

She Stoops to Conquer

She Stoops to Conquer by Oliver Goldsmith is a classic comedic play that humorously explores themes of mistaken identity, social class, and romantic misunderstandings in 18th-century England.

PROLOGUE



Summaryer

In David Garrick's prologue to "She Stoops to Conquer," we are introduced to a scene filled with melancholy and a sense of impending loss within the theatrical world, articulated through the character of Mr. Woodward. Dressed in somber black, Mr. Woodward embodies the mourning and despair prevalent among actors at the time, signifying not just a personal state of sorrow but a communal crisis within the realm of comedy. Mr. Woodward's lamentation begins with a poignant revelation that his tears are not for mere show nor solely because of his mourning attire; they stem from a deeper, irremediable grief: the decline of the Comic Muse. This personification of comedy, on the brink of death, encapsulates the existential threat faced by actors specialized in the comedic arts, including Woodward himself and his contemporaries.

The prologue cleverly addresses the audience directly, blurring the lines between performance and reality, and highlighting the performers' dependency on comedy for their livelihoods and identity. Woodward's fear is not just of financial ruin but of a loss of purpose, underscoring the vital role of the Comic Muse in their lives. The introduction of sentimentality and moralizing in theatrical performances is criticized as a poor substitute for genuine comedy, indicating a shift in public taste that threatens the traditional craft.

Woodward's attempt to adapt by adopting a moralizing tone is both humorous and tragic, illustrating his discomfort and ineptitude with this emerging form of drama. This juxtaposition of comedy and tragedy within the prologue serves as a meta-commentary on the state of theatrical arts and its audience's expectations.

The closing of the prologue introduces a glimmer of hope in the form of a Doctor, a metaphor for the playwright or perhaps the theatre itself, who offers a remedy to revive the ailing Comic Muse. This medicine, a blend of humor and performance contained in "Five Draughts," represents the play "She Stoops to Conquer" itself. The audience is entreated to open themselves to this comedic elixir, thereby participating in the potential revival of the Comic Muse. The prologue concludes on a note of cautious optimism, suggesting that the success of this theatrical endeavor depends not on the performers alone but on the audience's willingness to embrace the comedic cure being offered, emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between actor and spectator in the survival of comedy.

ACT THE FIRST.

In the first act of "She Stoops to Conquer," the scene opens in a chamber of an old-fashioned house, where Mrs. Hardcastle laments their dull, rural life and lack of fashionable society, unlike their neighbors who venture to London for "polishing." Mr. Hardcastle, on the other hand, cherishes the old ways, including his old wife. Their conversation shifts to their son, Tony Lumpkin, whom Mrs. Hardcastle dotes on despite his lack of scholarly ambition and penchant for mischief. Mr. Hardcastle criticizes Tony's antics and lack of interest in education, while Mrs. Hardcastle defends him, attributing his behavior to humor and ill health.

The plot thickens when Mr. Hardcastle discusses with his daughter, Miss Hardcastle, his plans for her marriage to Mr. Marlow, a young man of good standing whom he has chosen for her. Although initially resistant to the idea of an arranged marriage, Miss Hardcastle warms up to the prospect of marrying Marlow after hearing of his virtues but is disheartened again to learn of his reserved nature.

Meanwhile, Tony Lumpkin is found at an alehouse, reveling with the locals, clearly indicating his preference for low company and simple pleasures over the refinements his mother wishes for him. His mischief continues as he misdirects Marlow and Hastings, who are seeking Mr. Hardcastle's house, sending them on a convoluted path that ensures they won't reach their destination.

Miss Hardcastle and her cousin Miss Neville discuss their potential suitors with a mix of excitement and apprehension. Miss Neville is being courted by Mrs. Hardcastle for Tony, but her heart is set on Mr. Hastings, highlighting the young women's desire to control their own romantic destinies, despite family pressures.

The act concludes with Tony deceiving Marlow and Hastings into believing they are far from their destination, encouraging them to stay at an inn which is, in reality, the

Hardcastle's home. This setup initiates a comedy of errors, with Tony's trickery foreshadowing the misunderstandings and mistaken identities that will drive the play's humor and romantic entanglements.



ACT THE SECOND.

In Act II of "She Stoops to Conquer," Hardcastle tutors his awkward servants on etiquette to impress his guests. Amidst clumsy attempts at elegance and numerous faux pas, Marlow and Hastings, mistaking the house for an inn, arrive and are baffled by Hardcastle's hospitality which they perceive as overly familiar for an innkeeper. Hardcastle, unaware of their misunderstanding, is puzzled by their expectations.

Marlow struggles with his bashfulness around women of high social standing, a theme he discusses with Hastings. He prefers his interactions with women he considers less intimidating, revealing his vulnerability and discomfort with formal courtship.

The deception deepens with Miss Neville and Hastings plotting to keep Marlow unaware of his mistake, enjoying the forced inn setup to further their romantic interests without the prying eyes of their guardians. Mrs. Hardcastle's ambitions for Tony to marry Constance for her fortune are clear, but Tony's resistant and cunningly plays to avoid this fate.

The duplicitous environment is rife with misunderstandings and comic situations, notably when Marlow and Hardcastle converse with starkly different perceptions of their interaction. Marlow, under the impression he's speaking to an innkeeper, speaks freely and demands service, while Hardcastle is confounded by Marlow's lack of respect and the bizarre inquiries about supper and accommodation.

Miss Hardcastle and Hastings indulge the ruse, playing into the fantasies of mistaken identity, leading Marlow and herself into awkward yet revealing conversations. These exchanges lay bare Marlow's insecurities and his acute sense of social propriety, juxtaposed with his genuine admiration for modesty and virtue in women, albeit expressed through his painfully shy demeanor.

The complex dance of deception, societal expectations, and the pursuit of love and happiness unfolds in an old-fashioned setting, where every character navigates the thin line between appearance and reality, propriety and desire, much to the amusement and potential enlightenment of themselves and the audience.



ACT THE THIRD.

In Act III of "She Stoops to Conquer," the confusion and disguise continue to unfold with entertaining complexity. Hardcastle is utterly bewildered by the behavior of young Marlow, whom he deems impudent, contrary to Sir Charles's description of his son as modest. In contrast, Miss Hardcastle has a completely different experience with Marlow, seeing him as timid and respectful—a view that bewilders her father. Their amusing debate over Marlow's character reveals the amusing situation: Marlow behaves modestly with women of higher social standing, mistakenly believing Miss Hardcastle to be a maid, he treats her with a flirtatious ease absent in his interactions with ladies of his own class.

Tony Lumpkin, who revels in the chaos he's created by misleading Marlow and Hastings into thinking the Hardcastle home is an inn, adds another layer of mischief by stealing his cousin Constance's jewels from his mother, aiming to aid Hastings and Constance's elopement. Mrs. Hardcastle, who wants to keep Constance and her wealth close, is distraught over the missing jewels, unaware that her son is undermining her plans. The comic contrasts between characters' perceptions and realities, alongside their plots and counterplots, create a lively comedy of manners.

Marlow's blatant forwardness when he thinks Miss Hardcastle is a barmaid starkly contrasts with her father's expectations of a modest gentleman, while her own cunning plan to engage Marlow in this guise to reveal his true nature makes for a compelling exploration of social norms and personal identity. The chapter concludes with misunderstandings still ripe for comedic exploitation, as Hardcastle contemplates expelling Marlow, unaware of the deeper deceptions at play. Meanwhile, Miss Hardcastle and Marlow edge closer, each under mistaken identities, setting the stage for further comedic entanglements as she seeks to reveal his true character.

ACT THE FOURTH.

Act IV of "She Stoops to Conquer" escalates the confusion and chaos that have underpinned the play's humor and social commentary. Hastings, aware that Sir Charles Marlow is expected soon, plans an elopement with Miss Neville, fearing that his presence and intentions will be discovered. Meanwhile, Marlow, befuddled by the mistaken identity of the Hardcastle's house as an inn, entrusts a casket of jewels meant for Miss Neville to the landlady for safekeeping, a decision that both he and Hastings believe prudent, despite the actual risk it presents to their plan.

Conflict arises as Marlow revels in what he perceives as his successful courtship of the bar-maid, who is in reality Miss Hardcastle. The conversation between Marlow and Hastings highlights Marlow's arrogance and misogyny, which is meant for humor but also critiques the social norms regarding class and gender. The impending arrival of Sir Charles adds urgency to the various schemes and misunderstandings.

As Hardcastle confronts Marlow about the behavior of his servants, Marlow's entitlement and disrespect toward Hardcastle are made plain, leading to a heated argument that culminates in Hardcastle demanding Marlow and his party leave his house. This confrontation is interrupted by the realization of Marlow and Miss Hardcastle regarding the true nature of the house and its occupants, prompting Marlow to reconsider his actions and express a rare moment of humility and tenderness towards Miss Hardcastle.

The subplot involving Tony, Miss Neville, and Mrs. Hardcastle provides comic relief while also moving the story towards its climax. Tony's manipulation and the mistaken letter from Hastings to Tony intended for Miss Neville create a farcical scenario where each character's folly and scheme seem to thwart their desires. Mrs. Hardcastle's intervention prevents the elopement, directing the story towards a resolution that

remains uncertain.

Throughout, Goldsmith plays with themes of deception, social class, and the pursuit of love, using mistaken identities and misunderstandings to critique and satirize the manners and mores of 18th-century British society. The act ends with relationships tangled, plans in jeopardy, and the characters' respective futures uncertain, setting the stage for a climactic resolution in the concluding act.



ACT THE FIFTH.

In the final act of "She Stoops to Conquer," various emotional and comic twists lead to the resolution of misunderstandings and the successful pairing of couples. Hastings, initially disheartened by the departure of Miss Neville and the old lady, learns that old Sir Charles has arrived and finds humor in Marlow's mistake of perceiving Mr. Hardcastle's house as an inn. The conversation between Sir Charles and Hardcastle highlights their amusement and the impending union of Marlow with Hardcastle's daughter, encouraged by the parents despite the apparent small fortune.

Marlow seeks forgiveness from Hardcastle for his earlier impudence, misunderstanding Marlow's expressions of respect as signals of deeper affection. He denies any inappropriate behavior towards Miss Hardcastle, yet there's a playful hint from her father about her fondness for him. The arrival of Mrs. Hardcastle and Tony, confused and believing themselves far from home due to Tony's deceptive guidance, adds to the comedic confusion.

While Hastings learns from Tony that they've inadvertently circled back to Hardcastle's estate, Marlow continues to deny his affection for Miss Hardcastle in front of Sir Charles and Hardcastle, unaware of her dual identity as the modest woman he admires and the forward lady he boasts about in town. Miss Hardcastle proposes a plan to reveal the truth to her father and Sir Charles through eavesdropping on a private conversation about Marlow's affections.

The subsequent encounter between Marlow and Miss Hardcastle, as they express their genuine feelings, is overheard by the hidden observers, leading to Marlow's realization of his error and his earnest proposal to Miss Hardcastle. Tony's declaration of independence, upon learning he is of age, and his refusal to marry Miss Neville, frees her and Hastings to pursue their happiness without the constraints of her fortune.

Meanwhile, the parents express mixed reactions to these revelations, with joy, astonishment, and in Mrs. Hardcastle's case, dismay.

The play concludes with resolutions of the various romantic entanglements and the revelation of true identities. The characters celebrate the engagements and newfound clarity, amidst the comedic unraveling of deceptions and societal critiques embedded in the witty dialogue and the convoluted scenarios orchestrated by Goldsmith.

