RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN (1751-1816)

RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN, third son of Thomas and Frances Sheridan, was born in Dublin on the 30th of October, 1751. There is a story, discredited by Mr. Fraser Rae, that Mrs. Sheridan on placing her sons with their first schoolmaster, Samuel Whyte, said that she had been the only instructor of her children hitherto, and that they would exercise the schoolmaster in the quality of patience, "for two such impenetrable dunces she had never met with." One of the children thus humorously described was Richard Brinsley, then aged seven. At the age of eleven he was sent to Harrow school. Sheridan was extremely popular at school, winning somehow, Dr. Parr confesses, "the esteem and even admiration of all his schoolfellows"; and he acquired, according to the same authority, more learning than he is usually given credit for. He left Harrow at the age of seventeen, and was placed under the care of a tutor. He was also trained by his father in daily elocution, and put through a course of English reading. He had fencing and riding lessons at Angelo's.

The removal of the family to Bath in 1770-1771 led to an acquaintance with the daughters of the composer Thomas Linley. The eldest daughter, Elizabeth Ann (b. 1754), a girl of sixteen, the prima donna of her father's concerts, was exceedingly beautiful, and had many suitors, among them Sheridan, N.B. Halhed and a certain Major Mathews. To protect her from this man's persecutions, Sheridan, who seems to have acted at first only as a confidential friend, carried out the romantic plan of escorting Miss Linley, in March 1772, to a nunnery in France. Sheridan returned and fought two duels with Mathews, which made a considerable sensation at the time. The pair had gone through a ceremony of marriage in the course of their flight, but Sheridan kept the marriage secret, and was sternly denied access to Miss Linley by her father, who did not consider him an eligible suitor. Sheridan was sent to Waltham Abbey, in Essex, to continue his studies, especially in mathematics. He was entered at the Middle Temple on the 6th of April 1773, and a week later he was openly married to Miss Linley.

His daring start in life after this happy marriage showed a confidence in his genius which was justified by its success. Although he had no income, and no capital beyond a few thousand pounds brought by his wife, he took a house in Orchard Street, Portman Square, furnished it "in the most costly style," and proceeded to return on something like an equal footing the hospitalities of the fashionable world. His first comedy, The Rivals, was produced at Covent Garden on 17th January, 1775. It is said to have been not so favourably received on its first night, owing to its length and to the bad playing of the part of Sir Lucius O'Trigger. But the defects were remedied before the second performance, which was deferred to the 28th of the month, and the piece at once took that place on the stage which it has never lost.

His last years were harassed by debt and disappointment. He sat in parliament for Westminster in 1806-1807.