

Joseph Surface

Joseph is Charles' brother, cunning and ambitious. He wants to marry Maria because of her money, and he plots with Lady Sneerwell to make this happen. He is promiscuous and propositions Lady Teazle to have an affair. He loves money and he refuses to help his poor relative, Stanley (really Sir Oliver in disguise), telling him that he has no money, even though this is not true.

Charles Surface



Charles is one of Sir Oliver's nephews, madly in love with Maria. He is a young man who likes to spend money; he has a kind heart and is open about his flaws. He is grateful for the help his uncle provides and refuses to sell his portrait out of respect even when Mr. Premium (really Sir Oliver in disguise) offers to pay a fortune for it. Because of this, Charles is considered to be the worthy nephew.

Sir Peter (Pete) Teazle

Sir Pete is an old gentlemen, very rich, who marries a young girl. He takes Joseph's side and tells Sir Oliver about Charles' behavior. He wants to separate from his wife because he thinks that she spends too much money; in the separation, he is willing to let her a large sum of money as a form of compensation. Ultimately, however, he decides against breaking up with his wife, and tries to reconcile with her.

Lady Teazle

She is Sir Pete's young wife, described as very beautiful but vain, with a passion for having fashionable clothes. She and her husband have their little arguments and Lady Teazle thinks about having an affair with Joseph; however, she decides against it when she hears her husband talking about the money he intends to leave her.

Maria

Maria is a young girl, one of the only characters who doesn't like to gossip. She can be viewed as a symbol for what is pure and good. She loves Charles, but Joseph tries to break them up; he almost succeeds when rumors are spread about an affair between Lady Sneerwell and Charles.

Lady Sneerwell

Lady Sneerwell is a widow, a wealthy woman who likes Charles and who is willing to do anything to break up Charles and Maria. She finds an ally in Joseph, and together they start to scheme. She is known for her tendency to spread rumors; because of this, she is very popular in her social circle.

Mrs. Candour



She is one of Lady Sneerwell's friends who also likes to spread rumors. She is a hypocrite because she affirms that spreading rumors is bad, even though she does this too.

Snake

She is Lady Sneerwell's servant who helps her by spreading her rumors.

Moses

He is one of Charles' money lenders, who helps Sir Oliver get in touch with his nephew.

Minor Characters

Mrs. Candour

A high-society lady who spends her time spreading rumors, Mrs. Candour pretends to be good-natured and honest, but is actually just as malicious as the other gossips. Her name ironically references the word “candor,” another word for honesty.

Sir Benjamin Backbite

A young gentleman who hopes to marry Maria, Sir Benjamin spends his time spreading gossip about members of society. He is also an amateur poet and writes rhymes mocking people he knows. The word “backbite” means to say unkind things about someone who is not present.

Mr. Crabtree

A gossip who invents extremely specific details when spreading false stories, Mr. Crabtree is hoping to help his nephew Sir Benjamin woo Maria. A “crabtree” is a tree that produces only sour apples (crabapples), and so his name is a comment on this character’s own sourness.

Careless

One of Charles Surface's drinking buddies, Careless (true to his name) is even less responsible than Charles.

Mrs. Clackitt

An infamous gossipmonger who never appears in the play in person. A "clacket" is a loud noise made by striking two objects together.

Miss Nicely

An acquaintance with a good reputation who the gossipmongers say is pregnant out of wedlock and must marry her footman.

Miss Letitia Piper

A woman Crabtree says was falsely accused of giving birth to twins out of wedlock.

Miss Vermillion

An acquaintance mocked by the group of gossipmongers for the way she wears makeup. "Vermillion" is a shade of red that could be used as blush.

Mrs. Prim

An acquaintance mocked by the group of gossipmongers. To be “prim” means to be stiff and overly proper.

Mrs. Evergreen

An acquaintance mocked by the group of gossipmongers for trying to look young forever—that is, to stay “evergreen.”

Miss Simper

An acquaintance mocked by the group of gossipmongers. To “simper” is to smile in a silly or overly self-deprecating way.