

Aspects of comedy: Text overview – *She Stoops to Conquer*

What follows is an explanation of some of the ways this text can be considered in relation to the genre of comedy. This document is intended to provide a starting point for teachers in their thinking and planning in that it gives an introductory overview of how the text can be considered through the lens of the genre. There are some brief comments on how some elements of the genre can be linked to the text, although teachers and students may well think of other relevant ideas. Not all of the texts on the set texts list contain every element of the genre and that is reflected in this commentary. It is hoped this will provide a useful starting point and a springboard for thinking about the text in more detail.



“So then, all's out, and I have been damnably imposed on. O, confound my stupid head, I shall be laughed at over the whole town ...To mistake this house of all others for an inn, and my father's old friend for an innkeeper!”

Overview

There should not be any difficulty understanding why *She Stoops to Conquer* appears on a paper called aspects of comedy; it has much in common with the other comedy texts that appear there. It is a dramatic comedy above all else and, as many of its commentators and admirers have noted since its first performance, it is a “laughing comedy”, a very funny play at which the audience laughs aloud. Goldsmith himself, in his original dedication to Samuel Johnson, refers to the play as “a comedy not merely sentimental” which seems to point up that, unlike some other plays of the eighteenth century, this comedy is actually funny. Indeed, in the Prologue and Epilogue, Goldsmith says much about how this play differs from the sentimental comedies of his day which he mocks and castigates. *She Stoops to Conquer*, unlike sentimental comedies, is a classical low comedy containing a host of comic characters and an absurdly unbelievable plot based on mistaken identity, disguise and trickery. Its original title was *The*

Mistakes of a Night and the play does indeed follow the Unity of Time in that the action covers the events of one evening. Some critics argue that it also partly adheres to the Unities of Place and Action as the sub-plot is so closely connected to the main plot and the action mostly takes place in one location, the country residence of Mr and Mrs Hardcastle.

Disguise, deception and mistaken identity

These are key aspects of comedy and they form the basis of the plot of *She Stoops to Conquer*. The play's title is revealing in this respect, suggesting the subterfuge which is about to take place where the protagonist is a woman. Kate 'stoops', in taking on the guise of a lower class barmaid, to conquer the affections of the reticent Marlow. The overarching plot is set in motion by Tony Lumpkin, the play's fool and mischief maker, who convinces Marlow and Hastings that Mr Hardcastle's home is in fact an inn and Mr Hardcastle himself the innkeeper. It is interesting that the high born town dweller, Marlow, is thus duped twice. Goldsmith makes the improbable misunderstandings work because of the country/town dichotomy and the differing prevailing attitudes of the town and country folk. The two Londoners, Marlow and Hastings, are ever ready to display their arrogance and behave contemptuously towards the man they believe is an innkeeper; they, who have all the manners and sophistication, also cannot imagine that they can be tricked by a country bumpkin and Marlow could never imagine that he is being tricked by the demure Kate. Goldsmith also creates the well-meaning and unsuspecting Hardcastles, representatives of the countryside to ensure the success of Lumpkin's trick. They are somewhat in awe of the two young gentlemen, one of whom they expect to marry their daughter, and will it seems accept any display of condescending manners from them, no matter how 'impudent'. While Mr Hardcastle and his guests are unaware of the trick being played on them, other forms of disguise and deception are operating (besides that of Kate's feigning to be a barmaid to "teach [Marlow] a little confidence"). Constance pretends to her aunt she is in love with Tony, when actually she has set her sights on Hastings. Hastings pretends to be a disinterested friend of Marlow's when actually he is planning to elope with Constance. Mrs Hardcastle deceives her son into believing he is not yet of age, in an attempt to control his and Constance's destiny and keep the Neville jewels in the family. The play is a catalogue of deceptions and mistakes which accumulate and interact with each other. Even after Marlow has discovered he has been treating his father's old and respected friend as a common innkeeper he then has to suffer the indignity of finding out that the woman he has declared he barely knows and has no interest in is actually the same woman he is wooing with great passion. Despite his somewhat objectionable behaviour at times audiences perhaps sympathise with him when he declares in embarrassment and mortification, "there's no bearing this; it's worse than death".

Comic characters and comic scenes

Not only does Goldsmith create a busy and action filled plot, but *She Stoops to Conquer* also contains a range of comic characters to delight the audience. Goldsmith avoids creating characters who are merely two dimensional and instead his cast has a complexity and depth about it. Two of the chief comic characters are the bluff and boorish (but ultimately good natured) Tony and his over-protective, vain, eccentric mother and the stand-off between them is one of the key strands to make this a 'laughing comedy'. Tony is, on the one hand, an uneducated oaf who enjoys playing tricks and causing mischief. He is also however one of the only characters who throughout the play is openly honest and true to himself – he loves the alehouse, detests the idea of marrying Constance, greatly admires Bet Bouncer and outright refuses to obey his mother. He is also the character who actively sets about trying to resolve the problems of the others and he saves the day, despite the fact they so easily turn on him and blame him for their woes. He is, as Constance remarks, ultimately "a good natured creature at bottom". His mother is full of scheming and vanity, but her ideas come to nothing and Tony's trick on her at the end of the play where he fairly lodges her "in the horse-pond at the bottom of the garden" makes her a comic victim of sorts. Mr Hardcastle, is in some ways an old-fashioned, conservative, stick in the mud. Tony calls him "the old grumbletonian" and Hardcastle himself declares he loves all that is old. He wishes to see his daughter dress plainly, despite her liking for finery, and this may seem somewhat puritanical. He also has a propensity to name drop and to labour the old tales he loves to recant at any opportunity. However he is also a man who has worked and laughed alongside his servants for more than twenty years and who is horrified at the mercenary attitude his wife has adopted towards Constance. He is outraged by Marlow's audacity but he is also capable of good humoredly forgiving him once his error is discovered. Most significantly, though, he loves and trusts his daughter and works alongside her and in her best interests. The two characters who may well provoke a range of different responses are Marlow and Kate. Marlow's differing attitudes to different sorts of women may be seen as both bizarre and objectionable and it would be hard to judge his condescending attitude to Mr Hardcastle, even when he thinks he is an inn-keeper, as anything but rude and unpleasant. Yet he is also the victim of two significant deceptions, and he is ultimately completely outmaneuvered by his future wife which might suggest there is some comic justice at work. Kate can be seen as the most conniving and manipulative character in the play, more than her mother's equal. Using both her "power" and "art" to orchestrate events between herself and Marlow she controls both him and their fathers, managing to get what she wants. At the end, once all is revealed, the stage direction reveals she is "tormenting" Marlow and he refers to her as his "little tyrant". So this is, in one respect, the triumph of she who stoops to conquer. If there are any potential shadows within the comic resolution, there might be a question about how genuinely happy the union of Kate and Marlow is. But there is comedy to be enjoyed in Kate's strong independence as a woman; she has good

sense and spirit and audiences might rejoice in the way she is able to manage the ridiculous extremes of Marlow's character. In many ways it is the triumph of the country over the town. Many readers will think Marlow deserves to be tormented at the end, given what Kate has learnt of his conduct with women and celebrate the fact that she has conquered him.

Apart from the central characters, even the minor figures – Diggory, Roger and the unnamed fellows – and the characters who are named but do not appear in the play contribute to the play's comedy. Tony's drinking cronies sing and have comic exchanges of speech and Mrs Frizzle, Mrs Oddfish, Bet Bouncer, Mr Cripplegate ("the lame dancing master") have delightful and suggestive names.

Quite often comedy texts, particularly sentimental comedies, are not actually comic but in *She Stoops to Conquer* there are many scenes that are funny to watch – the drinking scene in the alehouse in which Tony sings a song celebrating ale and denouncing education, his deception of Marlow and Hastings in *The Three Pigeons* because they look "woundily like Frenchmen" and because he wants to be revenged on his step-father; Mr Hardcastle's attempts to train his farm workers as indoor servants who can serve at the table; Hastings' perhaps cruel flattery of Mrs Hardcastle (he says that from her "air and manner" he had concluded that she had "been bred all [her] life either at Ranlagh, St James's or Tower Wharf"); Mr Hardcastle's first encounter with his 'guests' who amaze him with their impudence; the saga of the stolen jewels that are inadvertently returned to Mrs Hardcastle from whom they were stolen; Tony supposedly driving his mother and cousin to Aunt Pedigree's and Mrs Hardcastle fearing she is being attacked by a highwayman on Crackskull Common when actually she is being addressed by her husband at the bottom of her own garden, having been driven into a horse pond. The list goes on. The action is extremely swift and is an essential ingredient in the comedy's fun. The chaos and confusions of the play mount apace until all is finally revealed and all the mistakes of the night are rectified. The revelations do not come without embarrassment and humiliation from those who have been tricked. Marlow is mortified that he has mistaken Hardcastle for an inn keeper, not because of his treatment of Hardcastle, but because he has been duped: "O confound my stupid head, I shall be laughed at over the whole town") and when Kate's trick is revealed he says that it is "worse than death".

Oppositions, contrasts and comedic pairings

Within *She Stoops to Conquer* Goldsmith establishes a number of oppositions, which form an intrinsic part of the comedy. A key opposition in the play is that between town and country, with Mrs Hardcastle preferring the former and her husband the latter. Mr Hardcastle declares "I love everything that is old" and he sees the town as a place of "vanity and affectation", whereas his wife claims to love all that is new and the latest fashion, wanting to go to town "to rub off the rust a little". The relationship between Tony and his mother is confrontational. When she tries to stop him from going to the ale house he is all the more determined to go. When she says he won't go, he says "We'll see which is

strongest, you or I” and he exits “hauling her out”. Goldsmith also contrasts the characters of Tony and his half-sister Kate. The open and unsophisticated nature of Tony is very different from the intelligent scheming of Kate who seamlessly adopts the guise of barmaid to manipulate her would-be husband. Marlow himself is constructed on oppositional lines. While his conduct with women of high degree is reticent and nervous, his behaviour with “creatures of another stamp” is forward and confident. Kate and her father’s first impressions of Marlow are in stark contrast to each other, as are the views of Sir Charles and Mr Hardcastle before the misunderstandings are cleared up at the end of the play. Mrs Hardcastle’s over protective, deluded view of her “sickly” and “consumptive” son is the opposite of the Tony Lumpkin who appears on stage. These oppositions and contrasts and the interplay between the different pairings are the essence of Goldsmith’s comedy of manners.

Love, marriage and resolution

Like many dramatic comedies, *She Stoops to Conquer* centers on love, courtship and marriage. As is typical of comedies too, the path to love does not run smooth. The action of the play is driven by both the pursuit and avoidance of love and marriage. Marlow has been sent, by his father, to visit the Hardcastles as a prospective husband for Kate; Hastings and Constance are secretly planning a future together but Constance pretends to be interested in Tony (on Tony’s advice) to ensure she secures her jewels from Mrs Hardcastle, her guardian; Tony, already captivated by the luscious Bet Bouncer, makes it very clear he cannot abide his cousin (though he happily enters into a pretence to dupe his mother); Mrs Hardcastle is plotting for Tony and Constance to marry for mercenary reasons; Marlow falls for the disguised barmaid Kate and almost resolves to have her before the revelation of her true identity saves him from having to make a contentious decision. At the end of the play, after much intrigue and revelation, all three potential couples are free to be together. The two fathers are happy and only Mrs Hardcastle, the nearest thing to a comic villain in the play, strikes a discordant note. Amidst the joyous raptures of others she bewails her “undutiful offspring” and claims that “this is all but the whining end of a modern novel” (Goldsmith here perhaps having a swipe at contemporary tastes). The play’s final word though goes to the hero Tony Lumpkin, who is given an epilogue in which to speak. There he informs the audience that having conquered the country he is ready to take on the town (“to make a bluster in the nation”). But Tony will not go alone: “big Bet Bouncer” will accompany him to operas and auctions and together they will make “these London gentry say, / We know what’s damned genteel, as well as they”. Goldsmith’s final comedic stab is perhaps at his sophisticated London audiences.

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