

## Oliver Goldsmith 1728-1774

The most versatile writer of the Johnson circle apart from Johnson himself was Oliver Goldsmith. Born in Ireland like Swift, he sought a livelihood like Johnson among the hack writers of London. Writing for various periodicals and booksellers, he churned out essays, reviews, histories, translations, and compilations as opportunities arose and financial need required. Though paid handsomely for many of his efforts, he was continually poor and died £2,000 in debt. "Was ever poet so trusted before?" mused Dr. Johnson. While writing for a living, Goldsmith also wrote for literary fame, achieving excellence in four important genres: the periodical essay, the novel, the drama (**satirical comedy**), and the formal poem of serious reflection.

Goldsmith, given like Johnson to irresolution and idleness, spent ten years settling on a literary vocation. After receiving his B.A. from Trinity College, Dublin (1749), studying medicine at the University of Leyden in the Netherlands (1752-53), and touring Europe on foot (1755-56), Goldsmith tried for two years to establish a medical practice among the poor of London (1757-58). Not succeeding, he turned to writing and published his first book in 1759. The short but ambitious *Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning in Europe* traced the decay of literature to dull academics in the schools and to the decline of literary patronage by the aristocracy.

More than forty publications followed in the next decade and a half, with works of artistic genius coming every three or four years. *The Citizen of the World* (1762) is a collection of periodical essays in the form of letters from abroad by a cultured Chinese traveler. By assuming the fictional identity of a foreign traveler, especially one from a nation distinguished for its philosophical tradition, Goldsmith gained an external, rational perspective from which to satirize English social behavior. *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), immensely popular in its own day and since, is a novel about the misfortunes of a country parson and his family, whose rescue from ruin—financial and social—is as unforeseen as their sudden fall. It is not Parson Primrose's religion, the rational piety of eighteenth-century Anglicanism, but arbitrary circumstance that saves the family from utter collapse. Goldsmith's story of the kindly but helpless gentleman-parson and his worldly wife exemplifies, though unintentionally, the feebleness of the church that made necessary the Wesleyan revivals.

In 1773 Goldsmith attempted to revive, after a century, the Restoration **comedy of manners**, though without its licentiousness. The play *She Stoops to Conquer* was intended to combine the wit of the earlier comedy with the morality of the current **sentimental comedy**. Staged by David Garrick at the famous Drury Lane theater, it was embraced as a literary cause by the Johnson circle. On opening night, members of the Club (including Reynolds, who could hardly hear, and Johnson, who could hardly see) turned out en masse to "clap it to victory." It has held the stage ever since.

Goldsmith's viewpoint as a writer was socially conservative—what we should expect from a charter member of the Literary Club. But his writings also show

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tendencies of the period toward **sentimentalism**. His conservatism and sentimentalism show strongly in the melancholy nostalgia of his best-known work, *The Deserted Village* (1770). Like Goldsmith's best work in other genres, it both reflects and rises above its age. To this day it retains its power to please.