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The Rivals And The Character Of Mrs. Malaprop

MRS. MALAPROP

A TYPICAL REPRESENTATIVE OF 18TH CENTURY UPPER CLASS

Of all female characters in *The Rivals* written by Sheridan, Mrs Malaprop's character is the most important, interesting and amusing. She is an elderly lady and a widow. She is the aunt of Lydia Languish. But, as Lydia Languish is still a minor girl, she is in the charge and care of her aunt, Mrs Malaprop.

Mrs. Malaprop objects to Lydia's love for a poor, penniless, beggarly young man called Ensign Beverley. She wants her niece to marry Sir Anthony's Absolute's son Captain Absolute, who is rich and an heir to three thousand a year. She considers the marriage between Captain Absolute and in keeping Lydia as a matching one and in keeping with social reputation and prestige of her family. But as she finds Lydia insistent on marrying Ensign Beverley, she calls her niece a simpleton, a foolish girl who is determined to disgrace her family by lavishing her love on a fellow who is not worth a shilling. As she tells Sir Anthony Absolute;

"There, Sir Anthony, there sits the deliberate simpleton, who wants to disgrace her family and lavish herself on a fellow not worth a shilling."

But the all in Malaprop's character is that when she is angry with Lydia's love for Ensign Beverley, she herself loves and wants to marry an Irish Baronet Sir Lucius O' Trigger. She carries her love with him in the name of Delia. When Sir Lucius O' Trigger comes to know that his lovely Delia is Mrs. Malaprop, he rejects her offer of love and marriage saying;

"You, Delia-Pho! Pho! be easy."

He then asks Bob Acres to marry her But Bob Acres also refuses to marry her. At this stage, Sir Anthony Absolute cuts a joke with her saying;

"Come, Mrs Malaprop, don't be cast down-you are bloom yet." Replying to him sharply she says, "Oh, Sir Antony-men are all barbarous."

This episode of love between Malaprop and Sir Lucius expresses her hypocrisy and hypocritical character in that what she disapproved in Lydia's case. She appears in her own case. But the most important trait of her character is to pass as a lady of fashion and culture in the aristocratic society of London and Bath. She gives herself airs of an educated lady of a socially high, elegant and accomplished lady. So, she is famous for her "niece derangement of epitaph." In Julia's light and satirical comment upon Mrs. Malaprop, she is a lady "with her select words so ingeniously misapplied without being mispronounced." To take a few examples of her words which she misapplies without mispronouncing them some of refer to illiterate for obliterate, progeny for boarding, reprehend for comprehend, local language oracular for vernacular epitaphs. This becomes more evident in the following speech of Malaprop to Captain Absolute as she says to him;

"There, Sir, an attack upon my language, what do you think of that? an aspersion upon my parts of speech! sure I reprehend anything in this world, it is the use of my oracular tongue, and a nice derangement of epitaphs."

Mrs. Malaprop's style of speaking , of misapplying words without mispronouncing them, has given birth to a new figure of speech in English called Malapropism.

Commenting upon this aspect of Mrs. Malaprop's character, Robert Herring says;

"Sheridan perhaps overdid this trick of misusing word, and certainly Mrs. Malaprop has received to much attention because of it, but it may be noticed that many of her mistakes, such as her choice of the words, 'locality', 'oracular', and 'malevolence' result is a dramatic irony that is wholly amusing."

Clearly, Mrs Malaprop is an inimitable comic figure. She is the provincial woman desperately trying to live up to the smartness of Bath, and be not too far behind London at the same time. Her vulgarity stands out against the century refinement of Sir Anthony Absolute.

However, she has examples in other female characters in English comedies. Mrs. Malaprop is closely allied to Goldsmith's Mrs. Hardcastle, in She Stoops To Conquer to Fielding's, Mrs. Slipston and several other characters.

Thus Mrs. Malaprop's character is lively, comical and delightful. Much of the comic effect, mirth and gaiety will disappear if Mrs. Malaprop is not there in the drama.

So, speaking about Sheridan's art of characterisation, a critic rightly observes;

"The great strength of The rivals is that its characters are admirably contrasted and varied, that the plot is skillfully managed and that the verbal felicities are many and delightful."

A. J. Wyatt and A. S. Collins also observe;

"The main qualities of the play are intellectual; its excellence lies in the amusing situation, the speaking witness, the lively reproduction of contemporary life, the clear, natural but somewhat superficial characterisation."