

# Representation of women in goldsmith's she stoops to conquer and chaucer's the me...

[Literature](#)



**“ Women are the subtler sex: more varied in their attractions, more ingenious in their stratagems”**

In *She Stoops To Conquer* and *The Merchant's Tale*, women are presented in various ways, both in positive and negative lights.

One major way women are presented is as the property of men. In *The Merchant's Tale*, Januarie (the protagonist) wants to get a wife for his own personal gain, believing that only in marriage will he have a “ blisful lyf” in his old age. The adjective ‘ blisful’ connotes to ‘ peaceful’ and ‘ serene’, and tells the reader that Januarie has a grand and somewhat utopian idea of what life with a wife can offer. As he talks to his friends, he notes the characteristics he wants in his ideal wife. One major one is obedience, remarking, “ For who kan be so buxom as a wyf?” – ‘ buxom’, meaning obedient, shows that he wants someone who will follow his commands and act according to his wishes. His ideal woman is someone who when told, “ Do this” she replies “ Al redy sire”. To unpack this deeply misogynistic outlook on women, one must understand the context in which it was written. At the time of Chaucer's writing, women were indeed second class citizens that men basically had ownership of, to some extent. For Januarie, a “ worthy knyghte”, he would have been in a high enough status as to pick a wife of his choosing, though with mutual consent, of course. Nevertheless, in Januarie's world he wants a wife that will remain obedient to the extent she will even call him ‘ sire’, a very formal title used to address someone of a much higher status. In *She Stoops To Conquer*, the times are much more liberal in comparison; Mr Hardcastle assures his daughter Kate that “ I'll never control your choice” when it comes to marriage. While he may be insisting on the

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appropriate match between Marlow and Kate, he never outright forces her into it and would respect her decision if she were to turn him down. 'Control' is not in Mr Hardcastle's intended purview as he respects Kate too much for that. Kate is not his property, and he would never give her away to another man for her to be his unhappy but obedient wife.

Another one of Januarie's criteria for the perfect wife is "mayde fair and tendre of age", someone young and fair, in stark contrast to his old age and "slakke skyn". He also claims that "bet than old boef is the tendre veel" - this disgusting metaphor talks about women in terms of 'boef' and 'veel', of mere pieces of meat. Januarie is comparing his ideal wife to 'tendre veel', young and fresh and just to his liking. It's an insulting view of women's beauty. On the other hand, in the second act of *She Stoops To Conquer*, one of the protagonists, Marlow states, "A modest woman, dressed out in all her finery, is the most tremendous object of the whole creation". The adjective 'tremendous' is flattering and positive, and to put it in the context women being the greatest "of all creation" shows that he has a much greater respect for women than Januarie. However, that sentiment is undercut by the use of 'object', demeaning women back to a mere noun. While the good intentions might have been there, the choice of vocabulary prevents the sentiment from being realized in full.

On the other hand, women are also presented as cunning, more deceptive and more intelligent than they first appear. May, who on most accounts is ironically described as 'fresshe', sneaks around behind her husband's back to have an affair with Januarie's squire, Damyan. While she may not even

speak for the majority of the poem, she has a deeper and darker side to her than first thought. For example, she doesn't love Januarie - that much is clear - but she puts on a façade. For example, in regards to their sex, " she preyseth nat his pleying worth a bene", yet she hides that fact from Januarie as it benefits her more to be dishonest. Under Januarie, she has security, an inheritance after his death, and later on, the chance to spend time with Damyan. It is wiser for her to be deceptive. Likewise with Kate in *She Stoops To Conquer*, she treats her match with Marlow as a conquest, knowing she has to help him overcome his insecurities if they are ever to be together. She states, " my chief aim is, to take my gentleman off his guard, and, like an invisible champion of romance, examine the giant's force before I offer to combat". This line sounds like she's proposing a battle strategy, proving she is more ingenious in her stratagems, yet more subtle in her planning and execution. She calls herself " an invisible champion of romance", and grandiose title that sums up her quest to 'conquer' Marlow, as per the plays title. The adjective 'invisible' is a particularly revealing word, showing that she values subtlety and secrecy in her conquest over, knowing that she will get further that way.

In conclusion, I believe that women are indeed presented as the subtler sex who are much more varied in their attractions and ingenious in their stratagems. May and Kate, in particular, use these qualities to their advantage in getting the men they desire.