladies’ Tutor, or the Art of Visiting’ concludes that scandal-mongering and gossip is in fact the essence of visiting saying:

‘Then you the Scandal of fage Billingsgate,  
Into the White-hall Language muft Tranflate.  
Reflections with the Name of Judgment Graé’t,  
And Scandal in politenesf of the Tafte  
Thefe are the rules to which you muft submit,  
The Art to make you for Acquaintance fit.’

Intriguingly, it also states that ‘you muft have all thofe Neceffaries,/ Before you vifit A la mode de Paris’, thus obliquely suggesting that the formality of visiting is essentially a

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9 Ibid
10 The Ladies tutor: or, The art of visiting (London; Printed for P. Hills in Cornhill, 1705) lines 134-9
11 Ibid, lines 142-3
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foreign import and so establishing it as an alternative to traditional English honesty and openness.

Furthermore, it is through the suggestion of a gossiping collection of individuals, a part of society and yet separated from it through their unsympathetic commentary upon it, that the simplistic separation between the public world and the private world delineated by Christopher Heyl, and exemplified by ‘threshold markers’ such as the front door, becomes less straightforward, and the sense of visiting as a kind of performance becomes more complicated. Certainly Heyl is right in suggesting that the front door was the epicentre of separation between the external and the internal spheres of society, and consequently an important focal point for action and much elaborate ritual: the elaborate code surrounding the number of knocks on the door or rings at the bell confirms this (there isn’t time here to detail this completely, but a full examination of the topic is included on your handouts). Yet rather than viewing the essentially ‘public’ rooms of a house as a uniformly public arena, it is interesting to note that conduct books such as The Conduct for Married Life, and later the Ladies Complete Visiting Guide, actually differentiate between communication with visitors of ceremony and the ‘real Conversation of your Friends’, for whom the time-saving Visiting Guide suggests the user will want to devote ‘those additional moments, which must be highly gratifying to the susceptible and the intelligent’.

Contributing to this is the sense that Sheridan’s play is also suggesting the presence of pseudo-public personas, most noticeably through the assertion of Lady Teazle that she has adopted Joseph Surface ‘as a lover no further than fashion requires’ (School, 2.2.224), and not with any serious adulterous intent; yet although she has formed this attachment for the enhancement of her public persona, she remains immune to the malicious gossip of her circle who instead focus upon spiteful gossip in which potential loss of chastity is more overtly interpretable. It is only when Charles Surface removes the screen in the denouement of the play, revealing her presence in Joseph Surface’s rooms to her husband, that the gossips Lady Sneerwell and Mrs. Candour begin to refer to Lady Teazle in the past tense, as someone who ‘was always too lively’ and who ‘had indeed some good qualities’ (School, 5.2.32 & 33–4), and whose character is therefore officially dead.

In this regard, therefore, appearances, and by association physical appearances, become key. The fact that Lady Teazle ‘leaves her chair at the milliner’s in the next street’ (School, 4.3.12) from Joseph Surface’s rooms, for example, highlights a kind of social respectability that is satisfied simply if the formal appearance of morality is maintained; essentially, it is the ostentation and location of the objects surrounding the visit that truly define respectability, and which preserve her reputation. Similarly, the room in which the visit occurs also becomes a reflection of the character both of the domestic occupant, and the kind of conversation that is about to occur. The fact that Joseph Surface has sold the family home to his brother and lives instead in private rooms is therefore an externalised reflection of the kind of close, dense layers of intrigue with which he is involved, as his room appears suited more to concealment (the screen, and the closet) and the kind of private conversation in which he engages both with Sir Peter Teazle and Lady Teazle.

Conversely, Charles Surface’s retention of the family home is similarly reflective, as the impression of large open spaces signified by the portrait gallery appears to reflect the open

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12 Christoph Heyl, ‘We Are Not At Home’, p. 16
13 Hill & Baldwin, The Conduct of a Married Life, p. 22
14 The Ladies Visiting Guide (London; printed for and sold by P. Boyle and Mr. Stockdale, [1800?]), p. vi
Corrina Readioff

and inartificial character which his uncle realises and approves of. (The fact that the house
has a portrait gallery separate to simply having portraits hung around the drawing room might
be indicative of the kind of lengthy, gallery that was a popular feature of Elizabethan
architecture and which often included massive multipaned windows to let in ample light for
the viewing of pictures, thus advancing the idea of transparency in the character of Charles
Surface). Similarly, a further sense of Charles’s worthiness is obliquely included by Sheridan
at the start of this scene, when he extends an invitation of refreshment to the two individuals
whom he believes to be a moneylender and his business associate, thus responding to the
‘very close association between visiting and refreshments…’\textsuperscript{15} which Lorna Weatherill has
noted came into extreme prominence in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. Viewed by his uncle within the play
as a mark of his extreme dissipation, the contrast that is formed when Joseph Surface
entertains an individual whom he believes is an old servant of his Uncle’s (and who has
himself abided by the customary forms of requesting an audience before admission into a
private domestic space), and omits even to offer him refreshment therefore constitutes an
oblique diversion from accepted manners and forms of behaviour that must surely have been
apparent (if only subconsciously) to contemporary audiences. For Sheridan, therefore,
visiting is not simply the catalyst and focal point of his narrative, but also the vehicle through
which aspects of character may be revealed through the observance or non-observance of
correct forms of social behaviour.

\textsuperscript{15} Lorna Weatherill, \textit{Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660-1760}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edn. (London, New
York; Routledge, ebrary inc., 1996) p. 157