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Excerpt from The Council Fire

At the close of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century Richard Brinsley Sheridan was one of the most conspicuous figures in England. The most successful dramatist of his day; among the first of parliamentary orators; one of the last surviving members of the Literary Club, to which he was elected on the nomination of Dr. Johnson; the most brilliant of conversationalists, the trusted friend of the Prince of Wales, the ally of Fox, the associate of Burke, the successor of Garrick in the management of Drury Lane, he tilled the public eye as did scarcely a man of his epoch. His family was eminent and has remained illustrious, and his personal adventures were romantic enough to have supplied the materials for his dramas. Among those who paid him extravagant eulogy was Byron, who recorded in an often quoted passage of his diary: 'Whatever Sheridan has done or chosen to do has been, par excellence, always the best of its kind. He has written the best comedy (School for Scandal); the best opera (The Duenna - in my mind far before that St. Giles's lampoon, The Beggar's Opera), the best farce (The Critic - it is only too good for an after-piece), and the best address (Monologue on Garrick), - and to crown all, delivered the very best oration (the famous Begum Speech) ever conceived or heard in this country.' In a vein of similar exaggeration it was popularly but erroneously affirmed that the same evening that heard him deliver the famous Begum speech witnessed the performance at Covent Garden and Drury Lane respectively of two of his dramatic masterpieces.

Of the aspects in which he presented himself to his contemporaries, several remain unobscured.

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