

***She Stoops to Conquer* Analysis**

Type of Play

She Stoops to Conquer is a stage play in the form of a **comedy of manners**, which ridicules the manners (way of life, social customs, etc.) of a certain segment of society, in this case the upper class. The play is also sometimes termed a *drawing-room comedy*. The play uses farce (including many mix-ups) and satire to poke fun at the class-consciousness of eighteenth-century Englishmen and to satirize what Goldsmith called the "weeping sentimental comedy so much in fashion at present."

Setting

Most of the action takes place in the Hardcastle mansion in the English countryside, about sixty miles from London. The mansion is an old but comfortable dwelling that resembles an inn. A brief episode takes place at a nearby tavern, The Three Pigeons Alehouse. The time is the eighteenth century.

Title

The title refers to Kate's ruse of pretending to be a barmaid to reach her goal. It originates in the poetry of Dryden, which Goldsmith may have seen misquoted by Lord Chesterfield. In Chesterfield's version, the lines in question read:

"The prostrate lover, when he lowest lies, But stoops to conquer, and but kneels to rise."

Plot Summary

In a downstairs room of their old mansion, Dorothy Hardcastle tells her husband that they need a little diversion—namely, a trip to London, a city she has never visited. Their neighbors, the Hoggs sisters and Mrs. Grigsby, spend a month in London every winter. It is the place to see and be seen. But old Hardcastle, content with his humdrum rural existence, says people who visit the great city only bring back its silly fashions and vanities. Once upon a time, he says, London's affectations and fopperies took a long time to reach the country; now they come swiftly and regularly by the coach-load.

Mrs. Hardcastle, eager for fresh faces and conversations, says their only visitors are Mrs. Oddfish, the wife of the local minister, and Mr. Cripplegate, the lame dancing teacher. What's more, their only entertainment is Mr. Hardcastle's old stories about sieges and battles. But Hardcastle says he likes everything old—friends, times, manners, books, wine, and, of course, his wife.

Living in their home with them is their daughter, Kate, a pretty miss of marriageable age, and Tony, Mrs. Hardcastle's son by her first husband, Mr. Lumpkin. As a boy, Tony bedeviled his stepfather, Mr. Hardcastle, with every variety of mischief, burning a servant's shoes, scaring the maids, and

vexing the kittens. And, Hardcastle says, "It was but yesterday he fastened my wig to the back of my chair, and when I went to make a bow, I popt my bald head in Mrs. Frizzle's face."

Now as a young man, Tony has become a fat slob who spends most of his time at the local alehouse. Soon he will come of age, making him eligible for an inheritance of 1500 pounds a year with which to feed his fancies. Mrs. Hardcastle wants to match Tony with her niece and ward, Constance Neville, who has inherited a casket of jewels from her uncle. As Miss Neville's guardian, Mrs. Hardcastle holds the jewels under lock and key against the day when Constance can take legal possession of them.

While Mr. and Mrs. Hardcastle discuss the London trip that is not to take place, Tony passes between them and sets off for the alehouse, The Three Pigeons. Mrs. Hardcastle chases out the door after him, saying he should find something better to do than associate with riffraff.

Alone, Mr. Hardcastle laments the follies of the age. Even his darling Kate is becoming infected, for now she has become fond of "French frippery." When she enters the room, he tells her he has arranged for her to meet an eligible young man, Mr. Charles Marlow, a scholar with many good qualities who "is designed for employment in the service of the country." Marlow is to arrive for a visit that very evening with a friend, Mr. George Hastings. Young Marlow is the son of Hardcastle's friend, Sir Charles Marlow. Kate welcomes the opportunity to meet the young man, although she is wary about her father's description of him as extremely shy around young ladies.

By and by, Constance Neville comes in for a visit. When Kate tells her about young Mr. Marlow, Constance tells her that her own admirer, Mr. Hastings, a friend of the Marlow family. Miss Neville welcomes the attentions of Hastings but laments Mrs. Hardcastle's attempts to pair her with her "pretty monster," Tony, in an effort to keep Miss Neville's jewels in the family. Tony and Constance despise each other.

Tony Plays Trick

Meanwhile, at the alehouse, Tony is having a ripping good time singing and drinking when Hastings and young Marlow come in asking for directions to the Hardcastle home. Having just arrived in the area from London after a wearisome trip, they have lost their way. Tony, who resents Mr. Hardcastle's treatment of him lately, sees a way to get even: He tells Marlow and Hastings that Hardcastle is an ugly, cantankerous fellow and that his daughter is a "tall, trapesing, trolloping, talkative maypole." But, he says, Hardcastle's son (meaning himself) is a "pretty, well-bred youth that everybody is fond of." Marlow says he has been told otherwise, namely, that the daughter is "well-bred and beautiful; the son, an awkward booby, reared up and spoiled at his mother's apron-string."

Taken aback, Tony can only hem and haw. Then, deciding to work a mischief, he tells them the Hardcastle home is too far to reach by nightfall but that there is a nice inn just up the road. The "inn" is, of course, the Hardcastle home. When Marlow and Hastings arrive there, they note that the inn is old but commendable in its own way. Hastings comments that

Marlow has traveled widely, staying at many inns, but wonders why such a man of the world is so shy around young women. Marlow reminds him that he is shy only around young ladies of culture and bearing. Around women of the lower classes, he is a nonstop talker, a wag completely at ease. Hastings replies: "But in the company of women of reputation I never saw such an idiot, such a trembler; you look for all the world as if you wanted an opportunity of stealing out of the room."

When Mr. Hardcastle enters, he welcomes them as the expected guests—the Marlow fellow who is to meet his daughter and Marlow's friend Hastings. However, the young men—believing that they are at the inn described by Tony—think Mr. Hardcastle is the innkeeper, and treat him like one, giving him orders to prepare their supper and asking to see the accommodations. Hardcastle is much offended by their behavior, thinking them the rudest of visitors, for he remains unaware that they think they are at an inn. He keeps his feelings to himself.

When Hardcastle goes upstairs with Marlow to show him his room, Hastings runs into Constance Neville and, through his conversation with her, realizes that he is at the Hardcastle home, not an inn. Hastings decides to keep the information a secret from Marlow, fearing that Marlow would react to the mix-up by immediately leaving. Thus, he allows Marlow to believe that Constance and Kate are also guests at the "inn."

When Marlow finally meets Kate, his shyness all but tongue-ties him. Almost every time he starts a sentence, Kate has to finish it. But she compliments him on being so clever as to bring up interesting topics of conversation. All the while that they talk, Marlow lacks the courage even to look at her face. He does not even know what she looks like.

In another room, Tony, who has returned from the pub, and Constance are insulting each other, as usual, to the dismay of Mrs. Hardcastle. After Hastings observes their spitfire give-and-take, he tells Tony he will take the young lady off his hands if Tony will help him win her.

"I'll engage to whip her off to France, and you shall never hear more of her," Hastings says.

Tony replies: "Ecod, I will [help] to the last drop of my blood."

Hardcastle Annoyed

Mr. Hardcastle, meanwhile, is becoming more and more annoyed with Marlow for treating him like a lackey. Alone on the stage, Hardcastle laments, "He has taken possession of the easy-chair by the fire-side already. He took off his boots in the parlour, and desired me to see them taken care of. I'm desirous to know how his impudence affects my daughter."

Kate has been upstairs changing into casual clothes. When she comes down and talks with her father, she bemoans Marlow's incredible shyness while Hardcastle, in turn, complains about Marlow's rudeness. They wonder whether they are talking about the same person.

While they converse, Tony, who knows where his mother keeps everything, gets the casket of jewels Mrs. Hardcastle is holding for Constance and gives it to Hastings as an

inducement for Hastings to run off with Constance. Later, Mrs. Hardcastle discovers it missing and thinks a robber is about.

Meanwhile, a maid tells Kate that Marlow believes he is at an inn. The maid also tells her that Marlow mistook Kate for a barmaid after she changed into her casual attire. Kate decides to keep up the charade, changing her voice and demeanor in Marlow's presence.

When he strikes up a conversation with her, he says she is "vastly handsome." Growing bold, he adds, "Suppose I should call for a taste, just by way of a trial, of the nectar of your lips." (To audiences attending the play, Marlow's bold behavior is not at all surprising, for they are aware that Marlow is a different man when in the presence of women of the servant class.) When old Hardcastle observes Kate and Marlow together, he sees Marlow seize Kate's hand and treat her like a milkmaid. He's thinking of turning Marlow out. When he makes his feelings known to Kate, she asks for an hour to convince her father that Marlow is not so bold and rude as her father believes he is. He agrees to her proposal.

The plot thickens at this point, for another visitor will shortly arrive—Marlow's father, Sir Charles Marlow. It seems Miss Neville happened on a letter to old Hardcastle in which Sir Charles announced that he would arrive at the Hardcastle home a few hours after his son made his appearance. When she tells George Hastings of Sir Charles's expected arrival at any minute, George worries that Sir Charles—who is aware of George's fondness for Constance—will somehow upset their plans to run off together. Constance asks whether the jewels are safe. George assures her they are, for he has sent the jewels, via a servant, to Marlow for safekeeping.

Unfortunately, unknown to Hastings, Marlow has told the servant to give the casket of jewels to the "landlady" for safekeeping. So the jewels are back where they were originally, in Mrs. Hardcastle's possession (as Miss Neville's guardian). Tony tells his mother a servant was responsible for misplacing them. Satisfied, she returns to the task of promoting a romance between Tony and Constance, unaware that Hastings and the young lady are plotting to abscond.

Marlow is by now captivated by the barmaid and says to himself, "She's mine, she must be mine."

Meanwhile, old Hardcastle has had enough of impudent Marlow and orders him to leave. Marlow protests. Hardcastle rants and exits in a huff. When Kate enters, she realizes Marlow now knows something strange is going on, so she reveals that the inn is Hardcastle's house. However, she describes herself as a "relative"—a "poor relation" who helps out. As such, she knows, Marlow will continue to talk to her freely, since a "poor relation" is the same in standing as a barmaid. Marlow, shaken and deeply embarrassed, says, "To mistake this house of all others for an inn, and my father's old friend for an innkeeper! What a swaggering puppy must he take me for! What a silly puppy do I find myself!"

Marlow tells the "poor relation" that he will be leaving, in view of the circumstances, but notes that she has been the only positive thing that happened to him during the confusing and disconcerting ordeal. His words help to identify the

feeling she felt for him when they met: love. Her scheme of posing as a barmaid/poor relation to find out his real feelings—a scheme in which she stooped to conquer—has proved wise.

Further mix-ups develop involving Miss Neville's jewels and Mr. Hastings' planned elopement with Constance. Tony is implicated as the trickster who set in motion the comedy of errors by telling Marlow and Hastings that the Hardcastle home was an inn.

When Sir Charles arrives, he and old Hardcastle have a laugh about the mix-ups, but Hardcastle tells Kate that he is still unconvinced that Marlow is anything but rude and insulting. To prove that Marlow is a worthy man, Kate enacts one final scene as the poor relative while Marlow converses with her and Sir Charles and Hardcastle listen behind a screen. In the end, Kate reveals her identity to Marlow, and everyone understands the mistakes of the evening.

But there is a further development: Old Hardcastle reveals that Tony is "of age"—and has been for three months, meaning he has a right now to make up his own mind about his future. Immediately, as his first act as his own man, Tony goes against his mother's wishes and refuses to marry Constance Neville, freeing her to marry Hastings—and qualifying her to receive the jewels. In the end, the young lovers—Kate and Marlow, Constance and Hastings—are betrothed.

Mrs. Hardcastle comments, "This is all but the whining end of a modern novel."

Climax

The climax occurs when Kate reveals her true identity to young Marlow while Hardcastle and Sir Charles listen behind a screen.

Style and Structure

Goldsmith's style is wry, witty, and simple but graceful. From beginning to end, the play is both entertaining and easy to understand, presenting few words and idioms that modern audiences would not understand. It is also well constructed and moves along rapidly, the events of the first act—in particular, references to Tony Lumpkin's childhood propensity for working mischief and playing practical jokes—foreshadowing the events of the following acts.

There are frequent scene changes, punctuated by an occasional appearance of a character alone on the stage (*solus* in the stage directions) reciting a brief account of his feelings. In modern terms, the play is a page-turner for readers. Goldsmith observed the classical unities of time and place, for the action of the play takes place in single locale (the English countryside) on a single day.

Themes

Class Bias

Until Kate teaches him a lesson, Marlow responds to women solely on the basis of their status in society. He looks down on women of the lower class but is wholly at ease around them; he esteems women of the upper class but is painfully shy around them. Like the London society in which he was brought up, he assumes that all women of a certain class think and act according to artificial and arbitrary standards expected of that class. As for Mrs. Hardcastle, she appears to assess a person by the value of his or her possessions.

Love Ignores Social Boundaries

Although prevailing attitudes among England's elite classes frown on romance between one of their own and a person of humble origin, Marlow can't help falling in love with a common "barmaid" (who is, of course, Kate in disguise).

Hope for Flawed Humanity

Although Marlow makes a fool of himself as a result of his upper-class biases, Kate has enough common sense to see through the London hauteur encasing him and to appreciate him for his genuinely good qualities—which are considerable, once he allows them to surface. Also, Mrs. Hardcastle, in spite of her misguided values, enjoys the love of her practical, down-to-earth husband. He, too, is willing to look beyond her foibles in favor of her good points.

Money Breeds Indolence

Tony Lumpkin will get 1,500 pounds a year when he comes of age. Thus, without financial worries, he devotes himself to ale and a do-nothing life.

First Performance

Goldsmith completed the play in 1773. It was first performed at Covent Garden Theatre in London on March 15 of that year. It was well received. Over the last two centuries, it has become one of the most popular comedies in English literary history. It is still performed often today throughout the English-speaking world.