

PJC REVEIWS

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*She Stoops to Conquer: Or, the Mistakes of a Night*

(written 1771; first performed 1773)

by Oliver Goldsmith.

At the National Theatre, London: 31 Jan. to 21 April 2012

Directed by: Jamie Lloyd

It was wonderful to see this play on stage and performed in a highly confident style. Although it is not theatrically ignored, it does not come round all that often. In this case, it was officially a triumph. The reviews were generally full of praise. My personal reservations are explained below; but I should record that many (perhaps most?) of the audience, on the night I went, were enraptured.

Goldsmith's mixture of sensibility and farce brought some pointed moments. So when Mr Hardcastle [Steve Pemberton] – the old-fashioned country gentleman in his old-fashioned hall – attempts to drill his staff in the 'modern' etiquette of serving at table, the audience is invited to sympathise with the servants as real individuals with ordinary human feelings. 'You must be all attention to the guests', Hardcastle explains to them in Act 2, sc.1. 'You must hear us talk and not think of talking. You must see us drink and not think of drinking. You must see us eat and not think of eating. ... Then, if I happen to say a good thing ... at table, you must not all burst out a-laughing.' To which, Diggory [Oliver Jackson], the farm-labourer-turned-waiter, replies with great naturalness: 'By the laws, your Worship, that's perfectly un-possible'.

Their exchange rightly gets a laugh. It also humanises the class hierarchy. The fact that serving impassively at table *is* a highly artificial state of affairs is instantly revealed. For all that the servants clown around at the director's bidding, they are not automata but real people. Culturally, they represent a democratising trend. In literature, Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) has already provided a sensitive and thoughtful heroine from 'below the stairs'. And in theatrical history, Beaumarchais' ultra-resourceful Figaro will shortly seize the stage in *The Barber of Seville* (1775) and show his masters what's what.

In this production, however, Goldsmith's comedy is played as close to farce as the plot will allow. The director Jamie Lloyd is an undoubted rising star. His impressive versatility is currently on display in his acclaimed production of Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* at the Old Vic (scheduled to run from 27 March to 9 June 2012). He can 'do' comedy as he can 'do' tragedy.

Yet in *She Stoops to Conquer*, it seems that the director did not trust the humour of the text. All but the leading actors get richly comic accents to indicate their rustic provinciality. The cast are licensed to overact, some wildly. Servants and yokels frequently burst into rousing dance and music routines. The stage directions incorporate a lot of comic stylisation. So when the two elderly fathers eavesdrop upon their children, to check whether the hero and heroine have finally fallen in love, the two men bob up and down behind the furniture like marionettes in synchronisation. It's funny but very frantic.

Extra details are also interpolated. In an early scene, the capering anti-hero Tony Lumpkin [David Fynn] serves the two smart young visitors from London with some ale into which he has twice vomited. One of the fooled newcomers duly responds: 'Thank you; delicious'. Of course, the audience laugh. Moreover, the joke was an authentic eighteenth-century standard, as Simon Dickie's revisionist account of eighteenth-century 'unsentimental'

literature has just shown.<sup>1</sup> Yet Goldsmith, who has his own extensive comic repertoire, did not include this detail. Does the addition matter much? Not in this particular case. Yet it indicates the director's desire to gild the lily – relentlessly.

And that really does matter when it comes to the core of the play. The theme is an awkward but genuine one, not often confronted publicly. It features male sexual anxiety. In this case, the hero, young Marlow [Harry Hadden-Paton] feels acute diffidence, even impotence, in making sexual advances to respectable women. Hence Kate Hardcastle [Katherine Kelly], the well-born and well-bred heroine, has to masquerade as a bawdy serving wench to win his love.

The Anglo-Irish Oliver Goldsmith teasingly labels Marlow's sexual anxiety syndrome as 'the Englishman's malady' (Act 2, sc.1). There's no reason, however, to consider it as confined to the males of one nation. Quite possibly Goldsmith was drawing from his own experience. He was a notoriously ugly man who was much ridiculed for this disability. He was said to live 'dissolutely' but never married. (This play was his last work, before his premature death in 1774.)

But whether inspired by personal experience or not, Goldsmith was exploring a genuine theme of great sensitivity, as well as one that attracts traditional mockery. Men who like to take the lead in sexual matters may be deterred if they feel that their potential partners 'outrank' them, whether in terms of wealth, status, fame, or intelligence. Certainly, in the eighteenth-century (and later) young women were advised to hide their brains, just as their counterparts in the twentieth century were told that 'men don't make passes at

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Dickie, *Cruelty and Laughter: Forgotten Comic Literature and the Unsentimental Eighteenth Century* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2011), pp. 267-8.

girls who wear glasses'. Happily, real sexual behaviour is polymorphous. Yet the variety of sex does not prevent it from being a source of anxiety.

*She Stoops to Conquer* imagines one case, where male diffidence is overcome by female resourcefulness. The first encounter of the young couple is beautifully done. Marlow is all embarrassed confusion and stammering incoherence. He has already confided to his travelling companion that: 'An impudent fellow may counterfeit modesty, but I'll be hanged if a modest man can ever counterfeit impudence'. The entire scene passes without Marlow once looking directly at Kate Hardcastle. His reticence thus sets the scene for a finely judged *coup de theatre* in their next encounter (Act 3, sc.1). At last, she gets him to see her. Their gazes lock and hold.

After that, their relationship is supposed to evolve from near-farce to genuine emotion. Yet their scenes together are overwhelmed by antic overplaying, as well as by the surrounding mayhem from the other strands of Goldsmith's comedic plotting. Kate Hardcastle signals her lusty 'commonness' by sitting legs akimbo – before then bending double, with her back to Marlow, and slowly swaying her rump from side to side. He reciprocates by hanging out his tongue, panting noisily, pawing the ground, and prancing around for some moments, with his hands held up like paws in front of his face. Okay, it could be argued that some exaggerated body language is licensed by the large scale of the Olivier Theatre. But these over-the-top signals make the funny business in the *Carry-On* films look like masterpieces of subtlety.

Eventually, Marlow comes to admire Kate Hardcastle for her character as well as her fine form. He starts to woo her seriously, despite her social 'lowliness'. She, who has always liked him, is moved by his generosity. At the end, they speak of their affection ringingly. Their respective parents are reassured that the arranged match will be cemented by true love. The plot

misunderstandings are then unravelled. After the mistakes of the night, all the characters are promised a 'merry morning'. Yet the denouement for the bashful lovers, as staged here, seems far too perfunctory. It is out of keeping with the rest of the play. Their serious dialogues have been rattled out too rapidly to allow the audience to follow and savour them. As a result, the ending has nothing like the impact of their earlier confrontations. This production has highlighted Goldsmith's farce but underplayed his characters' feelings.