

She Stoops to Conquer



by Oliver Goldsmith

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She Stoops to Conquer: Introduction

Most everyone has been the target of practical jokes, and most have been out on blind dates. Oliver Goldsmith bases his 1773 comedy *She Stoops to Conquer* on two such incidents, creating a complicated, convoluted plot based on miscommunication and mistaken identities. At the same time, Goldsmith explores a series of ethical and aesthetic issues.

Audiences responded favorably to *She Stoops to Conquer* when Goldsmith's play debuted in 1773 and have continued to do so ever since. Significantly, from its debut, it earned popular approval and remains today one of the few 18th century plays to be regularly performed for modern audiences. While the play proves funny and entertaining, it also marks an important step in the development of comic theory. Significantly, Goldsmith's play changed the face of comic theatre, eclipsing the popular sentimental comedy of the day, and inaugurated a new style of laughing comedy.

For those who believe the play's plot seems too far-fetched, Oscar James Campbell noted in an introduction to *Chief Plays of Goldsmith and Sheridan: The School for Scandal, She Stoops to Conquer, The Rivals* that the "central idea of *She Stoops to Conquer* was suggested to Goldsmith by an incident of his boyhood. He had been told that the house of a Mr. Featherstone was an inn and directed there for entertainment. Goldsmith, always easily deceived by a practical joke, had gone to the squire's house and treated him as a host. Out of this situation grew his characters and their games of cross-purposes." Other autobiographical elements in the play include resemblances between the young, vagabond Goldsmith who spent two years on a walking tour of Europe and the irresponsible, irrepressible Tony Lumpkin. Finally, Goldsmith, like his character Marlow, was at ease with serving women, but stiff in the company of proper ladies, in part because of insecurities about his physical appearance.

She Stoops to Conquer: Oliver Goldsmith Biography

Born November 10, 1728, in Ballymahon, Ireland, Goldsmith was from a poor but not needy family, supported by his father's position as a minister. The family had expected that Goldsmith would attend university, but the marriage of an older sister required his tuition money as part of her sizable dowry. In 1745, Goldsmith entered Trinity College in Dublin under the sizar system, which allowed poor students to study in exchange for work. Perhaps because of his tenuous economic circumstances, Goldsmith did not distinguish himself academically. He failed to take his studies entirely seriously, violated college rules, and even took part in a riot in which several people died.

Completing his B.A. in 1749, Goldsmith attempted various careers, including the ministry and medicine. From 1753-56, he wandered across the British continent before arriving in London. There, Goldsmith embarked on a career writing reviews and essays for such periodicals as Ralph Griffith's *Monthly Review* and Tobias Smollett's *Critical Review*, as well as proofreading for the novelist and printer Samuel Richardson.

The first book to appear under Goldsmith's name proved a notable success. Entitled *The Citizen of the World; or, Letters from a Chinese Philosopher Residing in London to His Friends in the East*, it began as a series of essays in the *Publick Ledger*. Goldsmith, masquerading under the identity of an Asian visitor, satirized the faults and foibles of fashionable London society. The work brought Goldsmith to the attention of the city's literary elite, particularly members of The Club, which included writers like Samuel Johnson, James Boswell, Edmund Burke, and Thomas Percy, the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds, and the actor David Garrick. The work also brought Goldsmith literary opportunities, but poor money management drove him to hack writing for survival, a pattern that unfortunately continued throughout his life.

In addition to periodical prose, Goldsmith wrote in various styles and genres. One of his most famous works, *The Deserted Village: A Poem*, laments the loss of Britain's rural lifestyle. Though politically a conservative Tory, Goldsmith condemned the enclosure of public land by wealthy landowners and the agricultural revolution, which drove small farmers off their land. Published in 1770, critics term the work a "loco-descriptive" poem, in which the narrator walks through and describes various natural and rustic settings, setting down in verse the thoughts these travels inspire.

Two of Goldsmith's other famous works stem from his aversion for Sentimentalism. According to Oscar James Campbell, Sentimentalism "was founded on the belief that man is innately good and that he can be softened into virtue through tears which are made to flow from contemplation of undeserved suffering." In Goldsmith's 1766 novel *The Vicar of Wakefield*, the excessive sufferings of the deserving Vicar and his family call to mind the sufferings of Job, and critics today read the work as a parody of Sentimental fiction.

In his plays, Goldsmith challenged the Sentimental comedy, which had developed in response to the perceived immorality of Restoration theatre. Goldsmith articulated his position in an "Essay on the Theatre; or, A

Comparison between Laughing and Sentimental Comedy." The article differentiates between Sentimental comedy, called so only because it—like Dante's *Divine Comedy*—has a happy ending, and the more modern, humorous "laughing" comedy. In 1768, a Sentimental comedy by Hugh Kelly opened the same night as *The Good Natur'd Man: A Comedy*, Goldsmith's first play. These competing productions offered theatre audiences two completely different forms of comic entertainment. According to Campbell, Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* proved innovative and "opened the door" to a new kind of comedy.

In 1773, Goldsmith presented *She Stoops to Conquer*. Though generally well-received, not everyone applauded Goldsmith's comedy—advocates of Sentimental comedy like Horace Walpole attacked the play for lacking a moral lesson. Still, audiences in general approved and today it remains Goldsmith's most popular work.

She Stoops to Conquer: Summary

Prologue

Mr. Woodward, a contemporary comic actor, walks on stage weeping at the death of comedy. His last hope is that Goldsmith's play will make him laugh and revive the comic arts. (This prologue was written by the era's foremost actor and producer, David Garrick).

Act I, Scene i

Mr. Hardcastle has selected for his daughter's husband someone neither have met, the son of his old friend, Sir Charles Marlow. Kate fears she will not like him because her father described him as handsome but reserved.

Act I, Scene ii

At the Three Pigeons Tavern, Hardcastle's stepson, Tony Lumpkin, sings with his drinking buddies. The landlord interrupts, saying that two London gentlemen have lost their way. As a joke, Tony tells the men, Marlow and Hastings, that they remain far from their destination, Hardcastle's house. Then, Tony directs them to his stepfather's house, describing it as an inn, run by an eccentric innkeeper who fancies himself a gentleman.

Act II, Scene i

Hardcastle expects a visit from his prospective son-in-law, Marlow, and explains to the servants how they are to behave. Because the Hardcastles seldom see company, their servants are farmhands and become confused when Hardcastle explains their duties.

Marlow explains to Hastings that while he can be affable and boisterous with serving women and barmaids, he remains painfully shy among proper ladies.

Tricked by Tony, Marlow and Hastings mistake Hardcastle for a common innkeeper. Instead of treating him like a country gentleman, they behave rudely.

Hastings meets Miss Constance Neville, the niece of Mrs. Hardcastle, and is surprised to find her in an inn. She corrects his mistake, explaining that this is not the Buck's Head Inn but Hardcastle's house. Hastings urges her to elope with him. Constance hedges, reluctant to leave behind her inheritance of jewels, which Mrs. Hardcastle greedily guards. Hastings approves of her plan to get the jewels but suggests they tell Marlow nothing. Hastings fears that if the reserved Marlow discovers that the mansion is not an inn, his embarrassment would drive him to leave, disrupting the lovers' plan.

When Marlow joins them, Hastings introduces Constance and Miss Kate Hardcastle, whom Marlow treats with extreme formality. Left alone together, Marlow's behavior becomes even more reserved, and at the end,

Kate asks herself, "Was there ever such a sober, sentimental interview? I'm certain he scarce looked in my face the whole time." She finds Marlow attractive but wonders if anyone—perhaps she—can overcome his shyness?

When Mrs. Hardcastle joins Hastings's talk with Constance, her conversation reveals her pretensions and ignorance of fashionable London life. He pokes fun at Mrs. Hardcastle's incomplete knowledge of London's fashionable society, of which she so yearns to be a part.

Hastings and Tony converse. Hastings loves Constance and wants to marry her, while Tony detests the thought of marrying Constance but is being urged to by his mother (so that she can maintain control of Constance's jewelry). They develop a plan to help them both. Hastings asks Tony's assistance in eloping with Constance, and Tony agrees, adding that he will also help her remove her inheritance of jewels.

Act III

Hardcastle, perplexed, wonders why his friend, Sir Marlow, recommended that Kate marry young Marlow, who seems rude and unmannered. When joined by Kate, they discuss Marlow's behavior and seem to be talking about two different people. In a sense, of course, they are. When with Hardcastle, whom he believes to be an eccentric innkeeper, Marlow behaves wildly and without manners. Knowing Kate to be a fine lady, however, Marlow remains shy and reserved. Father and daughter agree to reject a match with Marlow as unsuitable, but for different reasons—Hardcastle because of Marlow's apparent wildness, Kate because of his reserve.

Tony has Constance's jewels sent to Hastings but with no explanation about where they came from or what is to be done with them. Constance, unaware, asks Mrs. Hardcastle's permission to wear them. Constance believes that with the jewels in her possession, she can abscond with them when eloping. The jewels rightly belong to Constance, and Mrs. Hardcastle has difficulty finding a reason to refuse to give them to her. Tony suggests she say the jewels have been lost. Mrs. Hardcastle does so, but when she discovers the jewels have been lost, she tells Tony. He laughs, pretending to think her still playing a scene, though he knows the jewels are lost, because he took them.

When Kate discovers that Tony tricked the visitors into believing her father's house to be an inn, she urges all to maintain the deception. Consequently, Marlow mistakes Kate for a barmaid and flirts with her, behavior to which she responds. Hardcastle enters just in time to see Marlow seizing Kate's hand. Marlow rushes off, with Hardcastle even more convinced of Marlow's impropriety, while Kate insists she can prove the respectability of Marlow, to whom she has taken a fancy.

Act IV

Constance tells Hastings that they expect a visit from Marlow's father, Sir Marlow. Marlow wonders why Hastings has sent him a casket of jewels. Worried about their safety, Marlow returns them to the woman he believes to be the landlady but who is actually one of the Hardcastles' servants. The servant returns Constance's jewels to Mrs. Hardcastle, from whom they had been taken by Tony in the first place. When Hastings enters, Marlow reveals his infatuation with the barmaid (actually Kate). Hastings asks about the jewels, only to be told that Marlow has given them to the landlady (Mrs. Hardcastle). Hastings, who must continue the inn masquerade, cannot reveal the Hardcastles' identity. Consequently, Hastings decides he and Constance must elope without the jewels.

When Hardcastle tells Marlow that his servants have gotten drunk, he is astounded to learn they did so on Marlow's instructions! As Hardcastle storms out, outraged, Marlow realizes his mistake, confusing Hardcastle's house with an inn. Kate enters, confirming Marlow's suspicion. She conceals her identity, however, continuing to present herself as a barmaid. He tells her he would marry her, in spite of her lower class origins, if society—and his father—permitted, but he suspects that cannot be. She now understands his

generous nature and sincerity.

With the jewels back in her possession, Mrs. Hardcastle urges Tony to marry Constance the following day, but unbeknownst to her, Tony already has arranged to provide horses enabling Constance and Hastings to elope. When Mrs. Hardcastle discovers their plan, she storms off, furious, ordering Constance to accompany her to her Aunt Pedigree's house, where she will be kept safe from Hastings and their unapproved marriage.

The act ends with Marlow angry with Hastings for concealing the true nature of the mansion, and Hastings incensed with Marlow for inadvertently returning Constance's jewels to Mrs. Hardcastle. Constance goes off to the supervision of Aunt Pedigree and all seems lost, until Tony insists he has a plan.

Act V, Scene i

Sir Marlow and Hardcastle enter, aware of Tony's joke and laughing about Marlow's mistaking Hardcastle's mansion for an inn.

When told of his son's love for Kate, Sir Marlow remains skeptical that his son could overcome his reserve with a proper lady. Kate, of course, fails to mention that when Marlow declared his love, her barmaid's disguise concealed her identity.

Act V, Scene ii

Instead of taking Mrs. Hardcastle and Constance to Aunt Pedigree's house, Tony leads them in a circle, until they find themselves tired, hungry, and—without realizing it—right back where they started. Mrs. Hardcastle becomes furious with Tony when she discovers his prank. Hastings, reunited with Constance, demands she leave the jewels behind and elope with him, but she refuses, urging "prudence." She hopes that, in time, she can marry with both Hardcastle's approval and her inheritance.

Act V, Scene iii

Kate, to convince Hardcastle and Sir Marlow that Marlow loves her, hides them where they can secretly observe the lovers' interview. Kate then confronts Marlow, who has come to say goodbye. Knowing that Marlow would become shy if he knew her true identity as a proper lady and Hardcastle's daughter, Kate continues her pretence of being a barmaid, Marlow passionately confesses his love, offering his heart despite the differences in their social classes. Finally, Hardcastle and Sir Marlow interrupt, revealing Kate's true identity.

Mrs. Hardcastle thinks that Constance and Hastings have eloped without the jewels, but they have not. They enter and beg Hardcastle's permission to marry. Hardcastle tells Tony that he has been of age—and therefore eligible to refuse Constance's hand in marriage—for three months. Mrs. Hardcastle has kept this secret from him in hopes of convincing them to marry so she could keep control of Constance's jewels. Tony refuses Constance, whom he does not love, enabling her to marry Hastings, whom she does love. The play ends with Mrs. Hardcastle's greedy plot foiled and both couples— Marlow and Kate and Hastings and Constance— ready to wed.

Epilogue

Spoken in Goldsmith's voice, the epilogue summarizes the action, hoping that the humorous tale of how Kate "stooped to conquer" justifies the author's abandonment of sentimental comedy.

She Stoops to Conquer: Characters

Diggory

A talkative, likeable servant with poor table manners and a broad sense of humor. Mr. Hardcastle attempts to

teach Diggory and other field servants to serve at a formal table, with comic results.

Diggory also delivers the letter which tells Tony that Hastings needs fresh horses in order to elope with Constance. Constance must read the letter aloud in front of her aunt. Realizing its contents, Constance pretends to read, instead fabricating a story about gambling. Tony's interest in gaming causes him to hand the letter to his mother, which spoils the secret elopement.

Miss Kate Hardcastle

The daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Hardcastle, Kate seeks in marriage a compatible and companionable husband, not money or status. In an effort to ascertain Marlow's true feelings, she pretends to be a barmaid to get him to announce that he loves her despite her low social position. In her intelligence and versatility, she resembles such Shakespearean heroines as Viola in *Twelfth Night* and Rosalind in *As You Like It*.

Mr. Hardcastle

Mr. Hardcastle loves the rustic life away from fashionable London, which he believes breeds "vanity and affectation." He may be stuffy, long-winded, and old-fashioned, but he affectionately humors his wife, and loves his daughter, Kate. He wants the best for her, and in selecting a good husband for her, his objective is not money or status, but her happiness. A realist, Mr. Hardcastle sees the faults of Tony Lumpkin, Mrs. Hardcastle's son by her first marriage.

Mrs. Hardcastle

A vain and greedy widower, Mrs. Hardcastle remarried after the death of her first husband. Not evil as much as selfish and misguided, she lacks self-knowledge. While her husband enjoys rural pleasures, she yearns for a fashionable London social life and complains that they never entertain.

Her love for Tony Lumpkin, her son by her first husband, spoils him and makes it impossible for her to see his shortcomings clearly. While Mr. Hardcastle wants his daughter Kate to marry for compatibility and affection, however, Mrs. Hardcastle pushes Tony to marry Constance Neville because of her inheritance and social standing. Mrs. Hardcastle's greed and lack of perception prevent her from seeing that Tony does not love Constance.

Hastings

Marlow's friend, he loves Constance Neville, who returns his affection. He wants to marry her and has the permission of her now dead father, though Mrs. Hardcastle, who covets Constance's jewels, opposes the match. Impetuous when it comes to marriage, Hastings urges Constance to abandon her inheritance and insists (impractically) that they can live on love.

While not evil, Hastings does not behave with complete honesty. On discovering the inn to be Hardcastle's house, he conceals this information from Marlow, fearing his friend will want to leave immediately and disrupt Hastings's marriage plans.

Like Tony, Hastings too can be a joker. For example, Mrs. Hardcastle tells Hastings, "There's nothing in the world I love to talk of so much as London, and the fashions, though I was never there myself." Hastings makes amusement of her ignorance of the city and the pride that makes her pretend to more knowledge than she actually has. The scene's humor comes as their dialogue reveals to the audience her confusion between the fashionable and poor parts of London.

Landlord

The proprietor of the Three Pigeons alehouse, who informs Tony that Marlow and Hastings have arrived, searching for Tony's stepfather's house. The Landlord enables Tony to trick the travelers into thinking Mr. Hardcastle's house is an inn.

Squier Lumpkin

See Tony Lumpkin

Tony Lumpkin

Mrs. Hardcastle's son by her first marriage. Tony is a prankster and enjoys such practical jokes as burning the footman's shoes and disturbing his stepfather's wig. Tony sets the play's action in motion by lying to Marlow and Hastings, telling them that Mr. Hardcastle's house is an inn.

Ignorant and spoiled, though not unlikable, Tony is more concerned with having fun than advancing his education or social standing; Mr. Hardcastle says that the only schools Tony will ever attend are "the alehouse and the stable." As he drinks with his buddies at the Three Pigeons alehouse, Tony sings a song that calls drink a better teacher than schoolmasters or preachers. Tony assures his friends that when he comes of age and inherits, he will spend his money with them drinking and gambling on horses. It is clear, however, that while Tony may come of age, he will never grow up.

Mrs. Hardcastle wants Tony to marry Constance Neville so that the family might benefit from the girl's inheritance; Tony cannot refuse until he legally comes of age. Despite his foolishness and immaturity, Tony does exhibit some character with his refusal to marry for money. Instead, he helps the lovers get the jewels and elope, though he serves his own interests as well as theirs in each case.

Marlow

Marlow is Hastings friend and the son of Sir Charles Marlow, Mr. Hardcastle's old friend. Sir Charles has recommended his son as a suitable husband for Mr. Hardcastle's daughter, Kate. One peculiarity marks Marlow's behavior: while he can aggressively woo working-class women, he has no skill with proper ladies.

In a conversation with his daughter, Kate, Mr. Hardcastle describes Marlow as a scholar: young, handsome, brave, and generous. He is also, however, "one of the most bashful and reserved young fellows in the world." These qualities set Kate against him, because "a reserved lover ... always makes a suspicious husband." Marlow's reported good looks, however, make the situation not impossible. In a soliloquy, Kate wonders: "Yet can't he be cured of his timidity by being taught to be proud of his wife?"

Sir Charles Marlow

Sir Charles Marlow has recommended his son, Marlow, as a suitable husband for his old friend Mr. Hardcastle's daughter Kate.

Constance Neville

Constance, Mrs. Hardcastle's niece, inherited jewels from her uncle, a director of the East India Company. Mrs. Hardcastle controls Constance's inheritance and she greedily hopes to keep these jewels in the family by marrying Constance to Tony, who has no romantic affection for Constance.

Constance loves and wants to marry Hastings, but is reluctant to elope and lose her jewels and Mr. Hardcastle's blessing. Not blindly materialistic, but practical, her attitude toward money and marriage resembles that of Jane Austen's heroines Elinor Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* and Jane Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Maid

In Act III, the maid informs Kate about Tony's joke of telling Marlow the Hardcastle's house is an inn, and that Marlow believes Kate to be a barmaid.

Servants

Several servants fumble about awkwardly in the second act as Mr. Hardcastle attempts to train these farm

workers in the niceties of London dinner service, with little success and a good deal of comedy.

She Stoops to Conquer: Themes

Appearances and Reality

Much of the comedy of Goldsmith's play depends on confusion between appearance and reality. After all, Marlow's misperception of Mr. Hardcastle's house as an inn drives the narrative action in the first place. Ironically, Goldsmith's comedy allows appearance to lead to the discovery of reality. Kate's deception leads her to discover Marlow's true nature. Falling in love when he thinks her a barmaid, he declares his decision to defy society and marry her in spite of the differences in their social class. Her falsehood allows him to relax with her and reveal his true self.

Truth and Falsehood

Thematically related to the theme of Appearance and Reality, Goldsmith uses falsehood to reveal the truth. Most obviously Tony's lie about Mr. Hardcastle's mansion being an inn produces the truth of the lovers' affections. Lying also leads to poetic justice. When Constance asks to wear her jewels, Mrs. Hardcastle lies and tells her they have been lost. Tony takes the jewels to give to Hastings, and when Mrs. Hardcastle goes to find them, they *have* been lost. Her lie has become true.

Sex Roles

In many ways, Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* satirizes the ways the eighteenth-century society believed that proper men and women ought to behave. While the play shows the traditional pattern of male-female relations in Hastings's wooing of Constance, it also reverses the era's sexual etiquette by having Kate pursue Marlow.

Goldsmith's comedy raises serious issues, however. On the eighteenth century's "marriage market," many people married for money, land, or title. This practice often turned women into commodities, to be exchanged between fathers and prospective husbands more for economic than emotional reasons. In *She Stoops to Conquer*, the relationship between Mrs. Hardcastle and Constance depends entirely on her inheritance of colonial jewels, which provide Mrs. Hardcastle's sole reason for pressing Tony and Constance to wed. In this sense, Constance's jewels can be seen to symbolize the marketing of the female on the marriage market.

Though explored comically, the play also illustrates the tenuous status of contemporary working women and their constant danger of sexual harassment and the predatory nature of men. Goldsmith's comedy depends on our laughing because Marlow respects middle-and upper-class women but treats working class women as sexual objects. Historically, however, the situation for working women proved quite serious. During the eighteenth century, with more and more women entering domestic service, problems arose in which young female servants were vulnerable to unwelcome sexual advances from their employers and their families. Rape and sexual violence became common problems and figure prominently in eighteenth-century plays and novels. Novels by Austen, Burney, and Richardson treat the assault and seduction of young servants by their masters, in part to serve as a warning to those entering domestic service.

Culture Clash

As the play opens, Mr. Hardcastle associates his traditional attitudes with his life in the country. The comedy develops with the arrival of visitors from the city, Marlow and Hastings. Their lives of fashion represent innovation and change, though not necessarily for the better, as Mr. Hardcastle exclaims: "Is the whole age in a combination to drive sense and discretion out of doors?" The conflict between city and country values becomes clearer in light of countrified Tony's practical joke on supposedly sophisticated city residents like Marlow and Hastings. Mrs. Hardcastle also associates the urban with the fashionable and pretends to more urbanity than she actually possesses.

Obedience

The theme of obedience focuses primarily on the hierarchical relationship between parents and children, though Goldsmith's play suggests that obedience consists of more than blind servility. Children should obey their parents. Parents, however, should earn their respect and deserve to be obeyed by acting in their children's best interest. Kate obeys Mr. Hardcastle, but while they may not agree entirely on fashion and boyfriends, he acts as he does for what he believes to be her own good. Tony does not obey Mrs. Hardcastle and stymies her scheme to set him up with Constance. Greed, rather than paternal duty, motivates her actions, however, for she concerns herself primarily with maintaining possession of Constance's jewels, not with selecting a suitable mate for Tony. She does not deserve obedience, and no one condemns Tony for resisting her.

She Stoops to Conquer: Style

Age of Sensibility

Many works written between 1750 and 1798 emphasized emotion and pathos, instead of drama and humor. The Sentimental comedy, called a comedy not because of its humor but because it had a happy ending, ruled the stage. *She Stoops to Conquer* reacts against this tradition, for Goldsmith's comedy actually evokes laughter. The prologue by Garrick and the epilogue by Goldsmith clearly situate the play as a challenge to sensibility, and positive audience response initiated a new age in stage comedy.

Comedy of Manners

While *She Stoops to Conquer* contains elements of farce, its comedy also stems from poking fun at the manners and conventions of aristocratic, sophisticated society.

Epilogue

In the concluding statement of *She Stoops to Conquer*, Goldsmith summarizes the plot and hopes that the comedy has conquered his audience as Kate has conquered Marlow's heart.

Farce

Many critics have described *She Stoops to Conquer*, a comedy characterized by broad humor and outlandish incidents, as a farce.

Foreshadowing

Goldsmith uses foreshadowing to create expectations and explain subsequent developments. For example, Mrs. Hardcastle in act one describes their house as "an old rumbling mansion, that looks for all the world like an inn." This helps the audience understand what gave Tony the idea for his practical joke and explains how the travelers' could mistake the Hardcastle's house for an inn.

Later, when Marlow indicates his anxiety speaking with ladies, but comfort flirting with wenches, this foreshadows his comical interludes with Kate. Kate's discussion with Mr. Hardcastle about desiring an outgoing husband leads the audience to anticipate her disappointment with the formal Marlow. Her statement that Marlow's shyness during their first meeting prevented him from even looking at her face makes us expect some comical treatment of identity and gives Kate's disguise as a barmaid credibility.

Irony

When Mrs. Hardcastle and Hastings discuss London's high society, she intends the conversation to show her sophistication and knowledge of city Me. Instead, the conversation has exactly the opposite effect. Her confusion between fashionable and unfashionable neighborhoods shows her ignorance of high society, making her comments ironic.

Poetic Justice

Throughout the play, Mrs. Hardcastle tries maintain control over Constance's jewels. It is poetic justice that when Mrs. Hardcastle has hidden the jewels from Constance, claiming they've been stolen, they have in fact been stolen by Tony.

Prologue

David Garrick, the most famous actor and theatre producer of his time, wrote the introductory section of *She Stoops to Conquer*. Garrick claims that the "Comic muse, long sick, is now a-dying." He hopes that Goldsmith's play, with its humor, will challenge the traditional sentimental comedy and thus revive the muse.

She Stoops to Conquer: Historical Context

The late 18th century marked a period of great transition for England. Between 1640 and 1688, the nation fought a civil war, executed its king, and restored its monarchy; it then established a government which balanced power between monarch and parliament. England had also fought a series of wars with the United Dutch Provinces and France, setting the stage for English dominance as a colonial power. The American Revolution loomed on the horizon, but most historians agree that the loss of the colonies had limited political or economic impact. England became an increasingly prosperous nation occupying a central position on the world stage.

The Shift to Industrialism

That said, not everything in this transition went smoothly. The agricultural revolution had begun in the 16th century with developments in farming and animal husbandry. By the 18th century, these improvements resulted in generally greater supplies of higher-quality, lower-priced food. Still, hunger persisted because bad harvests, war, and inflation caused food supplies and prices to vary from region to region. Further, the change from a system of many small farms to fewer large farms drove many farmers off their land and into the factories created by the industrial revolution. Goldsmith's poem *The Deserted Village* elegizes one such village that became vacant as England shifted from an economy largely rural and agricultural to one more urban, based on manufacturing and trade.

England's mercantile economy provided the impetus needed to drive the industrial revolution, just as surely as inventions like James Watt's steam engine drove the factories themselves. Still, new, largely unplanned cities sprung up around these factories. Rural migrants found they had left farm life behind for factory work that often offered lower wages and a diminished quality of life for themselves and their families.

England's Changing Economy

Changes in England's industrial, agricultural, and colonial economies translated into a demand for English goods and services. While some became impoverished, others flourished, as these changes stimulated the rise of the middle class. This led, among things, to the increasingly literate population which supported a new generation of writers like Goldsmith.

In general, these changes decreased the wealth among those landed and titled, and increased the wealth among those connected with commerce. As a result, children from old, titled, landed families married with those of untitled, cash-rich, but land-poor commercial families. It is this "marriage market" which provides the backdrop for Goldsmith's examination of the various motives for marriage in *She Stoops to Conquer*.

Sentimental Times and Goldsmith's Comedy

Finally, an explanation of the tone of Goldsmith's play, a comedy rooted in things quite serious. The 18th century's validation of empiricism offered a challenge to religious belief based solely on faith. Many people

sought an accommodation between reason and faith. One such accommodation was Deism, which accepted as true certain observable "facts"—for example, the world had been created, so there must be a creator—but resisted specifics about the nature of religious doctrine. Such beliefs posed a problems, however: how can society develop a code for ethical conduct independent of the ten commandments? Sentimentalism, pioneered by Lord Kames, Francis Hutchinson, and Adam Smith, offered a psychological solution. They suggested that ethics arise from human sentiments, from sympathy and empathy.

Sentimental ethics work like this. A person contemplates an action—murder, for example—and wonders if it is wrong. To decide, one imagines the crime, first placing oneself in the victim's position, empathizing with the person's suffering. Then, one takes the objective position of an observer, attempting to feel sympathy for the person killed, for their family and loved ones. These two perspectives lead one to understand the emotions (the sentiments) involved and to condemn the action as evil.

Sentimentalism became a powerful force during the 18th century. It provided the philosophical underpinning for the American Revolution, which substituted the more Sentimental right to "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" for John Locke's "Life, Liberty, and Property." It also motivated reform of the slave trade, prisons, and insane asylums. In the theatre, however, this philosophy led to the creation of the Sentimental Comedy, called so not because it provoked laughter, but because it ended happily. (For the same reason, Dante titled his poem *The Divine Comedy*). The Sentimental Comedy provided Goldsmith's target in *She Stoops to Conquer*, as he attempted—and succeeded—in writing a comedy that provokes not sympathetic tears but actual laughter.

She Stoops to Conquer: Critical Overview

In "An Essay on the Theatre; or, A Comparison Between Laughing and Sentimental Comedy," Goldsmith distinguishes between "hard" and "soft" comedy. Instead of the "Weeping Sentimental Comedy" which gratified audience sympathies at injustice suffered by innocent worthies, Goldsmith's 1773 essay advocated the "laughing comedy," which offered a "natural portrait of Human Folly and Frailty." *She Stoops to Conquer* opens with a prologue by actor and impresario David Garrick declaiming on the state of the theatre and sentimental comedy. Mr. Woodward, who speaks the monologue, weeps, saying, "Would you know the reason why I'm crying?/The Comic Muse, long sick, is now a-dying!" In *She Stoops to Conquer* and his earlier play *The Good-Natur'd Man*, Goldsmith sought to rescue that muse. His writing, according to Louis Kronenberger in an introduction to the 1964 Heritage Press edition of the play, led "an assault on the sentimental comedy that had held the boards for upwards of fifty years." No mere iconoclast, Goldsmith does more than critique the past. In fact, according to Oscar James Campbell in his introduction to *Chief Plays of Goldsmith and Sheridan: The School for Scandal, She Stoops to Conquer, The Rivals, She Stoops to Conquer* is "a virtual School for Comedy." Goldsmith's play incorporates and transforms elements of both the earlier Restoration Comedy of Manners and contemporary Sentimental Comedy and "opened the door" to a new kind of comedy.

Goldsmith's comedy has its roots in serious philosophical debate. In his 1651 *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes describes original human nature as a constant state of war, with minimal social cohesion and strong dominating weak. Hobbes's ideas influenced the Restoration comedy, an urban comedy of manners in which power and polish led to social manipulation and dominance. By the 1690s, Locke and others argued that people's innate moral sense made them naturally good and happy. This led to the "soft," "sentimental," or "reform" comedy, which lacked laughter and attempted to teach virtue by making audiences feel sympathy and empathy for the suffering of the innocent. These were comedies only in having a happy ending, for the same reason that Dante named his poem *The Divine Comedy*.

In *She Stoops to Conquer* Goldsmith tries to correct both the rakish mannerism of the Restoration comedy and the pathos of the Sentimental comedy. For example, while Restoration comedy privileged urban sophistication over rural simplicity, Goldsmith reverses the trend. "In Restoration comedies countrymen appeared as fools in London drawing rooms," noted Campbell. In *She Stoops to Conquer*, "Tony, on his own turf, easily hoodwinks the city dudes into mistaking an old house for an inn." For Goldsmith, country life seems not unfashionable exile but the repository of the traditional English virtues he portrayed in *The Deserted Village*. In his portraits of Mr. Hardcastle and Kate, Goldsmith validates the familial warmth of country life. In the multiple marriages that mark its ending, the play shows the triumph of idealistic love instead of merely manners, all the while creating laughter and even "low" humor.

Goldsmith undermines Sentimentalism in ways which J. L. Styan, writing in an issue of *Costerus*, noted may be missed by contemporary audiences. For example, when Constance finds Kate alone in the first act, she judges by her complexion that something emotional has happened. Constance asks, "has the last novel been too moving?" She wonders if Kate's sensibilities have been engaged by a Sentimental novel—of the kind Goldsmith satirizes in *The Vicar of Wakefield*. We quickly learn that Kate's emotional state has been heightened, not by a novel but by the imminent arrival of her suitor, an action that will initiate actual, not Sentimental comedy.

Goldsmith's play does more than simply respond to the past, however. By striking a balance between situation and characterization, *She Stoops to Conquer* proved innovative. What makes the play work for Styan are its "madcap situations" which resembles a farce in seeming "exaggerated, impossible, absurd, and ridiculous." According to Louis Kronenberger, the "farce idea that galvanizes it [is] the idea of having two young men directed to a private house—the very house they have been invited to visit—under the impression that it is an inn." The subtitle of the play, "The Mistakes of a Night," suggests the plot's farcical beginnings, though the play's success as a comedy, for Kronenberger, comes from the ways Goldsmith "ingeniously keeps exploring and extracting... the possibilities in his hoax."

Still, most critics see the play not as pure farce but as something more, largely due to its strong characterization. Styan observed that the "important farcical ingredient in Goldsmith's comedy depends upon the invention of a situation absurd enough to admit an exaggeration of character." True, "Marlow's being altogether at his ease with wenches and hopelessly shy with young ladies scores best as an amusing plot device." Further, "The spirit of this comedy is made to turn on ... a marriage of convenience ... inverted so that the lady takes the initiative, Miss Hardcastle becomes Kate, and the genteel heroine a barmaid who sets about seducing the genteel hero." But it is the character of Kate, not merely her predicament, that makes the comedy work. According to Campbell, "Miss Hardcastle is the first heroine for many decades who has no taste for sentimental aphorism and tender hearts." This becomes clear in her response to Marlow's formal wooing during their initial meeting. She desires authentic emotional involvement, not sentimental claptrap and goes about getting it with her scheme to impersonate a barmaid.

In this, Goldsmith demands versatility of his characters, forcing them to present themselves in more than one way, as Styan noted. For example, compare the stiff, sentimental wooing scene in which Marlow first encounters Kate with later scenes between the more libertine Marlow and the "low" barmaid Kate, which provides comical counterpoint. For Campbell, characters like Mrs. Hardcastle and Tony Lumpkin, with his "pot house tastes and prankster ways... is a booby who lays booby traps for odiers," make the play "not farce, but comedy of continuous incident"

Two other elements of technical stagecraft enhance Goldsmith's comedy. One is his use of asides, in which a character makes a comment meant to be heard by the audience but not by other characters on stage. During Marlow's initial meeting with Kate, for example, Styan believes the characters' asides invite the audience into their thought processes and offer perspective on their actions. "The fact that the discussion here purports to be about hypocrisy makes the asides so pertinent that the farce shifts into a realm of social satire," Goldsmith also

creates comic tension by the ways he orchestrates the stage action. The scene in which Marlow agrees to accept Kate despite their class differences resembles those in the typical sentimental comedy. But, according to Mark Anthony Houlihan in the *International Dictionary of Theatre-1: Plays*, Goldsmith "invigorates the clichés of sentiment by placing... [the characters] in an absurdly contrived and complex setting" in which the lovers—with Kate in disguise—can be observed by Mr. Hardcastle and Sir Charles Marlow.

She Stoops to Conquer: Essays and Criticism

Advancements in the Era

Not accidentally, ages of great social change frequently leave behind great comedy. Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* provokes laughter—often at situations that are quite serious. Parent/child relationships and marriage stand at the center of Goldsmith's play, as the characters attempt to strike some balance between authority and freedom, obedience and independence. While Goldsmith treats these themes lightheartedly, the play's humor conceals a somber undercurrent. By the time Goldsmith's play debuted in the late 18th century, England had undergone great political, economic, and social transformations. These changes created what came to be known as the "marriage market," which provides the backdrop for *She Stoops to Conquer*. Simply put, the comedy asks how, at a time when many people married for money rather than love, can marriage join people who are both economically and emotionally compatible?

During the 17th century, England's Civil War moved the nation from a government by strong monarchy to one which balanced power between king and parliament. A series of wars with the United Dutch Provinces and France positioned England's ascent as a colonial power. The agricultural and industrial revolution had brought progress. By the mid-18th century, England had become an increasingly prosperous nation occupying a central position on the world stage.

These changes did not occur without costs, however. The agricultural revolution resulted in generally greater supplies of higher quality, lower priced food but drove many farmers off their land and into the factories created by the industrial revolution. England's mercantile economy provided the impetus needed to drive industrialization, but rural migrants often found that urban life and factory work compared unfavorably with agricultural work in the country. While some became impoverished, others prospered and rose to join England's growing middle class.

In general, these changes decreased the wealth among old, rural, titled families, and increased that of the newly rich commercial urbanites. As a result, children from old families, who were titled, married with those of untitled, cash-rich but land-poor commercial families. Such marriages created unions with money, land, and title. In *She Stoops to Conquer*, Goldsmith examines this "marriage market," seeking some balance between love and money,

The play's opening scene introduces the conflict between old and new, between country and city. Mr. and Mrs. Hardcastle discuss people who take trips to London, as they do not. Mr. Hardcastle remembers the days when rural life kept away the follies of town but no longer, for today, follies "travel faster than a stagecoach." Significantly, Tony's practical jokes reflect the long-standing comic jousting between the country bumpkin and the city slicker that goes back at least to the playwright Juvenal's satires of the late Roman empire. Mr. Hardcastle identifies himself as a barrier against the changing times, saying, "I love everything that's old: old friends, old times, old manners, old books, old wine," and even his "old wife." As the times change, human relationships like marriage change with them, though not necessarily for the better. While traditional, Mr. Hardcastle seeks for his daughter a marriage with both financial and emotional security; Mrs. Hardcastle's mercenary attitudes resemble those of fashionable London society's marriage market. This conflict between husband and wife represents a conflict between traditional and colonial value systems.

Different styles of parenting have produced different kinds of children. By spoiling Tony, Mrs. Hardcastle prevented him from growing up. Tony is disobedient. On his way out to the Three Pigeons alehouse, he refuses Mrs. Hardcastle's request that he stay home "for one night at least." More legitimately, he also refuses to obey her command that he marry Constance. Mrs. Hardcastle conceals from Tony the fact that he's come of age. She uses deceit to manipulate him into a loveless marriage to Constance which permits Mrs. Hardcastle to keep controls of the Constance's jewels. While Mr. Hardcastle wants the best for his daughter in marriage, Mrs. Hardcastle concerns herself not with Tony's happiness but with the money and status the jewels might bring.

Mr. Hardcastle, on the other hand, seems honest, if stuffy, and his daughter Kate behaves honestly toward him (she may not tell him everything, but at least she never lies to him). Where Tony is obstinate, Kate is accommodating. While Kate wants to dress fashionably, Mr. Hardcastle wants her attire to be simple. They compromise: she dresses as she pleases during the day, when she receives visitors, and as he likes in the evening.

The play's action advances when Mr. Hardcastle announces, "I expect the young gentleman I have chosen to be your husband from town this very day." Kate's father assures her that he would never control her choice, but she responds anxiously, worried at the formality of their meeting will prevent her from feeling "friendship or esteem." During the 18th century, entirely arranged marriages were unusual, though a young women rarely had the right to select a husband entirely on her own. More customarily, a women's parents—primarily her father—selected a prospective husband, whom the daughter had the right to accept or reject. The young man Hardcastle has in mind, Marlow, is the son of an old friend, Sir Charles Marlow, but Hardcastle assures Kate he would never control her choice.

This exchange establishes the parameters of a successful parent-child relationship. The good father, Mr. Hardcastle offers guidance without being tyrannical, while Kate, the good daughter, seems willing to be compliant—but not at the price of marrying without emotional attachment. Here, we realize another difference between Mr. and Mrs., Hardcastle, While he selects an appropriate husband for his daughter, according to what he believes will make her happy, his wife has selected a zero (her own son) for Constance's fiancé, a decision dictated not by concern for her own good, but by a selfish desire for gain.

She Stoops to Conquer portrays three strategies for parent-child relationships. In Tony's attitude toward his mother, Mrs., Hardcastle, we see resistance and deception, Likewise, deception characterizes her treatment of both Tony and Constance, and Finally, the play offers the preferred option of compromise, as exemplified by Mr., Hardcastle's attitude toward his daughter Kate. This seems the best way for families to cope with decisions: insight and empathy on the part of the parents, intelligence and compromise on that of the child.

The play also offers three types of marriage. One possibility: a loveless, parentally-enforced marriage, as that arranged by Mrs. Hardcastle between Tony and Constance. Another option: marriage for love, but against parental wishes, as seen in Hastings's plans for eloping with Constance. Finally, the best solution, compromise between parent and child, as in Kate's marriage with Marlow—a marriage based on affection but also sanctioned by paternal authority.

The compromise solutions in *She Stoops to Conquer* reflect the 18th century's general validation of reasonable compromise and balance of power. During the 17th century, traditional writers like Robert Filmer argued for the divine right of kings based on the *Great Chain of Being*. According to nature, God ruled over man, kings over peasants, men over women, and fathers over families. Natural hierarchies justified both monarchy and patriarchy. In *She Stoops to Conquer*, the viewer sees a model of private sphere compromise between Kate and Mr. Hardcastle in regard to her clothing (and more importantly, her marriage). This attitude echoes the public sphere power-sharing arranged between king and parliament after the Restoration of 1660 and Glorious Revolution of 1688. Goldsmith's play balances tradition and structure with freedom and innovation.

Goldsmith's attitude toward marriage reflects other aspects of his social moment, however. While Marlow and Kate's wedding unites two old money families, Mrs. Hardcastle's efforts to wed Tony and Constance are an attempt to link traditional and colonial wealth. In effect, Mrs. Hardcastle attempts to colonize Tony and Constance in marriage, simultaneously extracting his Submission (playing the good son) and her jewels. The play's action makes this impossible but does not reject colonial wealth. It merely aligns colonial wealth in a marriage for love rather than in a forced, arranged marriage. Constance marries Hastings instead of Tony. Marriage itself still serves the same economic function of combining landed and colonial wealth.

In *She Stoops to Conquer*, comedy is serious business with serious social and monetary consequences. While raising legitimate issues about the responsibilities between parents and children, it also calls to mind the cultural and historical moment which produced it.

Source: Arnold Schmidt, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale 1997.

Overview Originally Published in 1773

On Monday the 15th of this month [i.e. March] was first performed at this theatre a new comedy, called *She Stoops to Conquer, or The Mistakes of a Night*, written by Dr. Goldsmith...

Mr. Hardcastle is a plain honest country gentleman. His wife is well-meaning, but foolish and positive, and so indulgent to her son, Squire Lumpkin, that she has given him no education for fear of hurting his health. This Squire is quite a spoiled child, regardless of his mother, fond of low company, and full of mischievous humor. Miss Hardcastle is a lively and amiable young lady, whom her father is desirous of marrying to young Marlow the son of Sir Charles. This Marlow is a fashionable young fellow, who has constantly lived in the pleasures of the town; and by being accustomed to the company of courtesans only, is in great dread of modest women, and behaves in their presence with a very awkward bashfulness. Miss Neville is a niece of Mrs. Hardcastle's, has a good fortune, and lives in the family. It is the purpose of the relations to have this young lady married to Squire Lumpkin; but this couple have not the least regard for each other. On the contrary, the Squire is enamored with a vulgar country-beauty; and Miss Neville has a strong *penchant* for Mr. Hastings, the friend of Young Marlow. These two gentlemen had never been at Hardcastle's, but the former is expected every moment from London; and Hastings, by an agreement with Marlow, was to accompany him thither as his friend, but in fact to have an opportunity of seeing and conversing with his mistress, Miss Neville.

Thus the whole story is situated at the beginning of the play; near which time the young Squire is discovered in an ale-house, reveling with his pot companions. At this time the landlord enters to inform him, that two gentlemen were at the door enquiring their way to Mr. Hardcastle's. He, on seeing them, guessed Marlow to be one of his coarse jokes upon the travelers, mischievously informs them that as it was late, and they cannot be accommodated that night at the ale-house, if they will walk on for about a mile, they will come to a very good inn, which they might know by seeing a pair of stag's horns over the gate. This, in truth, was Hardcastle's; but the Squire wanted fun, and he got it; for when the gentlemen arrived there, thinking themselves in an inn, they used very great freedom, to the utter astonishment of Hardcastle; for he accidentally heard Marlow named, and knew him; but he resolved to hold his tongue.

Soon after their arrival here, Hastings meets with Miss Neville, who undeceives him with respect to their mistake; but he begs her to conceal it yet from Marlow, whose natural diffidence would force him to quit the family immediately, which he had so freely, though unwittingly used. Miss Neville informs her cousin Miss Hardcastle of the whole; and this lady (being obliged to dress herself very plainly every evening to please a whim of her father's) agrees to pass herself upon Marlow as the bar-maid of the inn, in order to carry on the plot. From these different dispositions arise all the Mistakes of the Night.

After many laughable scenes which arise from the mutual misunderstanding of the several parties, Hardcastle at length flies into a violent passion, and accidentally mentions some circumstances to Marlow which alarm him. Marlow, in short, discovers his error, and consequently undergoes much confusion and agitation; but the arrival of his father adjusts every difference, and he receives with joy the hand of Miss Hardcastle, who, in her character of barmaid, had greatly charmed him, and who, in consequence, might be said to have *Stooped to Conquer*.

While these things are transacting, the counterplot goes on successfully. Hastings gains over the Squire to his interest, and this hopeful son contrives to steal Miss Neville's jewels out of his mother's bureau, and gives them to Hastings, who was preparing to run away with his mistress. But the jewels being very valuable, he is unwilling to carry them with him on so hasty a journey, and gives them to Marlow to keep for him: Marlow, from the same laudable motives of security, consigns them to the keeping of Mrs. Hardcastle, whom he at this time supposed to be the landlady of the inn. Thus the old lady recovers the jewels; by which, and by means of a letter from Hastings to the Squire, which she read, she discovers the plot laid by the lovers for an elopement.

This plot known, Mrs. Hardcastle is greatly alarmed, as it threatened the destruction of her favorite scheme of marriage between her son and Miss Neville. She therefore determines to carry her that very night to her aunt's, about forty miles off. She soon hurries the young lady into the coach, and sets off under the guidance of the Squire on the horseback. Before their departure, however, the Squire whispers to Hastings not to despair yet, for he was still his friend, and would meet him behind the garden at a certain time which he named. Having set off, he leads his mother through danks, bogs, and quagmires, in a dirty condition, round through lanes and by-roads, till he landed her just at the back of her own garden, and then told her she was at least 40 miles from home, and upon a heath. Here, after a variety of roguish tricks with which he alarmed her, Hardcastle advances, and, after some misunderstanding, the parties recognize each other. In the mean time Hastings fled to his mistress, who was left in the coach; but they agree, instead of running away, to return to the family, and throw them-

selves upon the generosity of the Hardcastles. Mrs. Hardcastle will by no means consent to their union, insisting that Miss Neville cannot be married till her son is of age, who by articles was either to accept or refuse her hand—articles upon which her fortune depended. Hardcastle, however, obviates this, by informing the Squire that he has been already of age three months, and that he may do what he pleases. Lumpkin willingly refuses her, and her hand is consequently given to Hastings: with which the play concludes.

This comedy is not ill calculated to give pleasure in the representation; but when we regard it with a critical eye, we find it to abound with numerous inaccuracies. The fable (a fault too peculiar to the hasty productions of the modern Comic Muse) is twisted into incidents not naturally arising from the subject, in order *to make things meet*; and consistency is repeatedly violated for the sake of humor. But perhaps we ought to sign a general pardon to the author, for taking the field against that monster called Sentimental Comedy, to oppose which his comedy was avowedly written. Indeed, the attempt was bold, considering the strength of the enemy; and we are glad to observe that our author still keeps the field with flying colors.—But, {metaphor apart} it appears that the Doctor was too ardent. Well considering that the public were long accustomed to cry, he resolved to make them laugh at any rate. In aiming at this point, he seems to have stepped too far; and in lieu of comedy he has sometimes presented us with farce.

These redundancies are certainly the chief blots in his play. A stricter consistency in the fable, and a better attention to the unity of time in particular, would have exalted the comedy to a good and just reputation.

Source: Review of *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773) in *Goldsmith: The Critical Heritage*, edited by G. S. Rousseau, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974, pp. 119-22.

Prime Example of the Theatre Era From Which it Emerged

Oliver Goldsmith stands quite high in English literature, and a little apart, by reason of his three-pronged claims to recognition. There is his extremely famous poem, *The Deserted Village*; his extremely famous novel, *The Vicar of Wakefield*; his extremely famous play, *She Stoops to Conquer*. To have achieved three unquestioned classics that jointly run to about the length of an average-sized book is a notable example of how to travel down the ages with the lightest of luggage.

But though all three remain unquestioned classics, they no longer—if we are to be honest—enjoy a quite equal esteem or popularity. *The Deserted Village* has come to be a bit of a deserted poem. Certain of its lines and couplets have passed into the language, their authorship rather obscured; but the poem itself seems to be gradually passing out of circulation. Even as a high-school standby I suspect it is being replaced by something less pastoral and more vibrant. *The Vicar of Wakefield* has fared better, as it deserves to have done. For it has much of Goldsmith's kindliness and charm; and in any at all exhaustive journey through the English novel, one that stops at picturesque towns as well as populous cities, it must always have a place; it must, indeed—like *Cranford*, like *Our Village*—survive as the kind of minor work whose value rests on its being minor. Its voice may not carry far, or instantly rivet attention, but it is a genuinely individual one.

But of Goldsmith's three classics, it seems pretty certain that *She Stoops to Conquer* is much the best entrenched. It has so unequivocally survived as to seem, again and again, worth reviving; only a short time ago the Phoenix Theatre revived it in New York. So long as actors eye juicy character parts, they must glance at Tony Lumpkin; so long as producers eye time-tried comic plots, they must give thought to Goldsmith's; and in any journey through the English comic theatre, even one confined to Principal Points of Interest, it must surely have a place. Between 1728 and the 1870's, which is to say between *The Beggar's Opera* and Gilbert and Sullivan, *The School for Scandal* and *The Rivals* are its only rivals; and *The Rivals*, to my mind, is its inferior. *She Stoops to Conquer* is an extraordinary work on a very odd basis: that, without there being anything the least bit extraordinary about it, it stands alone of its kind among the comic classics of the English stage. Surely there should be at least a dozen *She Stoops to Conquer*s, a dozen farce comedies written between the age of Anne and the age of Victoria that, without ever seeming brilliant, are almost consistently lively; that, without ever turning bawdy, are not simpering or prim; that, with no great claim to wit, have a robust sense of fun; that, without being satirical, can spoof certain human weaknesses; and that, without being sentimental, remain friendly and good-natured.

Yet, unless they are moldering in unopened books on dust-covered shelves, far from there being a dozen such plays, where unmistakably is there another? What others manage (which is the crucial point) to sustain their good qualities throughout an entire evening? What others don't creep through a first act or crumble during the last, or don't plague us with a deadly subplot, or weary us with dialect jokes, or pelt us with petrified epigrams, or try our patience with spoonfuls of morality? *The Rivals*, for example, besides belonging to a different category or—what with mixing the satirical, the farcical, and the romantic—belonging to no category at all, makes us put up with Faulkland and Julia, who are decidedly bores. Goldsmith's lovers keep us far from breathless, but, by virtue of the uses Goldsmith puts them to, they are seldom boring.

Hence, instead of being recurrent in the English classic theatre, *She Stoops to Conquer* verges on the anomalous—a full evening's worth of good clean fun. It chiefly owes its vivacity, of course, to the farce idea that galvanizes it, the idea of having two young men directed to a private house—the very house they have been invited to visit—under the impression that it is an inn. The original title and surviving subtitle of the play, "The Mistakes of a Night," suggests the quick, cumulative nature of the plotting, and the frank nature of the farcicality. Goldsmith sticks to the possibilities in his hoax, which means that he ingeniously keeps exploring and extracting them. (pp. v-viii)

[The central incident] had particular stage value by virtue of its comic reversal of values. To mistake a private house for an inn, as against mistaking one private house for another, starts off with confusion on one side that can quickly spread to the other, and that creates not just personal misunderstandings but social "situations" and *gaffes*. ... The plot thickens, of course, and the fun fattens by having the 'landlord' stand aghast at the behavior of his guests; and the practical joke is kept going by the lubricating propinquity of the practical joker. Tony Lumpkin always stands ready to deceive or abet deception; no farce ever had more of a misleading man, whether at one moment by pretending to be in love with Miss Neville, or at another by driving Miss Neville and his mother over hill and dale in virtually their own backyard.

Tony, in the end, is much less a great character creation than a fat character part with pothouse tastes and prankster ways. But what is so lumpish in Tony is the more misleading thing about him: it conceals, it half denies, what is so sharp-witted. His mind must not be inferred from his manners. He is a booby who lays booby traps for others; he is the card-table simpleton who walks off with the winnings. The scene where he pretends to think his mother is shamming about the stolen jewels reveals how little of a fool he is and how greatly (in the theatre, above all) he can contribute to the fun.

Goldsmith does very well by Tony, and by us, in giving him Mrs. Hardcastle for a doting mother; theirs is perhaps the most enjoyable relationship in the play. The two pairs of lovers are to be praised, I think, not so much for qualities of character as for so lightly and briskly advancing the plot. Even Marlow's being altogether at his ease with wenches and hopelessly shy with young ladies scores best as an amusing plot device. Plot, as it must be in farce, is the real motive power of the play. But it proves the saving grace of the play as well, in that the plot, really, always calls the tune, always sets the level, refusing to halt for any detailed picture of manners or for more than a surface coat of romance.

Nothing is better known than that in *She Stoops to Conquer*—as earlier in *The Good-Natur'd Man*—Goldsmith was waging an assault on the sentimental comedy that had held the boards for upwards of fifty years. And the comedy of *She Stoops to Conquer* quite escapes being sentimental. But this, it seems to me, is chiefly through favoring plot situations over personal ones; which means, in the end, through flesh and blood no less than sighs and tears. And if *She Stoops to Conquer* also escapes seeming genteel, it is chiefly from a certain air of the bucolic and rowdy—a sort of taproom indecorum that conceals the total absence of boudoir indecency. Where, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, George Farquhar had let the hero of *The Constant Couple* mistake a private house for a bordello, Goldsmith scarcely suggests that *his* private house has bedrooms. But Farquhar's racier amusement lasts for only a scene of two (which is all the situation proves worth) and his play, as a whole, is decidedly mixed and uneven; whereas Goldsmith's situation does last out a whole play; and his effect, if on occasion tame, is never jumbled.

What in the long run has so much helped *She Stoops to Conquer* must at the outset have seemed destined to harm it—its old-fashioned countrified look, its genial humorist's good nature, its lack of something very new that must come to seem dated, of something very chic that in time must seem tacky. *She Stoops to Conquer* has its incidental merits: its best dialogue is thoroughly bright, it makes observations not just sound but astute, it contains social details that are revealing and vivid. But such things are just frequent enough to remind us that Goldsmith was a real writer, a man of real parts and cultivation. At the same time they are unobtrusive enough not to halt the flow of the fun—that immemorial fun born of human beings at cross-purposes and of situations gone askew and awry, (pp. viii—xi)

Source: Louis Kronenberger, introduction to *She Stoops to Conquer: or The Mistakes of a Night*, by Oliver Goldsmith, Heritage Press, 1964, pp. v-xi

She Stoops to Conquer: Compare and Contrast

1700s: During the 18th century, entirely arranged marriages were rare, but a young woman rarely had the right to select a husband entirely on her own. More customary was for the father to select the prospective husband, while the daughter had the right to accept or refuse him. In *She Stoops to Conquer*, Mr. Hardcastle has selected Marlow, the son of an old friend, but he assures Kate he would never control her choice.

Today: The majority of people who marry make their own decisions and join together primarily for love.

1700s: India was a British colony ruled largely by the East India Company, for whom Constance's uncle was a director.

Today: India is one of the world's largest democracies.

1700s: Mr. Hardcastle complains that life in the country has changed since he was a young man and offers no protection against the corruption of London life. Better roads and coaches carry mail and newspapers, connecting the city and country. London fashions and manners infiltrate even rural estates.

Today: Many people live in suburbs which lie between urban and rural areas. Not only mass transit, but mass media and the Internet connect communities throughout the world.

1700s: Mrs. Hardcastle's comment that "since inoculation began, there is no such thing to be seen as a plain woman" refers to the fact that, with advancing medical science and the advent of numerous vaccines against diseases, very few women were scarred by smallpox. A case of smallpox as a child left its mark on Goldsmith.

Today: Children receive inoculations against a host of diseases, including measles and polio, which for earlier generations caused illness, disfigurement, and death.

She Stoops to Conquer: Topics for Further Study

Today, we take it for granted that people marry for love. This was not always the case, however. During the 18th century, for example, parents—usually fathers—selected their daughters' prospective husbands. A young woman had the right to refuse their choice, and parents rarely forced her to marry a man she found entirely unappealing. Still, young women rarely had the right to select their own husbands.

What is Goldsmith saying about this kind of arrangement? Does his play suggest that the right people end up married to their proper spouses? How would you feel about this kind of arrangement?

Further research might be done into the 18th century's "marriage market," and the ways in which women reacted to it. The novels of Frances Burney or Jane Austen offer suitable comparisons. More generally, since much of *She Stoops to Conquer* revolves around parent-child relationships, you might investigate how parents really related to their children during this time.

One thing that keeps Constance and Hastings apart is money. If she marries without Hardcastle's permission, she loses her inheritance of jewels. How important should money be in deciding whom and when to marry? Should couples be practical, or can people really live on love?

You might research 18th century property law, under which all control of a woman's money passed to her husband after marriage. Until the Married Women's Property Act of 1867, the law also made it impossible for a woman to own anything, even custody of their children. Nor could women vote, hold office, or attend

universities. You might examine that status of women during the 18th century. In many ways, the status of working- and lower-class men was not much better. Your research might compare and contrast their various conditions.

Even today, we still hear jokes about the city slicker and the country bumpkin. This common comic theme began as soon as society became urbanized, starting with classical writers like Juvenal satirizing the inhabitants of ancient Rome. Goldsmith's play depends on this kind of culture clash, between London residents like Marlow and Hastings, and country gentry like Mr. and Mrs. Hardcastle. How does this theme of culture clash function in the play? What might it signify about love, society, and lifestyles?

Authors are not alone in exploring the tremendous changes which England experienced during the 18th century. Historians, social scientists, art historians, and anthropologists all work to uncover the complex web of related social changes. Select and research an aspect of this fascinating social upheaval. You might compare representations of English life in the paintings of Constable, Gainsborough, and Reynolds with the very different illustrations of Hogarth.

Constance's inheritance comes from an uncle who worked for the East India Company. During the 18th century, people called someone who returned wealthy from colonies in the East or West Indies a "nabob." Nabobs figure prominently in 18th century literature. You might examine the historical background of these people, then read a play or novel in which they play significant parts.

The comedy in *She Stoops to Conquer* results from a conflict between appearance and reality, between what things appear to be and what they are. We see this in Marlow's confusion of Hardcastle with an innkeeper and of Kate with a barmaid. In a sense, the action of the play revolves around Tony's lie, yet true love wins out in the end. What is Goldsmith saying about the role of honesty in society? How important and under what circumstances is it essential to be brutally honest? When do the ends justify the means? You might compare Goldsmith's play with a similar comedy by Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which treats being earnest (i.e. honest), among other things.

She Stoops to Conquer: Media Adaptations

She Stoops to Conquer was adapted for film by Paul H. Cromelm in 1914.

It was also adapted into a one-act play in Schulenburg, Texas, in 1965.

Readings of Goldsmith's poems are included in a recording entitled *Johnson, Goldsmith, Cowper*, produced by Argo in 1972.

She Stoops to Conquer: What Do I Read Next?

Students who enjoy reading Shakespeare might want to consider two of his plays which treat themes similar to those in Goldsmith's play, in particular love and the problems faced by young lovers whose marriage has been forbidden by parents. Critics see resemblances between Goldsmith's Kate and Rosalind, the heroine of Shakespeare's 1599 comedy *As You Like It*. Both plays feature smart and spirited women and both create comedy from forbidden loves, disguises, and mistaken identities.

Those preferring tragedy might prefer Shakespeare's 1595 *Romeo and Juliet*, in which parental interference with the lover's plans for marriage leads to suicide and death. Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim successfully adapted *Romeo and Juliet* for the musical theatre in *West Side Story*.

Like Goldsmith's play, Frances Burney's 1778 epistolary novel *Evelina, or a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* also portrays the eighteenth century's Britain's marriage market. It recounts the heroine's introduction into London society and explores the ways love and marriage influence female identity.

In Mary Wollstonecraft's *Mana, or, The Wrongs of Woman*, late eighteenth-century England's marriage market leads a naive, sincere young woman to destruction. Until the Married Women's Property Act of 1867, women who married lost control over their property under a legal convention known as "coverture.¹" In this short, fragmentary, gothic novel, Maria's cruel husband has her imprisoned in a madhouse for her refusal to give him her money which she has saved for her daughter. Wollstonecraft's novel, written just 15 years after Goldsmith's play, offers a suitable contrast to *She Stoops to Conquer* for students interested in feminism and human rights.

While any of Jane Austen's novels would serve as fine foils to Goldsmith's play, two in particular might be best to read next: *Emma* (1815) and *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). Both deal with the problems of love and marriage faced by young ladies in the eighteenth century. Structurally akin to *She Stoops to Conquer*, Austen's novels also develop themes in part by juxtaposing pairs of characters. In tone, Austen's irony might be contrasted with Goldsmith's comedy.

Recalling the struggles of lovers Constance and Hastings, Wilkie Collins's 1868 novel *The Moonstone* also revolves around a young lady whose marriage stalls due to an Indian jewel. Different in style from Goldsmith's play, many critics see *The Moonstone* as one of the first detective novels, with an ending guaranteed to surprise.

Oscar Wilde's funny, accessible 1895 comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest, A Trivial Comedy for Serious People* closely resembles *She Stoops to Conquer* in situation, theme, and tone. Both plays feature two city-fied male friends who woo two countrified female friends and both rely on disguise and double identities. Love triumphs at the end of both plays, which end in marriages all around.

She Stoops to Conquer: Bibliography and Further Reading

Bevis, Richard. "Oliver Goldsmith" in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 89: *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Dramatists*, Third Series, edited by Paula R. Backscheider, Gale, 1989. pp 150-69. Presents extensive information about Goldsmith's life and how it relates to his writings. Traces Goldsmith's career from student to journalist to novelist, playwright, and poet, with discussion of all the major and much minor work.

Kroenberger, Louis Introduction to *She Stoops to Conquer; or, The Mistakes of a Night*, by Oliver Goldsmith, Heritage, 1964, pp. v-xi.

Kroenberger discusses reasons for the continued popularity of Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, which he attributes particularly to its farcical elements.

Styan, J.L. "Goldsmith's Comic Skills" in *Costerus*, Vol 9, 1973, pp. 195-217

Styan situates Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* within the context of restoration and sentimental comedy, and analyzes the elements that contribute to the play's dramatic and comedic success. These elements include Goldsmith's manipulation of farce, absurdity, and exaggeration, and the creation of characters who must themselves act different parts (for example, Kate acts first as a dutiful daughter, then as a barmaid) Finally, Styan considers Goldsmith's development as a playwright, comparing the successful *She Stoops to Conquer* with the earlier, less successful *The Good-Natur'd Man*.