Social Behaviour and Gossip in *The School for Scandal*

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Our research focuses on how gossip shaped society in the eighteenth century through newspapers and word of mouth. We are motivated to study the impact that gossip has within the social world of Richard Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* because of the relevance its depiction continues to have in the twenty-first century across the globe. Through analysis of the edited script of the play, we believe that Sheridan used *The School for Scandal* to mirror contemporary London society. In Sheridan's play, gossip is manipulated through word of mouth and through newspapers to correct social behaviour in ways that still hold true to this day. To support our hypothesis, we are performing a contextual analysis of the play by relating it to further research into the historical, literary, and psychological prevalence of gossip; this research takes the form of published case studies and articles. Our findings show that gossip is not only used to manipulate others but also ensures that everyone conforms to the desired societal norms. When an individual is exposed negatively for not conforming to these norms, they become vulnerable to punishment, thereby setting a vivid example for other members of society (Anderson et al.). The fear of becoming isolated from society forces individuals to align with the predetermined societal standards set by society.

To maintain a structured society, individuals manipulate gossip in four different ways. First, one could use gossip through influence; thus, it is perceived to exert one individual's power over another's, forcing them to act within the societal norm (Hofman). Second, gossip can also be seen as knowledge if the gossiper is believed to be a dependable source of information, so that each snippet adds to that person's reputation for being "in-the-know," reliable, and trustworthy. Third, friendship can be gained and solidarity affirmed when gossip brings people together in the act of verbally separating a certain individual apart from the group. Lastly, gossip provides entertainment that allows for individuals to derive mental stimulation (often in the form of amusement) from contributing or listening to gossip (Peng et al.). We believe that these four factors (which prevail across a social spectrum; Al-Hindawi and Mirza) play an important role in correcting social behaviour in that they tamper with the psychological realm of each individual, and changes how one thinks and feels by altering what one believes. It is also important to apply these four factors to further consideration of the ways newspapers gained popularity in the late seventeenth century (Peacey). Specifically, they become a power tool for the spread of gossip within *The School for Scandal*. In our analysis, Lady Sneerwell emerges rapidly as an embodiment of power who uses newspapers to spread influential information to all polite society (Loughry and Tosi). Newspapers were accredited as a valid source in their own right, making it difficult (as with the current journalistic practice of citing tweets from supposedly "ordinary people") to trace back to a verifiable source. The prevalence of gossip is still a real and persuasive force, prevalent from when the play was written to present day. By understanding gossip in a fictional world, we can come to understand and find better ways to cope with gossip in our own lives, as it continues to be a successful instrument and manifestation of power within the twenty-first century.

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[1] With contributions from fellow students Rachel Cook and Jaiden Ivanochko.

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