

# SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER

by Oliver Goldsmith



## THE AUTHOR

Oliver Goldsmith (c.1728-1774) was born in Ireland, the son and grandson of Church of England rectors much like the central figure of his only novel. His family was poor but did manage to obtain an education for their son at Trinity College in Dublin, where he almost flunked out because he gave far too much attention to drinking and gambling, and at the University of Edinburgh, where he studied medicine. In early adulthood he wandered aimlessly from one job to another, including tutoring and practicing medicine, both of which he found largely unprofitable. Finally he found his true love, writing, beginning as an editor of the *Monthly Review*. Most of his editing and numerous translations of the works of others left little mark on his own time, let alone on future generations. He wrote on whatever subject would bring in money, whether he knew anything about it or not, and some of his largest works, including an eight-volume *History of the Earth and Animated Nature* and histories of England and Rome were largely plagiarized and frequently inaccurate. Amidst all the dross, however, were nuggets of gold – two poems, *The Traveller* (1764) and *The Deserted Village* (1770), two plays, *The Good Natured Man* (1768) and *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773), and one novel, *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), containing some of the finest writing the English language has ever known.

Despite his undeniable talent and versatility as a writer, Goldsmith's personal life was a disaster. He never forgot the poverty in which he had grown up, thus lusted for riches, which he tended to drink and gamble away whenever they came his way. He was remarkably ugly, so socially awkward that even his friends made fun of him, and was jealous of any praise given to others. Yet he attained to the highest literary circles in England, moving among the likes of Samuel Johnson, painter Sir Joshua Reynolds, actor David Garrick, and politicians Edmund Burke and Horace Walpole, who called him an "inspired idiot." Ever insecure, he died prematurely because he rejected the advice of doctors and instead insisted on diagnosing himself.

*She Stoops to Conquer* is Goldsmith's most famous play, and in fact revived the comedy of manners, which had fallen into disuse in the century before. Though the plot has its roots as far back as the comedies of ancient Rome, with the conflict between parents who wish to arrange their children's marriages and children who have ideas of their own on the subject, the central plot element actually came from Goldsmith's personal experience. He, like poor young Marlow, was socially awkward, and on one occasion actually wandered into a private home, mistook it for an inn, and began to order the owner about as if he were the proprietor of some hostelry. The play was originally entitled *Mistakes of a Night*, and indeed it observes the classical unity of time, with

the story occupying less than a day - little more time than the two hours spent in the theater. The scene in *The Three Pigeons* briefly violates the unity of place, while the Hastings/Constance subplot violates the unity of action, however.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Dick Hardcastle – The owner of a rambling old house that looks like an inn. He is a stubborn traditionalist who loves the old ways.
- Dorothy Hardcastle – His wife, she longs to get away from the house and spend time among the fashionable people in London.
- Tony Lumpkin – Dorothy’s son by a previous marriage, he is a ne’er-do-well practical joker intended by his mother to be married to Constance Neville despite the fact that the two cordially detest one another.
- Kate Hardcastle – The lovely and lively daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Hardcastle, she decides to pursue the bashful Charles Marlow, the love of her life, by pretending to be a kitchen maid.
- Constance Neville – Kate’s best friend, she is intended for Tony Lumpkin, though the two can’t stand one another, but is in love with George Hastings.
- Charles Marlow - A shy bachelor who falls apart in the presence of women of his own class but is very comfortable with servants and barmaids. Kate pretends to be a servant in order to increase his self-confidence and win his love.
- Sir Charles Marlow - Young Charles’ father and one of Hardcastle’s oldest friends, he wishes his son to marry Hardcastle’s daughter, though he despairs of the possibility because of the young man’s diffidence.
- George Hastings - Marlow’s best friend, he is in love with Constance Neville. The two of them participate in the plot to trick Marlow into falling in love with Kate.

## NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“An impudent fellow may counterfeit modesty, but I’ll be hanged if a modest man can ever counterfeit impudence.” (Marlow, Act II)

“I’m doomed to adore the sex, and yet to converse with the only part of it I despise.” (Marlow, Act II)

“If I could teach him a little confidence, it would be doing somebody that I know of a piece of service. But who is that somebody? That, faith, is a question I can scarce answer.” (Kate, Act II)

“Ask me no questions, and I’ll tell you no fibs.” (Tony, Act III)

“If I shortly convince you of his modesty, that he has only the faults that will pass off with time, and the virtues that will improve with age, I hope you’ll forgive him.” (Kate, Act III)

“May you be as successful for yourself as you have been for me.” (Hastings, Act IV)

“I never knew half his merit till now. He shall not go, if I have power to detain him. I’ll still preserve the character in which I stooped to conquer, but will undeceive my papa, who, perhaps, may laugh him out of his resolution.” (Kate, Act IV)

“Seriously, Mr. Marlow, do you think I could ever submit to a connection, where *I* must appear mercenary, and *you* imprudent?” (Kate, Act V, scene 3)

“Mr. Marlow, if she makes as good a wife as she has a daughter, I don’t believe you’ll ever repent your bargain.” (Hardcastle, Act V, scene 3)

## NOTES

**Prologue** - An actor named Woodward bemoans the impending death of Comedy, which is personified as a sick woman who can only be cured by the ministrations of a doctor [Goldsmith was a medical doctor]. He then begs the audience’s indulgence for the comedy that is to follow.

**Act I, scene 1** - Mr. and Mrs. Hardcastle live in a big rambling old house that looks like an inn. The scene begins with Mrs. Hardcastle begging her husband to take her to London for a vacation so she can see all the newest trends. He tells her that he loves what is old and reliable and hates everything new. We soon find that Mrs. Hardcastle has a son from a previous marriage, Tony Lumpkin, a ne’er-do-well practical joker. He briefly passes through the room on his way to the local pub despite his mother’s attempts to stop him. Soon the lovely Kate, daughter of the Hardcastles, enters. Her father complains about her fancy dress, and she reminds him that they have an agreement to the effect that she can dress as she pleases in the mornings as long as she wears a simple house dress in the evenings. Hardcastle tells his daughter that young Marlow, the son of a friend of his, will be coming for dinner that evening, and that he intends Kate to marry him. When he describes the young man to his daughter, she is very pleased, but he warns her that he is extremely shy. Kate is determined to win his love anyway. Soon Constance Neville, Kate’s best friend, arrives. When Kate explains her predicament, Constance exclaims that Marlow is the best friend of her admirer, Mr. Hastings. Constance informs Kate that Marlow is bashful indeed among gentleness, but quite a different person among those of the lower class.

**Act I, scene 2** – Tony Lumpkin and some of his lowlife friends are carousing in an alehouse called The Three Pigeons. As they sing, the landlord announces that two gentlemen from London have arrived asking directions to the Hardcastle home. Marlow and Hastings come in complaining because of the length of their journey; they had gotten lost because Marlow refused to stop and ask directions. Tony proceeds to give them a hard time, asking if the family they seek is one with an ugly and difficult father, an ungainly daughter, and a handsome son; Marlow replies that they

had heard that the daughter was beautiful and the son a spoiled, “awkward booby.” Tony gives such confusing directions that they give up all hope of reaching the house, so he tells them they can stay at an inn nearby (which is really the Hardcastle residence). The owner, they say, is eccentric and will try to convince them that he is a gentleman and the house is not an inn at all, but they should pay no attention.

**Act II** - At the Hardcastle house, the master is preparing his servants to receive the expected guests, but because he has brought them in from their duties in the barn and fields, they are very uncertain about how to wait tables. Soon Marlow and Hastings enter, believing that the house is an inn, and are greeted by a servant. When Hastings begins to chide Marlow about his awkwardness among members of the fairer sex, the latter claims his shyness is due to lack of experience, having spent much of his time among men at the university, but insists that he is perfectly at ease among lower-class women, whom he finds much less intimidating. In fact, he admits that he only came on the trip in the first place to help advance the romance between Hastings and Miss Neville.

When Hardcastle enters the room, the two young men mistake him for the innkeeper. When they demand drinks, he thinks them very impudent, while his reluctance to serve them creates a bad impression on their part as well. Mutual misunderstandings pile one upon another. Whenever Hardcastle tries to engage them in conversation about military history, they ignore him and think him very rude for inserting himself into their company. He, in his turn, wonders how anyone could describe Marlow as shy and withdrawn.

After Hardcastle and Marlow leave to check out room arrangements, Constance Neville enters, much to the delight of Hastings. When he asks her why she is staying at an inn, she quickly disabuses him of his mistake, realizing that he has been tricked by Tony Lumpkin. The two decide to keep Marlow in the dark while pursuing their own goal of matrimony. When Marlow returns, Hastings introduces him to Constance and tells him that Miss Hardcastle is also in the inn, but Marlow immediately becomes nervous and refuses to meet her. She soon enters, and he promptly begins stumbling over every sentence he attempts to speak. When Hastings and Constance leave to enjoy some privacy, things quickly get worse. Marlow soon takes his leave, but Miss Hardcastle has taken a liking to the man under the mask of shyness and is determined to give him some self-confidence.

The scene continues with a conversation involving Hastings, Constance, Tony, and Mrs. Hardcastle, largely comic in tone and content. After the women leave, Hastings and Tony talk about Constance, who is loved by the former and despised by the latter. When Hastings offers to take Constance off Tony’s hands, the latter readily agrees to help with the plan.

**Act III** - The scene begins with Hardcastle, alone on stage, wondering aloud at the rudeness of Marlow, who had been described by his father as the mildest of men. Kate then enters in simple dress and tells her father of her amazement at young Marlow’s shyness, so that the two soon wonder if they are speaking of the same person. Despite the vast differences of their impressions, however, both for their own reasons are determined to reject him as a suitor for Kate’s hand, though Kate proceeds to argue that he might be acceptable if he shows boldness to her and politeness to her father.

After they exit, Tony runs in with a box containing Constance’s jewels – the basis of her fortune – which he has stolen from his mother, who is Constance’s aunt and guardian. He gives

the casket to Hastings, who is preparing to elope with the love of his life. Hastings, however, tells him that Constance is trying to get the jewels from Mrs. Hardcastle at that very moment, and he is worried about what might happen if she finds them missing. Hastings exits just as Mrs. Hardcastle and Constance are coming downstairs. Clearly Constance has been unable to convince her to part with the jewels. Tony whispers to his mother that she should tell Constance that the jewels are missing, which she promptly does. After she leaves the room, Tony tells Constance that he has stolen them and given them to Hastings, which calms her significantly. Constance then leaves quickly before Mrs. Hardcastle comes back downstairs. When she discovers that her jewels are really gone, she is distraught, but Tony speaks to her as if she is pretending in preparation for putting Constance off despite all her assurances to the contrary. She finally chases him offstage in her frustration.

Kate then enters with her maid and tells her that she intends to pretend to be a barmaid in order to discover Marlow's true character. When he comes into the room, she asks if he called for her services. He is clearly upset with his treatment in the house and is preparing to leave when he gets a good look at the supposed barmaid and finds that she is quite fetching [the conceit here is that when he met her in the character of Kate he was too bashful to look her in the face, and thus does not recognize the barmaid as the same person]. He immediately tries to kiss her, though she resists his advances. As they banter back and forth he tries to seize her hand, but she pulls away and he quickly exits when Hardcastle enters the room. Kate then tries to convince her father that Marlow is truly modest rather than being the rake he just saw grab his daughter's hand, but to no avail.

**Act IV** – The scene begins with Constance telling Hastings that Sir Charles, Marlow's father, is expected to arrive that very evening. Because Sir Charles knows Hastings, the two realize they must carry off their elopement before he appears to ruin the plan. Hastings tells Constance that he has given the casket containing her jewels to Marlow for safekeeping. They leave and Marlow comes in with a servant, clearly puzzled at the valuables entrusted to him by his friend. Because he has no safe place to put them, he has given them to Mrs. Hardcastle, who needless to say was surprised to be getting the jewels back that she had lost that morning. Marlow, meanwhile, is becoming increasingly enamored of Kate, who he still thinks is the barmaid, and is determined to make her his own.

Hastings then returns, and Marlow assures him that the jewels are safe – in the hands of the landlady. Hastings conceals his consternation, and at the same time warns Marlow not to seek to corrupt the barmaid. He is convinced that he and Constance must now elope without the jewels, since he has no hope of retrieving them from the clutches of Mrs. Hardcastle. Hardcastle then enters and rebukes Marlow for the fact that his servants are drinking his wine cellar dry, though Marlow argues that he is doing so for the good of the house because he assumes he will be paying for it. Hardcastle can take no more of this and orders Marlow to leave his house, mumbling that the letter from Sir Charles had led him to expect a gentleman rather than an insolent bully, and Marlow demands to be given his bill. At this point Hardcastle stalks out of the room, leaving Marlow to wonder whether or not he has made a terrible mistake.

Kate then comes in and Marlow asks her about the house. She tells him plainly that it is the home of Mr. Hardcastle and that she is a poor relation employed to make guests comfortable and see to their needs. Marlow is embarrassed at his mistake, but remains ignorant of Kate's true identity. He is more than ever determined to leave, but admits that he parts from her with great

reluctance. He sees no alternative, however, since he cannot pursue a relationship with one so far below his station, nor can he in good conscience seduce one so kind and modest. At this point Kate begins to see his true character and is convinced that she should continue her pursuit of him, but must first persuade him to stay.

Tony, helping Constance and Hastings to deceive the family about their intended elopement, pretends to pay romantic attention to Constance when Mrs. Hardcastle enters the room. She is so convinced of their love that she promises to give Constance her jewels forthwith and arrange for the two to marry the following day. A letter then arrives for Tony from Hastings. Constance recognizes the handwriting and is determined that Mrs. Hardcastle not see it. Tony, however, can't read – his mother always reads his letters for him. Constance grabs it from her hand to keep her from doing so and makes up something about cock-fighting and then crumples it up, but Tony, wanting to hear the entire contents, seizes it and gives it to his mother. The letter informs Tony that Hastings is waiting at the foot of the garden to run away with Constance. Mrs. Hardcastle is indignant, especially since Hastings refers to her as an old hag, and tells Constance that the horses will be used to send her far away in the care of her Aunt Pedigree – something Constance considers a fate worse than death. Hastings and Marlow then enter, both furious that they have been betrayed on the one hand and duped on the other. Each begins to blame the other, and more than all to blame Tony. The friends soon apologize, however, and Tony assures them that he will make all right.

**Act V, scene 1** – Sir Charles Marlow has arrived, and he and Hardcastle are enjoying a good laugh at young Marlow's expense. The two openly look forward to the union of their houses through the marriage of young Charles and Kate. Hardcastle assures Sir Charles that Kate loves his son, but Sir Charles wants confirmation that the attraction is mutual from young Charles, who does not yet know the "barmaid's" true identity. When asked, he insists that nothing more than respect and cool reserve exists between him and Kate. He exits in confusion. Then Kate arrives and, when asked, tells them frankly that young Charles has professed his love for her openly on multiple occasions. The fathers are now at a loss, but Kate convinces them that all will become clear if they simply hide behind a screen during her next conversation with young Marlow.

**Act V, scene 2** – Hastings is in the garden behind the house waiting for a message from Tony. He has led the carriage by a roundabout route so that the ladies eventually arrived back where they started, and stuck in a pond at the bottom of the garden at that. Tony then instructs Hastings to make away with Constance while he keeps his mother occupied. The women struggle up from the pond, in deplorable condition after their terrible journey and still believing themselves to be forty miles distant. Tony warns his mother that the region is notorious as a thieves' lair, and insists that she hide herself when they see a man approaching. The man is none other than Mr. Hardcastle himself, and while he and Tony talk, Mrs. Hardcastle runs from behind the tree to beg mercy from the "highwayman." Once she recognizes her husband, however, they both turn on Tony as the most nefarious trickster and rogue in all the land, then proceed into the house. Hastings, meanwhile, sees his chance to escape with Constance, but she refuses to elope with him, insisting that she will do nothing underhanded, but instead patiently await the favor of her guardian.

**Act V, scene 3** – Inside the house, Kate has convinced Sir Charles to hide and observe her conversation with young Marlow. He goes to find Hardcastle so they can overhear what transpires together. When young Marlow comes in, still believing Kate to be the barmaid, he professes his

love and insists that he is willing to risk all in order to have her. Kate demurs, telling him that she could not be the means of hurting his prospects or his family, but he is not to be put off, and prepares to propose marriage. At that point Hardcastle and Sir Charles burst out from their hiding place and both excoriate Marlow for misrepresenting himself and Kate. He is astonished to discover that the girl he loves and the Hardcastle daughter he feared are one and the same. All, however, readily forgive him, and the young lovers retire to the back of the stage.

At this point Mrs. Hardcastle and Tony come in. By now she is quite willing, on Tony's recommendation, to allow Constance to marry Hastings as long as she is able to retain the jewels. Hardcastle, however, steps forward and rebukes her for her mercenary attitude. He reminds his wife that Constance will receive her inheritance if Tony, her intended, refuses to marry her when he comes of age. Mrs. Hardcastle quickly notes that this has not yet occurred, but Hardcastle tells Tony that he and his mother have concealed his true age, hoping that he might develop some maturity under their tutelage; in fact, he came of age three months earlier. Tony, overjoyed at the prospect of being his own man, eagerly rejects Constance, leaving her free both to receive her fortune and to marry whomever she pleases. The two then prepare to join Marlow and Kate in a state of blissful matrimony.

**Epilogue** – The play actually has two epilogues. The first, written by the playwright and spoken by Kate, summarizes the action of the play, while the second, written by J. Craddock, is spoken by Tony Lumpkin, who assures the audience that he has every intention of continuing his rakish ways, especially now that he can live on his own and soon expects to inherit a fortune.

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* and Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Rivals* appeared on the London stage within two years of one another. The two plays have similar plots involving conflicts between parents determined to choose their children's mates and children who have minds of their own on the subject. Compare and contrast the plot devices of mistaken identity used by the two playwrights, as both Kate Hardcastle and Captain Absolute pretend to be someone else in order to appeal to their chosen mates. Which is in your opinion more credible? Which is more humorous? Why?
2. Both Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* and William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* focus on young lovers whose romance is hindered because their parents have other plans. Compare and contrast the ways in which the two playwrights resolve this parent/child conflict. Be sure to consider elements of both plot and character along with the use of comedy to produce a satisfactory denouement.
3. Both Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* and William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* center around a young woman who disguises herself in order to win the love of a man to whom she is attracted. Compare and contrast the characters of Kate Hardcastle and Rosalind with regard to their motivations, methods, and successes. Which do you find more admirable, and why?

4. Evaluate the character of Charles Marlow in Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*. He behaves very differently in the presence of people of different social classes. Which set of behaviors reflects his true character? Is he really a rogue who puts on a polite front in society, or does his behavior have some other explanation? Support your arguments with specifics from the play.
5. While Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* is a delightful comedy, it also contains elements of social criticism. Discuss the treatment of social class distinctions in the play, especially with regard to the character of Charles Marlow and his romance with Kate Hardcastle. Does the playwright reject the legitimacy of all social distinctions or simply satirize the extent to which people behave differently in different social contexts? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
6. In Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, many characters engage in pretense of one kind or another. Choose three examples of characters who pretend, either to be someone they are not or to believe something they know not to be true. How do these instances of pretense drive the plot? How do they reveal the nature of the characters who engage in them and those who are deceived as a result?
7. In Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, Mr. and Mrs. Hardcastle are clearly pictured as opposites from the opening scene of the play. In what ways are they opposites? Choose three qualities that emphasize their opposing natures and discuss how these three serve to develop the themes of the play. Be sure to use specific situations and quotations in developing your argument.
8. Discuss the role of Tony Lumpkin in Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*. He is unlike any other character in the play, yet he winds up having an impact of one kind or another on most of them. How do his unique qualities enable him to bring out salient characteristics in the other principal figures in the story?
9. A number of characters in Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* are torn between what they want to do and what society expects of them. Choose three such characters and analyze how they resolve this conflict. What do these resolutions indicate about the position of the playwright with regard to primacy of social obligations versus personal preferences?
10. A number of characters in Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* make erroneous snap judgments based on first impressions. Choose three such instances and discuss what they say about the danger of judging people and places by appearances. Is the playwright's position on this issue compatible with the teachings of Scripture? Why or why not?
11. In Act II of Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, Marlow says, "An impudent fellow may counterfeit modesty, but I'll be hanged if a modest man can ever counterfeit impudence." Analyze the irony of this statement. Is Marlow right in his assessment, both regarding himself and others? Why or why not?

12. In Act II of Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, Marlow says, "I'm doomed to adore the sex, and yet to converse with the only part of it I despise." To what extent is this bit of self-analysis accurate? What incidents in the play support his assessment of his own character and which contradict it? In the end, is the statement true or false?
13. In Act III of Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, Kate Hardcastle says of Marlow, "He has only the faults that will pass off with time, and the virtues that will improve with age." Is her assessment of her prospective lover an accurate one? How can she be sure that his virtues are permanent while his flaws are temporary? Is this wishful thinking on her part, or does the play give some indication that her judgment is an accurate one? Support your conclusion with specific quotations and incidents from the play.
14. Throughout Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, Constance Neville and Tony Lumpkin, who are intended to marry by Mrs. Hardcastle, who is her guardian and his mother, are presented as cordially detesting one another. Is their attitude supported by the script itself or merely asserted as a plot device? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play, in the process analyzing the characters of the two.
15. Compare and contrast Mrs. Hardcastle in Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* and Mrs. Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* with regard to their attitudes toward the marriages of their children. Consider the importance to both women of marriages arranged by parents along with factors of wealth and social status. In what ways do the two authors mine the qualities of the mothers for comic purposes? In what ways do they help develop the main themes of the stories?
16. Analyze the view of marriage presented in Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*. To what extent is the picture presented in the play indicative of the era in which it was written? To what extent is it universal, transcending periods in history? To what extent is it biblical?