

Richard Brinsley Sheridan

From *The Rivals*

(Act I, Scene ii)

[Enter Mrs. Malaprop, and Sir Anthony Absolute.]

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

LYDIA Madam, I thought you once——

MRS. MALAPROP You thought, miss! I don't know any business you have to think at all—thought does not become a young woman. But the point we would request of you is, that you will promise to forget this fellow—to illiterate him, I say, quite from your memory.

LYDIA Ah, madam! our memories are independent of our wills. It is not so easy to forget.

MRS. MALAPROP But I say it is, miss; there is nothing on earth so easy as to forget, if a person chooses to set about it. I'm sure I have as much forgot your poor dear uncle as if he had never existed—and I thought it my duty so to do; and let me tell you, Lydia, these violent memories don't become a young woman.

Sir ANTHONY Why sure she won't pretend to remember what she's ordered not!—ay, this comes of her reading!

LYDIA What crime, madam, have I committed, to be treated thus?

MRS. MALAPROP Now don't attempt to extirpate yourself from the matter; you know I have proof controvertible of it.—But tell me, will you promise to do as you're bid? Will you take a husband of your friends' choosing?

LYDIA Madam, I must tell you plainly, that had I no preferment for any one else, the choice you have made would be my aversion.

MRS. MALAPROP What business have you, miss, with preference and aversion? They don't become a young woman; and you ought to know, that as both always wear off, 'tis safest in matrimony to begin with a little aversion. I am sure I hated your poor dear uncle before marriage as if he'd been a blackamoor—and yet, miss, you are sensible what a wife I made!—and when it pleased Heaven to release me from him, 'tis unknown what tears I shed!—But suppose we were going to give you another choice, will you promise us to give up this Beverley?

LYDIA Could I belie my thoughts so far as to give that promise, my actions would certainly as far belie my words.

MRS. MALAPROP Take yourself to your room.—You are fit company for nothing but your own ill humours.

Stefanie Wortman 1/26/2016 9:23 AM

Comment [1]: Though Mrs. Malaprop later argues that women should be able to speak clearly and correctly, she consistently displays muddled thinking and mistaken diction. When she says “illiterate” she means “obliterate;” “extricate” should replace “extirpate;” and so on. She makes these mistakes so frequently and to such great comic effect that her character inspired the word “malapropism,” which means the incorrect use of one word in place of another word with a similar sound.

LYDIA Willingly, ma'am—I cannot change for the worse. [Exit.]

MRS. MALAPROP There's a little intricate hussy for you!

Sir ANTHONY It is not to be wondered at, ma'am,—all this is the natural consequence of teaching girls to read. Had I a thousand daughters, by Heaven! I'd as soon have them taught the black art as their alphabet!

MRS. MALAPROP Nay, nay, Sir Anthony, you are an absolute misanthropy.

Sir ANTHONY In my way hither, Mrs. Malaprop, I observed your niece's maid coming forth from a circulating library!—She had a book in each hand—they were half-bound volumes, with marble covers!—From that moment I guessed how full of duty I should see her mistress!

MRS. MALAPROP Those are vile places, indeed!

Sir ANTHONY Madam, a circulating library in a town is as an evergreen tree of diabolical knowledge! It blossoms through the year!—And depend on it, Mrs. Malaprop, that they who are so fond of handling the leaves, will long for the fruit at last.

MRS. MALAPROP Fy, fy, Sir Anthony! you surely speak laconically.

Sir ANTHONY Why, Mrs. Malaprop, in moderation now, what would you have a woman know?

MRS. MALAPROP Observe me, Sir Anthony. I would by no means wish a daughter of mine to be a progeny of learning; I don't think so much learning becomes a young woman; for instance, I would never let her meddle with Greek, or Hebrew, or algebra, or simony, or fluxions, or paradoxes, or such inflammatory branches of learning—neither would it be necessary for her to handle any of your mathematical, astronomical, diabolical instruments.—But, Sir Anthony, I would send her, at nine years old, to a boarding-school, in order to learn a little ingenuity and artifice. Then, sir, she should have a supercilious knowledge in accounts;—and as she grew up, I would have her instructed in geometry, that she might know something of the contagious countries;—but above all, Sir Anthony, she should be mistress of orthodoxy, that she might not mis-spell, and mis-pronounce words so shamefully as girls usually do; and likewise that she might reprehend the true meaning of what she is saying. This, Sir Anthony, is what I would have a woman know;—and I don't think there is a superstitious article in it.

Sir ANTHONY Well, well, Mrs. Malaprop, I will dispute the point no further with you; though I must confess, that you are a truly moderate and polite arguer, for almost every third word you say is on my side of the question. But, Mrs. Malaprop, to the more important point in debate—you say you have no objection to my proposal?

Mrs. MALAPROP None, I assure you. I am under no positive engagement with Mr. Acres, and as Lydia is so obstinate against him, perhaps your son may have better success.

Sir ANTHONY Well, madam, I will write for the boy directly. He knows not a syllable

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Comment [2]: Sir Anthony extends on the idea of pages in a book as leaves to connect books metaphorically with the Biblical tree of knowledge and its sinful "fruit."

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Comment [3]: Sir Anthony's question is central to the play. Mrs. Malaprop is a model of ignorance though she doesn't seem to know it. Unlike her aunt, Lydia is interested in reading, particularly novels. In Sheridan's time, long works of fiction were a relatively new form of literature, and they were regarded as potentially dangerous for young, naive readers—particularly female readers. In fact, Sir Anthony thinks the books Lydia prefers are full of "diabolical knowledge."

of this yet, though I have for some time had the proposal in my head. He is at present with his regiment.

Mrs. MALAPROP We have never seen your son, Sir Anthony; but I hope no objection on his side.

Sir ANTHONY Objection!—let him object if he dare!—No, no, Mrs. Malaprop, Jack knows that the least demur puts me in a frenzy directly. My process was always very simple—in their younger days, 'twas “Jack, do this”;—if he demurred, I knocked him down—and if he grumbled at that, I always sent him out of the room.

Mrs. MALAPROP Ay, and the properest way, o' my conscience!—nothing is so conciliating to young people as severity.—Well, Sir Anthony, I shall give Mr. Acres his discharge, and prepare Lydia to receive your son's invocations;—and I hope you will represent her to the captain as an object not altogether illegible.

Sir ANTHONY Madam, I will handle the subject prudently.—Well, I must leave you; and let me beg you, Mrs. Malaprop, to enforce this matter roundly to the girl.—Take my advice—keep a tight hand: if she rejects this proposal, clap her under lock and key; and if you were just to let the servants forget to bring her dinner for three or four days, you can't conceive how she'd come about. [Exit.]

(*The Rivals* by Richard Brinsley Sheridan was first performed at Covent Garden Theatre on January 17, 1775.)