ABSTRACT

GENDER, GENRE, AND GOSSIP IN BURNEY’S
THE WITLINGS AND SHERIDAN’S
THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL

This thesis focuses on a comparison between Richard Sheridan’s *The School for Scandal* and Frances Burney’s unpublished play *The Witlings* to reveal how female satire writers such as Burney were marginalized in London society. Sheridan, because of his position in society as a male, was not limited in his success because he was able to publish and direct his play *The School for Scandal* without encountering the same barriers as Burney. The considerable differences in these playwrights’ access to the theater world can be revealed in an analysis of gender and genre in their plays. Additionally, a comparison of gossip, reveals that Burney and Sheridan used satire throughout *The School for Scandal* and *The Witlings*, with the hope of ridding London of its scandalmongers. Burney wanted to expose London of gossipmongers to show that the literati elite were snobs among London society. Sheridan had a satirical perspective on gossip to reveal that the refined women lowered their own status through spreading gossip throughout London.

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GENDER, GENRE, AND GOSSIP IN BURNEY’S
THE WITLINGS AND SHERIDAN’S
THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL

by

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APPROVED

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For Rosemary
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The plays *The School for Scandal* by Richard Sheridan and *The Witlings* by Frances Burney were written three years apart; *The School for Scandal* was performed on May 7th, 1777, and Burney began working on her comedy a year or so later, completing it by 1780. The plays were very similar in terms of style and plot but they were received very differently. Sheridan’s *The School for Scandal* was a hit in the London theater world but Burney was never able to get *The Witlings* performed in a live theater. This thesis compares and contrasts the two contemporary pieces of eighteenth-century literature.

Both Richard Sheridan’s *The School for Scandal* and Frances Burney’s *The Witlings* are satire. Both writers used the vehicle of satire to create social commentary on the aristocratic and literary salon groups of the 1770s. This social commentary was important because it skillfully exposed the flaws of upper-class men and women and lowered the aristocrats to the status of common people in the eyes of the residents of London. Burney used her ability as a writer to expose Londoners’ foibles in order to gain a sense of power because as a woman she was marginalized by the males in English society. Burney also used her writing abilities to transcend her position as a female in her patriarchal society, since this was the only realm that she could control. Sheridan, however, was able to use his writing abilities to ridicule the aristocracy without worrying about the same repercussions because he was a male in an upper class position in London who owned a theater. These comparisons among Sheridan and Burney reveal that gender heavily influenced one’s position among London society.
Influence of Gender

In the eighteenth century, being a woman with an interest outside the home, such as writing plays, was difficult. Elin Diamond, in her article “Gestus and Signature in Aphra Behn’s *The Rover,*” observed that women of that day were “market[ed]... in marriage and prostitution” (519). Diamond pointed out that women in Behn’s time—almost a century before Burney—“through marriage had evident exchange value; that is, the virgin became a commodity not only for her use-value but…for her portion, which, through exchange, generated capital” (524). The expectation was that women would devote their lives to the “domestic sphere.” Their “place” in that sphere gave them “influence and control over husbands, children, and, to an extent, fathers” (Straub 7), but their behavior was “under the social and economic power of men” (Straub 7). Females faced problems if they wanted to do anything other than fulfill the social roles expected of them.

If what she wanted was to write plays, she encountered additional problems. Throughout the eighteenth century, male playwrights were seen as the norm in well known theaters such as Drury Lane and Covent Garden. Women who engaged in the activity of writing plays were deemed unladylike. They were “sexualized, circulated and denied a subject position in the theater hierarchy” (Diamond 535). Ellen Donkin described how women in Burney’s time were viewed in the theater world in her book *Getting Into the Act: Women Playwrights in London 1776-1829.* She noted that writing plays was viewed differently from writing novels. Playwrights were in positions of “immediate physical contact with a host of people and tangible objects connected to the… production” (2). Therefore, many men worried that if women became playwrights they would be “exposed…to wicked company” (Donkin 3).
In addition to facing scorn for becoming playwrights, women had problems getting the plays they wrote performed because the theater “was...overwhelmingly controlled by males” (Diamond 536). Donkin observed that in “Drury Lane, Covent Garden, and the Haymarket, all the managers were white, male, and middle class” (3). If females got the manuscripts of their plays noticed by these managers, the only reason was that “being female tended to mark them as a curiosity” (Donkin 6).

Thus, Burney faced a challenge in being a female playwright. She first had to defy society’s expectations of her as a woman by being recognized as a writer who could earn a living through some means other than marriage or prostitution. Burney was able to gain authority as a writer in England with her novel *Evelina*, which was praised by well known authors such as Samuel Johnson and Hester Thrale. Even though she had this affirmation, Burney still feared she would be chastised by her family and the public for writing a novel because women at this time were simply not supposed to produce literary works. She was hesitant to tell her father about it because she had written it in secret and was somewhat ashamed of having written a work of fiction (Spencer 96). So she wrote *Evelina* as an anonymous author, arranging for one of her brothers and a cousin to have it published. She was following the lead of female authors before her. Most works from women writers from the 1660s to the 1680s were “either presented anonymously, in hope of being taken for a man’s, or its female authorship was emphasized with apologies” (Spencer 29).

Nevertheless by the 1760s “women’s talent was more generally acknowledged” (Spencer 95) although still not well received. Jane Spencer, in her book *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen*, noted that *Evelina* was met not as much with disapproval as with disdain: “Critics
(mostly male) presented themselves as upholders of cultural standards, bewailing the popularity of a low (and they believed, female) amusement of fiction” (4).

Most eighteenth-century women who wrote novels did so in the hopes of making money from them (Spencer 7). Burney eventually proved that women could make money through their writing when she “built a home for her and her penniless husband on the proceeds of Camilla [one of her later novels]” (Spencer 7). Writing plays, however, was a different matter. Women who wrote novels were viewed as less scandalous than those who wrote plays because writing novels could “take place in relative peace and privacy” (Donkin 2). This explains why Burney worried in one of her letters to Samuel Crisp that her authorship of the play The Witlings might reflect negatively on her reputation. She told him, “I would rather a thousand times risk my ridicule as a Writer, rather than risk censure as a Female” (Burney, Known Scribbler 170).

Frances Burney also worried that she would be criticized if satire was seen in her play. In her world, women writing satire was fraught with negative associations. However, she had a role model of a female satirist in Aphra Behn; Behn was known for writing satiric plays and not caring what her English audiences thought about them. Behn received negative responses to satiric elements in her play The Rover. Burney, although not wanting to risk the same criticisms for The Witlings, did include elements of satire throughout Evelina as she made fun of both male and female figures.

As a male contemporary of Burney, Richard Sheridan was able to get away with satire and mockery in his plays. Sheridan’s ridicule of the aristocracy was dramatized in The School for Scandal. Of course, Sheridan had the added benefit of being partial owner of the Drury Lane Theater. He was able to have his play published and performed because he got approval from the theater’s guardian, who
approved all plays before their performances. Burney’s letters show that she received advice from Sheridan that she should write a comedic play.

When *The Witlings* was finished, however, both Samuel Crisp and Burney’s father, Charles, criticized the play, saying it should not be performed because it mocked the Bluestockings. Additionally, Charles Burney and Samuel Crisp had both written plays that received negative reviews from their London audiences. These men worried that Frances Burney would receive an unenthusiastic response from London critics and peers if her play was performed in Drury Lane Theater.

But Sheridan’s *The School for Scandal* was well received by critics and audiences. Even with Sheridan’s notoriety, he struggled in writing this play because he had to combine two plays, one about the Teazles and one about the Slanderers. Furthermore, he wanted to instill restoration moirés within the play so that it harkened back to the plays of Congreve while at the same time criticizing the sentimental values of the 1770s. Acceptance of the performances was probably helped by the fact that Sheridan cast the famous actors Frances Abington, John Palmer, and Thomas King.

**Genre**

Both Sheridan and Burney combined elements of three literary genres: comedy, satire, and wit. Sheridan’s comedy fit the definition from Dryden. Dryden viewed comedy as a form of communication. Harmon et al.’s *A Handbook to Literature* defines comedy as literature that “provokes smiles and laughter” (109). *The School for Scandal* contains elements of various types of comedy including laughing comedy, sentimental comedy, and the comedy of manners. Additionally, satire is a genre evident in *The School for Scandal*. The
play can be seen as a satirical comedy since it encourages engaging in virtuous activities and ridicules those who engage in bad behavior.

Another genre also prevalent in Sheridan’s comedic play is wit. Congreve, in his essay “Concerning Humor in Comedy,” tried to define “wit.” He believed that “wit is often mistaken for humor” (474), and he described wit as a characteristic that is “either to be born with us or of natural growth” (476). Steele considered “wit” an attribute of “the people that are more dreadful” (482). Congreve did not think that wit could be associated with female behavior; he believed that only men should be involved with comedic productions. Addison also associated wit with men that “makes us laugh...by betraying some oddness or infirmity in his own character or in the representation of what he makes of others” (*The Spectator*, No. 47 485).

The problem with these views is that they associate humor and wit only with men. Therefore, they do not allow women to create their own comedy. Frances Burney, however, did create comedy. In *Evelina* and *The Witlings*, she set up her own definitions of comedy, satire, and wit. For Burney, the comedic moments came when characters interrupt one another. Burney used satire when characters made fun of one another. She used wit in both of these works to show that a character had in-depth knowledge of another character.

As a vehicle for satire, both Sheridan and Burney employed gossip throughout *The School for Scandal* and *The Witlings*. The female protagonists in both plays, Sheridan’s Lady Sneerwell and Burney’s Lady Smatter, engaged in gossip. Their hypocritical actions were meant to satirize the hypocrisy of London society which was ironic given that *The London* and *Town and Country* magazines were exposing the scandals of London. In *The School for Scandal*, Sheridan explicitly aired the aristocrats’ scandalous secrets to make the people of London
wonder if they should let the upper-class people get away with their affairs. At the same time, Burney exposed patrons of the arts by mocking their book clubs and their habit of quoting from literature. She exposed their idiosyncrasies so that the common people of London would learn from their errors.

Burney used Lady Smatter to mock the literati; critics believe this character was inspired by Mrs. Montagu. Elizabeth Montagu had a complicated relationship with Burney that involved gossip. The two women had heard different rumors about each other. Mrs. Montagu initially did not want to interact with Burney, considering her not to be a person of consequence. However, as soon as she found out that Burney had written *Evelina*, she wanted to be involved in her literary future. Even though Burney admired Mrs. Montagu, she was hesitant to become involved with her. Burney had heard that Montagu used people to raise her status and from a conversation the two had, Burney was unsure if Montagu had actually read her novel. Also, she had heard from others that Montagu was indifferent to a woman with talent. These rumors may have been the reason that Burney was hesitant to become close with Elizabeth Montagu. This is the evidence critics cite to suggest that Montagu might have been Lady Smatter. If she was, Burney might have been biting the hand that fed her when she decided to mock the head of the literati that supported her and her father in their writing of plays, novels, and poetry.

Burney faced difficulties other than the lack of endorsement from people who might support her. Her greatest challenge was one with which Sheridan did not have to wrestle: she was a woman trying to be a playwright in a male dominated world. Not only was her gender a problem in becoming recognized as a playwright, but it was also an issue in the type of play she wanted to write. In the eighteenth century, writing satire was considered appropriate for men but not
women. Nevertheless, in *The Witlings*, Burney, like Sheridan, used satire to expose the follies of the upper middle class in London. Through the tool of satire, both authors hoped that common people would learn better behavior from the mistakes of the aristocrats who were mocked on stage.
CHAPTER 2: EFFECTS OF GENDER ON PRODUCTION OF 
THE WITLINGS

Before and throughout the eighteenth century authors were typically male. Males were accepted as playwrights; Britain had a long tradition of male authors such as Dryden, Congreve, and Pope. One of the most successful male authors in the 1770s was Richard Brinsely Sheridan. Sheridan wrote and produced a number of plays: The Critic, The Duenna, Pizarro, St. Patrick’s Day, The School for Scandal, and The Rivals. Prior to writing his own plays, Sheridan had been a lyric poet. His poems such as “Dry Be That Tear” and “Hymen and Hirco” had been published in The Bath Chronicle. In addition to writing and producing his own works, Sheridan was part owner of the Drury Lane Theater from 1778 to 1780. Sheridan, together with Thomas Linley and Dr. James Ford, bought the theater from David Garrick (Morwood, Sheridan 81). In 1779, Sheridan began to get involved in English politics when “he launched a publication called The Englishman” in which he criticized the Whig Lord North’s administration (Morwood, Life and Works 108). In 1780 he was elected to Parliament representing Stafford, and he remained in that position for over twenty years (Morwood, Life and Works 109).

During his active theatrical and political life, Sheridan was married to a Miss Elizabeth Linley. Elizabeth Linley was a famous singer in the 1770s, and she had many suitors who wanted her hand in marriage. Sheridan’s father was a preacher who did not approve of the match because he thought music would cause his son to socialize with people he would rather the young man avoid (Morwood, Life and Works 20). Sheridan, however, ran off with Elizabeth after she broke off her engagement with an “old man named Walter Long” (Morwood, Life and Works 21).
Even though Sheridan took great pains to win over Elizabeth as his own, he was not faithful to her; he had many affairs. One of Sheridan’s affairs was with an aristocrat named Mrs. Crewe. Elizabeth knew of her husband’s affair, but she tried to remain a good friend of Mrs. Crewe. At the end of 1790, Sheridan had an affair with the Lady Duncannon, who was the sister of the Duchess of Devonshire (Morwood, *Life and Works* 174). He became so involved with the duchess that he would have got a divorce had not the duke persuaded him against it (Morwood, *Life and Works* 174). Sheridan’s many affairs revealed he had the freedom to pursue women other than his wife while married. Although Sheridan did not exhibit the best behavior with regards to women, he advanced far in the political and literary realms.

Sheridan’s writing was influenced by the literature of Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift. Pope and Swift used the vehicle of satire frequently to criticize upper-middle-class women. Pope used satire in his poem “Epistle to a Lady: Of the Characters of Women,” which was published in 1743. In the poem, Pope described the toiletries of an upper-middle-class woman getting ready to go out on the London scene. He noted how “All eyes might see the change that arose/All eyes might see the pimple on her nose” (35-36). Pope depicted a woman sitting in front of her mirror worrying that there might be a blemish on her nose. He was making reference to an actual woman named Calista, describing her as someone who was nice but was very self-conscious about her looks.

Pope’s perception was that what most aristocratic women cared most about their looks; he showed this perception with Calista’s concern about a blemish on her face. Pope made his view clearer in the first couplet: “Nothing so true as what you once let fall/Most women have no character at all” (1-2). Pope believed that some women in the upper class cared only about themselves. He was not the only
author expressing this perspective of aristocratic women. Swift was just as harsh in his perspective of women. In his poem “The Furniture in a Woman’s Mind,” published in 1727, Swift satirized the fact that a woman “Can in her female clubs dispute, /what linen best the silk will suit,/what colors each complexion match,/and where with art to place a patch” (29-32). Swift suggested that the main occupations of an aristocratic woman were shopping, determining the fashion of the eighteenth century, and discussing how art should be placed within the home.

In addition to stereotyping women in this way in their poems, Pope and Swift placed them purely in the private perspective of the home. The poets also suggested to their readers that all women cared about were their own needs, even though this was not the case. These male authors were greatly mistaken as the roles and duties of a woman of their day were based on her class and what her family expected of her. These influences in English culture denied women’s roles a positive perspective, since they were not encouraged to be writers. Women aspiring to become writers had to overcome many obstacles to make a place for themselves in a mainly male literary world.

**Eighteenth Century Perceptions of Women**

Women in the late 1600s had limited options; they could be “in the market of marriage or prostitution” (Diamond 519). Women were viewed as commodities rather than having worth as individuals. Most women were “marketed” in marriage with the best dowry the fathers could offer the groom; others were forced due to unsavory circumstances to sell themselves sexually. A woman was only of value if she was a virgin. According to Diamond in her article “Gestus and Signature in Aphra Behn’s *The Rover*,” a virgin was viewed as a “commodity…through her use-value as breeder of the legal heir of her portion,
which through exchange generated capital” (524). A virgin was a valued commodity during this time because the groom knew that his bride had not been sullied before the wedding night.

Catharine Gallagher, in her book *Nobody’s Story*, supported the notion that a woman was viewed as a commodity, suggesting that women’s “presumed genital lack and their secondary ontological status to men overlaps with their conceptual disembodiment that all commodities achieve at the moment of exchange” (xv). Gallagher’s argument was that because a woman could be bought and sold she had value only as the males surrounding her—such as her fathers, brothers, and potential suitors—assigned it. This lack of power is what made women struggle to gain any value in English society.

One obstacle to women achieving value in the male-dominated world of the eighteenth century was the Marriage Act of 1753. This legislation deprived a woman of any value and social status she might have if she had a child and her lover left her; she was considered a whore and her child a bastard (Bannett 240). The intention of the Marriage Act was to encourage men to sleep only with women who would marry them and have their children (Bannett 240). The legislation was enacted, oddly enough, with the hope that married men and women would have many children and increase the population of England. The effect of the law was to enforce the status quo, reaffirming the widely held view that the woman’s place was in the home. Moreover, the law restricted a woman’s sexual activities to her husband. It took from women their sexual rights as human beings whether they were married or not.

If a woman was able to find a husband and get married, she still faced many problems. Kristina Straub, in her book *Divided Fictions: Fanny Burney and Feminine Strategy*, discussed the status of women in the eighteenth century in
relation to space. Women were bound within the private sphere, “granted influence over husbands, children and to an extent fathers” (Straub 7). This life of taking care of her family was very limiting for a woman; she was unable to express herself or talk about her needs and wants in life. However, women stayed in their marriages, whether they were fulfilling or not, because they felt a sense of duty towards their husbands (Straub 11). If a woman was not married she was a spinster and worried about being “ostracize[d] and ridicule[d]” (Straub 11) and unable to provide for herself. For this reason, most women felt forced to marry. If they did not marry, they had no way to provide for themselves. No matter what decision a woman made, she faced criticism for her decisions and behaviors. Even if her actions were noble and met with approval or even praise, a woman’s social status was determined predominately by her class in English society. Her status in life determined how much power she would have to make decisions about her own life.

In the eighteenth century, a woman’s caste mattered because it determined her access to education and whether she would be able to help in running the family household. Straub noted that “upper middle class women managed their husbands’ own money and participated in the business committee as heads or co-heads of the households” (16). Straub observed that if women were rich enough, they could have influence outside the private sphere; they could be involved in their husbands’ business and they could maintain the family budget (Straub 16). Middle-class women in England during the eighteenth century, on the other hand, did not have as many options as aristocrats. A middle-class woman was expected to “to take part in family affairs” and “be a provider of her family’s income” (Straub 16-18). These women had to find ways to make money for their families at
a time when English society dictated that the only proper role for a woman in England was that of wife.

A woman’s role became more problematic when she did not have a tutor to teach her how to read and write and she had to teach herself. This was the case for most women in the eighteenth century, and their only outlets for writing were journals and letters. However, even with these limitations, Sarah Prescott, in *Women, Authorship and Literary Culture, 1690-1740*, noted that the number of women writers “increased at around 50 percent every decade after the 1760’s” (9). These statistics are significant because it shows that women in the late eighteenth century were in the process of becoming the new consumers and writers of literary novels.

**Women Writers**

With new consumers came new works. From the 1770s to the 1790s the number of publications increased a dramatic 64 percent (Gallagher 219). Women began writing as well as reading, and judging “from the rate of increase at which women began publishing in these decades, the expanding market was receptive to female authors and all forms of belles’ letters” (Gallagher 219). Women were beginning to assume a relevant role in the literary marketplace, and their opinions were starting to matter to the English literary public. However, although women’s works were becoming more accepted, the type of writing considered appropriate for women was still limited and controlled by men.

The only public outlet most women were allowed was letter writing. Dale Spender, in the introduction of her book *Mothers of the Novel: 100 Good Women Writers Before Jane Austen*, observed that women were “permitted the ‘indulgence’” of writing letters “and were even permitted to excel at it” (4). For
women, writing letters or journal accounts enabled them to finally express their own thoughts in a public forum. In another book, Spender noted that letter writing was the only socially approved form of writing in which a woman could create “a friend or confidante” (Spender, Living 5). Some of the novels of the eighteenth century were epistolary novels—series of letters written in such a way as to form a narrative. Some women wrote this type of novel because they were familiar and comfortable with writing letters, having done so since they were little girls because it was the “one sort of writing women were supposed to do well” (Spender, Living 4, qtd. in Perry 68).

Spender noted since women were unable to go to coffee houses and “such places on the grounds that their content was inappropriate for females, women probably comprised very few of the writers to the editor” (Spender, Living 4). However, the aspect of female letter writing opened the door to more women writing their own novels about topics of interest to them “such as their own position…relationships…love and marriage…ideas, politics, and reality” (Spender, Mothers 16). In print, women could discuss the issues that arose in their everyday lives such as “whether a woman should marry for love or money, whether she should follow the dictates of her heart or elect to provide security for her mother or brother” (Spender, Mothers 18). Their writing exposed eighteenth-century England to the view that a woman had many facets and should not be compartmentalized to the roles of daughter, wife, and sister. Additionally, writing let women express their thoughts about current events and gave them a voice in the literary world. But women writers did not always know what they wanted out of life, and they wondered if their writing would pay enough to help provide for their families. One woman who wrestled with her aspirations and what she could do to help her family was Frances Burney.
Frances Burney, Author

Burney faced many trials in trying to become an author in a predominately male literary world. Because of the difficulties, she decided to publish her first novel, *Evelina*, anonymously. She bristled against the marginalization of women writers, referring to herself in her journal as “Nobody” (Gallagher 210). At one point she asked the journal, “Must a female be made Nobody? Ah! My dear, what were the world good for, were Nobody a female?” (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. I* 2). Burney’s journal entries reflect the belief, common at the time, that a woman’s position is of no value. Because of this widely accepted view, Burney believed that her thoughts and beliefs were not worth anything to anybody, not even herself.

But for Burney, keeping a journal was a means to “not [write] for them, but for me” (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. I* 21). Burney’s journal writing complicated her identity as she thought her position as a woman to be valueless but believed she had important things to say, at least to herself. She wrote to vindicate events that were going on in her life that she believed were worth reporting.

Still, Burney seems to be hesitant that her words had any value since she did not even want her father, the famous author Charles Burney, to learn that she had written a novel. She wrote of Hester Thrale in a July 7, 1778, journal entry, “But though we were some Time together, and though she was so very civil, she did not hint at my Book; and I love her much more than ever for her delicacy in avoiding a subject which she could not but see would greatly embarrass me” (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. III* 88). Burney worried that her father would be disappointed that she had written an epistolary novel. She also feared he might not be interested in the subject matter in the novel *Evelina*, given that the focus was an adolescent woman’s entrance into the cultural mores of London life. She might
also have felt overshadowed because Charles Burney was known for great literary works such as *An Essay Towards a History of Comets* (1769), *The Present State of Music in France and Italy* (1771), *The Present State of Music in Germany, the Netherlands and United Provinces* (1773), *A General History of Music* (1776-1789), and the *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Abate Metastasio* (1796). She did not know if she could compare with her father, who already had two books published by the time she published *Evelina*.

Burney’s personal and public fears prevented her from revealing to her father that she had written the novel *Evelina*. She revealed indirectly that she wanted the approval of her father when she had her main protagonist, Evelina, seek approval from her guardian, Mr. Villars, concerning decisions she made in London. Like Evelina with this father figure, Burney wanted to make her own father proud of the decisions she had made in her life.

Gallagher noted that both “Evelina and her creator…[were] thematically linked to their fathers’ power to ‘own’ or ‘disown’ them” (211). For both Burney and Evelina, their existence could be justified only by the claims that their fathers had on them. Evelina’s existence was validated by her guardian, Mr. Villars, from whom she sought advice as a father figure throughout the novel. Also Evelina’s biological father was able to give her an existence in London, validating their relationship by acknowledging that she was his daughter. This theme is significant because most women of the eighteenth century depended on their father’s ability to procure their dowries and thus determine their worth to a suitor. The Marriage Act of 1753 had given fathers “greater control over the extensive provisions for inheritance” (Anderson 48). Heads of the households determined how much inheritance a daughter would receive when moving from her father’s house to her husband’s. Even if Burney accepted the prevalent view that her value should be
determined by her father, Hester Thrale believed Burney’s talent gave her value as a person.

Hester Thrale made the convincing point to Burney—and Burney recorded it in her journal—that *Evelina* “has success [such] that if you don’t own [your work] somebody else will” (Burney, *Known Scribbler* 157). Thrale was concerned that if Burney did not admit authorship of the great novel that she had written, someone else would claim credit for her hard work. However, Burney’s hesitation in letting it be known that she was the author of *Evelina* suggests that she knew she was in a precarious position if she tried openly to become a writer. She may have believed that even though women writers were becoming more accepted, there were still plenty of critics in England who disapproved of female authors.

When the truth became known, writing *Evelina* enabled Burney to defy critics’ perceptions; the work raised her family’s social status and introduced her to members of the Streatham Circle such as Hester Thrale, Elizabeth Montagu, and Samuel Johnson. With this introduction to the Streatham Circle, Burney received a compliment from Johnson; he told her that because of her novel *Evelina*, “Richardson would have been really afraid of her;--there is merit in *Evelina* that has not been borne” (Burney, *Journals and Letters* 97). Johnson also believed that “there is nothing so delicately finished in all of Henry Fielding’s Works as in *Evelina*” (Burney, *Journals and Letters* 97). These authors were great literary men of the 1740s and 50s, so he paid Burney a high compliment.

Johnson was himself a figure in the literary world who was known for a variety of accomplishments: writing a dictionary, composing the periodicals *The Rambler* and *The Idler*, contributing to *The Birmingham Journal*, penning his own poetry such as “London” and “The Vanity of Human Wishes,” and compiling an edition of Shakespeare’s complete works. He was a prolific writer who was well
known in elite literary circles such as the Streatham Circle and the Literary Club. The high praise he gave Burney suggested to his contemporaries that women had promise in the literary world as novel writers, and it gave Burney confidence in her next endeavor, The Witlings. Nevertheless, even with this success Burney gained through her popular novel Evelina, she faced trouble a couple years later in trying to write and produce her play The Witlings.

Frances Burney, Playwright

Burney had a myriad of hurdles in getting her play performed in Drury Lane or Covent Garden Theaters in London. Ellen Donkin noted in her book Getting Into the Act: Women Playwrights in London: 1776-1829 that only one quarter of women who wrote plays were able to have them produced between 1775 and 1800 (3). Most women in the 1770s were “sexualized, criminalized, and denied a subject position in the theater hierarchy” (Donkin 2). Women faced scrutiny because the “theater was somehow a more ‘public’ form of writing, that… exposed women (actresses and playwrights alike) to wicked company, … a women’s reputation was at risk on contact” (Donkin 2).

But eighteenth-century women faced contradictory perspectives in conduct books from authors such as Thomas Gisbourne. In his conduct book, Gisbourne wrote that “the sphere of domestic life, and the sphere in which female exertion is chiefly occupied” is the area in which “female excellence is best displayed” (Donkin 13 qtd. in Gisbourne An Enquiry 2). Women who tried to become playwrights in the eighteenth century were pushing boundaries. These women faced problems in convincing managers to read the manuscripts of their plays.

Women had to deal with the harsh reality that most theater managers were “male, white, and middle class” (Donkin 3). These theater managers made major
decisions such as what plays would be read and approved to be edited and produced for the big stage. Since men were mainly the ones making these big decisions, a bias towards male authors was strong, and theater managers viewed female playwrights as curiosities (Donkin 6). If a woman got as far as obtaining the manager’s approval, her “script was submitted to the censorship of the Lord Chamberlain’s office” (Donkin 5). Plays had to be sent to the Lord Chamberlain’s office due to the Licensing Act of 1737, which was an attempt to eliminate any “plays that make any reference to social struggle” (Donkin 5).

After going through all the official procedure to get a play read and produced, women also had to have an in-depth knowledge of “production and stage mechanics” (Donkin 6). This knowledge was necessary because in 1660 moveable scenery was introduced on the public stage (Donkin 6). The only way the craft of the theater could be learned was through being an actress, or by “watch[ing] a great number of plays or be[ing] carefully edited by a manager willing to take the time” (Donkin 6). Donkin observed that a woman had to either have access to the theater or a theater manager to gain the experience about theater production, scenery, and cues necessary to become a playwright.

Burney had to deal with some of these hurdles when getting *The Witlings* produced, but due to the popularity of *Evelina* she had encouragement from Richard Sheridan and Hester Thrale to write a comedy. Sheridan told Burney in a conversation, “I think and say she should write a Comedy” (Burney, *Known Scribbler* 173). He even agreed that he would view this comedy “sight unseen” (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. I* 111). Thrale had different reasons for encouraging Burney to write a comedy. She knew the stage was “certainly the highroad to riches and Fame” (Burney, *Known Scribbler* 176). Also she thought Burney
should write this comedy while she still enjoyed “great politeness” from Mr. Sheridan (Burney, *Known Scribbler* 176).

Sheridan agreed that he would accept the play unseen. He wanted to use Burney for his own personal gain with the end of “enhancing his management profile at Drury Lane” (Donkin 14). But Burney faced problems from other males prominent in her life such as Charles Burney and Samuel Crisp, often referred to as her two daddies. After reading *The Witlings* they advised her, for reasons of their own interests, that she should not produce the play.

Charles Burney explains in a letter to Frances Burney that “only for the stage I would have you very Careful & very perfect—that is so far as your own Efforts & the best advice can make you. In a Novel there is no danger” (Burney, *Known Scribbler* 188). Charles made the argument that it would be less risky for Burney to write novels than plays. He implied that writing a novel was what he thought would be best for her. However, earlier in the letter he mentioned that “the plot [of *The Witlings*] had best be kept secret, from everybody. As to finishing another upon a new story, in a hurry, for next winter” (Burney, *Known Scribbler* 187). Charles tried to placate Burney by telling her to write a new play next winter with the hope that she would not go through with sending her play to be seen and read by the London public in its current state.

Charles Burney wanted the information about *The Witlings* manuscript not to be leaked because he feared his own reputation would be at stake if the play were published or performed in Drury Lane Theater. Charles also worried about the backlash he would face from Elizabeth Montagu if she discovered that she was satirically portrayed as Lady Smatter in *The Witlings*. In fact, Dr. Burney was “persuaded by Crisp to forbid its production, probably out of the fear that it would offend the bluestockings” (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. 1* 127). The Bluestockings
were members of a literary salon group that consisted “exclusively of women”: Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Vesey, Hester Capone, and Catherine Talbot (Haslett 9). The Bluestockings “read and discussed each other’s writings prior to their publication, and often when they were not published at all” (Haslett 52). Mrs. Montagu ran this group most of the time, but Vesey was also known for her parties to which she invited Lord Leyton, Samuel Johnson, and Horace Walpole because she was able to “check the tendencies of boredom, distraction and staring which characterized companies which sat in a complete circle” (Haslett 40–41). Vesey’s parties reveal that Montagu knew plenty of powerful people who could destroy Dr. Burney’s reputation. Dr. Burney did not want to alienate her because she was one of the chief supporters of his writing.

Additionally, Elizabeth Montagu was viewed as “queen of the Bluestockings,” and Charles Burney feared that if his daughter’s play received a negative response from Montagu, her entire family could become social outcasts within the Streatham Circle (Gallagher 229). Charles Burney’s social status had become directly related to his daughter’s. Furthermore, if Frances Burney were to have social significance in the Streatham Circle, she could threaten her father’s and Samuel Crisp’s reputations. The Streatham Circle consisted of well known men such as Joshua Reynolds, Charles Burney, Samuel Crisp, Samuel Johnson, and many others who socialized at Hester Thrale’s Streatham house. Charles Burney was a prominent member of this group, and he worried that these men might have a negative effect on the ego of his daughter. Frances Burney was able to gain access to this group because her father and Hester Thrale introduced her to other members. His daughter’s growing involvement in this club caused Charles Burney to worry that he would look bad in front of this elite group of literary authors and aristocrats.
Samuel Crisp had a similar worry, and with the advent of print, he also worried that he could be lampooned by Elizabeth Montagu in the various periodicals such as *The London Magazine* and *Gentleman’s Magazine*. Samuel Crisp sent Burney a letter in 1779 to explain why he thought she should not continue with efforts for the production of *The Witlings*. The first part of his argument seemed gallant: “I will never allow You to sacrifice a Grain of female delicacy for all the Wit of Congreve and Vanbrugh” (Burney, *Known Scribbler* 177). Crisp suggested that Burney might no longer be viewed as ladylike if she proceeded with the production of *The Witlings* and she would therefore seem less attractive to future suitors.

Crisp was also worried about Mrs. Montagu, who had mentioned to him, “If Miss Burney does write a Play I beg I may know of it, & if she thinks proper see it” (Burney, *Known Scribbler* 177). He was concerned that Mrs. Montagu would figure out that she was the inspiration for Lady Smatter in *The Witlings*. If Mrs. Montagu identified herself as Lady Smatter, she might alienate Charles Burney and Samuel Crisp within her elite social circle because of their association with Frances Burney. Crisp suggested to Frances Burney that she make many changes to her play. He argued that her plot did not “appear interesting enough to seize and keep hold of the attention and eager expectations of the generality of the Audience” (Burney, *Known Scribbler* 191). He pointed out that “Cecilia’s loss and new unexpected restoration of her fortune, is not a new Incident by any means” (Burney, *Known Scribbler* 191). Burney was unable to test Crisp’s theory because she never saw an audience’s reaction to her play as a whole.

Burney was unable to view the dress rehearsal of *The Witlings* because of a “propriety that forbade her fraternization with theater performers and therefore from participation in the collaborative process of the play’s production” (Burney,
Known Scribbler 27). Burney was able to get only far enough in the “summer of 1779 [to have *The Witlings*] ...read aloud by assembled family and friends” (Donkin 140). She was not able to attend this reading of her play; instead she received a letter from her sister about her father’s and Samuel Crisp’s reaction to *The Witlings*.

In addition to receiving negative criticism about her play, Burney also faced struggles because most of her written work was satirical in nature. Throughout the eighteenth century a woman satirist was not common. The only noted female satire writer in the late seventeenth century was Aphra Behn who was noted for her satirical play *The Rover*. According to Adam Beach, in his article “Politics, Satire, and National Spectacle in Behn’s *The Rover*,” Behn was satirizing “the Cavalier sexuality in the safe critical space provided for the carnival” (3). He believed she also satirized the Stuarts “in the venerable tradition of the court jester” (5). Behn was a royalist and was indifferent to Charles II’s rule over England in the 1670s, which was why she satirized the Stuarts. In Behn’s story, the protagonists Hellena and Florinda go to a carnival. The “Cavalier sexuality” was also seen through characters such as Wilmore, who sleeps with the prostitute Angelica and tries to seduce Florinda (Beach 3).

Behn received negative responses as a writer because she used satire in *The Rover* and because she openly admitted that she wrote to support “rather than express herself” (Rogers 5). Also, whenever she was attacked verbally for being a writer, “she defended herself with vigorous counter attacks” (Rogers 1). Behn became a major contender as a playwright among major London theaters, competing against men. Behn wrote numerous plays in her lifetime and defended herself again the English public when necessary.
Burney, however, had a hard time trying to assert herself in the male literary world; she would have to contend with issues similar to those Behn faced when making a name for herself. She may not have wanted to follow in Behn’s footsteps as a writer, considering these women spent their whole lives downplaying their writing abilities or defending themselves to male English writers and critics.

Burney was not worried just about the negative feedback she would receive from *The Witlings* as a work of satire. She was concerned that the English public would realize that there was satire in *Evelina* and would change their opinion of the novel.

Burney was a satirist as she wrote *Evelina* because she wrote as “one who attacks his or her satiric objects” (Kinservik 21). Frank Palmeri noted that Burney’s first novel, *Evelina*, had “strong and prominent use of satiric elements” (228). Throughout *Evelina* Burney mocked people in London who were in various stations in life by posing “questions about the social world [that] draw attention to its emptiness and vanity” (Palmeri 228). Evelina questions her own “social world” when she notices that the milliners in London are mostly men and “that they seem to understand every part of a women’s dress better than we do ourselves; and they recommended caps and ribbands with an air of importance” (Burney, *Evelina* 119). Burney was making a mockery of the selling techniques of the milliners and of their ability to know so much about the products they sold to women. She seemed to think that men should not have knowledge of those products.

Another example in *Evelina* in which gender roles are satirized occurs when Mrs. Selwyn tells Lord Merton to let go of her hand. She says, “You don’t consider that the better Miss Anville looks, the more striking is the contrast with your Lordship; therefore, for your own sake, I would advise you not to hold her”
By being open and honest to Mr. Morton, Mrs. Selwyn acts contrary to her gender role since women stereotypically are not expected to question a man’s behavior. She questions his behavior and indirectly threatens that she will do something if he does not let go of Evelina’s hand. This was not seen as ladylike behavior from an eighteenth-century perspective. Burney, knowing this, satirizes Selwyn, who is engaging in what would be seen as typical male behavior, by being honest and subtle with a violent undertone towards Mr. Morton.

The male characters Mr. Morton and Lovell agree that Mrs. Selwyn is not engaging in ladylike behavior when Lovell comments, “’Pon honour, that lady,—if she was not a lady—I should be tempted to observe—that there is something—in such severity—that is rather, I must say, rather—oddish” (Burney, *Evelina* 504). Mr. Lovel’s commentary reveals that Mrs. Selwyn is not engaging in ladylike behavior when she is upfront and confronts the men when there is a problem. However, whether Burney meant this or not, Lovell is going against his own gender role when he engages in the behavior of gossip. He maintains this behavior by talking to Mrs. Selwyn behind her back. In the actions of Lovell, Selwyn, and the milliners, Burney satirized her characters by having them act in ways that were contrary to their accepted gender roles. The men act effeminate and gossip, whereas the women act honestly and are bossy to the men. Burney may have been playing with these gender roles to show that women were just as capable as men of engaging in masculine roles, be it through being honest or trying to become writers or playwrights in what was deemed a field fit only for men. Burney tried to push the gender role boundaries by including satire in her novel *Evelina*.

Frances Burney demonstrated through *Evelina* that women were able to be writers of satire. However, since this accomplishment in the 1770s, women have
received very little notice for being satirists. Very little research has been done on the female satire writers of the eighteenth century. Claudia Kairoff, in her chapter “Gendering Satire: Behn to Burney” observed that Burney “in The Witlings…exercised true stagecraft in the satirical use of secondary characters to a degree unequalled until Charles Dickens” (290). Kairoff demonstrated scholarly interest in the satire written by women such as Burney, but the subject needs further investigation and analysis so current readers understand how the satirical written works of writers such as Burney constituted social commentary about English culture in the 1770s.

Summary

In contrast to the fact that female writers did not receive many accolades for their written work, male writers such as Richard Sheridan were known for having satire throughout their plays. Richard Sheridan, because he was a man, was able to earn a reputation as a playwright, an owner of Drury Lane Theater, and a member of Parliament. He was influenced by other male satiric writers such as Pope and Swift, who made fun of various classes of women in their poetry. Burney, on the other hand, had a hard time establishing a career outside the home. Women in the eighteenth century were expected to marry, work in less prestigious jobs, or even become prostitutes. Most women chose to marry although some, such as Burney, tried to become writers. Becoming anything other than a wife or prostitute was difficult because a woman’s class determined her access to education. Many women had to either have a tutor’s help or, as in the case of Burney, teach themselves to read and write. It was acceptable for women who learned to read and write to become novelists of romance, epistolary, and other types of novels. However, for a woman to become a playwright was not seen as positive because
men thought that women playwrights would be exposed to bad behavior in the theater.

Even with these perceptions and beliefs about woman writers in the eighteenth century, Frances Burney still decided to write *The Witlings*. But she faced problems from her father figures, Samuel Crisp and Charles Burney, who disapproved of the play because they did not want to offend Mrs. Montagu. Burney, rather than standing up for herself and her gender, decided to concede and not have *The Witlings* published or performed in a London theater.

In addition to the fact that Burney’s two father figures were terrified that Mrs. Montagu might destroy their reputations, other factors were involved in the failure to have *The Witlings* performed. These are discussed in chapter 3 along with the people who encouraged Burney to write *The Witlings* and their reasons for doing so. In contrast, Richard Sheridan was able to get his plays both published and performed. The only production issues he had to deal with were combining plots and overcoming writer’s block so that he could complete his plays in time for them to be performed at the peak of the London theater season. The contrasting production schedules of *The Witlings* and *The School for Scandal* reveal how gender affects what a playwright could accomplish in the competitive London theater world of the eighteenth century. Burney was never able to view a completed version of her play or see it produced at Drury Lane Theater due to the marginalization of women in London. Sheridan, however, was able to have his play be produced and in turn, it became a big hit in the London theater world.
CHAPTER 3: THE PRODUCTION OF BURNEY’S *THE WITLINGS* AND SHERIDAN’S *THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL*

In the eighteenth century in Britain, composing a play was not an easy task. The playwright had to be known by a theater manager or his play had to stand out among the many manuscripts sent to the playhouse. If the play was accepted by the theater manager, the author would have to get approval for it from the Lord Chamberlin’s office. To gain approval, a manuscript “had to be in the hand of the examiner at least two weeks before the proposed date of production” (Hogan clxxx). However, Charles Hogan noted that most pieces “never reached the Lord Chamberlin’s office until a week or less before the opening night” (clxx).

Also, the number of theaters to which playwrights in the eighteenth century could submit their manuscripts was small. They included Drury Lane and Covent Garden Theater, as well as the Haymarket Theater until 1777. The Licensing Act, passed in 1737, allowed only these theaters to put on plays. Furthermore, the number of plays was limited to “a different play every six nights of the week” (Hogan xx). The Drury Lane Theater was “in every respect a beautiful spectacle—acting, singing, orchestra, scenery” (Hasselhoff 142, qtd. in Hogan xliii). Hogan speculated that the size of the auditorium of the Drury Lane Theater must have been massive to hold such large events.

If a manuscript was approved, the author was responsible for the production of the play. This meant the playwright had to hire cast members, get a team to build scenery, and edit out any space problems for actors in the play while on stage. Managers had to be very picky about the plays performed as copyrights stipulated that “no production should be removed from one stage to the other till it has been performed for two years” (Hogan cxli). But audiences expected
Drury Lane and Covent Garden Theaters to offer certain stock plays. After the stock plays were performed, new plays were usually performed days after they had been rehearsed, so the playwright could rewrite scenes after receiving “the first night’s reaction from the audience” (Hogan clii). Playwrights had time constraints for how long their plays could last, usually about three and one half hours (Hogan lxxxiviii).

Playwrights faced many roadblocks to getting their plays produced and noticed. The difficulties were more pronounced for women because in the eighteenth century male and female playwrights were regarded differently. It was more socially acceptable for male playwrights to produce plays than for female playwrights. This is evident as we explore the arduous process Frances Burney went through in her efforts to see The Witlings performed.

Frances Burney had difficulty as a woman playwright figuring out what her play was going to be about, discussing her play with fellow authors, and ultimately producing the play. Burney described the whole process of production of The Witlings in her journals and letters. Burney’s journals exposed her personal thoughts about those around her and told her readers how she really felt. Burney’s letters revealed her personal feelings towards close family members and friends such as Susanna Burney, Samuel Crisp, and Charles Burney. The letters tell how she felt about writing a comedy, the support she received, and her sense of betrayal by her two “daddies,” Charles Burney and Samuel Crisp. Additionally, in her journals she recorded many of the conversations she had with Joshua Reynolds, Samuel Crisp, Richard Sheridan, Arthur Murphy, and Hester Thrale. These conversations indicate whether the people she spoke with were using Burney for their own personal agendas or genuinely cared if she succeeded at being a playwright in the London theater world. The journals and letters reveal
many influences on the author, but Burney’s personal history also impacted her decision to write *The Witlings*.

**Burney’s Decision to Write *The Witlings***

As a child, Burney had a love of theater; she was able to view plays from David Garrick’s private box at Drury Lane Theater (Harman 31). As a teenager, she and her siblings were involved in “amateur theatrical productions” (Harman 67). Burney was terrified about acting in these productions as she had terrible stage fright. Harman noted that when Burney had to speak in front of an audience, “[she] was terrified… [and said], ‘I really cannot’” (Harman 68, qtd. in Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. II* 239). Nevertheless, Burney had experience watching and helping with theater productions, even if she did not act in them. Harman felt that Burney had been captivated by the world of the theater since she was a little girl, suggesting that *Evelina* “had aspects of sentimental comedy which would have transferred very nicely onto the stage of Drury Lane” (100).

Burney’s interest in comic writing may have begun in her teenage years, used as a “release valve…when she was never allowed to utter a harsh word in public” (Harman 55). In fact, some scholars believe she began work on *The Witlings* in the winter of 1778, prior to her discussions with other authors and close friends about writing a comedy. If this is true, it “suggests that she had given the project serious thought for a long time” (Harman 131). If Burney started writing *The Witlings* this early, she may have not needed much encouragement to write a comedy. But the support from Crisp and others probably gave Burney confidence to follow through with the writing of her comedy *The Witlings*.

In Burney’s first letter from Samuel Crisp, on January 7, 1779, Crisp “urged concerning the salt & spirit of gay, unrestrained freedoms in Comedies,
carries conviction along with it—a conviction which I feel in trembling! should I ever venture into that walk publicly” (Burney, Known Scribbler 169-70). While excited at the thought of writing a comedy for the theater, Burney was concerned that if the play was not received well, her reputation would be ruined. The experience of past female playwrights such as Hannah Cowley and Elizabeth Ichbald told her that women who wrote comedies could expect enthusiastic responses from the English public. Even though these women writers had met with success, Burney feared that her comedy would be “fairly slept off the stage” (Burney, Known Scribbler 170). Burney appeared to be worried that people would be bored by a comedy she might produce for a London theater.

Encouragement of Richard Sheridan

Despite these worries, Burney was able to get support for writing a play from Richard Sheridan. Before she mentioned her desire to write a play, Sheridan asked her if she “intend[ed] to throw away her pen” (Burney, Known Scribbler 171). Sheridan was probing to find out if she planned to continue her work as an author. She was surprised that Sheridan had read Evelina and that he was supportive of her career as a writer. In her shock over Sheridan’s praise, Burney warned him, “You should take care, Sir, what you say—for you may not know what weight it might have” (Burney, Known Scribbler 171). Burney was letting him know that his words affected her because she admired Sheridan and did not want to disappoint him by engaging in actions that would displease him. Burney idolized Sheridan as he was part of the literary club, and she was surprised that someone of his social status would even deign to visit her at her house. The literary club consisted mainly of male authors such as Samuel Johnson, Oliver Goldsmith, Bishop Percy, Richard Sheridan, James Boswell, and David Garrick
This literary club lasted thirty years from 1764 to 1794 and grew from nine members to thirty-five (Haslett 12-13).

Not only had Sheridan read *Evelina*, but he professed that he “holds it superior to Fielding [’s work]” (Burney, *Known Scribbler* 172). The words of such a well known figure in the literary world meant a lot to Burney, who had just published her first novel. Sheridan knew the weight of his words, but he had encouraged Burney to write a comedy only because of the hope that her comedy would improve his and Drury Lane’s reputation. Sheridan realized that Burney “would have [been] a very attractive box office prospect for any of the theaters. His interest in her was undoubtedly and understandably to enhance his management profile at Drury Lane” (Donkin 145). It was for this reason that Sheridan was so insistent that Burney write a play for his theater. He knew he would gain both status and fortune by producing Burney’s play at Drury Lane.

**Support of Joshua Reynolds**

In his attempt to get Burney to write a comedy, Sheridan enlisted the aid of Joshua Reynolds, telling him, “I think & say she [Burney] should write a Comedy” (Burney, *Known Scribbler* 173). Sir Joshua Reynolds agreed, responding, “I am sure I think so & I hope she will” (Burney, *Known Scribbler* 173). Joshua Reynolds was known for his “significant achievements as a portrait painter” (Rogers 2). Reynolds was a close family friend who lived near the Burney’s residence (Hemlow 55). He was one of the “Streathamites,” a group that included Garrick, Murphy, William Seward, and James Boswell (Harman 109). These authors were called “Streathamites” because they socialized at Hester Thrale’s house in Streatham. Reynolds knew Frances Burney because he was a friend of her father; he had been in Charles Burney’s company for “a year and a
half by the time *Evelina* was published” (Harman 109). Reynolds was one of the progressive males of the eighteenth century “who was capable of taking women more seriously in a way than many of the club could never manage” (Rogers 3). Burney’s status was raised by her connections with these two impressive men in elite literary circles. Also this support increased the likelihood that her play would be read and produced in Sheridan’s Drury Lane Theater.

Burney had a relationship with Joshua Reynolds because he was a colleague of her father’s and they had known each other since Burney was a little girl. He convinced Burney to write a play when he told her, “You already had all the applause and fame you can have given in the Clozet,—but the acclamation of the Theater will be new to you” (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. I* 110). Reynolds believed since Burney had succeeded in conquering the writing of a novel, she should have no problem in writing a play. Burney worried that “there may be noise—but it will just be the reverse” if her play were to be performed at a London theater (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. I* 110). Reynolds and Sheridan reassured Burney that she had “certainly something of a knack at Characters” (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. I* 110).

Reynolds was inclined to compliment Burney because of a conversation he had with Samuel Johnson. Reynolds stated, “If he ‘was’ conscious of himself of any trick, or any affectation, there is Nobody he should so much fear as this little Burney” (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. I* 185). Reynolds supported Burney because he did not want to wind up as one of the characters she mocked in her play. Reynolds also assisted her because he had read *Evelina* and knew that what she wrote could translate to the theater. Reynolds wanted a friend he could show off to others. In one of Burney’s journals, she wrote that Reynolds told her, “Give me leave, Miss Burney, to introduce Dr. Warton to you” (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. I* 110).
Vol. III 236). He asked Dr. Warton to give his opinion of Evelina. Burney noted that Reynolds seemed “eager to procure Homage from all the world” (Burney, Early Journals, Vol. III 236). She thought he was showing her off with the hope of raising his own social status among the literary elite.

Whether he meant to do so or not, Sir Joshua teamed up with Richard Sheridan to convince Burney to make this idea of her writing a play a reality. He told Sheridan that “[he] would take anything of hers, would you not?—…sight unseen?” (Burney, Early Journals, Vol. I 111). Sheridan replied, “Yes….My best thanks into the Bargain” (Burney, Early Journals, Vol. I 111). By pushing the issue of Burney writing a play, Burney gave Sheridan an opening for the Drury Lane Theater to produce it. Sheridan did not want any competitor to try to produce Burney’s play in another theater. Burney accepted this agreement because it was rare for a play to be accepted before it was completed.

Even with the attention Frances Burney received from Sheridan and Reynolds, she was not the first female playwright; she had examples in Hannah Cowley and Elizabeth Inchbald, who were playwrights from the 1740s to the 1790s. Elizabeth Inchbald was able to become a playwright because she was an actress before becoming an author. Patricia Sigl noted that for Inchbald “writing plays was her steady and lucrative business” (1). Inchbald was well known for translating French plays for use in the Haymarket Theater (Sigl 4). Dale Spender, an Australian feminist critic and literary theorist who wrote many works about eighteenth century feminism (Mothers of the Novel, Writing a New World, and The Diary of Elizabeth Pepys) theorized that Inchbald wanted to be a successful playwright because she was independent and believed that “a woman could be content and not married” (Spender, Living 211). Hannah Cowley received a place as a playwright because she had David Garrick as her mentor. She “wrote thirteen
plays—two of them tragedies but her reputation rests on her comedies” (Gagen 2).

As the lives of these two women authors of the eighteenth century illustrate, it was not impossible for a woman to become a playwright for the Covent Garden or Drury Lane Theater. These women, through mentorship or through their own hard work, became famous female playwrights in London in the eighteenth century.

Because of her connections with Sheridan and others, Burney didn’t have to worry about her work being read among the many plays that were sent to London theater managers on a weekly basis (Donkin 4). By writing *Evelina*, Burney had become a powerful female in the literary world, gaining access to powerful men such as Richard Sheridan and Joshua Reynolds.

**Influence of Hester Thrale**

Burney was also encouraged by Hester Thrale, who told her, “You should bring some of your Work with you; Sheridan really has behaved with great politeness; pity to let it cool I think & Mr. Johnson says so too. The stage is certainly the high road to Riches and Fame” (Burney, *Known Scribbler* 176).

Hester Thrale was a powerful female supporter for Burney’s play because she was known for her own literary works, *Letters To and From the Late Samuel Johnson* and *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson*. Thrale was Burney’s only female supporter; she knew the struggles of being a female writer. Even Thrale’s husband was “unresponsive to her literary efforts” (Brownley 2). She must have understood how Burney felt as she sought approval from the men in her life. Thrale encouraged Burney to work on *The Witlings* so that she could finish it and show it to her famous supporters Samuel Johnson and Richard Sheridan. Also, Thrale herself knew that a female could make money from the theater. Like Sheridan,
Thrale knew that if *The Witlings* was performed in a theater, it could make Burney popular among the literary elite.

Also like Sheridan, Hester Thrale had her own personal reason for wanting Burney to become famous: Thrale wanted to introduce Burney to Mrs. Montagu “to promote her as a protégé against Mrs. Montagu’s Hannah Moore” (Harman 132). Thrale wanted to “puff up” *Evelina* by publicizing the fact that Edmund Burke, the famous politician, had stayed up all night to read it (Harman 132). Thrale was essentially using Burney to because she wanted to exalt her reputation among the Bluestockings, hoping that by complimenting her she might make Burney “swell with vanity, pride, or self importance” (“Puff” 7). Another part of her agenda was either “to marry her [Burney] off well or to persuade her to write for the stage” (Harman 130). Thrale asked “at every opportunity ‘Have you begun your comedy’ [while] promising to ensure success” (Harman 131). Thrale thought that through Burney’s success in the theater her social status would be raised by association alone.

**Influence of Arthur Murphy**

Another person who gave encouragement and help in the writing of *The Witlings* was Arthur Murphy. Murphy knew Burney through her father, Charles Burney, a fellow member of the “Streathamities” (Harman 109). Murphy was also a friend of Hester Thrale, so he knew her through Thrale also. Murphy, like Sheridan, was a playwright, “one of the most popular comic dramatists of the second half of eighteenth century” (Bode 3). In addition to writing plays for Covent Garden and Drury Lane Theater, he was also an actor and a writer for the newspapers *The Test* and *The Chronicle*. Murphy’s support was significant as he
had written successful plays and knew what a London audience might expect from a comedy.

Burney asked Murphy to evaluate her comedy: “If I should make such an attempt—would you be so good to allow me...to put it in the Coach for you to look over as you go to Town?” (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. I* 179). Burney asked Murphy for advice because she had known of his work in the theater and thought he would be an excellent source as a playwright to make her comedy good. This was confirmed by Johnson, who in a conversation with Burney suggested that she consult Murphy because “he knows the stage for I am ignorant of it” (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. I* 180). Johnson knew that Murphy had experience as a playwright and must have dealt with the technical aspects of the theater when writing and producing his many plays. In addition to gaining from Murphy’s expertise in theatrical production, Burney was also able to obtain his assistance in writing her play *The Witlings*.

Murphy might have helped Burney just so he could boast that he had helped with her comedic play. In a June 1, 1779, journal entry he is cited as telling Burney, “Dr. Delap, too, heard how I discovered you” (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. III* 287). This is the reason he helped Burney with *The Witlings*. He also knew that if he helped her he could become her confidante for future plays. Murphy apparently changed his mind, as in later letters Burney wrote “that [she] neither see[s] nor hear[s] from Dr. Murphy” (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. III* 324). The fact that Murphy left Burney in the lurch implies that he was using her to raise his own social status and once that was achieved, he could leave her, no questions asked. The last time he saw her he had not learned that Crisp and her father wanted to stop the production of *The Witlings*. He asked if he could “read the rest of [her] play” (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. III* 454). Burney replied, “I shall bring
it with me to Town and hide it” (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. III* 454). Murphy showed his true motives as he wanted to be known as the man who launched Burney’s career as a playwright by helping her write and edit *The Witlings*.

**Support from Samuel Crisp**

In addition to professional support, Burney received personal literary support from one of her father figures, Samuel Crisp. Burney had received a letter from her sister, Susanna Burney, on August 3, 1779, detailing Samuel Crisp’s response to *The Witlings*. Susanna was the only person to whom Frances showed “her precious writings” (Harman 45). As a teenager Burney wrote “journal-letters” to her sister (Harman 55). She was very honest with her about her opinions of others when she read a poem by John Bampfylde called “Worley.” One section of the poem states, “Will you metre a Council engage an Attorney/ or gain approbation from dear little Burney?” (Harman 129). These lines seem to imply that Burney was a tougher opponent than a lawyer. Burney told Susanna this was a “vile poem” and “she couldn’t eat or sleep for a week” because of “vehemence and vexation” (Harman 129). Therefore Susanna was comfortable writing her sister a letter reporting her and other people’s reactions to the reading of Burney’s *The Witlings*. She said she “laughed till...almost black in the face at Codger’s part” (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. III* 183). She thought the “serious part seem’d even to improve upon me by this 2d. hearing & made me cry in 2 or 3 places” (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. III* 184). Susanna Burney had a close relationship with her sister, so she gave her honest opinion of Burney’s *The Witlings*. Susanna was another supporter in addition to Samuel Crisp.

Frances Burney knew Crisp because he was the elder Burney’s “friend and ‘Daddy’” (Doody 70). Frances Burney seems to have gained Crisp as a second
father figure because he was a close friend of her father’s and became one of her own dear friends. When Crisp was “in declining health,” Burney sent him letters from “Dr. Burney, his world and his creatures” (Hemlow 43). He became a “surrogate mother figure who was able to join [Burney and her siblings] in despising their stepmother even in her presence” (Thaddeus 20). Crisp was also fond of Burney, “who returned his affection abundantly” (Harman 41). She revered his opinion as much as her father’s.

Burney was excited when she learned from Susanna that Mr. Crisp appeared to be pleased by “the Dramatis Personae & the name of Codger occasioned him a grin” (Burney, Early Journals, Vol. III 183). Susanna was the one who sent the letter describing Crisp’s reactions because she had been Burney’s confidante when she was writing Evelina. He also thought “it was funny, funny indeed!” and that while the second act was shorter, it had “more Zest” and “the 3rd act was charming” (Burney, Early Journals, Vol. III 183). Susanna also observed that the fourth act “seemed least to exhilarate or interest the audience” (Burney, Early Journals, Vol. III 183).

The support from Sheridan, Reynolds, Crisp, Thrale, and Susanna Burney may have put pressure on Burney to write a really good comedy. She faced total humiliation if these literary figures did not like her play. She also had to keep in mind that her reputation was frail, built only on the popularity of her novel Evelina. Also, as evident from her journals, Burney did not think highly of her own written work, so she may not have been very confident about The Witlings or anything else she wrote unless a close friend or literary figure gave it the stamp of approval. This worry can be seen in one of her diary entries from July 20, 1779:

What process we will make in this learned scheme I know not; but as I have always told you, I am sure I fag more for fear of disgrace than
hope of profit. To devote so much time to acquire something I shall always dread to have known is really unpleasant enough. (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. III* 252)

Burney was not worried about the profit she might gain from her play; she was afraid of the shame she might cause herself and her family if no one liked her comedy and if the time she had devoted to it would be worth it. Even with the many votes of confidence with regards to the writing and producing of her play *The Witlings*, she still had doubts about it being performed in the Drury Lane Theater. The main reason for her worry over public shame was that she desperately wanted approval from her father for a text she wrote.

**Opposition from Charles Burney and Samuel Crisp**

Frances Burney’s dreams of being a playwright and getting the play *The Witlings* produced at Drury Lane Theater by Richard Sheridan were killed quickly when her father, Charles Burney, and Samuel Crisp warned her against producing the comedy. Her father planned “on taking the play to Chessington himself and reading it to Mr. Crisp” (Hemlow 133). Doody theorized that Charles Burney might have taken the play to Chessington because he “had already been feeling uneasy about the piece” (95). This seems very odd, given that Burney wanted Crisp’s comments before her father’s. However, when Charles Burney read *The Witlings* to Crisp, the two men made the decision to tell Burney that it should not be performed. Her response to this censorship from Charles Burney is given in a letter in which she told him: “Down among the Dead men sink the poor Witlings,—for-ever and for-ever, and for-ever!”(Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. I* 127).

Burney was saddened at the loss, especially since her father had a positive response “after a reading at Chessington [but] he was persuaded by Crisp to forbid
its production, probably out of the fear that it would offend the bluestockings” (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. I* 127). As mentioned previously, Charles Burney was worried about how his own social status would be affected if *The Witlings* was performed at the Drury Lane Theater. Harman made the cogent point that “Dr. Burney heartily loathed the idea of ever offending the powerful, even in the slightest degree. Mocking the Braghton’s was one thing; alienating Mrs. Montagu was another” (Harman 93).

Throughout *Evelina*, Burney’s character Evelina mocked her relatives known as the Braghtons. The Braghtons were portrayed in *Evelina* as working class, uncivilized, and uncultured. In one scene in *Evelina*, Evelina mocks the Braghtons for not having good manners during supper and for getting in and out of their seats whenever anybody sat up or down. Charles Burney had no problem with his daughter satirizing the Braghtons, but not Mrs. Montagu because he feared being socially isolated and publicly humiliated by Elizabeth Montagu. Also the elder Burney needed Montagu’s patronage for his own writing career. His response was complicated by the fact that it was rumored that Charles Burney had mixed feelings toward the queen of the Bluestockings, Elizabeth Montagu, as he wanted her support but was personally not a fan of hers. Hemlow corroborated the point that Dr. Burney was not fond of Mrs. Montagu but did not want to engage in hardy combat with her “and so withdrew [the] ewe lamb from the fray”(137). Dr. Burney even told Frances Burney, “I am glad all the objections fall on the Bluestocking-Club-party—as my chief and only quarrel was with its members” (Burney, *Known Scribbler* 187).

The elder Burney had another reason for discouraging Frances’s attempt to produce a play. He had written music for “Garrick’s Midsummer Night’s dream in 1763…and the piece had failed completely, having an obstreperous audience
during its one night and terrible reviews” (Doody 97). Charles Burney did not want his daughter to experience the failure that he had when getting involved in the world of theater.

Charles Burney was not the only one worried about social alienation if *The Witlings* made it to the theater; so was Samuel Crisp. Crisp had been supportive of Burney writing a play, and he immensely enjoyed reading *The Witlings*. Crisp was initially supportive of Burney as a playwright because he did not know who or what the play was about until Charles Burney read it to him and many others on August 2, 1779. Crisp changed his mind, withdrawing his support because, as discussed previously, he disapproved of its “depiction of the *Blues* [stockings]” (Harman 138). He thought that rather than making a satire of the Bluestockings, Burney should be able to compose a “Comedy without descending to the invidious & cruel practice of pointing out individual characters & holding them to public Ridicule” (Harman 138, qtd. in Burney, *Early Journals*, Vol. III 335). He was ashamed that Burney was mocking the personal characteristics of the head Bluestocking, Elizabeth Montagu and did not think that she should be subjected to ridicule.

Crisp must have known, as a father figure to Burney, how much his negative response would affect her. Burney responded to Crisp with sarcasm and mockery, telling him, “As soon as I have read myself into the forgetfulness of the *Dramatis Persona*—at least I should produce something else as Witless as the last” (Burney, *Known Scribbler* 185). She implied that *The Witlings* was good and he shouldn’t have tried to stop its production. In addition to being mad at Crisp, she also mocked him because in a prior letter he had said he loved the characters that had been chosen for the play.
In addition to his negative assessment of *The Witlings*, Crisp gave an excuse as to why Burney should not produce her comedic play. He suggested *The Witlings* “resemblance to Moliere’s *Femmes Scavantes* & consequent immense inferiority” (Burney, *Known Scribbler* 186). Burney told Crisp that “she had never read *Femmes Savantes* and couldn’t even spell it correctly” (Harman 138).

Moliere was a famous playwright, director, and actor from the 1620s to 1670s. Moliere wrote his plays for the masses in the genres of tragedy, farce, and comedy. His play *Les Femmes Savantes* was “performed and published in 1672” (Zanger 24). This satiric play is about “a mother, a sister, and one of her daughters” who “think they are learned… [when] they are not” (Zanger 24).

Although Crisp could make the accusation that Burney copied Moliere because they both mocked learned bourgeoisies women, Burney’s play focused on learned women in literary groups who were not related. Burney spoke the truth, even though the plot lines of the two plays were similar; and Moliere had characters similar to Lady Smatter and Lady Sapient who were mocked by the serious Censor. Crisp was just making excuses because he was afraid of backlash if *The Witlings* was performed and if Mrs. Montagu watched it at the Drury Lane Theater.

Burney was deeply hurt that a man she thought was one of the biggest supporters of her writing would say such things to her. She sent two angry responses to Mr. Crisp. In a letter sent August 3, 1779, she told him he did not “have…a Grain of Taste in your whole composition” (Burney, *Known Scribbler* 187). Burney was insulted that Crisp would say he loved *The Witlings* then strongly advise that she not produce it. Crisp might have changed his mind because he was afraid Burney’s play would be a failure like the play *Virginia* he tried to produce in 1754 (Doody 71).
Six months after her first response, Burney sent Crisp another letter, on January 22, 1780, from London. She told him that Sheridan was begging to see the manuscript of her play, and that due to his counsel she would have to get rid of Smatter, Dabbler, and any references to the Bluestockings as well as change the ending. She said she hoped to let *The Witlings* “Die a quiet Death” (Burney, *Known Scribbler* 189). Perhaps Burney thought to let go of *The Witlings* because one of the important men in her life, Crisp, did not like it. She might have not wanted to disappoint him by trying to produce a play he considered not worthy of being viewed in a London theater. Also she may have figured that if she gave up her dream of being a playwright and of producing *The Witlings*, no one would notice and she could return to her life of quiet obscurity. Burney was unable to return to her quiet life; instead, she tried to convince Crisp through guilt to condone her version of *The Witlings*.

Burney complained of having to rewrite her play for a London audience with the hope of making Mr. Crisp feel bad for what he had said. She told him that due to the necessity of making changes she had “so much more Fear than hope & Anxiety than pleasure in thinking at all of the Theater, that I believe my wisest way will be to shirk—which if by evasive and sneaking means I can, I shall” (Burney, *Known Scribbler* 190). Burney was basically saying she had negative feelings about writing for the theater and would avoid doing so at all costs, since Crisp and Charles Burney wanted her to eliminate the major characters and plot of her play *The Witlings*. She must have thought that Crisp and her father knew how much their opinions about her work meant to her as she appeared desperate for their approval.

However, with Samuel Crisp producing *The Witlings* was also a matter of ego. According to Margaret Doody, Crisp “himself was a failed playwright,
having never fully recovered from the delay in producing his tragedy *Virginia* (1754) nor from its less than mediocre success” (71). Crisp’s issues with Burney’s play had more to do with him than her; he was displacing his own disappointment as a failed playwright onto her. Crisp’s worries prevented *The Witlings* from being performed in a London theater.

Frances Burney failed to overcome the opinions and fears of Samuel Crisp and Charles Burney. Doody made the cogent argument that “it was ironic that a dramatist who took her theme as ‘self dependence’ could not produce her play because her father wouldn’t let her” (91). Burney was too dependent on these two men to decide the fate of her play. She may have tried to fight both of them verbally, but in the end she gave into them and decided to not pursue the production of *The Witlings*. Doody noted that due to “the daddies’ censorship…*The Witlings* has never been produced, nor even published” (98).

**Sheridan and The School for Scandal**

Burney faced censorship in trying to have her play performed; Richard Sheridan faced other difficulties in getting *The School for Scandal* produced at the Drury Lane Theater. Sheridan had some problems with his ownership of the theater as a playwright and a manager. As a playwright he had written and produced *The Rivals, St. Patrick’s Day, The Duenna*, and *A Trip to Scarborough*. After many years as a playwright, Sheridan made a huge investment in buying the patent of the theater with “his father-in-law Thomas Linley and their friend Dr. James Ford” (Auburn, *Sheridan’s Comedies* 81). After this investment he became partial owner of the Drury Lane Theater, acquiring it from David Garrick after he retired in 1776. On September 21, 1776, Sheridan “opened Drury Lane theater as the principal manager” (Sheridan xv). He invested himself wholeheartedly as the
new manager of the Drury Lane Theater by “keeping an eye open for fresh acting
talent, and [he]looked out for new plays as well as presented revivals and revised
versions of the classics” (Morwood, *Life and Works* 63). He knew he had big
shoes to fill, as David Garrick had been a brilliant theater businessman. In his
seasons as a manager, Garrick “garnered an average of more than 266 pounds [per
night]” (Auburn, *Sheridan’s Comedies* 82). Sheridan, however, only “averaged
191 pounds [per night]” (Auburn, *Sheridan’s Comedies* 82).

Sheridan faced difficulties with co-owner Willoughby Lacy; “squabbles
arose early in the first season” (Auburn, *Sheridan’s Comedies* 83). Lacy was
Garrick’s partner at Drury Lane Theater. He had co-owned the theater with
Garrick before Sheridan bought its patent. When Sheridan bought the theater, he
and Lacy both owned the patent.

In owning Drury Lane Theater, Sheridan took a position on the “political
divisions of parliament” (O’Toole 120). He showed loyalty to the Whig party by
buying the theater, so he essentially risked alienating those from the Tory party,
keeping them from coming to his theater. Even with these political difficulties, he
did his best to present “acceptable stage pieces” to the people of London,
providing a helping hand in “every new prelude, main piece, afterpiece, as well as
every redirected or refurbished piece” (Auburn, *Sheridan’s Comedies* 83). Still,
the problems with Lacy interrupted some of Sheridan’s literary activity (Auburn,
*Sheridan’s Comedies* 83).

**Concept**

His costly venture into theater ownership caused Sheridan to work as hard
as possible to put good ideas and concepts into his play *The School for Scandal.*
His first problem was coming up for an idea for the play. The first ideas for his
play were said to have come from one of his mother’s plays and from Foote’s *The Maid of Bath* (Sheridan 288). Fintan O’Toole, in his biography of Sheridan called *A Traitor’s Kiss: The Life of Richard Brinsley Sheridan: 1751-1816*, observed that Sheridan “named the central characters Surface after a family in [his mother’s] comedy, *A Journey to Bath*” (130).

After he gained ideas from these plays, he drafted two works: *The Slanders* and *The Teazles* (Schiller 699). Sheridan combined these two plays to make one cohesive play that would be understood by a London audience. Scholars have many opinions as to how well Sheridan was able to combine these two plays to make one work. Schiller suggested in his article “*The School for Scandal*: The Restoration Unrestored” that “the scandal plot and the Teazle plot never achieved for Sheridan a final intellectual integration. The fact is that the scandal has nothing to do with the outcome of the Teazle problem” (699). Schiller pointed out that the scandal plot involved the characters “Lady Sneerwell, Snake, Mrs. Candour, Sir Benjamin Backbite” and all are “perilously close to being entirely separable from the main action” (699). Schiller noted that the “screen scene is the only real jointure” (699). What Schiller called the “Teazle problem” was the fact that “Lady Teazle was misled in the first place not by gossip but by vanity—the country girl gone giddy with city fopperies” (699). He also observed that the “Teazle problem” focused on a “sentimental domestic conflict” between Lady Teazle and her husband (Schiller 699). The two plots were hard to connect as one focused on the conflict of a couple, and the other focused on the scandalous actions of various characters throughout London.

Jackson expanded on Schiller’s theory of how Sheridan composed his play, wondering if “Sheridan constructed his play around the witty sayings,” suggesting the playwright might be “prepared to ignore flaws of plot in order to preserve
favorite aphorisms intact” (601). Jackson believed Sheridan “manipulated the plot to fit the dialogue” (604). Jackson’s theory was that Sheridan wanted to write a play that fit in with his scandalous dialogue and ignored some of the flaws in his plays because his main goal was to write a witty play. Whether that was the case, Sheridan’s dialogue was what made the play so popular to London audiences.

In addition to using witty dialogue, Sheridan wanted to use *The School for Scandal* to pay homage to restoration comedy. He tried to revive restoration comedy in his play “through his use of the witty pair that contrast neatly in their basic attitudes” with the “older Bawdy pair, maybe debauched or previously married” (Schiller 696-97). According to Schiller, Sheridan used characters from restoration comedies in *The School for Scandal* to try to “recapture the tone of the restoration age” (704). Many people believe that in his desire to bring the restoration age back to life through his play, Sheridan used the play ideas of Moliere and Congreve in *The School for Scandal*. Sheridan’s attempts to revive restoration comedy can be seen years before he wrote *The School for Scandal*. As an owner of Drury Lane Theater, he revived William Congreve’s plays *The Old Bachelor, Love for Love*, and *The Way of the World* (O’Toole 127). He also revived John Vanbrugh’s *The Relapse*, changing the name to *A Trip to Scarborough* (O’Toole 127). Sheridan revived these old comedies as a “criticism to the cult of the sensibility” that could be seen in the 1770s (O’Toole 127). He was trying to mock all the sentiments of the 1770s by showing restoration comedies, and he wanted to end the 1775 theater season with a showing of *The School for Scandal*, but he did not complete the play until 1777.

After Sheridan’s play was completed, some claimed he had stolen some of his ideas for *The School for Scandal* from Moliere. James Morwood made the argument in his article “Sheridan, Moliere and the Idea of *The School for Scandal*”
that even the title “is a tribute to Moliere and [his] school plays, *The School for Women* and *The School for Husbands*” (*Sheridan, Moliere* 81). He pointed out many similarities to Moliere’s *Tartuffe* and *Le Misanthrope* in *The School for Scandal*. Eric Rump, a colleague of Morwood, claimed that Sheridan borrowed concepts from Congreve’s plays in the conception of *The School for Scandal*. Rump believed that Sheridan wanted to “revive the ‘licentious’ plays of Congreve” (59). He also believed that Congreve was “the touchstone by which Sheridan’s indecisively witty treatment of the subject can be justly and properly judged” (Rump 70).

Sheridan employed artistic license when using parts of other authors’ works that he thought would be useful for his own. Sheridan’s ability to borrow from other authors was restricted by the 1710 Act of Anne. Essentially the Act of Anne “prohibited piracy but did not regulate imitations, condensations, adaptations, anthologies, indexes, and similar partial copies” (Stern 69). The Act was further delineated when in “1774 the House of Lords ruled that the Act of Anne limited the term of copyright to 28 years” (Stern 69). This legislation did not prevent authors from using plot points or themes from other authors’ works as long as they did not quote an author’s work as their own. There were “various suits over piracy, but the publications of imitations, anthologies and revisions, and the like processed with very little fear or threat” (Stern 77). Although borrowing from other authors was frowned upon in the eighteenth century, it was a widely accepted practice.

**Timing**

Sheridan imposed upon himself a deadline for finishing the play in order to produce it at Drury Lane Theater. Jordan noted in his book *The Theatrical
Craftsmanship of Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s School for Scandal that Sheridan’s journals and diaries show that “the last act of the play was almost certainly written in haste to meet the production deadline since it has no corrections, the preceding four acts were heavily changed” (7). Sheridan’s hurry was most likely due to the deadline of the Lord Chamberlin’s office; the play had to be done by a certain date in order for it to be produced by his theater. Sheridan had agreed to be licensed by the Lord Chamberlain’s office. This license for The School for Scandal was refused because

Presumably passages in the play about the Annuity Bill (passed in the events four days after the first night) were a clear attack on one Benjamin Hopkins then engaged in a struggle with John Wilkes for the office of Chamberlain for the city of London. (Morwood, The Life and Works 82)

There were rumors about the play that supported the contention that the character “Moses the Jewish money lender…was a satiric portrait of Hopkins” (O’Toole 132). Oddly enough, when Sheridan went to see the Lord Chamberlin about the license, the official approved it, even though he stated, “Theater [is] no fit place for politics” (Morwood, The Life and Works 82). Sheridan convinced the Lord Chamberlin that his play “was a matter of general satire and not of personal obloquy or ridicule” (O’Toole 132, qtd. in Cobbett 441).

Producing The School for Scandal

After Sheridan finished his play, he had to find actors and design the scenery and lighting for the play. As a respected playwright, Sheridan was able to choose well known actors to play his characters in The School for Scandal. Drawing on Christian Deelman's scholarship on the history of casting the play,
Mark Auburn, in his book *Sheridan’s Comedies*, described the casting for *The School for Scandal* as brilliant: “John Palmer in real life ‘as famous for his hypocrisy as for his acting’ as Joseph Surface, Thomas King as Sir Peter, and Frances Abington as Lady Teazle were particularly notable for their performances” (106). Frances Abington was a popular actress who was seen as a “graceful young lady, but was so able to modulate her tones and to articulate her words that she won regular applause” (Auburn, *Theatre in the 26*). She had “gaiety, ease, humour and elegance in her acting” (Auburn, *Theatre in the 26*).

Apparently, women actresses of the eighteenth-century theater had to have lots of verbal and non verbal skills. Abington seemed perfect for the part of Lady Teazle in *The School for Scandal*, who is transformed from a country girl to a city woman.

Another successful role Sheridan cast for *The School for Scandal* was Joseph Palmer as Joseph Surface. Palmer was perfect for this part because apparently many incidents in his real life had given him a reputation for being devious. Furthermore, many reviews of *The School for Scandal* show that Palmer was successful in “his delivery of lines” (Jordan 44).

The next successful role Sheridan was able to cast was Thomas King as Sir Peter Teazle. Sheridan used King to play Peter because he knew that he excelled at playing “the elderly nobleman or knight” (Auburn, *Theatre in the 25*). Sheridan’s securing of elite actors for casting was a big factor in making his play a success. And the actors could simply borrow their costumes from the theater (Auburn, *Theatre in the 13*).

Sheridan had all the resources of the theater at his disposal. His use of simple scenery, brilliant actors, and witty dialogue made the play a success. The play opened in the Drury Lane Theater on May 8, 1777 (Auburn, *Sheridan’s*
Comedies 105). His play “had 45 performances of comedy in [the] 1777-1778 seasons [and] averaged a staggering 255 pounds per night” (Auburn, Sheridan’s Comedies 105).

Summary

Chapter 2 described the many struggles for women playwrights in the eighteenth century. This chapter illustrates that despite the difficulties, women such as Elizabeth Ichbald, Hannah Cowley, and even Frances Burney had some support to become playwrights. Frances Burney received support from Richard Sheridan, Samuel Crisp, Arthur Murphy, and Hester Thrale. These people encouraged her to write The Witlings, although Crisp later advised her against it. Even with this encouragement from authors and friends, Burney was still unable to produce The Witlings. She was dissuaded by Samuel Crisp and her father; who had personal reasons for not wanting to see the play in production.

Richard Sheridan did not face the same difficulties as Burney. He had the advantages of being male, already being recognized and accepted as a playwright, and owning the Drury Lane Theater. His only struggles were coming up with an idea for his play and overcoming writer’s block. Sheridan was able to cast famous actors, had access to scenery and lighting for the stage, and received rave reviews from critics for The School for Scandal. Sheridan’s ease in the theater world reflected that in the eighteenth century men had more access to power as a playwright and director. Burney as a woman, however, was marginalized by her two fathers Crisp and Burney when trying to get her play The Witlings produced at the Drury Lane Theater. She faced further threat of being seen as an insignificant person by Mrs. Montagu if she read the play The Witlings and decided to stop funding her father’s literary projects.
Sheridan, however, did not face the threat of being seen as unimportant when he composed a play that contained various types of comedy, wit, and satire. However, literary scholars have debated the types of comedy, wit, and satire that appear throughout *The School for Scandal*. Sheridan’s play was not the only one that contained elements of these genres; so did Burney’s *The Witlings*. As the next chapter demonstrates, these authors used wit, comedy, and satire differently.
CHAPTER 4: THE USE OF COMEDY, WIT, AND SATIRE IN SHERIDAN’S THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL AND BURNEY’S THE WITLINGS

It is important to know the difference between the genres comedy, wit, and satire; they can be confusing as they are similar to one another. During the 1770s the production of comedies and satires increased. However, before a discussion of the genres in these plays, a description of the basic plots of The School for Scandal and The Witlings is in order.

The Plots

The School for Scandal is about Charles Surface’s love for Maria. The relationship between Charles and Maria is in danger of being destroyed by Charles’s brother Joseph and Lady Sneerwell because Joseph is in love with Maria and Lady Sneerwell is in love with Charles. This story becomes complicated when Lady Teazle begins to show an interest in Joseph Surface. More problems in this comedic play arise as Lady Sneerwell and Snake spread rumors about Lady Teazle, Peter Teazle, Charles, and Maria throughout the play.

Similar problems from constant misunderstandings and rumors occur in Burney’s The Witlings. Burney’s comedic play is about Cecilia’s loss of fortune and her attempt to marry her love, Beaufort. Beaufort’s aunt, Lady Smatter, tries to thwart the romance because Cecilia is no longer a lady of fortune. Lady Smatter’s efforts come to naught as Beaufort’s friend, Censor, is able to undermine Lady Smatter’s plans so that Beaufort and Cecilia can marry.

For both of these plays, scholars have debated what types of comedy, wit, and satire are contained in them. For example, Mark Auburn and Thomas Jordan attempt to ascertain whether The School for Scandal is sentimental comedy, laughing comedy, or both. Burney, however, defined her notions of comedy
through her novel *Evelina*. In both of these comedic plays, satire is used to criticize people’s behavior. Sheridan, unlike Burney, used satire for moral instruction in his comedic play. However, wit is used in both of these plays to show the intelligence of a character. Burney used wit in *The Witlings* to exaggerate a character’s behavior. These differences and similarities in the two plays are discussed in detail in this chapter. The first genre to be considered is comedy.

**Comedy in *The School for Scandal***

As a genre in the eighteenth century, comedy had a place within the theater world. The *Handbook to Literature* has many definitions of comedy. One entry defines comedy as something “striving to provoke smiles and laughter, [using] both wit and humor” (Harmon 109). This definition of comedy fits *The School for Scandal* because by the end of the play Maria can wed Charles, and those who had been spreading rumors throughout the whole play were caught and their bad deeds recognized.

Another definition of comedy that seems applicable to Sheridan’s comedic play is “people in their human state, restrained and often made ridiculous by their limitations, faults, bodily functions, and animal nature” (Harmon 109). This form of comedy is seen in *The School for Scandal* in the “screen scene,” in which it is discovered that Joseph Surface was pursuing Lady Teazle while her husband came to inquire about her. Charles Surface knocks down the screen hiding Lady Teazle and exposes the potential affair.

Richard Bevis noted that “comedies and farces burgeoned unstoppably after 1756: close to two hundred comic pieces of all kinds—three or four times the number of tragedies—were produced in London over forty seasons” (*English Drama* 212). Bevis believed this trend was significant because Sheridan wrote a
comedy at a time in which the genre was very popular in London. Bevis also made
the point that audiences in the eighteenth century “had different wishes and tastes”
(Bevis, English Drama 197). He noted that “sentimental’ comedies had been in
vogue in the 1760’s whereas spectators of the 1770’s were apt to ridicule them”
(Bevis, English Drama 197). Bevis’s observation shows the fickleness of London
audiences but also shows that the trend in their tastes in the 1770s seemed to be
toward comedies.

John Dryden defined “comedy” in his preface to his play An Evening Love.
For Dryden, comedy “consisted of low persons, yet of natural actions and
characters” (467). He believed that “comedy presents us with the imperfections of
human nature” (467). Dryden thought comedies contained “the very soul of the
conversation” (468). The aspects of comedy Dryden described can be seen
throughout Sheridan’s comedic play. For example, one can see the flaws of Joseph
Surface as he tries to hide his own phoniness in Act V scene I: he does not offer to
give his uncle’s poor friend, Stanley, money. Furthermore, Dryden’s view of
comedy as the “soul of the conversation” applies to Sheridan’s play; throughout
the entire play miscommunication occurs and rumors are spread.

Some of the arguments among scholars about the types of comedy within
The School for Scandal stem from the fact that there are sub genres of comedy.
Thomas Jordan categorized The School for Scandal as a “sentimental comedy”
because it “contained two love matches involving the main plot and sub plot, some
form of description or disguise, a misunderstanding about the main character, and
an ending in which the hero married his love and the villains were banished” (29).
By this definition, sentimental comedy occurs throughout The School for Scandal.
There are two couples: Charles Surface and Maria, and Lady and Sir Peter Teazle.
There are disguises: Oliver Surface pretends to be a banker and a poor man to
determine how his nephews truly feel about him. There is a hero—Charles—who marries his love, Maria. The slanderers who gossiped about others—Lady Sneerwell, Candour, and Snake—are looked down upon for their bad behavior.

Characterizing the argument of Arthur Sherbo, Robert Hume distinguished between sentimental and laughing comedy and contended that there were sentimental comic elements in laughing comedies through “an eschewal of humor and the bawdy, repetition and prolongation of certain kinds of scenes, and an emphasis which bring sensibility to the fore” (321). He admitted that while laughing comedies such as *The School for Scandal* have sentimental elements, they are not purely sentimental. Sheridan’s comedic play can be seen to have slander and sexual innuendo, but contain sentimental elements such as when Oliver realizes that Charles cared about him, and Charles loves Maria throughout the play.

Another scholar, Mark Auburn, made the argument that Sheridan’s play is more comedic than sentimental. Auburn wrote three books on eighteenth-century theater and drama and is best known for his work on Richard Sheridan. He did not consider *The School for Scandal* a sentimental comedy. He believed “the eighteenth century, and particularly the Georgian period, is justifiably seen as the time when tears were emphasized in comedy” (Auburn, *Sheridan’s Comedies* 25). Auburn also thought that “the portrayal of comic characters whose faults and foibles are forgiven on the basis of their good hearts does not by itself identify sentimental comedy. Such appeals are so common and prevalent that we hardly notice them in comic works” (*Sheridan’s Comedies* 25). Finally Auburn argued that Sheridan’s comedy was not a sentimental comedy because “the eschewal of bawdry, farce, and improbabilities of farce and characters from common life in favor of an emphasis on the refined, sensitive, dignified and morally uplifting—
does not itself identify ‘sentimental’ comedy or characterize the mass of the late eighteenth century comedy” (Sheridan’s Comedies 25). For Auburn, Sheridan’s play was not a sentimental comedy; rather it had the characteristics of a typical Georgian comedy.

Auburn defined a Georgian comedy as having a plot that was “concerned with distresses of a pair or two lovers. Their plight is the fault of insensitive or venal parents or of villains motivated by obscure crotches or pure evil” (Sheridan’s Comedies 26). Through the actions of a “benevolent person—an uncle, a family member—the obstacles are rather suddenly removed” (Auburn, Sheridan’s Comedies 26). All these elements are present in The School for Scandal. Charles and Maria’s relationship is threatened because Lady Sneerwell is in love with Charles. The threat is removed when others learn about the gossip Lady Sneerwell and others have spread about the Teazles, Maria, and Charles. This is an example of Georgian comedy in Sheridan’s comedic play, but it is not the only type of comedy in The School for Scandal.

Auburn and Jordan drew upon Oliver Goldsmith’s view of the place of laughing and sentimental comedy in the eighteenth century. Goldsmith was an eighteenth-century playwright who wrote The Good Natured Man and She Stoops to Conquer. Goldsmith wrote an essay about sentimental and laughing comedy “in a strangely indirect way to promote his play [She Stoops to Conquer]” (Donoghue 665). Goldsmith had a “sustained engagement with reviewers” and he made an “attempt to influence their opinion of him by instructing them how to judge him” (Donoghue 666). Goldsmith reasoned that telling the critics how to judge him would result in a favorable review for his comedy. Also Goldsmith, like many other authors of the 1770s, was worried about “driving away his audience with too many refined and sentimental episodes” (Donoghue 666). He was able to convince
his reviewers that “laughing comedy” has a place in the English stage by warning that the “old comedy” was threatened “by the French Influence” (Donoghue 679). Goldsmith’s essay influenced the way critics of the 1770s and afterward viewed comedic plays.

Goldsmith characterized laughing comedy as something that “excites our laughter, by ridiculously exhibiting the follies of the lower part of mankind” (79-80). Goldsmith had a different view of sentimental comedy, describing it as a genre in which “the virtues of the private life are exhibited, rather than vices exposed, and the distresses rather than the faults of mankind make our interest in the piece” (80). He thought sentimental comedy was for people who “find delight in weeping at a comedy” (Goldsmith 81). Goldsmith made the distinction between laughing and sentimental comedy whether virtue or vice were shown by its characters and whether it makes the audience laugh or cry.

The problem with trying to compartmentalize the two genres of sentimental comedy and laughing comedy is that both can be seen in *The School for Scandal*. The vices of London society are exposed when Sneerweell, Joseph Surface, Candour, and Snake spread gossip. Charles displays redeeming virtues throughout the play: he loves Maria and his uncle, Oliver Surface. Although both types of comedy are evident in Sheridan’s work, there is social significance in Goldsmith’s distinction between laughing and sentimental comedy; both reflected the tastes of an English audience in the 1770s.

Aside from sentimental or laughing comedy, *The School for Scandal* has elements of what Joseph Addison called false humor. Addison was known for his writings as a playwright, poet, and contributor to the periodicals the *Tatler*, the *Spectator*, and the *Examiner* during the eighteenth century. He discussed the term “false humor” in number 35 of the *Spectator*, published on April 10, 1711. From
Addison’s perspective, *The School for Scandal* can be seen as false humor because it “is apish and…delights in mimickry…ridicules friends and foes indifferently…[and] is ludicrous for the sake of being so” (148). Addison explained that in false humor the “ridicule is always personal and aimed at the vicious [person] or writer” (148). Sheridan’s *School for Scandal* can be labeled as false humor since the Teazles were mocked through the gossip spread by Lady Sneerwell. Also, Sheridan’s comedy ridicules those who gossip and spread gossip, such as Candour, Sneerwell, and Snake. This ridicule was necessary in order for Sheridan to make the point that spreading slander should not be tolerated.

Addison contrasted false comedy with true humor, which he defined as having “good sense, mirth, humour” (147). Sheridan’s play has elements of true humor as well as false comedy: Sir Teazle, out of good humor, is teased for being married to Lady Teazle. Addison’s definitions of true and false humor are very similar to the definitions of satire and comedy. False humor—in which people are ridiculed—is very similar to satire. True humor—having “mirth [and] humor”—is very much like the definition of comedy (Addison 147).

From another perspective, *The School for Scandal* can be seen as a “comedy of manners” because it is a “comedy in which the modes of manners are amusingly presented” (“Comedy of Manners”). In *The School for Scandal*, the manners of the aristocrats of the 1770s are presented in an amusing manner through the characters of Lady Sneerwell and Peter Teazle. Lady Sneerwell, even though a rich widow, still wants to spread gossip about others. Peter Teazle is not happy about his wealth since his young wife constantly spends his money. Furthermore, this play is a “comedy of manners” because it has “the action or quality of being amusing” (“Comedy of Manners”). There are many amusing parts in *The School for Scandal*. In Act III, scene I, Peter Teazle and his wife argue one
moment and later appear to be in love. Another entertaining moment occurs in Act V, when Joseph Surface pretends to be a sentimental man who believes his Uncle Oliver has done nothing for him. However, it is revealed that Oliver had lent him money and Joseph was not grateful for this kind gesture. It is from these parts of *The School for Scandal* that it can be argued that the play is a “comedy of manners.”

The problem with trying to categorize *The School for Scandal* as a specific sub genre of comedy is that it appears to have elements of Georgian comedy, laughing comedy, sentimental comedy, false humor, and comedy of manners. All these sub genres might be necessary because all seem to be present in Sheridan’s play. However, at the same time he was “infected by the prevailing sentimentalism” of the time (Hume 312). Also, during the 1770s there was an increase in the “popularity of … laughing comedies” and “older comedies were doing well” (Hume 337). Sheridan’s purpose in using these various comedies was to appeal to the wide audience in England by combining parts of sentimental comedy of the 1760s with resurgent old and new comedies of the 1770s. Richard W. Bevis, in *The Laughing Tradition*, agreed with this argument: “*The School for Scandal* was basically a laughing comedy but has sentimental elements that are sometimes an interpretative problem, that are often seen as a throwback to the restoration comedy of manners” (221). Bevis believed that the throwback in *The School for Scandal* was necessary for Sheridan to focus on the “two Georgian concerns wit and good nature” (*Laughing* 223). But he noted that although sentimentality is part of Sheridan’s comedy, the play is “not a sentimental comedy” (Bevis, *Laughing* 223). Along with this argument over the types of comedy within *The School for Scandal*, scholars also debate what Sheridan’s purpose was for the comedy in his play.
Robert Hume and Arthur Scouten made the argument that the comedy was supposed to be seen as a “serious moral vehicle” (55). They pointed out that the moral of *The School for Scandal* is that people should not gossip or they will be punished. Similarly, Jack Durant, in his article “The Moral Focus of *The School for Scandal,*” suggested that Sheridan used comedy as a “comic charity sermon” to show that “1) vice is an acquisition of discipline and art [and] 2) virtue asserts itself through direct and spontaneous conduct” (47). The characters of Lady Sneerwell and Snake illustrate vice in Sheridan’s play by spreading gossip. They are able “to proclaim their power to make things happen in the world” (Spacks 141). One example of virtue in this play is Charles Surface’s display of his love for his uncle by not wanting to sell his painting. This action shows that Charles has a moral compass; he is an example of good behavior in contrast to the slanderers. Even with these virtuous characters in this comedic play, there are also elements of satire throughout it.

**Satire in *The School for Scandal***

Satire is also a very prominent genre in *The School for Scandal*. Satire is difficult to define, and scholars have gotten it confused with comedy. Matthew Kinservik noted in his book *Disciplining Satire* that eighteenth-century theater critic Jeremy Collier used the terms “comedy” and “satire” interchangeably” (23). Collier was a priest who was best known for his “pamphlet war concerning the immorality of the English stage” (Boster 1). Collier published *A Further Vindication of the Short View of Profanes and Immorality of the English Stage* in 1698. For Collier, the purpose of a play appeared to “mismark the nature of Good and Evil and confound the Understandings of the Audience” (Kinservik 30, qtd. in Collier 126). Collier tried to censor comedy and satire because he believed that
“satire was the antithesis of virtue” (Kinservik 24). Collier served as a censor of the theater; he could “construe the most innocent passages into blasphemy and immorality where it had never been detected before his analysis” (Kinservik 24). Collier’s reign lasted from 1677 to 1725, but he influenced how theater genres such as comedy and satire were viewed from the 1730s to the 1770s.

Hume and Scouten observed that “Collier in fact had a long term effect on [Theater] repertory offerings” (79). Collier did not see the changes he wanted in the London theater world; not until the 1770s was there a “substantive adaption to change the moral nature of offensive plays” (Hume 502). The critics of the 1760s and 1770s had “the same kinds of criticism [against plays]”as Collier had against Congreve and Vanbrugh (Hume and Scouten 80). Other scholars also entered the debate of how to best define the terms “satire” and “comedy.”

Jack Canfield, in his book *Trickster and Estates*, suggested that satire and comedy could be distinguished by the ending of the play. He reasoned that comedies end in “closure, celebration and centripity” whereas satires “sometimes end in draconian closure or apocalyptic closure but more often in nonclosure” (4). Sheridan’s *The School for Scandal*, from Canfield’s perspective, would be viewed as a comedy as at the end of the play the couples are reunited and the slanderer Sneerwell is scolded for her spreading of gossip. Scholars, such as Matthew Kinservik and John Dryden, disagreed with Canfield about the definitions of comedy and satire within plays.

Kinservik wanted to broaden the definition of satire “to include plays that eschew attack and punishment in favor of sympathy and discipline” (211). Kinservik believed that satire should focus on sympathy and discipline because he has discovered that many satiric plays can include elements of sentimentality. He wanted to regard “‘sentiment’ as a satiric method commonly (almost universally)
employed in eighteenth century comic drama” (Kinservik 211). By Kinservik’s definition, The School for Scandal meets the criteria of a satiric play since it has moments of sentiment, such as when Charles voices his love for Maria. However, even if satire can include sentimentality, many see mocking others as satire’s primary use.

J.A. Cuddon’s Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory had a different definition of the term “satire,” but it was a bit too broad. The dictionary’s term that best describes The School for Scandal is “satirical comedy.” Sheridan’s comedic play is a satirical comedy in that its “purpose is to expose, censure and ridicule the follies, vices and short comings of society and of individuals who represent that society” (Cuddon 785). The School for Scandal fits within this definition of a satirical comedy as much of the play makes fun of aristocratic women like Lady Sneerwell and Lady Candour, who use gossip in order to gain moral superiority in London society.

John Dryden thoroughly discussed satire in his essay “A Discourse Concerning the Origin and Progress of Satire.” In this essay, published in 1693, Dryden described how the Greeks and Romans used satire. For the Romans, satire “decried vice or exposed folly, but for others also… virtue was recommended” (Dryden 67). Exposing folly and recommending virtue are seen throughout Sheridan’s play. In the “screen scene,” Joseph’s attempt to seduce Lady Teazle, who was married, is exposed. At the end, the moral is a recommendation that people be truthful rather than spread lies about one another. Dryden explained the Greek view of satire by showing how Horace used it to “combat our vices, to regulate our passions, to follow nature, to give bounds to our desire” (97). For the Greeks the purpose of satire was to instruct others to behave well. Sheridan’s comedy, while showing the bad behaviors of Lady Sneerwell, Joseph Surface,
Candour, taught the London audience that they shouldn’t talk badly about others. This was taught through the play’s “moral models,” Sir Oliver and Charles, who do not speak of any rumors throughout the play (Spacks 145).

Sheridan produced his comedy in the 1770s, when “comic productions began to vastly outweigh tragic ones” (Kinservik 165). Kinservik observed that “most of the comic main pieces between 1747 and 1776 were essentially satiric” (165). The fact that London audiences demanded more comedy and satire in their plays gave Sheridan leeway to write a satiric play.

**Wit in The School for Scandal**

Along with satire and comedy, wit was a genre prevalent in Sheridan’s play. According to J. A. Cuddon’s *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, wit “was primarily a matter of propriety” in the eighteenth century (985). Wit was socially acceptable behavior at this time. One definition Cuddon gave for wit “suggests intellectual brilliance and ingenuity; verbal deftness. Wit is commonly verbal when humour need not be” (985-86). All these definitions describe the wit in *The School for Scandal* as many of the characters make witty remarks. Bevis made the argument in *English Drama: Restoration and Eighteenth Century 1660-1779* that Sheridan wanted wit “to blame the false and value the true” [but still link] “his characters to human nature” (229). He did this through Lady Sneerwell, who “condemns herself”; through the scandalmongers, who are “malicious and clever”; and through Joseph Surface, who “employs the silver tongue for hypocrisy and seduction” (Bevis, *English Drama* 230).

John Dryden believed that wit and witty characters had certain characteristics. He thought that a person who has wit is “someone who despairs of himself” (469). Dryden suggested “there was greater latitude in characters of wit
than in those of humor” (469). Dryden felt that witty characters of his time were mainly males with no self-esteem who had a range of emotions and actions. In Sheridan’s comedic play, the witty characters are Snake, Lady Sneerwell, and Joseph Surface. These characters maintain their guise of wit throughout the play. One would think these characters do not think highly of themselves since they resort to gossip to win the people they love.

**Comedy in Burney’s Works**

Sheridan is able to determine his definitions of comedy, satire, and wit from past authors such as Dryden, Addison, and Goldsmith. Burney uses her novel *Evelina* to lay the foundation for her definitions of comedy, satire, and wit. The novel *Evelina* is about a seventeen-year-old girl named Evelina who decides to spend her summer with Mr. Villars’s friend, Miravan, in London. While in London, she is pursued by many men, including Mr. Brown and Sir Clement Willoughby, but she falls in love with Lord Orville. Before she can marry Lord Orville she had to learn about her father, the death of her mother, and where she had come from prior to living with Mr. Villars. By the end of the novel Lord Orville and Evelina live happily ever after.

Even if this novel sounds like a romance, many comedic moments are sprinkled throughout the story. One occurs when Madame Duval is thrown out of her own carriage by “robbers” who are probably Sir Willoughby and Mr. Branghton, and who had been teasing her since the beginning of Burney’s novel. Another comedic moment is in the scene in which Madame Duval can see and is gaining her bearings; she cries, “My God! What is become of my hair? –Why, the villain has stolen all my curls!” (Burney, *Evelina* 261). Burney considered robbers doing something absurd, such as stealing an old women’s wig, comedy. She also
thought of silly instances as comedy—Madame Duval’s concern only for finding her wig after she is robbed.

A ridiculous instance similar to this occurs in *The Witlings* when Beaufort tries to talk to his half brother Jack in Act I. Beaufort tells Jack, “Why, with all your boasted activity, I question if there is a man in England who would be more embarrassed how to give an account of his time” (I.405-407). Jack replies, “Well, well, I can’t stay now to discourse upon these matters—I have too many things to do to stand here talking” (I.408-409). This exchange is absurd: Beaufort was saying Jack can never give account of where he is at any time, and Jack answers that he doesn’t have time to talk about it. How can Jack not have time, when he is making the time to talk to his step-brother? These moments shows that Burney’s perception of comedy is that it is an illogical response, such as a wig being one’s priority after a robbery.

In another instance of Burney’s comedy, Evelina is getting ready when her “chamber maid door was flung open and the two Branghtons enter the room! They advanced to me with great familiarity saying, ‘How do you do, cousin? —so we’ve caught you at the glass—well I am determined I will tell my brother of that!’” (Burney 185). Burney is defining comedy as a moment in which a person is interrupted. The hilarity is in the unexpected; Evelina did not expect the Branghtons to interrupt her trip to the opera. Burney also uses interruption for comedic effect in *The Witlings*. For instance, Codger tries to tell Lady Smatter about his sister, stating, “Well, madam, my sister writes me word—” (II.154). His train of thought is interrupted when Mr. Dabbler enters and Lady Smatter says, “Mr. Dabbler, you are the man in the world I most wished to see” (II. 156-157). When Codger tries later in the scene to tell Lady Smatter “so, madam, my sister Deborah writes me word—” (II.180-81), Lady Smatter interrupts him again to say
“O, dear Mr. Codger, I merely wanted to know if all our friends were well” (II. 182-83). Burney uses this interruption for a comedic moment as Codger constantly tries to talk to Lady Smatter.

**Satire in Burney’s Works**

In addition to these moments of comedy, Burney used *Evelina* to shape her definition of satire. For example, Mr. Branghton comments about the opera: “What a jabbering they make….There’s no knowing a word they say. Pray what’s the reason they can’t as well sing in English?—but I suppose fine folks would not like it if they could understand it” (195). Burney’s purpose for the satire here is to critique the working classes of London, suggesting they are not cultured enough to enjoy an opera. Burney uses satire to ridicule someone’s behavior, in this case it is Mr. Branghton’s.

Burney brings this concept of satire to life a year later in her play *The Witlings*. She does this in Act I at the point at which Mrs. Voluble is mocking Mr. Dabbler. Mrs. Voluble notes that when Mr. Dabbler writes poetry, “she can make nothing out, only a heap of words all in a chime, as one may say—mean, lean, dean, wean—Lord, I can’t remember half of them” (I.I. 69-71). Mrs. Voluble mocks a writer, specifically a poet trying to come up with rhyming words to appease the masses. She does this because she assumes that since writing poetry is his job, he should be able to do it extemporaneously.

Mocking behavior is not Burney’s only use of satire. In *Evelina* another purpose for using satire is revealed. At one point Evelina is having dinner with the Branghtons, who “aimed at appearing to advantage and even fancied they succeed” (291). Evelina mentions that this goal to appear civilized is pointless as “the whole family continually disputed whose turn it was to rise, and whose to be
allowed to sit still” (291). Burney uses satire in this instance to say that appearances can be deceiving, as the Branghtons try to appear cultured rather than working class. However, in the process of trying to appear better than they are, the Branghtons end up looking like dunces.

Burney shows that appearances can be deceiving a year later in her comedic play *The Witlings*. In Act II Lady Smatter is talking to her so-called “friends.” Before one of those friends, Mrs. Sapient, enters Lady Smatter’s house, she states, “Lord, how tiresome! She’ll talk us to death” (II.273). But as soon as Mrs. Sapient enters, Lady Smatter tells her, “Dear Mrs. Sapient, this is vastly good of you” (II.274). Through Lady Smatter pretending to like Mrs. Sapient when in reality Mrs. Sapient bores her, Burney crystallizes her definition of satire.

**Wit in Burney’s Works**

In addition to using satire, Burney uses wit throughout her novel and her play. One moment of wit in *Evelina* occurs when Mr. Lovel talks to Mrs. Mirivan about Evelina. Mrs. Mirivan had just told Mr. Lovell, “I must beg no insinuations of this sort; Miss Anville’s colour, as you have successful tried, may, you see, be heightened” (180). Mr. Lovell responds to this accusation by saying “You wrong me. I prefer not to infer that rouge was the only succedaneum for health; but, really, I have known many different causes for a lady’s colour, such as flushing,—anger,—mauvaise honte—and so forth, that I never dare decide to which it may be owing” (180). Mr. Lovell’s retort reveals Burney’s use of wit to be in circumstances in which one person has superior knowledge of another’s behavior.

In *The Witlings*, Censor shows himself to have knowledge of other people’s behavior when he tells Beaufort, “Resemblance? An hare and tortoise are not more different; for Jack is always running, without knowing what he pursues, and his
father is always pondering without knowing what he thinks of” (I.469-72). Burney’s notion of wit, as revealed in her novel and her play, is that one has expert knowledge of another person’s behaviors.

Burney used wit in another way. In one instance in her novel, there is a conversation between Mr. Lovell and Louisa, who is Lord Orville’s sister. Louisa asks, “Mr. Lovell! I declare I did not see you: Have you been here long?” (417). He replies, “By my watch only…five minutes, but by your ladyship’s absence, as many hours” (417). Burney uses melodrama in this scene to show wit. Mr. Lovell’s exaggeration of how long he has been gone is witty behavior.

Burney’s characters use wit through melodrama again in her play The Witlings. A scene in Burney’s comedy in which wit occurs has Censor ranting about Lady Smatter, saying, “Will she not tell me that the Pope brands a breach of Trust as dishonorable?—that Shakespeare stigmatizes the meanness of Treachery—and recollect having read in Swift—that Fortitude is one of the cardinal virtues?” (III.I.196-199). Censor is being melodramatic here, using wit to exaggerate the behaviors of Lady Smatter. He uses wit in this situation in order to make the point that Lady Smatter misquotes authors and that he views her as an ignorant person.

Comparison of Sheridan and Burney

Burney’s use of wit, satire, and comedy were somewhat similar to Richard Sheridan’s, but also different. Both Burney and Sheridan used wit in having knowledge of another character. Burney took the genre of wit further, using exaggerations. Burney and Sheridan, also, used satire differently. Sheridan’s main uses for satire were to ridicule aristocratic figures such as Lady Teazle, her husband, and Lady Candour; to teach virtuous behavior; and to show sympathy to
others. Burney used satire to mock classes, showing that those who keep up public appearances, such as the Branghtons, may act cultured but in reality they are not. But these playwrights used different types of comedy.

In terms of different definitions of comedy, placing either play is difficult. Sheridan’s play combines the genres of laughing, sentimental, and Georgian comedy. The one similarity between Sheridan’s comedy and Burney’s is that both are comedies of manners, in which amusing events happen. Burney was able to distinguish herself from Sheridan in terms of comedy by using interruptions as comedic moments.

The significance of the similarities in these two plays is that it suggests that Burney was influenced by Sheridan’s writing. This view is supported by a conversation with Sheridan in which Burney makes reference to Lady Candour (Burney, *Known Scribbler* 173). Also, the analysis of the various genres and subgenres in the plays indicates that Burney pushed the boundaries of what was acceptable comedy because she wanted to prove to her two daddies, Samuel Crisp and Charles Burney, that she could write a comedy. Furthermore, she wanted to be noticed as a female playwright in the London theater world and she should have been because she “incorporates the real essential *waiting* of late eighteenth century comedy in the structure of a play” (Doody 80). Also she was able to write a comedy that “accommodates female knowledge and experience” (Doody 90). Burney took eighteenth-century comedy to a new level.

**Summary**

This chapter discussed how humor was used in Sheridan’s comedy and Burney’s novel and comedic play. Scholars such as Auburn, Jordan, and Goldsmith disagree about how to characterize the various types of comedies in
Sheridan’s play. Richard Bevis’s theory was that *The School for Scandal* is a mixture of a variety of different types of comedy. This chapter also includes a discussion about the purpose of Sheridan’s comedy for his eighteenth-century viewers. However, comedy was not the only genre in Sheridan’s play; satire and wit were also present. There is some confusion among scholars regarding the definitions of satire and comedy. Jeremy Collier thought satire and comedy made plays indecent. Nevertheless, Sheridan used satire in *The School for Scandal* to ridicule certain people, expose their foolish behavior, and teach his audiences to practice virtuous behavior. Sheridan’s comedy used wit as the play revealed characters’ in-depth knowledge about the behavior of other characters.

Burney also used comedy, satire, and wit in her novel and her play. The comedy was in the form of moments that were ludicrous, when characters interrupted one another. Burney used satire in *Evelina* and *The Witlings* to criticize certain behavior and to mock people who appear one way but act another. Burney used wit in her novel and her play to reveal an in-depth knowledge of a person’s behavior, for example, Censor using the analogy of the tortoise and the hare for Codger and Jack. Burney also used wit in melodramatic moments to exaggerate a character’s behavior, as Mr. Lovell exaggerates how much he misses Louisa and Censor overstates how little Lady Smatter knows about literature. Both authors used wit, satire, and comedy because these genres and modes were becoming very popular with the London audience in the 1770s. The interest in theatrical tragedies was decreasing for the London population. The growing popularity of comedic drama probably made Sheridan and Burney inclined to write and produce comedies.

In the moments of comedy, wit, and satire, gossip is the common connector among these genres. In the satire, gossip is used to mock others. Wit is also
expressed in gossip, when characters come up with something intelligent and rude to say about someone else. Gossip is part of the comedy, as most of the comedic moments in the plays have one character mocking another. Sheridan’s *The School for Scandal* uses gossip as a way for the common man to criticize female aristocratic behavior and for the aristocrats in London to have something to talk about and bond over. However, in *The Witlings* gossip is used as a tool to bring down those who engage in negative behavior, such as the Espirit Literary Club members Lady Smatter, Mrs. Sapient, and Mrs. Voluble. One similarity in Sheridan’s and Burney’s plays is the fact that even though the rumors show that people dislike one another, they help people bond because they give the aristocrats and those in literary circles something to talk about. Burney, however, was on the receiving end of rumors in real life. Many rumors floated around concerning how Mrs. Montagu viewed the playwright. Both, Burney and Sheridan used the theme of gossip throughout their plays to mock upper middle class women. Sheridan also wanted to convince upper class women to not engage in the behavior of gossip in a private or public setting because it was unbecoming of women with their status in society.
In the eighteenth century, gossip played a central role in the lives of Londoners, as seen in magazines such as *Town and Country* and *The Weekly Miscellany*. These magazines usually told the scandals, affairs, and divorces of the aristocratic and upper-middle classes of London. The tendency to talk about scandals can be seen in both Sheridan’s and Burney’s plays; gossip is a theme in both. In addition to gossip, satire also played an important role in both plays. Burney used both gossip and satire to make fun of the aristocrats of the Bluestockings Club.

The Bluestockings Club was a literary club run by Mrs. Montagu. The common people ridiculed the club because the women in the club were concerned mainly with social events and talking about novels they might not have read. Haslett theorized that Burney was mocking “groups in general [in] the 1770’s” in her play (10). While Burney may have been satirizing the Bluestockings, her main concern in *The Witlings* is Lady Smatter, probably a veiled caricature of Montagu, who had a lot of power in the literary world.

**The Role of Gossip and Social Satire in *The School for Scandal***

Sheridan begins *The School for Scandal* with a portrait that illustrates the behaviors of aristocratic women in England. One key behavior he presents among these women is gossip. Gossip plays a prevalent role in *The School for Scandal*. Sheridan praises Francis Anne Crewe for spreading rumors about others throughout London. He praises her by stating, “In worthier Verse is sung by the Beauty’s Fame” (26). Sheridan refers to other aristocratic women: “Oh Granby’s
Cheek might bid new Glories rise/Or point a purer beem from Devon’s eyes” (39-40). In these lines, Sheridan makes reference to Mary Isabella, the wife of Charles Manners, Duke of Rutland. The second aristocratic woman he refers to (through the beauty of her eyes) was Georgina Spencer, “the first wife of William Cavendish, fifth Duke of Devonshire” (222).

After praising the aristocratic women, Sheridan begins mocking them: “The Height of Vanity might be thought well of Prerogative of her—and nature’s fault/….As well as Charms—rejects the Vainer theme/And half mistrustful of her beauty’s store/ She barbs with wit—those darts too keen before” (88-89, 91-93). Sheridan changes his perspective as he calls these women vain and insecure about their own beauty, even if they have witty comebacks. Sheridan’s mention of these aristocratic women before his introduction is significant because the first character the audience is introduced to in the play is Lady Sneerwell.

Lady Sneerwell is an aristocratic woman; she owns her own house and can afford to have servants. She is known for spreading gossip about others, a fact shown in the first act of the play. Her first question to her assistant, Snake, is: “Did you circulate the report of Lady Brittle’s Intrigue with Captain Boastall?” (I.I. 7-8). Mrs. Sneerwell reinforces the negative perception of aristocratic women by spreading rumors about others. The talk of scandal becomes worse when the audience learns that an acquaintance of Lady Sneerwell, Mrs. Clackit, has “cause[d] six matches to be broken/ off, and three sons to be disinherited, of four forced elopements/ as many close confinements, nine separate maintenances and two/Divorces” (I.I.14-18). The mention of the number of lives ruined due to slander sets the audience up for the negative consequences of this behavior. It associates aristocratic women with the consequences of spreading slander.

However, the characters who repeat rumors in The School for Scandal have their
own reasons for engaging in this behavior. Lady Sneerwell’s motivation for slander is to gain power in a world where women have very little, even if they are aristocrats. Also, Sneerwell wants to gain the heart of the man she loves, Charles Surface.

Lady Sneerwell is not the only character in this play who spreads gossip; Lady Candour is another. Candour’s seems to like to spread gossip for gossip’s sake. This is ironic, given that her name, Candour, means “honesty.” She is not honest at all, as she spends the whole play spreading gossip about others. Her first comment to Joseph Surface is: “I think one hears nothing else but scandal” (I.I.167). She is representative of the typical audience of the eighteenth century, as their lives have become inundated with the scandal of the aristocrats.

Scandal was spread quickly through print in *The Town and Country Magazine* (1769) and *The Morning Post* (1772) (Rosenthal 72-73). Michael Rosenthal, in his article “Public Reputation and Image Control in Late-eighteenth Century Britain,” observed that the magazine *The Weekly Miscellany* was “aimed at city readership and determined to expose patrician depravity” (80). The character Benjamin Backbite reinforces this phenomenon in London life: “Tis Very Vulgar to print, and as my little productions are mostly satires and lampoons on particular people/I find they mostly circulate more by giving confidence to the Friends” (I.I.242-44). Backbite’s purpose in the *School for Scandal* is to show how rumors spread like wildfire through print. He demonstrates that while the typical London audience is interested in reading about people who gain “fame through acts of disinterested virtue, it was rather notoriety, whether deserved or not that attracted a general interest, often lubricious, usually censorious and generally manifested through print media of various kinds” (Rosenthal 69). Backbite
reflected the reality that spreading satire had become a trend in London magazines.

This hunger for gossip gave magazines incentive to make the world aware of the private lives of public figures. Furthermore, it is revealing that in the play it is a common man, the poet Backbite, who controls how the slander is spread by determining which rumors to repeat. Through the printed rumors Lady Candour learns that a “story circulated last month—of Mrs. Festino’s/affair with Colonel Cassino—tho to be sure the matter was never/rightly cleared up” (I.I. 191-93). Candour acquires this information from a periodical known as The Public Advertiser. Candour hears gossip from both print and other people.

Through word of mouth Lady Candour learns that “Miss Gadabout had eloped with Sir Filagree Flirt—but Lord!/there is no minding what one hears—tho to be sure I heard this from/a good authority” (I.I. 180-82). Candour shows that there are many ways that gossip can be spread to a plebian London audience. Her character also shows the hypocrisy of an audience that declares that slander has no place in their world, but yet continues to spread it.

One problem Lady Candour raises is that her gossip fragments the people she slanders. Crabtree and Sir Benjamin Backbite illustrate this with a character named Ogle. In Act II, scene II, Crabtree and Backbite describe Ogle as having “Caledonian Locks—/Dutch nose—/Austrian Lip—/” (II.II.121-23). Gossip turns her into “but a shred of an identity, a face they then tear apart into incompatible elements” (Picker 643). Ogle’s fate illustrates that “scandal serves to fragment the individual” (Picker 644). Ogle does not have her own identity because the gossipers Backbite and Crabtree view her from a public perspective. She is an example of how an aristocratic woman can be figuratively broken into pieces
when people gossip about her. The gossip lowers her in terms of class, but it also humanizes her to lower-class workers of London.

Backbite, Crabtree, and Candour show that the gossip in Sheridan’s comedy lowers people’s status, gives the common person a say in what gossip will be spread, and literally destroy the victim’s identity. The spreading of gossip is worse for the aristocratic women who were mentioned at the play’s beginning as their reputations can be destroyed by people talking about them. Lady Sneerwell shows this constantly as she spreads rumors as a way to maintain power and get revenge for wrongs done to her, hoping that others will not gossip about her. Lady Sneerwell wants to get retribution because she was “wounded [herself]/ in the early part of [her] life by the envenomed tongue of slander/I confess I have since known no Pleasure equal to reducing others/to the Level of my injured Reputation” (I.I. 31-34). Lady Sneerwell likes to slander others because she was hurt by a slander in the past

In Act II, scene II Lady Sneerwell tells Benjamin Backbite, “Mrs. Evergreen does take some pains/ to repair the ravage of time—you must allow she affects it with great/ingenuity—and surely that’s better than the careless manner in which the Widow Acre caulks her wrinkles”(II.II. 49-52). Backbite agrees that Mrs. Evergreen “looks like a mended statue in which the connoisseur sees at once the head’s/modern though the trunk’s antique” (II.II. 55-57). Here, Sneerwell’s gossip gives her the power to persuade Backbite to her opinion. It also helps form a bond between people of various classes; Lady Sneerwell is an aristocratic woman and Backbite is a poet, a commoner. Furthermore, the spreading of information is a currency that gives women power.

Lady Teazle, unlike Sneerwell, does not use gossip for power and control; she uses it to bond with others. In Act II, scene II, Lady Teazle engages in slander
with Lady Candour when she talks about “the Fat Dowager—who was at Mrs. Codille’s/last night” (II.II.80-81). Lady Candour replies in kind, saying, “Nay—her bulk is her misfortune and when she takes/ such pains to get rid of it, you ought not to reflect on her” (II.II. 82-83). For Lady Teazle, inquiring about Mrs. Codille is a way to bond with Lady Candour. From Candour’s conversation, Teazle learns that Codille “almost lives on acids—and small whey/ laces herself by pullies and often in the hottest noon in summer you/ may see her squat a little Poney with her hair platted up behind/ like a Drummer’s” (II.II.84-87). However, the gossip reduces Lady Codille, turning her into a “monochromatic cartoon” (Picker 642).

In *The School for Scandal*, gossip is spread by women about aristocratic women. This is significant because it reveals what little power women had in the 1770s. The lack of power is shown in the slanderous tete-a-tetes about women. Cindy McCreery described how women and men were viewed in the scandalous magazines in the 1770s. She demonstrated that in *Town and Country* the women were described with “less information about their family background, education and personality” (217). This shows that aristocratic women might not have had a say in how they were portrayed to the public. McCreery observed that women “appear[ed] as ornaments to their lovers and as a brief interlude in these lovers’ long and romantic careers” (217). In the magazines, women apparently were not seen as of value to the men with whom they had affairs. The magazines attacked the individuals while protecting the editors from possible libel suits (McCreery 218). The editors exercised power because they never fully disclosed who they were talking about; most wrote their tete-a-tetes as “comment[s] on individual aristocrats” (McCreery 222). Aristocratic women did not have many
responsibilities in the 1770s other than taking care of their husbands and children and maintaining their dowry if they had inherited money from their fathers.

Upper-class women may not have had much power in the public realm, but they did have control in London’s theater world. Kimberly Crouch notes that “aristocratic women could attempt to insult an actress and interfere with a production” (69). Also, any actresses who portrayed noble women could “represent them as fashionably dressed women” (Crouch 73). The actresses wanted to be like aristocrats because the aristocrats “provided a model of behavior for an actress to appropriate” (Crouch 67). However, aristocratic women were discouraged from going to the theater because “anti-theatrical pamphleteers…thought their encouragement of other women ‘to act smuttily’ was neither suitable nor acceptable” (Crouch 67, qtd. in Collier 9). These aristocratic women faced contradictory expectations; they were role models for actresses and other women, but at the same time they were criticized if they decided to go to the theater. One way for these women to exercise power without drawing disapproval from others was to gossip. Gossip became a currency that could be bought or sold.

A character in Sheridan’s comedy who used gossip as a currency is Snake. In the last scene of Act V he tells Lady Sneerwell, “I beg your ladyship—Ten thousand pardons, you paid me/ extremely liberally for the lie in question—but I have unfortunately/ been offered double to speak the Truth” (V.II.182-85). In this exchange, Snake set the standard that speaking the truth is more valuable than spreading lies and slander. Additionally, he shows that spreading gossip has a price, literally. The high price is evident at the end of the play, when Lady Sneerwell endures the humiliation of the truth being revealed that she paid Snake to spread lies with the hope that she could win the heart of Charles Surface. Also,
the gossip cost her reputation; she is unmasked as a scandalmonger at the end of the play.

Lady Sneerwell is not the only one who gossips. Her right-hand man, Joseph Surface, uses gossip as a way to keep in Sneerwell’s good graces. In fact, he informs her about the effects of her gossip being spread throughout London, saying that some of her stories “have taken a good effect/on Maria” (I.I.91-92). In addition to being an informant, he enjoys spreading gossip. He says as much to Lady Sneerwell: “That conversation where the spirit of/ raillery is too suppress’d will ever appear tedious and insipid” (I.I.147-48). In other words, he believes that if people are not gossiping they have no reason to be talking at all. In Act IV he tells his servant, “ I have a difficult hand to/ play in this affair—Lady Teazle has lately suspected my views on/ Maria—but she must by no means be let into that secret, at least not/ till I have more in my power”(IV.III.15-18). Joseph is spreading gossip for gossip’s sake. He represents, in a way, the typical Londoner who read the tabloids to stay up on gossip. He also seems to use gossip as a way to gain power since he controls Lady Teazle through a lie of omission, not telling her of his feelings towards Maria. Furthermore, he spreads gossip with Lady Sneerwell with the hope that he can use the false information to make Charles look bad.

Joseph Surface provides an example of the type of behavior Sheridan does not want his London audience to emulate, and Sheridan made a point of having characters in The School for Scandal whose lives do not revolve around gossip. The characters who show how Sheridan believed people are supposed to behave are Charles Surface and Maria. Charles, an upper-middle-class male, has a strict moral code; he proclaims, “People that expect truth generally do” (III.III.131).
Sheridan sets up male and female examples of the type of behavior in which he wants his hypocritical London audience to engage.

One female example is Lady Teazle, who redeems herself at the end of *The School for Scandal* when she tells Lady Sneerwell she wants to “[leave] off Practice and kill Characters no longer” (V.V.195). Lady Teazle has decided to not spread slander throughout London anymore because gossip hurts too many people, including herself. Another female moral model in *The School for Scandal* is Maria, who does not endorse the spreading of gossip. She asks Joseph Surface why people “raise malicious smiles at the/ infirmities and misfortunes…of those who have never injured us” (II.II.179-80). Maria sees no value in spreading gossip about those who know nothing about her. Furthermore, she sets herself up as a moral model for others to follow. Maria provides an interesting contrast to the slanderers as most of the play associates scandal with aristocratic women, with the exception of Crabtree and Snake. The contrast between Maria and the female aristocratic gossipers communicates the idea that spreading rumors, while not a good behavior, gives power and sway over other people, can be a form of currency, and helps women bond and stay close with one another.

**The Use of Gossip in Burney’s *The Witlings***

Throughout Burney’s *The Witlings*, gossip is an indicator of which characters have good reputations and are truthful. Gossip also shows whether characters wish to keep information they know private or make it public. The characters who tend not to gossip are Beaufort, Cecilia, and Censor. Censor does mock Lady Smatter, but he does so only because of her nonsensical behavior. The characters whose focus is having information about their lives become public knowledge are Lady Smatter and Mrs. Voluble. Lady Smatter uses gossip with the
hope of maintaining her social standing because she cares about how others view her. Through gossip Mrs. Voluble is able to maintain her social standing because she knows information that others do not, information others want to know for their own personal reasons. Through this knowledge Voluble gains power over other characters. In Act I, scene I, Mrs. Voluble shows with the milliners that she wants to spread gossip about people she has talked to prior to entering the shop. She tells Mrs. Wheedle, the head milliner, “I was going to tell you/about Miss Stanley; you must know she’s a young lady with a fortune all in her own hands but she’s just come of age, and/she’s got neither mama or papa” (I.I.82-84). Mrs. Voluble spreads such rumors at the milliners shop because she wants to be known and liked. Lady Voluble is like Lady Candour in Sheridan’s comedy; she will spread gossip with no regard for who she hurts in the process. However, as Lady Smatter demonstrates, the desire to spread gossip to maintain one’s social status is not a good idea.

Lady Smatter reveals that she has a tendency to gossip when she learns that Mrs. Stanley has lost her fortune: “I can’t think what the poor Girl will do! For/ here is the end of marrying her” (II.557-58). Smatter talks about Cecilia in this manner because she believes money and status matter if one is to marry. Also she fears her own status being lowered if her nephew, Beaufort, marries someone who is broke. Lady Smatter tries to resolve this situation by sending Cecilia away so she is no longer a problem for her. In Act III she tells her nephew, “Well, well, whether she writ to you or not is nothing/to the purpose; she has acted very prudent part in going/ away, &, once again I repeat, you must give her up” (III.36-38). Lady Smatter believes that if Cecilia leaves she will no longer be connected to a broke heiress and neither will her nephew. Margaret Doody made the argument
that Burney used the character of Smatter to “deride” the “sentiments” by having sentiments “uttered as grace notes by people who do not believe them” (82).

Even though Lady Smatter informs Beaufort of Cecilia’s position and appears sentimental about it, she does not have enough power to convince him to leave her. She does control the purse strings and can disinherit Beaufort if he decides to marry Cecilia. Beaufort takes a risk in standing up to his aunt, even when he knows he is broke and in love with Cecilia. Lady Smatter has money and power and Beaufort is in a lesser position, but when he rejects her offer, the broke and helpless nephew has more power than Lady Smatter.

The fact that the men in Lady Smatter’s life have more power than she is seen when Censor spreads slander about her in print. Censor has a lampoon published that states, “Yes, Smatter is a Muse’s Friend/She knows to censure or commend/and has of Faith and Truth Store/She’ll ne’er desert you—till you’re poor” (V. 755-58). Censor uses Smatter’s need to hear gossip against her, hoping that publishing her bad behavior throughout London will make her agree to let Beaufort marry Cecilia. He also does this with the hope of censoring her from spreading more negative gossip about others. This is ironic given that, according to Doody, Lady Smatter represents “the fear that those who live upon the public words will be punished for them, and this humiliation is enacted [by her]” (92). Lady Smatter is presented at the beginning as a person who humiliates others publicly, but in the end she receives the ultimate public humiliation when others talk badly about her.

The effects of the public humiliation are seen in Jack’s ballad about Lady Smatter: “Critics & Pendants & Doctors I clatter/For who else will heed of what becomes of poor Smatter” (V.886-87). By spreading gossip and disapproving of Beaufort’s marriage to Cecilia, Smatter has become the laughingstock of London.
She responds to this negative turn of events by having a nervous breakdown and misquoting her favorite authors, Swift and Pope. Thus Lady Smatter shows herself not to be a moral model. For Burney, the moral models are Beaufort, Censor, and Cecilia, who do not care about money and status, but about being happy. Censor mocks Smatter only to help his friend marry. Beaufort disobeys his aunt only because he is in love with Cecilia. These characters are all honorable and have no reason to gossip.

The Mocking of the Literati Throughout *The Witlings*

When Burney created Lady Smatter, she used her as a representation of Mrs. Montagu, who was the head of the Bluestockings Club. Along with Lady Smatter, Burney mocks the characters Voluble, Sapient, and Dabbler for the integrity they pretend to have throughout *The Witlings*. Mrs. Sapient reveals her lack of substance as she points out the obvious. In Act I, when the milliner, Mrs. Wheedle, shows her some ribbons, she tells her, “Now you want to tempt me; but I always say the best way to escape temptation is to run away from it” (I.310-12). She points out the obvious: she is tempted by the ribbons. Mrs. Sapient is not the only person lacking in intelligence; Dabbler is another.

Dabbler shows that he is a duplicitous person when he tells Lady Smatter, “I’ve just finished an epigram of the very subject! I protest I shall grow more sick of books every day, for I can never look into/any” (II.215-18). He shows himself to be of little worth as he is a poet who does not like to read books. He then puts on airs to show that he is a better writer than he actually might be. In Act IV, when Censor asks Dabbler to compose “an Epigram on slander?” (IV. 490), Dabbler replies by claiming that slander is an “illiberal subject, Sir! A most illiberal subject….I will have nothing to do with it” (492-93). He makes further excuses to
Censor, saying he would love to compose the epigram but he is “particularly pressed for time” (IV. 500). By refusing to compose an epigram extemporaneously, Dabbler shows that he does not have a knack for writing epigrams and should therefore not brag to Lady Smatter to the effect that he does. His refusal also destroys his reputation among the women for being a great poet. But he is not the only one in the comedy who brags about skills he does not possess.

Lady Smatter displays her lack of integrity when she acts conceited about her in-depth knowledge of Swift and Pope. In Act II she tells Cecilia, “I declare sometimes I am so immensely fatigued with the toil of study/ing for faults & objections, that I am ready to fling all my/books behind the fire” (II. 46-48). Lady Smatter is bragging that she has read so many books looking for parts to critique that she cannot keep track of everything she reads. However, she has a tendency to misquote authors. In Act III she tells Censor, “Well, well, I won’t be positive as to Swift/Perhaps it was Pope. ‘Tis impractical for anybody that reads as much as I do to be always exact” (III.91-93). Her superficial knowledge is revealed when she cannot keep track of what the authors she has read have said in their books.

Burney created these characters without substance to lower the reputation of the Bluestockings for all Londoners who would like to be part of their group. Perhaps Burney portrayed these characters negatively with the hope that people would not try to join their group. On the other hand, Moyra Haslett argues that Burney may have intended to “poke fun at groups in general” (10). She makes the point that “club culture was satirized as [much as] it is celebrated” (10). Sylvia Myers offers the argument that Burney had a degree of respect for the Bluestockings because of a “sense of solidarity with the women who had been singled out for their abilities” (257). Because of Burney’s respect for the
Bluestockings and Mrs. Montagu, Doody suggests that Lady Smatter is a “generalized well known type in the dramatic tradition” known as “debellare superbos” (93). But Burney’s complicated relationship with Montagu raises questions about whether she could have been the inspiration for Lady Smatter.

Frances Burney began to know Lady Elizabeth Montagu through her friend Hester Thrale and her father, Charles Burney. But the relationship was complicated by rumors each one heard about the other. Burney noted in a September 1778 journal entry that she wanted to meet Mrs. Montagu because she “is in very great estimation here, even with Dr. Johnson himself, when others do not praise her improperly. Mrs. Thrale ranks her as the first of women in the literary way” (Burney, Journals 101). This journal entry reveals that at least at the beginning of their relationship Burney thought highly of Mrs. Montagu. However, Dr. Johnson interfered with Burney’s perception of Montagu by telling her, “Down with her! …spare her not! Attack her, fight her, and down with her at once!…You are a rising wit…she is at the top!” (Burney, Journals 101). Johnson implied that he believed Burney should take Montagu’s position as literary queen because she had just written Evelina. Johnson was not a fan of Montagu because she did not like the fact that he contradicted her. He told Burney in September 1778: “I won’t answer that I shan’t contradict her again, if she provokes me as she did then; but a less provocation I will withstand” (Burney, Early Journals, Vol. III, 151). Johnson did not like contradicting Montagu; he just wished she would not provoke him to anger. But Burney, unlike Johnson, liked Montagu. She wrote in her journal on September 7, 1780, “Mrs. Montagu was in very good spirits, and extremely civil to me, taking my Hand, and expressing herself well pleased that I had accompanied Mrs. Thrale hither” (Burney, Early Journals, Vol. III, 150).
Burney appeared to be shocked that Mrs. Montagu would want to meet with and talk with her.

Originally Mrs. Montagu did not consider Burney a “person of consequence” (Myers 257). But when Montagu discovered that Burney wrote *Evelina*, she wanted to meet her. One odd entry in Burney’s journal described Montagu’s reaction to *Evelina*: she was “proud of it; I am proud that a work so commended should be a woman’s” (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. III*, 158). However, Johnson discovered that Montagu had not even bothered to read *Evelina*; she simply liked the fact that it was written by a woman. She even complained to Hester Thrale, “It is not in verse? I can read anything in prose, but I have great dread of a long story in verse” (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. III*, 157). Mrs. Montagu seemed to make excuses for not reading Burney’s first novel, *Evelina*.

Mrs. Montagu continued to make a bad impression on Burney when she commented on the fact that Burney was writing a comedy. She told Burney, “Fielding, who was so admirable in Novel writing; never succeeded when he wrote for the stage” (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. III*, 162). Later Montagu said that if “Miss Burney writes a play; I beg I must know of it, or if she thinks it proper see it…& all my Influence is at her service;…we shall be glad to assist in spreading the fame of Miss Burney” (Burney, *Early Journals, Vol. III*, 162). Montagu contradicted herself as it is not known if she read *Evelina*, much less if she would have the patience or time to read *The Witlings*. But these instances in which Montagu was duplicitous to Burney lowered Burney’s estimation of her.

Burney had also heard rumors about Mrs. Montagu. Some said that she “imposed a circle on her guests, who also could not help wishing to ‘shine’” (Myers 253). Burney also heard that Montagu believed “those talents[s] were
dangerous for a woman to have” (Myers 183). This gossip about Montagu could have made Burney hesitant to meet her, given that Burney was a modest person and did not even want to admit that she had published *Evelina*. Also Burney disagreed with what she had heard of Montagu, believing that women should have talents since she was a gifted writer. Her opinion of Mrs. Montagu seemed to be that “she has no wit, while Mrs. Thrale had almost too much” (Myers 258). Burney’s relationship to Montagu was complicated by the fact that her father, although he personally disliked her, benefited from her patronage.

Her experiences with Mrs. Montagu and the rumors about her kept Burney from having a good perception of this influential woman. These complications might have inspired Burney to portray Mrs. Montagu negatively in *The Witlings* as Lady Smatter. Some of Burney’s journal entries show Mrs. Montagu with the characteristics of Smatter: all she cared about appeared to be her status and who she knew, such as the famous literary figures Samuel Johnson and Frances Burney. Also, Montagu, like Smatter, mentioned authors such as Fielding to defend her points, even if she changed her mind moments later. Burney may have used Montagu as her inspiration for the character of Lady Smatter and thought Montagu might consider it a compliment. Another theory is that she took Johnson’s suggestion and wanted to become top wit.

If Lady Smatter was Montagu, Montagu was not the only person Burney mocked. Her father, Charles Burney, may have been the inspiration for Dabbler. Dr. Burney, like Dabbler, wrote to appease women such as Mrs. Montagu and Hester Thrale of the Bluestockings. He depended on their patronage to make his living as a writer. He wrote an epistle to Hester Thrale that stated, “Not more the hungry pilf‘ring wretch/His brain can sack or fancy stretch/ How best his neighbors Goods to seize/Than you, your friends save and please” (Doody 67).
This rhyme seems like one Dabbl would make, as noted by Voluble, who thinks Dabbl’s poetry is a “heap of Words all in a chime, as one may say,—mean lean dean, wean, Lord, I/can’t remember half of them” (I. 69-70). If Dr. Burney noticed the similarity, that could have been one of many reasons he disapproved of Burney’s publishing of *The Witlings*.

**Similarities and Differences Between *The Witlings* and *The School for Scandal***

Frances Burney’s *The Witlings* and Richard Sheridan’s *The School for Scandal*, although different, have many similarities in terms of themes and social satire. Sheridan mocks aristocratic women who have no sentiment or substance from his perspective. Burney portrays the literati, as seen through lady Smatter, Montagu, and the Bluestockings, as putting on airs and pretending to be what they are not. In both plays, gossip plays a prominent role in people’s perceptions of one another. In *The School for Scandal*, gossip determines how much people know of their own lives and the lives of other people and whether one gossips defines the character’s moral compass throughout the play. For example, the moral models in the *School for Scandal* are those who do not gossip: Charles Surface and Maria. This clear distinction between those who gossip and those who do not is also seen in Burney’s *The Witlings*. In *The Witlings*, the moral models are also those who do not gossip: Beaufort and Cecilia. In both these plays, gossip is one’s currency. For the aristocratic women of *The School for Scandal* such as Lady Sneerwell, gossip buys one access to print and a potential affair with another women’s husband. Gossip also exacts a price when others learn who has been spreading rumors. For Lady Smatter in *The Witlings*, the price for gossiping about Cecilia’s bad situation is having rumors circulate about own her audacious behavior.
Both plays contain a mockery of the upper classes, either aristocratic women or women in the literati. Sheridan and Burney both seem to make the point that upper-class females—be they in an exclusive literary club or merely aristocratic women who like to gossip—put on airs, treat people without respect, and hope to avoid any repercussions from their actions. Perhaps both authors hoped that their extreme negative portrayals of these women would motivate women to stop using sentiments to cover their true selves and that lowering their reputation in these negative portrayals would cause people from the working and lower classes to not respect them.

Burney had good intentions with the hope of rectifying the bad behavior of upper class women but she still faced repercussions as a female because these women could destroy her reputation in London ironically through gossip. Furthermore, Burney was blocked by her two fathers Crisp and Burney who feared what would happen to their own reputations if The Witlings was performed in the Drury Lane theater. Sheridan did not have these obstacles when he decided to produce The School for Scandal as a man, male playwright, and owner of the Drury Lane theater. His position of power gained him access into the upper class lifestyle and the ability to critique the lives of the upper class. His patrons, in turn might have taken his play The School for Scandal as homage to their fabulous lives.
CONCLUSION

This thesis explored how gender roles in the 1770s greatly influenced Burney as she wrote and attempted to produce her play *The Witlings*. She may have had inspiration from women such as Hannah Ichbald and Aphra Behn, but social mores and her own shyness made her hesitant to write a play, even if people in England raved about her novel *Evelina*. She faced additional scrutiny as she wrote satire, which was frowned upon for women in England. However, Sheridan, being a man, was able to write plays without interferences from father figures. He had the freedom to pursue a mistress and become a member of Parliament. Burney, on the other hand, faced censure from her father and Samuel Crisp for her intention to have a play performed in the Drury Lane Theater at Richard Sheridan’s encouragement. Women writers were marginalized in the 1770s. Burney was unable to become a playwright because of the way women were viewed and the ways men and the general public felt about women being in the theater or writing for it.

Burney wrote *The Witlings*, and was encouraged by such famous literary figures as Joshua Reynolds, Hester Thrale, and Richard Sheridan. Despite this encouragement, she was never able to view even a dress rehearsal of her play. Her career as a playwright was impeded by her father and Samuel Crisp, both of whom feared they would lose the patronage of Elizabeth Montagu if she saw the play, which appeared to mock her through the character of Lady Smatter. By contrast, Sheridan had a theater in which to have his play performed and his major impediment was the challenge of combining the plays *The Slanderers* and *The Teazles*. He also had the challenges of submitting his play to the Lord Chamberlin’s office by a certain deadline. Sheridan wanted to integrate the restoration mores of Congreve into his play in order to mock the popular
sentimental plays of the 1770s. Even with these issues, Sheridan was able to have has play acted out by the popular actors of the time: Thomas King, Frances Abington, and Joseph Palmer. The genres of Sheridan’s play were comedy, satire, and wit.

Sheridan’s *The School for Scandal* and Burney’s *The Witlings* are similar in terms of genre; both contain elements of wit, comedy, and satire. The two authors had different purposes for using these genres. Sheridan used various forms of comedy throughout his play whereas Burney used comedy during absurd moments or when characters interrupted one another. Burney and Sheridan both used satire with the end goal of ridiculing others and teaching those they made fun of to engage in good behavior. Burney and Sheridan both used wit to show in-depth knowledge about a character’s behavior.

Sheridan and Burney used wit, comedy, and satire as vehicles for the theme of how gossip was used by upper-middle-class women in England. Sheridan focused on the aristocratic women, represented by the character Lady Sneerwell, who uses gossip to bond, have power over others, and as currency with her friends Snake and Joseph Surface. The moral models that appear in *The School for Scandal* are the characters Charles Surface and Maria. Burney’s characters who gossip and are interested in how things appear to others are Lady Voluble and Lady Smatter. The foils to these characters are Beaufort, Cecilia, and Censor. Even though Censor mocks others, he does so only to save the reputation of his friend, Beaufort. Lady Smatter is significant, as she may represent Mrs. Montagu, with whom Frances Burney had a relationship that was complicated by rumors. Burney had heard many rumors to the effect that Mrs. Montagu did not have integrity, that she used people to raise her own status, and that she believed women should not have talents. The characterization of Mrs. Montagu that arose
from the rumors could not have appealed to Burney, who wanted to be known for being a writer and did not want to be used by people such as Elizabeth Montagu. Burney and Sheridan both used gossip to mock upper-middle-class women. Sheridan mocked aristocratic women to convince them they should not engage in gossip in either a private or public setting. Burney used gossip to show, through the characters Lady Voluble and Lady Smatter, how the literati salon groups such as the Bluestockings treated others.

This research has implications for other scholars because it demonstrates that Burney was a satire writer as seen from her novel *Evelina* and her play *The Witlings*. This is significant because women authors of the 1770s were not applauded for being satire writers, as that was an occupation of predominately men. This needs to be contrasted with Sheridan, who was a well known satirist of the 1770s, famous for the satirical writings in his play *The School for Scandal*.

Burney, she faced more trials as a satire writer because as a female she had little power in a patriarchal society. The only realm in society in which she could have control and assert herself was through her writing. She used her writing in *The Witlings* and *Evelina* to transcend her position to give her and other females a voice in society. Burney, unlike Sheridan, had to fight to maintain her position in society.

Sheridan was given more freedoms as a male and he used satire with the motivation to mock the aristocracy. Sheridan could mock the aristocracy because he was already in a powerful position as an upper class male that owned the Drury Lane Theater. He had a voice that mattered in this patriarchal society, and, unlike Burney, did not have to worry about backlash from the aristocrats if he mocked their hypocritical behavior that they displayed while gossiping all over London.
Another implication of this thesis is the demonstration that Burney and Sheridan were both concerned with the scandal and gossip of upper-class women during the eighteenth century. Sheridan wanted to show how aristocratic women lowered themselves in English society by spreading gossip about others. Burney showed that women in English literary groups such as the Bluestockings were snobby women who cared only about themselves. These women had different reasons for using gossip. Burney herself was subject to gossip. The relationship between Burney and Montagu was complicated as each had heard rumors about the other; it has never been demonstrated whether Montagu and Burney liked or respected one another.
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