

**HUMOUR AND COMIC DEVICES IN 18TH CENTURY PLAYS:
SOME PARALLELS BETWEEN OLIVER GOLDSMITH'S *SHE STOOPS TO
CONQUER* AND TOMÁS DE IRIARTE'S *EL SEÑORITO MIMADO***

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This paper will focus on analysing humour and comic devices in Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* and Tomás de Iriarte's *El señorito mimado*. These comedies are two excellent examples of Enlightenment plays in which the audience must discover the ridiculousness of the characters and the performance, and these situations will create a subtle and complex comic effect. Thus, both plays are connected in this respect: while Goldsmith's main objective with his comedy was to entertain the audience; Iriarte's intention was to expose a series of vices characteristic of his aristocratic contemporary society to preach to the crowd, that is why *El señorito mimado* is known as a moralistic comedy. Notwithstanding this, the most obvious difference between these plays is their immediate aim. *El señorito mimado* intends to be exemplary by showing a series of vices characteristic of the defective education of upper-class young people of the time. Contrary to that, *She Stoops to Conquer* attempts to cause laughter and to have the public's approval by presenting a series of humorous episodes in which the audience would laugh at the situation. However, the parallels between both plays are numerous and interesting to analyse, which is the primary aim of this study.

Keywords: 18th century drama, Goldsmith, Iriarte, humour, comedy, Comparative Literature

Characteristic of the Age of Enlightenment, the classics were the main sources that the authors of this period used to design their literary comic precepts. For both, Plato and Aristotle, *the aim is the means* and that was why they considered that comedy should be presented on the stage using wit and irony to represent of a group of people whose vices and faults seem so ridiculous that the audience will try to avoid them in order not to be considered as pathetic as they might seem to be. Moreover, humour is a weapon used to attack those whose shortcomings and defects manifest as negative, but also to indoctrinate the audience on those moral aspects which are reprehensible. The two plays that I am going to analyse belong to the English and Spanish neoclassic era and therefore they are also inheritors of the classic precepts. Checa Beltrán (1999: 23) points out in his article about the poetics of laughter that neoclassic authors considered that human beings were envious by nature, which is something already present through Plato's legacy. There are two other cases in which the misfortunes of other people might give raise to laughter but these are probably questionable since there are many comedies that use these devices to create a comic effect and to move the audience to laughter. These two other cases are, on the one hand, when humour makes reference to something rude or impolite and, on the other, when it focuses on an unexpected situation. These last two cases are suspect since they are closely connected with Morreall's (1983) 'Relief and Incongruity' theories. Thus, scatological elements are extremely rude, but

will still cause a comic effect on the stage in many cases, as well as within the surprising development of the action, which sometimes can be funny due to its inconsistency.

Firstly, it is important to establish from the beginning, the most basic differences existing between the Age of Enlightenment in the Spanish and in the English theatre. The Spanish audience demanded a theatrical performance from the etymological sense of the word, that is to say, an eclectic and versatile show to entertain them. It is with King Charles III when the Italian influences entered abruptly into the Spanish theatre with what is known as *jocular operas*, which were appreciated by the different social classes. Despite all the genres and sub-genres, there is a common element in all these plays and that is the burden of censorship. This is why the author's creative process could not be entirely fulfilled if he wanted to have their première without too many problems. For instance, Sebald (1978) in his introduction to *El señorito mimado* points out that the censor's review of the play in Madrid, dated June 1788, highlighted the fact that the audience of the comedy experienced moderate, soft and tender emotions while watching it, particularly the scenes in which Mariano's tutor takes part, to show his frank and honest nature. Indeed, this play can be classified into what is known as a 'moral comedy' due to its instructional aim. Secondly, the debate around English theatre at that time was focused on sentimental comedies. Sentimentalism removed cynical and sexual elements from the stage to put the onus on the purity of human beings. Therefore, plays became morally acceptable but still, there were also other kinds of comedies which were based on satire and the parody of the social and political figures of that time. With the passing of the Licensing Act in May 1737, the administration tried to prevent the criticism of politicians in the plays. Wood affirms that "the Act lent greater power to the two main patent houses ... that could both resist government interference and also gauge and/or shape popular demand" (2007: xii). Goldsmith's intention was, as Black points out, "to raise a genuine, hearty laugh" (2004: 134) and not to transform comedy into an emotional experience. Even so, *She Stoops to Conquer* uses benevolence as one of the main motifs of the play, which implies an optimistic view of human beings, rather than an exposition of faults to avoid.

The most significant similarity between *She Stoops to Conquer* and *El señorito mimado* lies in the sub-plot. I consider that the attitude that Tony Lumpkin and Don Mariano have towards their mothers and elders is a challenge to certain social and oppressive conventions. Through the rejection of established behavioural code, both characters question the sanctimonious education given to young upper-class males, at the same time as they look for the emancipation from a social environment that they consider repressive. The statement above also implies a universal problem that constantly appears in literature: the generational gap. Two different generations usually denote two different ideologies. Andioc (1976) considers that the economic prosperity that Europe (especially England and Spain) was enjoying thanks to the profits obtained from the colonies, gave them certain laxity towards paternal prerogatives in which arranged marriages were not acceptable as proper any more by young people.

Apart from this, the comic devices used in both plays work in connection with the relationship that Tony and Mariano establish with the other characters. I am initially going to consider the parallels that exist between the tutors of the two protagonists, which are clearly similar. Don Cristóbal and Mr. Hardcastle represent old values but with the encumbrance that none of them is the biological father of their protégés and, therefore, they are unable to replace the figure of the absent father. In addition to this, Doña Dominga and Mrs. Hardcastle are characterised as permissive mothers who are incompetent when trying to transmit to their sons the accepted moral code of the age.

This difference between the male figures –who represent sensibility and common sense– and the female figures –who represent incompetence and indulgence– creates a comic juxtaposition that manifests through the dialectic struggle that they maintain regarding the education of the protagonists. For example, both women justify the fact that their sons never enjoyed studying Latin because in the case of Tony “who knows what a year or two’s Latin may do for him?” (Goldsmith: 165 I.i) and in the case of Mariano “¡Buena gana de llenarse los sesos de latinajos!” (Iriarte: 154 I.ii). At the same time, Mr. Hardcastle and Don Cristóbal acknowledge the boy’s lack of manners: “If burning the footmen’s shoes, fighting the maids, and worrying the kittens, be humour, he has it” (Goldsmith: 165 I.i) and “si Mariano no se corrige, no puede ser buen padre, esposo ni amo” (Iriarte: 169 I.iii). Sebold (1986) considers that this lax maternal behaviour is the result of an absolutely disaffection towards their duties and responsibilities which are very typical of upper-class women of the age, because at a subconscious level, all their children’s mistakes lets them be seen as a kind of maternal martyr in the eyes of society. This pretension often creates a comic effect because the readers and the theatre audience are aware of the women’s self-ignorance, which is connected with Morreall’s ‘Superiority Theory’ in which he states that when we laugh at the hypocrisy of people, “our attention is focused on vice” (1983: 4) and therefore, the didactic purpose of comedy is fulfilled.

The dialectic struggle mentioned above between the protagonist’s tutors also seems to establish a difference between the two young boys. This is characterised by Tony’s childish behaviour in comparison to Mariano. Indeed, it is important to highlight the fact that, even though Mariano and Tony could perfectly correspond to Traugott’s classic description of a *rake*, that is to say, a “freethinker, voyeur, masker, ironist” (1966: 9), the main difference between the two characters is their sexuality and the way that they experience personal relationships with women. In his study about the *rake* on the English stage, Evans recalls Robert Markley’s definition of it as “a hero who embodies the ironies of libertine existence” (in Evans 2003: 2) which implies convulsive relationships with women. The fact is that Tony does not fit into this definition of a libertine due to his high degree of asexuality during the play. This is not only due to his lack of interest towards Miss Neville, but also because he does not show any kind of sexual interest towards women generally anywhere in the play. This factor brings to my attention the clear opposition between the protagonists of the two plays because it seems that Mariano holds all the characteristics that Tony lacks, that is to say, Mariano can be described as a *rake* in the classical sense who acknowledges the influence that he has on women.

Apart from this, there are other more pragmatic comic devices used by both authors to make the audience laugh during their plays. For example, from the very first scene *El señorito mimado* uses typical sayings and proverbs that carry a really funny, and at times, ironic meaning. These popular expressions contribute an incredible richness to the text because they are part of the linguistic legacy of the age, which also allows us to understand more about that period. Most of them need an additional explanation because their meaning has not reached our contemporary time, so, in this way we can state that “tener el frenillo bien cortado” (Iriarte: 164 I.ii) means that one speaks too much or “ir a ver a los birretes colorados” (Iriarte: 277 III.v) implies that one has to appear in court. Moreover, the ever useful scatological effects are really funny depending on the situation. Even so, Goldsmith does not make a great deal of use of them apart from the drunken servant that enters the room when Mr. Hardcastle and Marlow are having their last argument. The assistant intervenes making evident his state: “Good liquor will sit upon a good supper, but a good supper will not sit upon –

hiccup– upon my conscience, sir” (Goldsmith: 203 IV.i). In contrast, Iriarte does not hesitate to make use of scatological effects in the annotations in which the servants, and also Mariano, cough and spit all over the stage.

Finally, it should also be pointed out that the most effective linguistic device to make the audience laugh is the constant juxtaposition between the elevated language that some characters use compared to the vulgar and sometimes rude register of others. The dichotomy between the countryside and the city is obvious in the conversations held by Tony with both Hastings and Marlow. In these exchanges, the booby boy uses a plain vocabulary with expressions like “she’s as loud as a hog in a gate” or “you’re flung in a ditch” (Goldsmith: 189 II.i), while the two friends use a more specific language that characterises their social status. There is no doubt that the case of Mariano is the most interesting to analyse because his comical characterisation is constructed around the vulgar language that he uses to shock the audience due to the incongruity between the way that he is supposed to behave and his actual manners. For instance, in his first intervention in the play he uses a register that differs from what was expected: “Sobre que usted y su pleito me estaban ya jorobando la paciencia ... ¡Anda con Dios!” (Iriarte: 184 I.viii). The following dialogue could be a good example of Mariano’s rudeness. Here, the boy maintains a comical dialectical struggle with his mother in which she demands an explanation of where he was during the whole day:

D. MARIANO: (Paseándose con gran desembarazo.) ¡Vaya, no faltaba más!
Madrecita, ¿a mí con fiestas? Pues ¡fuera bueno que usted diese ahora en esa tema!
¡Cáscaras! ¿De cuándo acá quiere usted pedirme cuentas?
D.^a DOMINGA: Como hoy no has comido en casa...
D. MARIANO: ¿Qué? Pues ¿es eso cosa nueva?
D.^a DOMINGA: Pero di: ¿dónde has comido, hijo?
D. MARIANO: ¿Dónde? En una mesa.

(Iriarte: 201- 202 II. i)

There is no doubt that Mariano is an honest character that, contrary to his mother, does not pretend to be someone that he is not. This sincere recognition of his mistakes implies knowledge of them at the same time as a lack of will to correct his conduct. Despite this, the audience cannot do more than laugh at this shameless behaviour. Andioc (1976) stresses the fact that this behaviour is characteristic of the *majismo*, the social group to which Mariano belongs. His outlook perfectly matches with that of *majos*: he smokes, gambles, flirts, disobeys his elders, etc. This is a consequence of the Spanish well-off youth of the time that, as we previously commented, rejects social impositions.

In conclusion, as I commented at the beginning of this paper, both plays follow classic precepts, that is to say, the principle of *imitatio* which is so important for Horace. *She Stoops to Conquer* and *El señorito mimado* deal with social issues which develop due to the generation gap. Paternal authority is also questioned in an interesting way by the young characters who reject the arranged marriage that their mothers have planned for them. These and other topics are some of the most transcendental that are presented in both plays, but as comedies there are the humoristic devices which are constantly used to create a comic effect for the audience. Due to the differences between the literary traditions of England and Spain, the results of the works differ but even so, and as I have shown, there are still some interesting points which they share. Despite the parallels that exist in some scenes, the classical motto of *docere et delectare* is much more subtle in Goldsmith’s play than in Iriarte’s. Therefore, I can sum up by saying that on the one hand, *She Stoops to Conquer* delights the audience with honest laughter that

comes from comical situations, while on the other hand, *El señorito mimado* succeeds in showing the vices of the aristocratic well-off youth of the time and the consequences that their lack of responsibilities might cause.

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