

The Art of Puffing: Now and Then

Rima Bhattacharya

Department of Humanities and Social Science, Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, India

Abstract

This paper deals with Sheridan's play *The Critic* which was produced on October 30th, 1779. My objective is to explore the attitude of the unblushing advertising agent, Mr. Puff, one of the stock characters presented by Sheridan in this play. The paper would discuss the shrewd comments delivered by Sheridan, on the noble art of 'puffing', whose modern version is called 'advertising'. Sheridan uses Mr. Puff to satirize the means by which the skills of the playwright are marketed in the world outside the theatre specifically in the world of advertising. Mr. Puff's swindling is strikingly in tune with some modern advertising practices. He catalogues four principles of his profession: the puff direct, the puff collateral, the puff collusive and the puff oblique, all of which involve some form of misrepresentation. The paper points out that a similar form of misrepresentation is a common scenario of the modern advertising world. The paper indulges in a comparative study between the eighteenth century and the modern trends among advertisers, based on certain authentic examples from both these periods. It further discusses the methods used by these advertisers to somehow affect the subconscious mind of the customers and mislead them.

Keywords: Puffing, Sheridan, Critic, Advertisements, Satire

"I first taught them to crowd their advertisements with panegyrical superlatives, each epithet rising above the other... from me they learned to inlay their phraseology with variegated chips of exotic metaphor.... This Sir, is, the Art of Puffing' (Sheridan, 34)

Introduction:

Sheridan's play *The Critic*, produced on October 30th, 1779, bears all the marks of his genius. In its immediate form it may come close to Garrick's *A Peep Behind the Curtain*, with the satire directed at theatrical amateurs, as Dangle and Sneer, instead of Garrick's Sir Toby Fuz and Sir Macaroni Virtu, and with Puff taking the place of Glib. However Sheridan's genius is far above Garrick's work. Sheridan's *The Critic* is not only a witty attack on poor taste and awkward dramatic construction, but an orchestration of the overlapping realities of art and life. It is both on its surface and subterranean levels, a play about perception. It raises a multitude of questions about how we should see things and how we should judge them. The concentric realities of Sheridan's play and our own sense of life promote tensions and reverberations that are intuitively felt and demand rational analysis. It is a work in which the stage becomes not only a 'mirror of Nature', but a mirror of itself and of the very process of perception. This process of perception regarding 'puffs' or 'advertisements' have been satirized by Sheridan in his play *The Critic* through the character of Mr. Puff.

Material and Discussion:

Mr. Puff is one of the most likeable villains who ever strutted across the English stage; he is Falstaff, Bottom, and Autolycus rolled into one and given a new suit of clothes. Quite glibly he undercuts himself with self-revelation at every turn. As for his little tricks, they are all in the finest tradition of free enterprise. Mr Puff describes himself as a

'Practitioner in panegyric... a professor in the art of Puffing' (Sheridan, 33). His job involves him in promoting various business or individuals in the newspapers by advertisement or by placing articles. As such he represents the forerunner and a parody of both the advertising and public relation agency. He is presented as an unscrupulous rogue, capable of saying anything in his own or in his client's favour. He catalogues four principles of his profession: the puff direct, the puff collateral, the puff collusive and the puff oblique, all of which involve some form of misrepresentation. If this lampoon of the public relations and the advertising industries is somewhat cruel it reflects a general view that persists to this day, that what appears in press releases, in articles of the press, and in advertising should be treated with suspicion.

Sheridan uses Puff to satirize the means by which the skills of a playwright are used in the world outside of the theatre, specifically in the world of advertising. Sheridan's actors were required to keep the straightest of faces, while hearing themselves fulsomely praised by name for their performances, as in Mr. Puff's illustration of his advertising skills: "Mr. DODD was astonishingly great... That universal and judicious actor Mr. PALMER, perhaps never appeared to more advantage than in the COLONEL, but it is not in the power of language to do justice to Mr. KING!" (Sheridan, 40). The special beauty of this for Sheridan's audience was that the real Mr. Dodd (Dangle) was listening to his own praise, and the real Mr. King (Puff) praising himself. Sheridan does not forget the stage crew, giving them a chance to make their presence on the stage really felt. De Louthembourg, designer for *The Critic* in real life, becomes a character in the play when Mr. Puff praises his abilities in his model advertising: "The miraculous power of Mr. DE LOUTHERBOURG's pencil is universally acknowledged!" (Sheridan, 40). Sheridan was laughing at himself in all this. His advertisements for Drury Lane were every bit as hyperbolic as Puff's, and it was he, after all, who underwrote de Louthembourg's dominant role there.

Puff explains that he "does as much business in that way as any six of the fraternity in town" (Sheridan, 33) and that it is his talent for "puffing" up language to extraordinary heights that helps Puff to make a living from the press. For example, Puff has taught advertisers to employ "panegyric superlatives" to create appealing images of their products and capture consumers' interest; he has also used his talent for "puffing" to create false newspaper advertisements in which he pretended to be bankrupt, an invalid, and a widower in order to live upon the charity of credulous readers. Mr. Puff's swindling can be identified with the practice of deceptive advertising which is prevalent even in modern advertising world. Conceptually, deception exists when an advertisement is introduced into the perpetual process of some audience and the output of that perpetual process (1) differs from the reality of the situation and (2) affects buying behaviour to the detriment of the consumer.

In Sheridan's play *The Critic*, Mr. Puff was at first obliged to take advantage of the benevolence of others, but his conscience hurt him. One is bound to come across numerous such advertisements regarding charity and donations in the eighteenth century newspapers¹. Mr. Puff's false charity advertisements are equivalent to modern charity frauds where people are exposed to a variety of different solicitations urging them to make a financial contribution to a worthy cause. However, Sheridan's satire on advertisements for charity causes had been criticized in

¹Eighteenth Century newspaper advertisement for charity: Saturday, 3 November 1739. Yesterday was preached at Saint Margaret's Church Westminster, the annual Sermon commonly called the Oatmeal Woman's Sermon, being left by Mrs. Joan Bennet, who sold oatmeal. She died on the 6th of May, 1674, and left 40*l.* per annum to twenty poor widows of St. Margaret, Westminster, to be the ancientest and soberest livers, to be divided quarterly. Likewise twenty shillings for a sermon yearly on All-souls Day; 20*s.* for a treat to the Trustees of the said charity; and 20*s.* to the Officers of the said Church. (*Read's Weekly Journal or British-Gazetteer*). (Taken from Rictor Norton, *Early Eighteenth-Century Newspaper Reports: A Sourcebook, "Charity"*, 28th February, 2009, 4.00 pm. <http://grubstreet.rictornorton.co.uk/charity.html>)

the First Review of the play, *The Critic* which appeared on 1st November, 1779 in the *Morning Chronicle*: “The character of Puff is mixture of Spatter in the *English Merchant*, and Bayes in the *Rehearsal*, with some additional colouring. The ridicule upon newspapers is in many cases very just, but in the warmth of resentment; Mr. Sheridan has been carried too far. Possibly the satire on advertisements addressed to the affluent and humane, may deprive some worthy objects of that relief which their distresses might otherwise receive from the benevolent....”²

In due course, Mr. Puff graduated to stratagems like the ‘puff direct’. He would write and publish reviews of plays even before they were produced. The eighteenth century newspapers and periodicals³ were filled with such review and theatrical criticism⁴.

The modern theatre and film reviews are not very different from these. They too, seem to be adequately biased and prefer to cover up theatrical and cinematographic flaws with so-called ‘unseen merits’. One can go through the Theatre Review of a production of ‘*The Winter’s Tale*’ for getting an account of this. The reviewer Chester Higgins Jr. writes for *The New York Times* on the Bridge Company’s production of “*A Winter’s Tale*,” enacted by Rebecca Hall, Josh Hamilton and directed by Sam Mendes: “The first 90 minutes of this “*Winter’s Tale*” have a pure emotional strength that leave you open mouthed and teary eyed. The Director, Sam Mendes, brings to the production an intimate understanding of unhappy households, where the taint of bile stains even the nursery. At the same time, though, the mise-en-scene conjures up a world of ticking clocks, tolling bells and a pregnant, omnipresent darkness, suggesting that no matter what a character’s immediate crisis or joys, time will transform everything – for good or for ill. The feelings embodied by Simon Russell Beale’s Leontes and those around him -- particularly the splendid Rebecca Hall as

²Taken from LCRT (*Last Chance to Read*). *The Morning Chronicle, and London Advertiser*. Issue no: 3261. Published and printed by W. Woodfall, 1799. (<<http://www.lastchancetoread.com/docs/1799-11-01-the-morning-chronicle-and-london-advertiser.aspx>>).

³Examples of Eighteenth century periodicals: 1) *The London Review of English and Foreign Literature*, William Kenrick, ed. (Jan 1775 – July 1780), monthly. Gave habitual bad reviews of Covent Garden and Drury Lane.

2) *The World, or Fashionable Advertiser*, Charles Este (1 Jan. - 26 Nov. m1787), daily. Became *The World* 27 Nov. 1787-30 June 1794. Contributors were Robert Merry, Hannah Cowley, M.P. Andrews, Edward Jerningham, and R. B. Sheridan.

3) *Have At You All; or, The Drury-Lane Journal*, Madame Roxana Termagant [i.e., Bonnel Thornton] (16 Jan.- 9 April 1752; succeeded as *The Spring-Garden Journal* 16 Nov.- 7 Dec. 1752). Some essays or theatrical criticism of Thornton. (Taken from *The Eighteenth Century Periodical and the Theatre: 1715-1803*. 27th February, 2009, 5 p.m. <<http://www.auburn.edu/pkrb/periodical%20theatre.html>>).

⁴Example of theatre reviews published in the eighteenth century newspaper: Monday, 17 August, 1752. On Tuesday last information was laid before Justice Fielding by a tradesman in Westminster, that one of his apprentices had robbed him, in order to equip himself for acting a play, and that the said play was to be acted that evening by several apprentices, and other idle persons, at the old Tennis-Court in James-Street. Upon this the justice dispatched Mr Welch in the evening with a party of soldiers to apprehend the persons concerned in the representation of that play, which was the *Tragedy of Venice Preserved*. Jaffier, Pierse, Belvidera, and most of the other principle characters were taken, and some of them, particularly Belvidera, were brought in their theatrical attire before the Justice. The men all appeared to be young apprentices, and the woman a young milliner [sic]; wherefore the justice was unwilling to proceed against them as rogues and vagabonds, as they are made by the last Vagrant Act in which case they must have been committed to Bridewell, which might have proved their ruin; He treated them therefore as guilty of an unlawful assembly, and a common nuisance; for which they were either bound to their good behaviour, or committed for want of sureties, and soon after discharged. It was sworn before the Justice, that Sunday had been the usual day of rehearsing their parts. (*General Advertiser*). (Taken from Rictor Norton. *Early Eighteenth-Century Newspaper Reports: A Sourcebook*, “Theatrical Performances”. 20th February, 2009, 4:50 pm <<http://grubstreet.rictornorton.co.uk/theatre.htm>>).

Hermione, his ill-used queen, and Sinead Cusack as the fierce Paulina, Hermione's lioness of a friend—scorch with their pain. Yet the show tingles with a subliminal awareness that life goes on and mends itself, even after earthquakes.”⁵

Next Mr.Puff talks about the ‘puff preliminary’ which is an advertisement concealed in the form of a caution. Puff publishes an advertisement in the *Morning Post*, warning a beautiful lady, Lady Fanny Fete to be on her guard against a dangerous character, Sir Flimsy Gossamer, who in fact, is his client. Sir Flimsy Gossamer desires to see, both his and the lady's name in print together, which would serve him as an accomplishment of gallantry. Modern cigarette advertisements are the best example of this kind, where the caution message is almost insignificant and in many cases acts as an inducement for the customer. The FTC has stated that one of the purposes of tobacco advertising is to undermine the health warnings. According to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the advertisements and handouts distributed by the tobacco industry may be aimed at confusing the public: “Not only are most cigarette advertisements filled with this rich, thematic imagery, many may even more strongly divert or distract attention away from the health consequences of smoking by portraying smoking as compatible with or, at least, as associated with a wide range of rigorous athletic or other strenuous activities”⁶. Thus the warning, “Cigarette smoking is injurious to health” could never be changed in to something like “Cigarette smoking not allowed”.

Following this, Mr. Puff elucidates his next genre of advertising or puffing known as ‘puff collateral’. For this he composes stories wherein he sneaks in advertisements that seem glaringly out of place. He recites a story he wrote about George Bon-Mot “sauntering down St. James's-street,” where he met Lady Mary Myrtle and said: “ I just saw a picture of you, in a new publication called THE CAMP MAGAZINE, which, bye the bye, is a devilish clever thing, and is sold at No. 3, on the right-hand of the way, two doors from the printing-office, the corner of Ivy-lane, Paternoster-row, price only one shilling!” (Sheridan, 42).

This is remarkably reminiscent of the advertising practice known as “product placement,” in which corporations pay to have characters in films use their clearly marked products. Many corporations selling things such as cars, food, and clothing use product placement as a means of exposing their products to a captive audience. Mr. Puff also reflects a modern trend among advertisers when he describes his technique “The Puff Collusive,” in which he acts “in the guise of determined hostility” to presumably warn the public about the moral dangers of a new work of art. In this case he gives the example of a poem: “Here you see the two strongest inducements are held forth; first, that nobody ought to read it; and secondly, that everybody buys it.” (Sheridan, 43). When one considers that furore over certain books (such as *The Catcher in the Rye* or *The Satanic Verses*), television shows (such as *N.Y.P.D. Blue* or *South Park*), or albums by artists as different as Elvis Presley and Eminem, one sees just how prescient Sheridan was in his creation of Puff and all his “various sorts” of “Puffing.” In addition to the large number of book reviews⁷ that were

⁵Theatre Review of *The Winter's Tale*: Ben Brantley. *Alas, Poor Leontes (That God King Has Not Been Himself Of Late)*. 23rd February, 2009, 6.00 pm
(<http://theater2nytimes.com/2009/02/03/theater/review/23winter.html>)

⁶(Taken from Larry Breed. *Strategies of the Tobacco Industry*. 17th February, 2009, 3.00 p.m. Taken from (<http://www.tobacco.org/resources/history/strategies1b.html>).

⁷Book review published in eighteenth century newspaper: 1 January 1726. **The Life and Action of MOLL FLANDERS:** Containing, her birth and education in Newgate; her ambition to be a gentlewoman; her being taken into a gentleman's family; her being debauch'd by her master's eldest son, and married to the younger; her marriage to her own brother; her going over with him to, and settling in Virginia; her return to England; her marriage to an highwayman, who pass'd for a Person of Quality; her being reduc'd, and turning thief; her taking some plate from an house on fire; her turning informer; her robbing in man's clothes; a singular adventure that happen'd to her at

published in the eighteenth century newspapers; a large number of advertisements on bawdy literature⁸ could also be traced. Lastly, Mr. Puff talks about the 'puff oblique', which serves as a kind of political or legal advertisement universally found in all newspapers. Puff uses this kind of advertisement to draw crowds at public places where political speeches are delivered. He also uses them to recommend a promotion or reward for any army officer. Such legal advertisements have been published in many eighteenth century newspapers.⁹

Eighteenth-century advertisements were frequently referred to as 'puffs,' and in the market with no regulations on advertising, 'puffing' was an appropriate term. Most advertisements glossed over facts in favour of grandiose claims. Advertisements in the eighteenth-century newspapers were mostly without graphics except in some rare cases and were related to medicine, the press, or commerce.¹⁰ The famous Anodyne Necklace was one of the Rare Advertisements to Contain Graphic.

The 'puffs' or 'advertisements of the eighteenth century newspapers both reflected and affected the society of Sheridan's time. Moral considerations apart, no more desirable lot can well be imagined for a human being than that he should be included in the ranks of a highly-civilized aristocracy at the culminating moment of its vigour. A society so strongly based, within its own borders, that it could safely permit absolute liberty of thought and speech. The members of the society were able to believe that the interests of the state are identical with their own, and at the same time were so privileged that they were sure to get the best of everything they wanted. Sheridan's audience who patronized Drury Lane and Covent Garden were men and women of the upper class who liked seeing themselves depicted on stage. An intelligent reader will have realized the salient weaknesses of eighteenth Century London society by the time he has finished reading Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* and *The Critic*. In 1763, Horace Walpole penned a bitterly sarcastic

Bartholomew-Fair; her being apprehended, committed to Newgate, try'd and cast for her life; her obtaining transportation; her meeting with her Quality-Husband in the same condition; her being transported with him, her second settlement, and happy success in Virginia, and removal into Ireland; her estate, penitence, age, death, burial, elegy, and epitaph. Adorn'd with cuts suitable to each chapter. London: Printed and Sold by T. Read, behind the Sun-Tavern in Fleet-Street [*Weekly Journal, or The British Gazetteer*] (Rictor Norton. *Early Eighteenth-Century Newspaper Reports: A Sourcebook*, "Book Advertisements". 4 March 2009, 8:00 pm. <<http://gurbstreet.rictornorton.co.uk/book.html>>).

⁸Example of reports written on bawdy literature in eighteenth century newspaper which almost seem to be advertisements: 6 March 1732 Monday, March 13. Jos. Taylor, committed to Tothill-fields Bridewell, as an idle vagrant, and for hawking scandalous, lewd, or obscene pamphlets, was yesterday brought before the R. Hon. the L. Raymond, at his chambers in Serjeants Inn; who, upon hearing the matter, remanded him again to Bridewell, to be kept to hard labour. C. – My brother DJ. mentions the Pamphlet called the *Fair Concubine, or, The secret History of Vanella*, which he had puff'd in his paper of Mar. 9. and 11. and very tenderly here says, his Lordship ordered the prisoner to be continued in custody 'till next term. (*Grub-street-Journal*) [The book was originally published in 1675] (Rictor Norton. *Early Eighteenth-Century Newspaper Reports: A Sourcebook*, "Bawdy Literature". 3rd March 2009, 7:00 pm. <<http://grubstreet.rictornorton.co.uk/bawdy.html>>)

⁹Example of advertisement on libel and sedition in eighteenth century newspaper: 14-18 March, 1726 [i.e. 1727 *New Style*] Whereas some villainous and evil-minded persons, did, on Saturday Night Last, very much abuse and deface the Statue of his present Majesty on Horseback, lately set up in Grosvenor-Square, by tearing off the Left Leg at the Thigh, and cutting the Neck of the said Statue, and also the Rein of the Bridle, and by wrenching off the Sword and Truncheon, (both which they carried away.) Now this is to give Notice, that if any person shall discover the person or persons concerned in the same Fact (so as such Person or Persons shall be convicted thereof) to Mr Robert Andrews, near the Blue-Boar in Great Russell-Street, Bloomsbury, the Party making such Discovery, shall on such conviction receive from Sir Richard Grovenor [sic], Bart, the Sum of One Pounds, to be paid by the said Robert Andrews. March 16, 1726. Robert-Andrews. [*The London Gazette*]. (Rictor Norton. *Early Eighteenth-Century Newspaper Reports: A Sourcebook*, "Sedition and Libel". 8th March, 2009, 6:00 pm <<http://grubstreet.rictornorton.co.uk/Sedition.html>>)

¹⁰See A Brief History of Eighteenth Century ads. 7th March, 2009, 3:42 pm (<http://www.umich.edu/~ece/student_projects/advertising/admiddle.html>).

picture of the gentlemen's year.¹¹ Gambling had reached monstrous heights. As for the ladies, toilette, gallantry, play, balls and spectacles absorbed all their time. As for their costumes, fashionable headgear on full dress occasions reached the height of absurdity.¹² Nor were the dresses much less elaborate. No wonder they were affected by the 'puffs' on latest fashion published in the eighteenth century newspapers. Laxity in the observance of marriage vows, excessive wine-drinking, extravagant expenditure on luxuries was the order of the day. Voltaire once described the English as a hogshead of beer, the top of which was froth, the middle excellent. According to him, Sheridan's audience did not belong to the "middle" but to the "froth". Their manners required adequate reformation which is clear from a study of the eighteenth century newspaper advertisements.¹³

Conclusion:

Sheridan in his play *The Critic* uses the character of Mr. Puff in order to expose the traps that were created by 'puffers' of the eighteenth century in order to mislead people. Interestingly, the traps which modern advertisers use to attract customers are not very different from these. Sheridan's play *The Critic*, when seen from such a perspective seems to be a very modern and contemporary play. Advertising by its very nature receives wide exposure. Furthermore, it presumably has an effect on society's value, life-style, and on society's economic well being. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that, if not misused, advertisements can act as a force for improving society and alleviating social problems.

¹¹In 1763, Horace Walpole wrote to Lord Hertford: "The beginning of October one is certain that everybody will be at New market and the Duke of Cumberland will lose and Shafto win two or three thousand pounds...The parliament opens and everybody is bribed; and the new establishment is perceived to be composed of adamant people. November passes with two or three self-murders and new play." (Taken from Horace Walpole and John Wright. *The Letters of Horace Walpole: Earl of Oxford*. London: R. Bentley, 1840, p. 337).

¹² Example of latest fashion from the eighteenth century newspaper which could have inspired the use of headgears: Monday, 27 July, 1724, L. Morris, at the Blue Peruke next the King's Arms Tavern on Ludgate-Hill, does accommodate Gentlemen with Perukes at the following prices, viz. The lightest Tyes that are made are intirely neat strong English Human Hairs at 4l. 10s. those that are very light and but little inferior at 4l. from that price down to 50s. proportionable to their colour and bulk. He declines making a tedious harangue as is usual with advertisers, and believes he speaks more to the purpose when he offers to forfeit any of his perukes that is, by any of the trade, proved to be any ways adulterated; or to exchange any Gentleman's peruke that does not answer their expectation, and that has not been apparently abus'd; his profits (as he has computed) are but small, but the encouragement he has and still hopes to meet from those Gentlemen that are pleas'd to make use of him, may make his returns so considerable as fully to answer the end of this undertaking. (*The Daily Journal*). (Taken from Rictor Norton. *Early Eighteenth-Century Newspaper Reports: A Sourcebook*, "The Latest Fashions". 3rd March 2009, 4:00 pm. <<http://grubstreet.rictornorton.co.uk/fashions.html>>).

¹³ Example of report from the eighteenth century newspapers on the reformation of manners of the people: 13-15 January 1719. The Societies for Reformation of Manners in the Cities of London and Westminster have prosecuted the following number of offenders, from the 1st of December 1717 to the 1st of December 1718. (*White-hall Evening-Post*). (Taken from Rictor Norton. *Early Eighteenth-Century Newspaper Reports: A Sourcebook*, "The Reformation of Manners" 19th February, 2009, 6:00 pm. <<http://grubstreet.rictornorton.co.uk/vice.html>>).

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