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# Wit, Humour And Intrigue In Oliver Goldsmith's She Stoops To Conquer

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## Abstract

She Stoops to Conquer is a remarkable comedy by Oliver Goldsmith, first performed in London in 1773. It is one of the few plays from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to have retained its appeal and is still regularly performed. The play has been adapted into a film several times, including in 1914 and 1923. Initially the play was titled Mistakes of a Night and the events within the play take place in one long night. In 1778, John O'Keeffe wrote a loose sequel, Tony Lumpkin in Town. The play is notable for being the origin of the common English phrase, "Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies." (Appearing as 'fibs' in the play). The play centres around noble Kate Hardcastle and her betrothed, Young Marlow, after Kate's father arranges for their marriage. Marlow, who tends to get nervous around women of noble stature, finds himself the centre of an outrageous scheme after Kate disguises herself as a servant to trick him into wooing her. It is a splendid comedy of wit, humour and intrigue. In the play, we find plots, designs, contrivances, and even conspiracies of one character or a group of characters against the others.

**Keywords:** Comedy, Wit, Intrigue, Humour, Conspiracies.

## Introduction:

Oliver Goldsmith is regarded as a prolific author of the 18<sup>th</sup> century who wrote works in a variety of genres. He was a playwright, a novelist and an essayist. His plays are written against sentimentalism of Steele and Lawrence Sterne and hence he seems propagating the theory of anti-sentimentalism. His renowned play She Stoops to Conquer or The Mistakes of a Night deals well with human relationships, goodness of humanity and humour in life. Characters inside the play belong to the restoration age of William Congreve, Vanbrugh, Etherege, Wycherley. In the restoration age of Charles II, wit was employed mostly in the dramas to the pleasure of king. The present play also fulfils the demands of comedy of manners whereby characters are witty and jolly and amuses the audience/readers with their witty dialogues. Though the comedy deals with various issues as disguises, identities, directions, corrections, politeness, modesty, impudence but all results into humour and hence declares the play to be the best comic play ever. The play centres around noble Kate Hardcastle and her betrothed, Young Marlow, after Kate's father arranges for their marriage. Marlow, who tends to get nervous around women of

noble stature, finds himself the centre of an outrageous scheme after Kate disguises herself as a servant to trick him into wooing her.

### **Review of Literature:**

Oliver Goldsmith's remarkable play *She Stoops to Conquer* mocked the simple morality of sentimental comedies. Subtitled *The Mistakes of a Night*, the play is a light-hearted farce that derives its charm from the misunderstandings which entangle the well-drawn characters. Himani Sharma (2020) in a research paper titled "Wit and Humour in Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*" highlights wit and humour in the play. Her textual analysis of the play leads her to conclude that one major mistake and one misleading by Tony Lumpkin made the play a masterpiece. In a research paper titled "Immense Variety of Humour in Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*", Dr. C.N. Baby Maheswari highlights the immense variety of humour in the play that happen because of the intrigues. Rameshwar Prasad Singha (2022) in his thesis titled "The Mind and Art of Oliver Goldsmith" analyses the unique art of Goldsmith in creating literary masterpieces. He highlights Goldsmith's art and mind by critically analysing his major plays. The present study aims to bring out wit, humour and intrigues in the play by critically examining the play using various literary tools.

### **Objective:**

The study primarily aims to bring out wit, humour and intrigue in Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*. The paper highlights how Goldsmiths employs plots, designs, contrivances, and even conspiracies of one character or a group of characters against the other to infuse wit and humour in the play.

### **Research Methodology:**

To write this paper, prime concentration was given on textual approach. The author uses descriptive analytical method to analyse the play *She Stoops to Conquer*, first performed in 1773. The data are taken from the play written by Oliver Goldsmith, whose utterances, events, dialogues and paragraphs show factors that lead to wit and humour in the play.

### **Discussion:**

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no fibs," declares Tony Lumpkin as he conveys a box full of stolen jewels to his friend Hastings in the third act of *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773). The quotation gives a good indication of the central mechanisms of Oliver Goldsmith's most popular play, in which assumptions, fibs, misunderstandings, and mistakes conspire with results that have tickled audiences through the centuries. *She Stoops to Conquer* opens with a prologue in which an actor mourns the death of the classical low comedy at the altar of sentimental, "mawkish" comedy. He hopes that Dr. Goldsmith can remedy this problem through the play about to be presented.

The subtitle *The Mistakes of a Night* refers to the several mistakes Marlow committed during the course of a single night. First, he mistakes the residence of a respectable

country Squire Hardcastle to be an inn. Second, he takes Hardcastle himself to be an innkeeper though an uncommon one and thirdly, he mistakes Miss Hardcastle to be a barmaid. It is all a comedy of errors packed with hilarious fun and laughter. There is not even a single dull moment from the beginning to end. The plot of the play is made up of a main plot and a sub plot. The main plot consists of the Marlow- Kate Hardcastle love story. The subplot deals with Hastings – Constance Neville love story. The two stories are fused into a single whole by the intrigues of Tony Lumpkin, the step son of the Mr. Hardcastle. It is he who initiates the action, as well as brings it to a successful conclusion.

Act I is full of set-up for the rest of the play. Mr. And Mrs. Hardcastle live in an old house that resembles an inn, and they are waiting for the arrival of Marlow, son of Mr. Hardcastle's old friend and a possible suitor to his daughter Kate. Kate is very close to her father, so much so that she dresses plainly in the evenings (to suit his conservative tastes) and fancifully in the mornings for her friends. Meanwhile, Mrs. Hardcastle's niece Constance is in the old woman's care, and has her small inheritance (consisting of some valuable jewels) held until she is married, hopefully to Mrs. Hardcastle's spoiled son from an earlier marriage, Tony Lumpkin. The problem is that neither Tony nor Constance loves the other, and in fact Constance has a beloved, who will be traveling to the house that night with Marlow. Tony's problem is also that he is a drunk and a lover of low living, which he shows when the play shifts to a pub nearby. When Marlow and Hastings (Constance's beloved) arrive at the pub, lost on the way to Hardcastle's, Tony plays a practical joke by telling the two men that there is no room at the pub and that they can find lodging at the old inn down the road (which is of course Hardcastle's home).

Act II sees the plot get complicated. When Marlow and Hastings arrive, they are impertinent and rude with Hardcastle, whom they think is a landlord and not a host (because of Tony's trick). Hardcastle expects Marlow to be a polite young man, and is shocked at the behavior. Constance finds Hastings, and reveals to him that Tony must have played a trick. However, they decide to keep the truth from Marlow, because they think revealing it will upset him and ruin the trip. They decide they will try to get her jewels and elope together. Marlow has a bizarre tendency to speak with exaggerated timidity to "modest" women, while speaking in lively and hearty tones to women of low-class. When he has his first meeting with Kate, she is dressed well, and hence drives him into a debilitating stupor because of his inability to speak to modest women. She is nevertheless attracted to him, and decides to try and draw out his true character. Tony and Hastings decide together that Tony will steal the jewels for Hastings and Constance, so that he can be rid of his mother's pressure to marry Constance, whom he doesn't love.

Act III opens with Hardcastle and Kate each confused with the side of Marlow they saw. Where Hardcastle is shocked at his impertinence, Kate is disappointed to have seen only modesty. Kate asks her father for the chance to show him that Marlow is more than both believe. Tony has stolen the jewels, but Constance doesn't know and continues to beg her aunt for them. Tony convinces Mrs. Hardcastle to pretend they were stolen to dissuade Constance, a plea she willingly accepts until she realizes they have actually been stolen.

Meanwhile, Kate is now dressed in her plain dress and is mistaken by Marlow (who never looked her in the face in their earlier meeting) as a barmaid to whom he is attracted. She decides to play the part, and they have a lively, fun conversation that ends with him trying to embrace her, a move Mr. Hardcastle observes. Kate asks for the night to prove that he can be both respectful and lively.

Act IV finds the plots almost falling apart. News has spread that Sir Charles Marlow (Hardcastle's friend, and father to young Marlow) is on his way, which will reveal Hastings's identity as beloved of Constance and also force the question of whether Kate and Marlow are to marry. Hastings has sent the jewels in a casket to Marlow for safekeeping but Marlow, confused, has given them to Mrs. Hardcastle (whom he still believes is the landlady of the inn). When Hastings learns this, he realizes his plan to elope with wealth is over, and decides he must convince Constance to elope immediately. Meanwhile, Marlow's impertinence towards Hardcastle (whom he believes is the landlord) reaches its apex, and Hardcastle kicks him out of the house, during which altercation Marlow begins to realize what is actually happening. He finds Kate, who now pretends to be a poor relation to the Hardcastles, which would make her a proper match as far as class but not a good marriage as far as wealth. Marlow is starting to love her, but cannot pursue it because it would be unacceptable to his father because of her lack of wealth, so he leaves her. Meanwhile, a letter from Hastings arrives that Mrs. Hardcastle intercepts, and she reads that he waits for Constance in the garden, ready to elope. Angry, she insists that she will bring Constance far away, and makes plans for that. Marlow, Hastings and Tony confront one another, and the anger over all the deceit leads to a severe argument, resolved temporarily when Tony promises to solve the problem for Hastings.

Act V finds the truth coming to light, and everyone happy. Sir Charles has arrived, and he and Hastings laugh together over the confusion young Marlow was in. Marlow arrives to apologize, and in the discussion over Kate, claims he barely talked to Kate. Hardcastle accuses him of lying, since Hardcastle saw him embrace Kate (but Marlow does not know that was indeed Kate). Kate arrives after Marlow leaves the room and convinces the older men she will reveal the full truth if they watch an interview between the two from a hidden vantage behind a screen. Meanwhile, Hastings waits in the garden, per Tony's instruction, and Tony arrives to tell him that he drove his mother and Constance all over in circles, so that they think they are lost far from home when in fact they have been left nearby. Mrs. Hardcastle, distraught, arrives and is convinced she must hide from a highwayman who is approaching. The "highwayman" proves to be Mr. Hardcastle, who scares her in her confusion for a while but ultimately discovers what is happening. Hastings and Constance, nearby, decide they will not elope but rather appeal to Mr. Hardcastle for mercy. Back at the house, the interview between Kate (playing the poor relation) and Marlow reveals his truly good character, and after some discussion, everyone agrees to the match. Hastings and Constance ask permission to marry and, since Tony is actually of age and therefore can of his own volition decide not to marry

Constance, the permission is granted. All are happy (except for miserly Mrs. Hardcastle), and the “mistakes of a night” have been corrected.

There are two epilogues generally printed to the play, one of which sketches in metaphor Goldsmith's attempt to bring comedy back to its traditional roots, and the other of which suggests Tony Lumpkin has adventures yet to be realized. 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.” Goldsmith's friend and contemporary, Samuel Johnson, greatly admired the play. James Boswell quoted him as saying, “I know of no comedy for many years that has so much exhilarated an audience that it has answered so much the great end of comedy – making an audience merry”.

### **Conclusion:**

Goldsmith sets out to make us laugh and he does so successfully. He used for his plot a reputed experience of his own as a school boy. When having lost his way, he asked for an inn and was directed by a practical joke to the local squire's house. He behaved there rather as Marlow, the hero of his play, behaves but in the morning when he called for his bill, discovered that the man he had assumed to be an innkeeper was in fact an old college friend of his father. His use of the incident is farcical; but his hero Marlow and his friend Hastings are possible young men; his host innkeeper, Mr. Hardcastle and his wife are another convincing pair of characters. The play is blend of broad and light comedy. Hardcastle has a fine sense of humour and a lively wit. It is his sense of humour which enables him to bear so much with a smile on his face. When his wife speaks of Tony's reaching the age of discretion, he retorts that he will never do that. When she says that she is afraid of his lungs, Hardcastle wittily observes that he also is afraid of Tony's Lungs that is of his loud shouting. His sense of humour enables him to see the ludicrous aspect of things and keeps him always in a genial and cheerful frame of mind. When his daughter tells him that Marlow is a shy and modest youth, he laughs in his sleeve, for he knows why she has a suddenly formed this good opinion of Marlow. He is shrewd enough to understand the situation at once, and forgives Marlow for all his previous insolence and is well pleased that both he and his daughter like each other so well. The humour view of life separates the play from the two opposing schools of its own day. It is certainly unsentimental without any parade or refined sensibilities even in its heroines. It is pure comedy throughout eschewing tears and reforms. It is also free from the sarcastic or satirical attitudes of Congreve. It offers no view of high society or stylish wit. It can be called high comedy either in the sense that it is concerned with the refinement of humour and manners as opposed to low and obvious excitement of laughter or in the sense that its plot is determined by its characters.

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