

She Stoops to Conquer (1773)

Oliver Goldsmith

Oliver Goldsmith (1730-1774)

Oliver Goldsmith was born into a lower middle class Anglo-Irish family. He worked his way through Trinity College, Dublin, studied medicine in Edinburgh, and toured parts of Europe before taking up a life of writing in London. In 1761, he met Samuel Johnson, become an important member of his literary circle. He is best known for a comic novel, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, a poem about urbanization, *The Deserted Village*, and a stage comedy, *She Stoops to Conquer*.



Goldsmith, by Joshua Reynolds, ca. 1773

By reputation, Goldsmith was brilliant but insecure, and well-meaning and good-natured, but often foolish or gauche in social situations.

The Play's the Thing . . .

In many regards, a play is a very different beast than most other forms of literature.

What are the primary differences between drama, and (say) novels and poems?

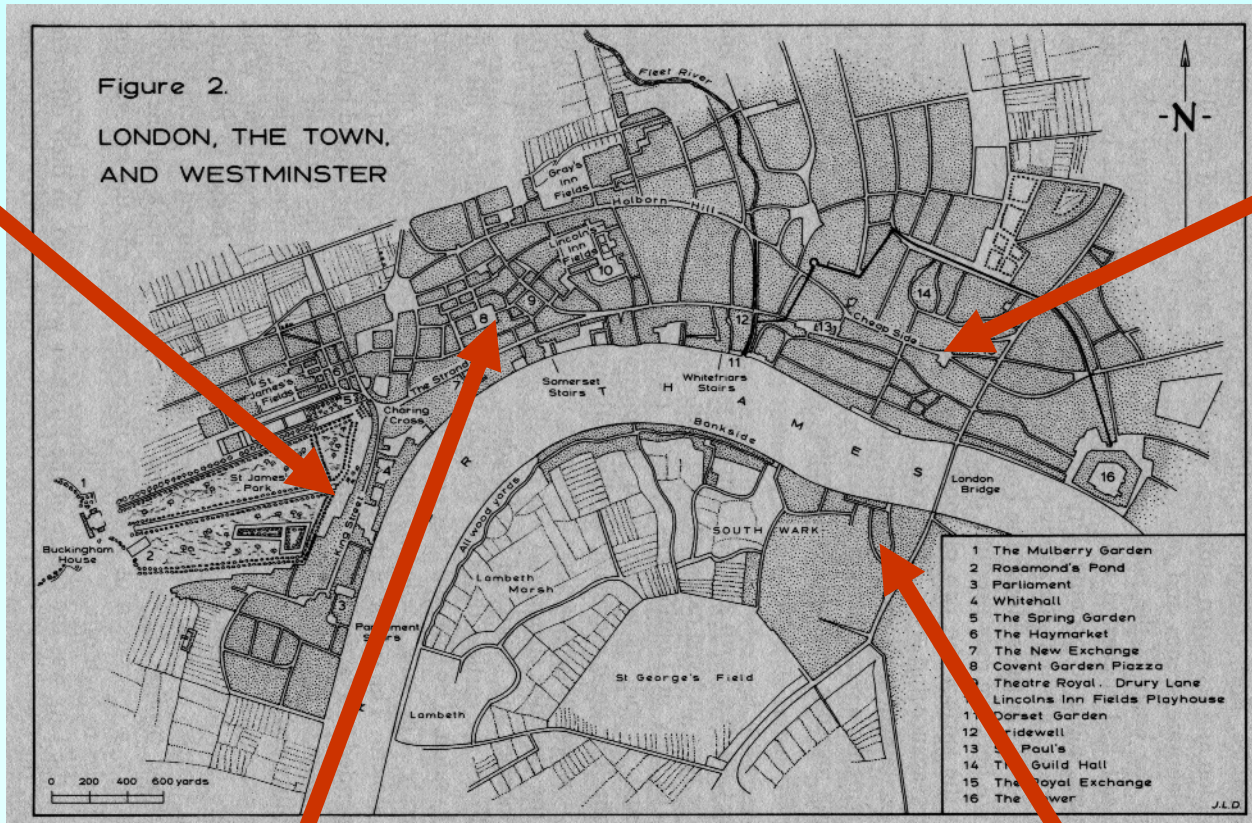
Drama is PERFORMANCE!!!!

As a performance, Drama occurs in three dimensions, and unfolds in real time. The presence of the “author” is usually almost entirely effaced.

How did your *experience* of this play differ from your *reading* of the play?

Theatre and Society

Westminster,
site of the
Court



The "City,"
financial
and
business
hub of
London

The 18th-century theatre district,
in the fashionable "Town"

Southwark, site of the
Elizabethan theatres.

Theatre Audiences



Covent Garden Theatre, ca. 1808

The shift in the *locale* of the London theatres after 1660 signals a change in the composition of the audience, which in turn had important effects on drama in performance.

Given the new proximity to the fashionable “Town” and the Court, what changes might we expect to see?

What might part of the attraction of the theatre for the “fashionable” world of the *beau monde* be?

New Theatre Designs

The most important innovation was the introduction of a new design for playhouses. Elizabethan theatres had been

- Circular
- Open air
- With all action occurring on a “thrust” stage
- With minimal stage props, scenery, or special effects.

The new theatres, by contrast, were in many respects far more recognizably “modern” in their design . . .



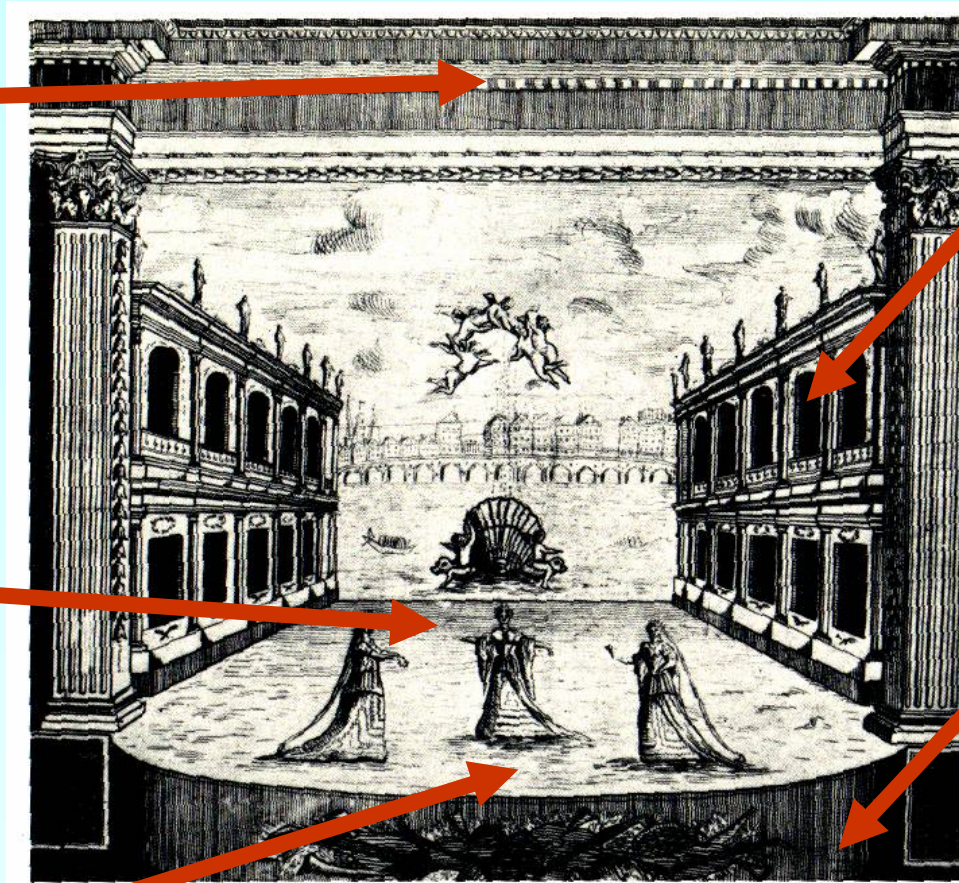
Reconstruction of the Globe Theatre, *ca.* 1599

New Stages

Proscenium arch

Back stage (raked)

Forestage

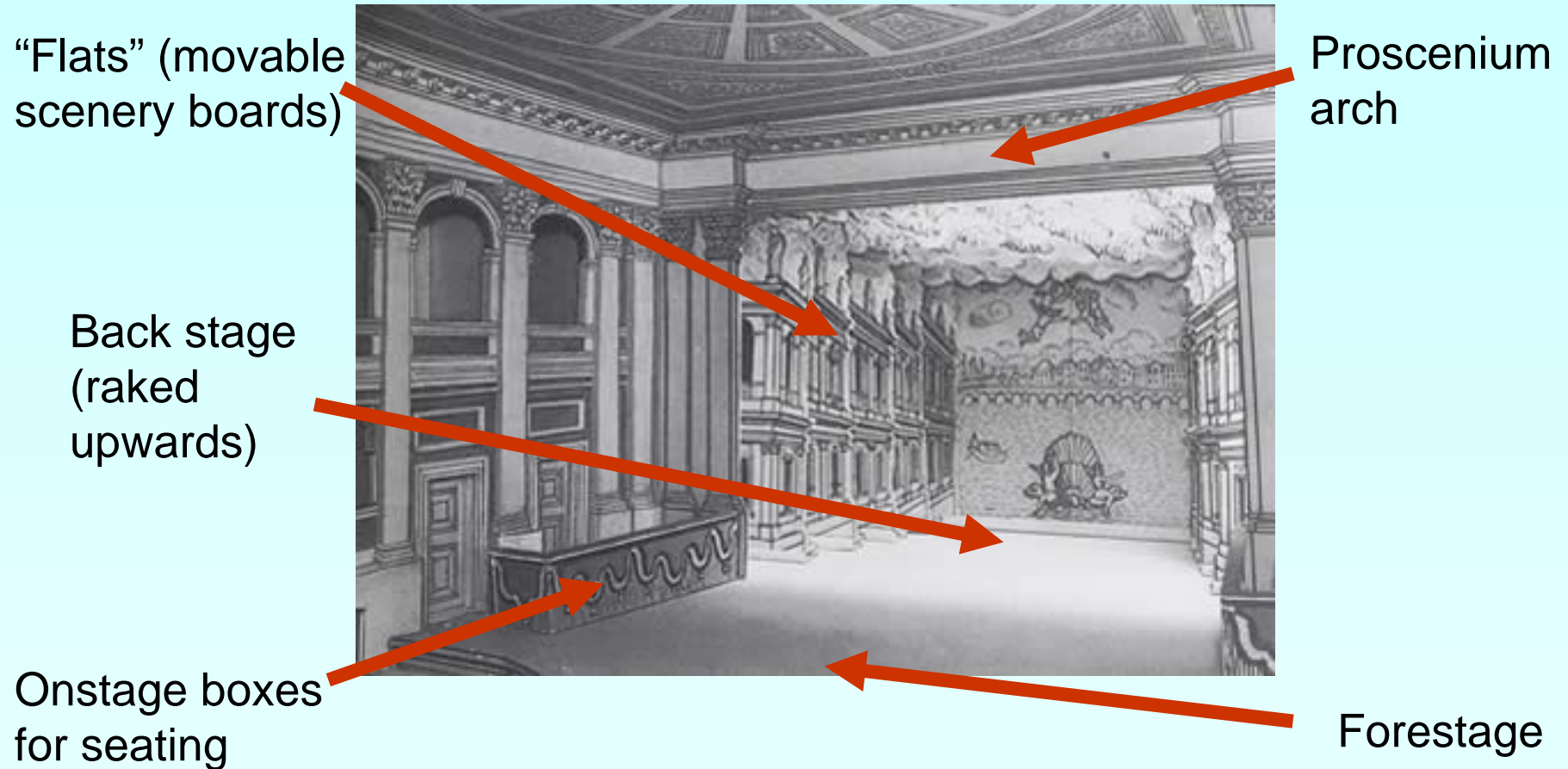


“Flats” (movable scenery boards)

“The Pit,” the favoured area for fashionable spectators

Scene from the Restoration opera *Ariane*, performed at Drury Lane Theatre.

New Stages (cont'd)



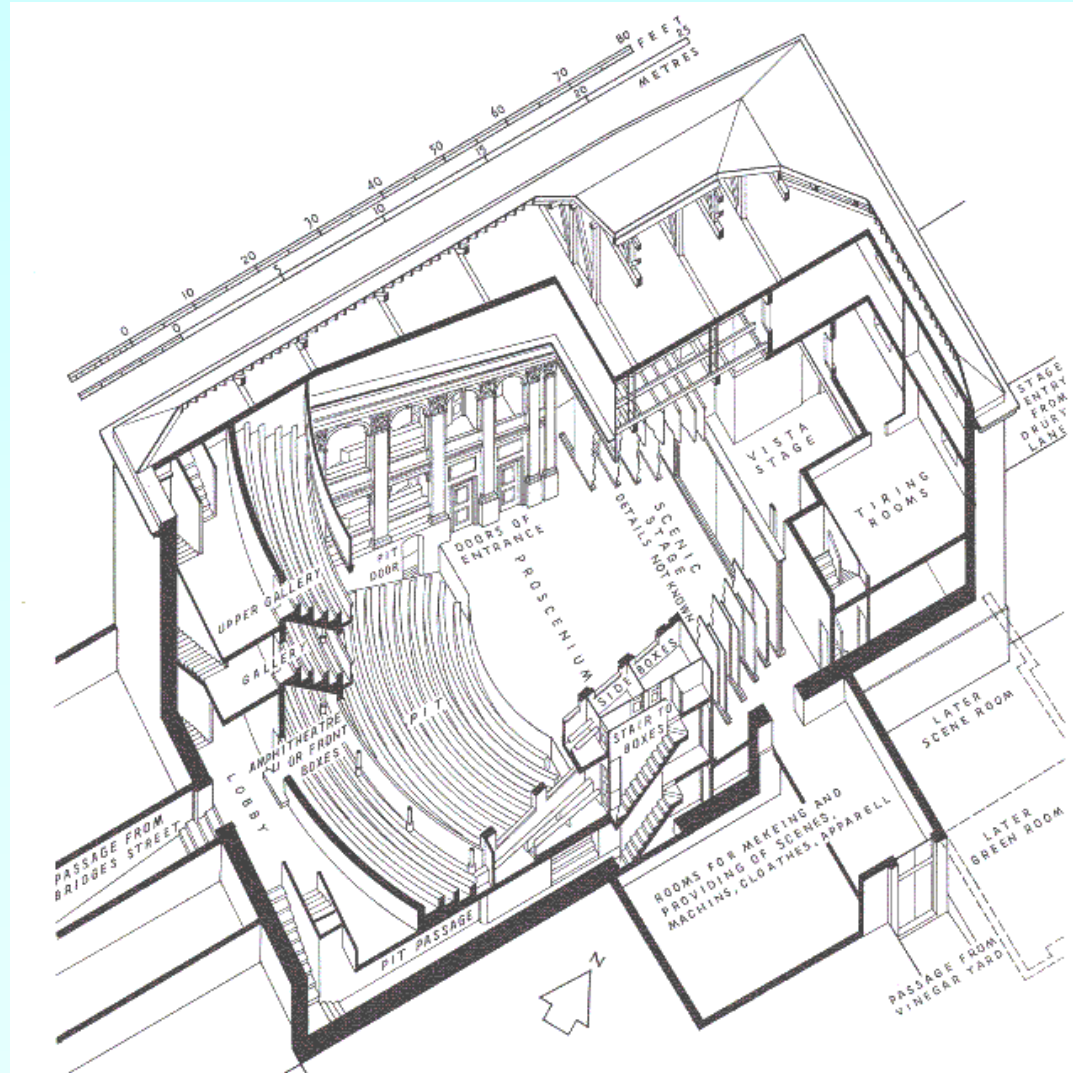
Modern reconstruction of the stage layout for the Restoration production of *Ariane* at Drury Lane Theatre.

Using the Stage

The eighteenth-century stage was divisible into two clear parts, defined by the proscenium. Productions of comedy and tragedy tended to use these stage spaces differently.

Given that tragedy was usually “about” larger-than-life figures in exotic settings, how might you stage it here?

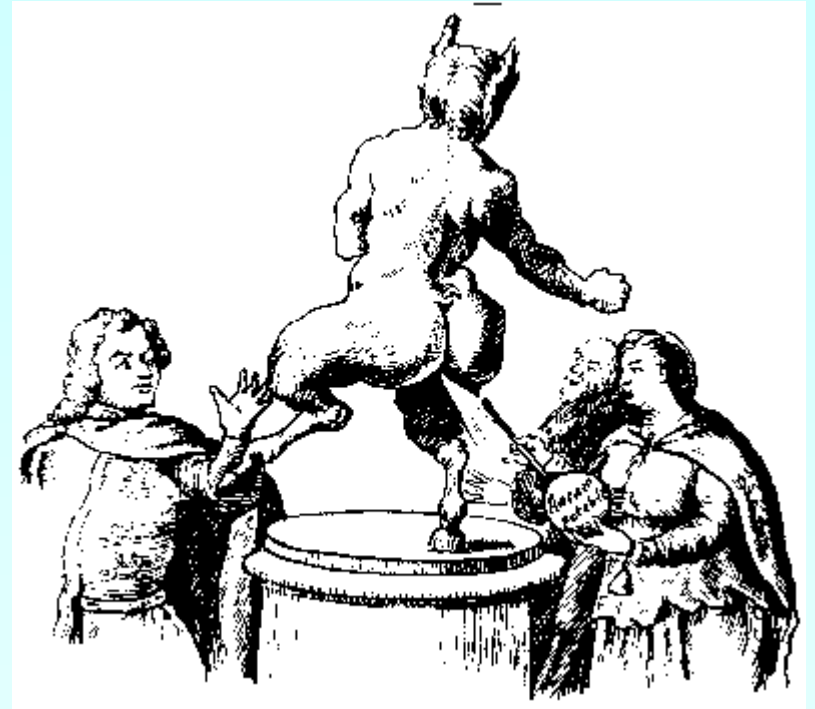
Comedy is “about” people whose status and lifestyle reflects the social nature of the audience. How might you stage comedy?



English Theatre in Decline

English theatre had been in the doldrums since 1737, when the Licensing Act closed down all but two officially-sanctioned theatres, and imposed strict government censorship on all plays.

This move had driven many of the best playwrights (most notably the future novelist Henry Fielding) away from the theatre.



From an advertisement for “The Golden Rump,” a threatened satirical play of 1737

Sentimentalism on Stage



Maria and her dog Silvio, 1781

At the same time, the rise of “sentimentalism” in drama since at least the 1720s emphasized “weeping” over “laughing,” and overt moralizing over the subtle exploration of ideas.

Satire was largely neglected in favour of “feel-good” comedies in which unquestionably virtuous people suffered pitifully before triumphing over one-dimensional depictions of wickedness, usually by *reforming* the wicked.

Comedy vs. Tragedy

For Goldsmith, the excellence of “laughing” comedy, and the inferiority of *sentimental* comedy, derived from the distinctions between comedy and *tragedy*.

What distinguishes these two genres?



Comedy and Ridicule

In *An Essay on the Theatre; or, A Comparison between Laughing and Sentimental Comedy* (1773), Goldsmith lays out the “true” purpose of dramatic comedy:

“Comedy is defined by Aristotle to be a picture of the frailties of the lower part of mankind, to distinguish it from tragedy, which is an exhibition of the misfortunes of the great.

...

If we apply to authorities, all the great masters in the dramatic art have but one opinion. Their rule is, that as tragedy displays the calamities of the great, so comedy should excite our laughter by ridiculously exhibiting the follies of the lower part of mankind.”

“Laughing Comedy”

In *An Essay on the Theatre*, Goldsmith argued that “sentimental comedy” was really a form of “bastard tragedy”:

“Distress, therefore, is the proper object of tragedy, since the great excite our pity by their fall; but not equally so of comedy, since the actors employed in it are originally so mean that they sink but little by the fall.”



The actor and playwright David Garrick torn between comic and tragic muses, by Sir Joshua Reynolds.

A Return to Old Forms



William Hogarth: *The Laughing Audience*, 1733

In the 1770s, two playwrights, Goldsmith and Richard Brinsley Sheridan, challenged the format of sentimental comedy by using the older “Comedy of Manners,” which dates originally from the Restoration a century or so before, as the model for their comedies.

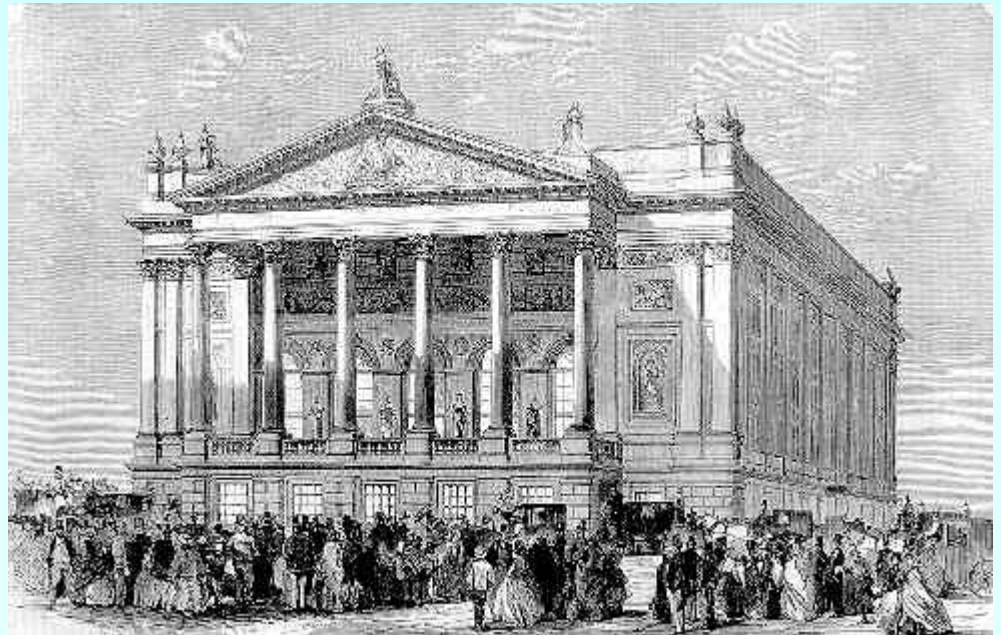
Goldsmith’s play is implicitly aligned with this older form by David Garrick in his “Prologue” to the play.

“Excuse me sirs, I pray – I can’t yet speak -- . . .” (*She Stoops* xxvi)

A “Laughing Comedy”?

Has Goldsmith’s attempt to produce a “laughing comedy” succeeded? *Do we laugh? What do we tend to find funny here?*

- Verbal Wit
- Situational Humour
- “Low” farce (including physical comedy)
- The vicious or foolish made *ridiculous*.



Wit and Verbal Jousting

Consider the examples of verbal “wit” we have in the play. What is the *function* of wit?

What does it *do*?

How does it produce “meaning”?

“Hard[castle]: And I love it. I love everything that’s old . . .”
(*She Stoops 2-3*)

One function of “wit” is to reveal the way in which language can *disguise* the truth.

Situational Humour

Humour is frequently generated through the creation of particularly absurd situations. This is the way the modern “sitcom” (think *Seinfeld*) functions.

What examples of situational comedy do we find in this play?

“Miss Hard[castle] (after a pause): But you have not been wholly an observer, I presume . . .”

(*She Stoops* 27-29)

What is the function of this kind of scene?

Ridicule

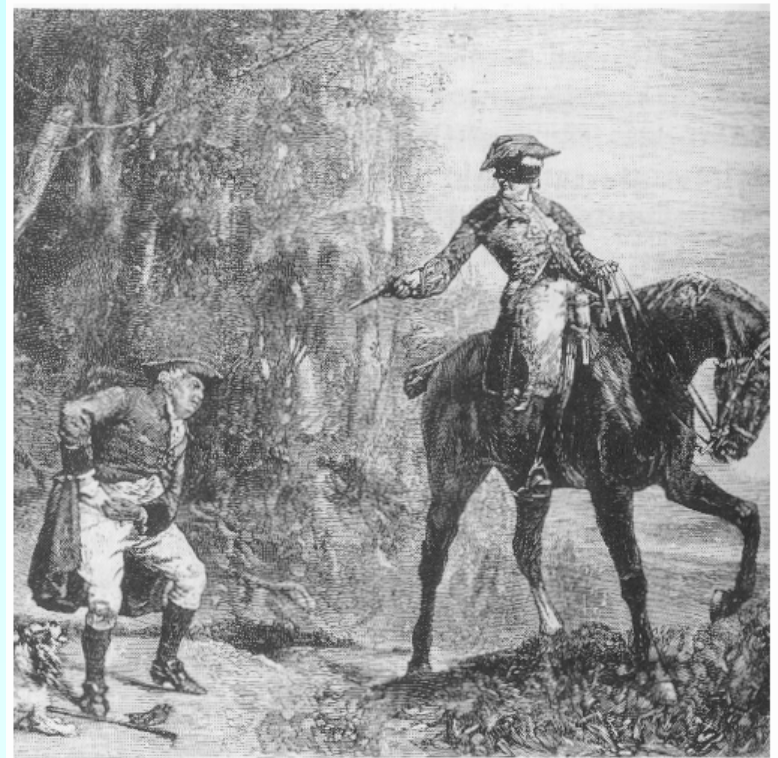
As the function of comedy is, in theory, to expose to ridicule the “vicious” or the “foolish,” it should feature a fair amount of satiric ridicule.

What examples of ridicule do we find in the play?

“Hard[castle]: I’m mistaken, or I heard voices of people in want of help . . .”

(*She Stoops* 69-71)

How is Mrs. Hardcastle satirized here?



Disguise



We notice the prevalence of images of *disguise*, of things not being what they seem, in all of these situations.

One of the primary functions of comic satire is to *expose* false appearances. And this is why *disguise* is so important to dramatic comedy.

What examples of “disguise” are featured in this play?

“Marl[ow]: No, no, I tell you. (Looks full in her face) Yes, child, I think I did call . . .” (*She Stoops* 43-45).

Marlow's "Disguise"

To what degree can we say that Marlow is "disguised" in this play?

Marlow's *awkwardness* around ladies of a certain social class does not, in a *conscious sense*, constitute a "disguise." Yet one of the central movements of the play involves "revealing" his truer, more forthright nature.

His "disguise" is a disguise in that it is "artificial," a result of social conditioning and the expectations and assumptions about class that pervade the play.



Class



Class is an omnipresent and vitally real part of the way in which society functioned in the 18th century. The play, in some ways, is “about” class.

How, and in what episodes, does the play examine the notion of “class”?

“Second Fel[low]: O he takes after his own father for that. To sure old Squire Lumpkin was the finest gentleman I ever set my eyes on. For winding the straight horn, or beating the thicket for a hare, or a wench, he never had his fellow. It was a saying in the place, that he kept the best horses, dogs, and girls in the whole country.” (*She Stoops* 9)

Class and Love

Why is Marlow so awkward around ladies of a certain social class?

The class system did not, generally, permit marriage between people of different classes.

“Marl[ow]: Tho’ prepared for setting out, I come once more to take leave . . .” (*She Stoops* 72-74)

How is class depicted in this scene?



Class and Disguise

In fact, as is demonstrated in this scene, “class” is another *kind* of disguise. It is when Marlow learns this that he becomes “liberated” from his own awkwardness.



Kate's "Disguise"

Is disguise is "bad," what do we make of Kate's assumption of it to win over Marlow?

Comedies represent *battlegrounds* between good and bad, and, most particularly, between young and old. Conventionally, the young employ the weapons of *wit* as a means to an end in attaining victory.

This is how Kate's "disguise" functions. There is the sense that the end justifies the means.



Danger, Will Robinson!



How *real* is the threat and danger faced by the young protagonists in this play?

Goldsmith's "villains" here are not very villainous, and the "threat" posed even my Mrs. Hardcastle not very worrisome.

Why not?

Goldsmith is avoiding the representation of the kind of dangers that might push the play towards the "tragic," because he sees this as a characteristic of "sentimental" comedy.

A Sentimental Laughing Comedy?

At the same time, the absence of a real threat is in concord with the sentimental view of a world that sees people as fundamentally “good,” and evil as susceptible to reform.

In this sense, Goldsmith’s play is actually quite “sentimental” in its “world view.” This is *most* apparent in the passage in which Marlow is at last won over entirely by the “poor relation” that Kate is pretending to be.



While the play attacks the dramatic *form* of sentimental comedy, it *affirms* the basic notion that “sentiment” can heal and reform.