

She Stoops to Conquer

by Oliver Goldsmith

Prologue

Summary

The prologue is attributed to David Garrick, Esq., a popular actor of his day. The basic premise of the prologue is that the comic arts are passing away, and that Dr. Goldsmith might prove the doctor, and *She Stoops to Conquer* the medicine, that will cease its death.

At the play's opening, Mr. Woodward enters and speaks a prologue. Woodward, a celebrated actor of his day and one who had turned down the role of Tony Lumpkin in the play's initial production, is drying his eyes as though he has been crying.

In verse, Woodward laments to the audience that "the Comic muse, long sick, is now a-dying!" As an actor trained in comedy, he intuits that his own career will pass away along with comedy itself, since he "can as soon speak Greek as sentiments!" Unable to tell moralistic, sentimental stories, he fears for the fate of himself and his brethren.

He attempts to tell a moral poem beginning with "All is gold that glitters," but performs poorly and stops himself. He offers one final hope for his problem – "a doctor [has come] this night to show his skill," perhaps to make the audience laugh through his five "draughts" of medicine (paralleling the five acts of the play). He urges the audience to accept the doctor's comic medicine willingly, to laugh heartily, and stresses that should the doctor's goal not be achieved, then they can hold it against him and deny him his fee.

Analysis

Though not written by Goldsmith, the play's prologue is useful in the way it provides insight into Goldsmith's purpose in the play. Obviously, the most explicit purpose is to make the audience laugh. The speaker – Mr. Woodward, who would have been portrayed by a different actor – comes out in mourning, already having been crying, which in a way poses a challenge to the play. If we, as actors and audience, are in a state of sadness, can the play lift our spirits?

However, most relevant is the state of affairs sculpted here. The prologue mirrors the trend in theatre that writers like Goldsmith were desperately trying to change. At the time of *She Stoops to Conquer*, popular theatre comedy was separated into what was commonly termed "sentimental comedy" and "laughing comedy." The former was concerned with bourgeois (middle-class) morality and with praising virtue. The latter, which dated back to the Greeks and Romans and through Shakespeare, was more willing to engage in "low" humor for the sake of mocking vice.

Woodward suggests that a certain class of actor (and by extension, then, audience and writer) were dying out as sentimental comedy became more popular. So Goldsmith's play has an extra purpose: it must rejuvenate the joy taken in "laughing comedy," which could be willing to be more stupid, to dramatize base characters and characteristics, and to mock even the characters who profess to be moral.