



A Traitor's Kiss: The Life of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, 1751-1816

By Fintan O'Toole

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The great Irish-English playwright--his politics, his impassioned life.

A tale of stunning literary success, political celebrity and intrigue, early death, murder, treason, and revolution, this extraordinary book takes as its subject one of the most exciting and enigmatic figures in Irish and English history.

Dramatist, politician, entrepreneur, philanderer, duelist, and revolutionary (or traitor), Richard Brinsley Sheridan was a man of many contradictions: a Protestant gentleman who cared about the rights of the Irish Catholic peasantry; a creative writer who was best known as a politician; a believer in sincerity yet a role-playing chameleon; a radical who masterminded the crisis following the madness of King George; a member of Parliament who associated with insurrectionists against the Crown.

His unusual and still-relevant life has been captured superbly by the masterful young scholar Fintan O'Toole, in an innovative work that opens up a radical new perspective on a great writer. O'Toole shows that Sheridan must be understood as an Irish writer and dissident, a complicated man who walked a thin line between success in London and extreme danger as a supporter of democratic reform and Irish independence.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Richard Sheridan is primarily remembered for three brilliant plays: *The Rivals*, *The School for Scandal*, and *The Critic*. With these elegant comedies of manners, he almost single-handedly revived the comic spirit of the Restoration, deemed too coarse by the more refined society of the latter 18th century. In Sheridan's work, the clichés of traditional melodrama are turned on their heads (*The Rivals*, for example, features a man who forces his son to marry the woman he himself is in love with), and romantic intrigues become a forum for discussing political issues and the nature of theater itself. Sheridan's major plays were all written by the time he was 28. While melodramas, adaptations, and pantomimes followed, his career as a playwright was just a prelude to a long involvement in other fields, most notably managing London's Drury Lane theater and a political career that eventually led to a seat in the House of Commons. Little has been written about his later political and business life.

There are romantic intrigues, political battles, and dodges from the debt collectors aplenty in Sheridan's later life, though they seem but a lengthy epilogue to the wit and creativity of his early years. O'Toole is wonderfully lucid, however, in explaining the struggles for Irish autonomy in this period (Sheridan would all his life, to the detriment of his social standing, identify himself as Irish), and he offers an in-depth analysis of the elaborate political and social arena of the time. Particularly well drawn are Sheridan's complex romantic relationships with his wives, involving infidelities and duels. But when compared to the brilliance of his early plays, the historical details of his later life seem somewhat lackluster. --John Longenbaugh

From Publishers Weekly

O'Toole's mistitled biography exaggerates the hold of Sheridan's (and O'Toole's) native Ireland on his careers as playwright and politician. Although Sheridan supported Irish causes as well as English reforms, he never returned to the island he left as a boy in 1759, and despite a sometimes self-destructive idealism, he was opportunist enough to spend 32 of his 64 years in parliament. In his early 20s, with *The Rivals* and *The School for Scandal*, he became the most successful writer of comedy in his time. Politics magnetized him, however, and he put his genius for wit and invective into Whig partisanship?when not earning a reputation for boozing and womanizing. He died in 1816 in a house emptied by seizures for debt of nearly everything but his abused and ailing second wife, and the beds in which they lay. In *The Critic*, O'Toole (currently drama critic for the New York Daily News) notes, Sheridan "went further than ever before in blurring the boundaries between the stage and the world, between theatre and politics." O'Toole builds his quirky biography on Sheridan's living that way as well. A great parliamentary orator, he packed speeches doomed to fail amid the era's political cynicism with an exuberance of language that might have earned him riches if performed at his debt-ridden playhouse, Drury Lane. During decades of misguided loyalty to the worthless Prince of Wales, Sheridan relished his dangerous role on England's real stage. In O'Toole's often elegant telling, Sheridan possessed a risky excess of Irish feeling and an overwhelming rage for ruin.

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From Library Journal

This is the first Irish biography of Sheridan in the modern era. O'Toole (*The Ex-Isle of Erin*, LJ 1/98) brings to the task impressive scholarship, subtlety of vision, a fine ear for language, and writing of a high order. Sheridan was an Irishman who never forgot his Irishness but abandoned Ireland for England. From the disreputable theater class, he had aspirations to become a gentleman and a political figure. By succeeding in a precarious balancing act, he made himself a spectacular success as a playwright, theater manager, and

orator for reform in Parliament. A writer to watch, O'Toole is as clear and convincing in his explication of the connections between Sheridan's life and his plays as he is strong on the linguistic ambiguity Sheridan used to tweak the establishment while fostering his reputation. A valuable addition to the literature.?'Thomas E. Luddy, Salem State Coll., MA
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Users Review

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