She Stoops to Conquer

Act 1- Scene 1 and 2

Summary

The play opens in its primary setting, a chamber in the "old-fashioned" country house of Mr. Hardcastle.

Mr. and Mrs. Hardcastle enter in the midst of a pleasant argument. Mrs. Hardcastle is perturbed at her husband's refusal to take trips into London, while he insists he is not interested in the "vanity and affectation" of the city. He tires even of the pretentious London trends that find their way into his removed country community. Mrs. Hardcastle mocks him for his love of old-fashioned trends, so much that he keeps his house in such a way that it "looks for all the world like an inn."

They joke about her age, which she wishes to downplay, and speak of her son from a first marriage, Tony Lumpkin. Mr. Hardcastle finds his roguish ways grating, and laments how the boy is too given to practical jokes. On the other hand, Mrs. Hardcastle (Tony's natural mother) defends him, saying education is unnecessary for him since he needs only plan for spending his sizable fortune, and she begs her husband to be easier on Tony. They both grant that he is too inclined towards drink and jokes, but Mrs. Hardcastle believes him frail and needing of sympathy.

Tony passes by and tells them he is off to the Three Pigeons, a local pub. Both adults request him not associate with such "low" company, but he defends the liveliness of his pub companions as "not so low." Mrs. Hardcastle forbids him to go, but he insists he has the stronger willpower, and drags her out.

Alone, Mr. Hardcastle describes them as "a pair that only spoil each other." He blames it partially on how the modern fashions have infiltrated their lives, and worries that even his own daughter Kate has been infected by those fashions because of her having lived for a few years in London.

Kate (labeled in the play as Miss Hardcastle, but called Kate here for ease) enters dressed in a lavish gown, which her father finds troublesome. Kate reminds him that they have an agreement: in the morning she dresses as she likes in order to welcome friends, while in the evening she dresses plainly in order to please his tastes.

Mr. Hardcastle then gives her news: he has invited Mr. Marlow, son of Hardcastle's old friend Charles Marlow, to their house that evening in order to court Kate. Hardcastle has chosen Marlow as husband for her, but she is immediately worried that their interview will be overly formal and dull. Mr. Hardcastle considers this a virtue, and in fact insists to her that Marlow is, while generous, brave, and handsome, best known for being reserved.

He leaves to prepare the servants, and Kate laments that she might have to spend her life with a boring man. She begins to wonder whether she might be able to find a way to be happy even in such a marriage or whether she can change him, but stops herself from thinking too far ahead.

Constance Neville (called Miss Neville in the play but Constance here for ease) enters and Kate tells her the news of Marlow. Constance is a cousin of Kate, a niece of Mr. Hardcastle who has been orphaned and now lives with the Hardcastles under the protectorship of Mrs. Hardcastle. Constance reveals that she knows Marlow's reputation, since Marlow is friends with Mr. Hastings, her admirer and the man she hopes to marry. Constance tells how Marlow is known for excessive formality amongst women of reputation and virtue, but that he is a "very different character" amongst common women. Kate finds this description strange, and they then discuss how Mrs. Hardcastle disparately wants Constance to marry her son Tony, in hopes of keeping Constance's small fortune (which consists of some jewels that were bequeathed to her) in the family. Constance quite hates Tony but does not want to reveal to Mrs. Hardcastle that she is in love with Mr. Hastings, and so is in a tricky spot. Her only small comfort is that Tony hates her equally.

Scene Two

Note that the scene is not explicitly labeled "Scene Two" but instead is marked by the setting change.

The setting changes to the room in the Three Pigeons, where Tony fraternizes with several other drunk men.

They all urge Tony to sing a song, and he sings of how liquor provides the best learning, while traditional school wisdom can be ignorance. The song also touches on the hypocrisy of men of manners, who like liquor as much as anyone. The song is a great hit amongst the drunkards, who speak amongst themselves of how wonderful it is to hear songs that are not "low." They also reminisce to themselves about Tony's father, who was "the finest gentleman" in the way he celebrated life.

The landlord brings news that two gentleman have arrived, and are lost on their way to Mr. Hardcastle's house. Tony intuits quickly they must be Marlow and Hastings, and since Tony is still angry about Hardcastle's insults, decides he will play a joke on his step-father. He will convince them that Hardcastle's house is in fact an inn and so will they present themselves there not as gracious guests, but as entitled patrons.

He has the men brought to him. Marlow and Hastings are in poor spirits from a long day of travel, Hastings more so because Marlow's reserve prevented him from asking directions. Tony gives them nonsensical directions to Hardcastle's that make the place sound many miles away (when it is in fact down the road.) Tony interrogates them, and they tell how they have heard about Hardcastle's well-bred daughter and roguish, spoiled son. Tony argues that their information is reversed, that the son (himself) is much loved and the daughter a "talkative maypole." The men ask the landlord if they can stay, but, at Tony's instructions, he tells them there is no room, and so Tony suggests they head down to a nearby inn he knows of. He then gives directions to Hardcastle's house, cautioning them that landlord there puts on airs and expects to be treated as a gentleman rather than servant. They thank him, and leave for Hardcastle's home, and so the stage is set for the comedy to come.

Analysis

While *She Stoops to Conquer* is most notable for the way it subverts the expectations of its intended audience and provides complicated characters within the guise of stock characters, it is also a "well-made play," in that it is well structured to deliver a complicated plot with recognizable characters. It is worth understanding this structure before getting into the play's eccentricities.

Goldsmith writes a first act that establishes with great economy all of the plot to come. Firstly, this act shows his ability as a comedian to “set up” his joke. Several plot details are provided in quick succession that will be necessary to establish all of the zaniness in the subsequent acts. For instance: the house resembles an inn; Kate dresses in nice dresses early, and plain dresses later; Constance is set to inherit jewels that Mrs. Hardcastle hopes will stay in the family; and Marlow has a tendency to speak meekly to “respectable” ladies and passionately to common ladies. All of these elements are important for an audience to understand so that the great comedy to follow can be easily understood. In this first act, Goldsmith masterfully lays it all out. This play will operate very much through the use of dramatic irony, the effect produced when the audience knows something the characters do not. Everything Tony sets up in the second scene provides the audience the information they need for dramatic irony to happen. Notice how what we learn here allows us to laugh when all of the characters will only be confused and bothered by their lack of information.

Goldsmith also ably establishes the plot lines we are to follow. The main plot is clearly whether Kate will marry Marlow, while the primary subplot is whether Constance will marry Hastings. And yet one gets the sense from this first act that such stories (which are typical for comedies not only of the period but even today – think romantic comedy films) are not really Goldsmith's concern. Tony seems to stand at the center of the play, considering that it is he who takes action to put the plot in motion, making him what would traditionally be called the protagonist. His love of life and disavowal of customary, respectable expectations will prove crucial to Goldsmith's purpose of praising low comedy over sentimental comedy. Further, there is an additional subplot of whether the Hardcastles will resolve their differences over whether old or new is superior. While this subplot never directly affects the action of the play, it is thematically important, and is given attention right away.

Through all these plots, Goldsmith lays the groundwork for his exploration of morality and respectability. The play's ironic subversion of traditional expectation is established in both scenes of Act I. In sentimental comedy, characters of virtue would be expected to be the heroes, and would ultimately end up together as reward for such virtue. Sophisticated, educated characters of the town would be praised for their superiority over antiquated country bumpkins who eschew education. Goldsmith creates a world that operates in the same milieu – wealthy characters concerned with appearance and marriage – but subverts these easy classifications.

Firstly, Mrs. Hardcastle, who is presented first as the supporter of sophisticated London ways, has already been presented as a much less admirable person than her husband. Not only does she spoil her rogue son, but she is concerned only with the appearance of things. She wants her son to marry Constance only for the sake of the girl's fortune, and is clearly vain in the way she wants to mirror the London fashions and hide her age. On the other hand, Mr. Hardcastle seems to have a great concern for the well-being of his daughter Kate, and while he too is drawn to force her into a marriage with little concern for love, he at least looks to Marlow's character

and not wealth or appearance as the reasoning. This conflict will continue to escalate in later acts.

Further, Marlow, who is ostensibly the hero of the play in its traditional sense, exhibits complications. While he would typically be praised by sentimental comedy for his modesty, we learn that such modesty is not a true expression of his character, but rather a front he uses around modest women. In truth, he is a lively fellow more than willing to engage in more lively, baser behaviors around women of less reputation, suggesting a type of hypocrisy that lies behind "refined" behaviors. Likewise, Kate seems to straddle both sides of the expectation. As a country girl who once lived in town, she is able to both respect the expectations of respectable, plain behavior, while also engaging her love for liveliness.

In truth, Kate stands as the exemplary illustration of moderation, which the play seems to preach. Her foremost virtue in the world is liveliness. She wants to live and enjoy her life, a desire that strict formality seems to exclude. She worries that custom will force her into a boring and loveless marriage, and so seeks to find in this overly-respectable gentleman a man she might enjoy. In the same way, Tony becomes a bit of a spokesman for the play. He presents us with a great irony in his alehouse song: traditional wisdom is presented as ignorance, while base living is praised as the wise way to live. He stresses to his mother that his "low" friends are in fact worthy of respect, which mirrors Goldsmith's goal of praising "low" comedy. It is worth noting that the alehouse scene, in which drunkards sing and carouse, would have been risky in the theatre of his time. In fact, Goldsmith's previous play had been criticized for showing scenes of "low" behavior, and so here he not only presents a scene of that sort, but has his drunkards deliberately comment on it, calling it not only acceptable but also stressing that it is not "low" at all to live one's life in this way, since that is what people do. As Tony's song says, even the minister engages in such behavior when eyes are not turned his way.

Lastly, the parent-child relationships in the play are quite fascinating. Most worthy of note is that between Tony and his mother, which has a pre-Freudian Oedipal nature. Mrs. Hardcastle is extremely overprotective of Tony, which accounts somewhat for the juvenile life he lives. He wants so badly to strike out at her and defeat her, but the sense is not that of a hero vanquishing a villain, but of an infantile sort. While such psychological interpretation is anachronistic for Goldsmith's purposes, it is a lens worth considering in one of the play's strangest, most eccentric relationships. Certainly, this is necessary to plot in the way Tony's relationship with his mother is not a part of the plot, but one is led to wonder to what extent Goldsmith, so concerned with satirizing and attacking conventional establishment values, might be concerned with attacking the convention of a child's deference to her father. Should Kate be less deferential to her father? Does he smother her to some extent, which is what forces her to want so badly a life away from convention? The play is not primarily concerned with this question and as such never gives a definitive answer, but the set-up is interesting enough that one can approach the play with the question in mind.