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"Be war, ye wemen, of youre subtyl fo"
- A Study of Chaucer's
Legend of Good Women

A thesis presented in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
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Abstract

The principal aim of this thesis is to survey the two main critical opinions which have been expressed upon the Legend of Good Women, and to ascertain the merits of each case in conjunction with an attempt at bringing about some reconciliation of the two.

The thesis begins by pointing out the relatively cursory critical attention that the Legend has in fact received. The Prologue alone has appealed to critics generally because of its two versions, Chaucer's use of courtly love conventions, and because Queen Anne may have commanded him to write it. The weight of critical opinion maintains that the legends themselves are generally monotonous and tedious, and that Chaucer himself was bored. A survey is made of the development and entrenchment of this, the bored thesis. A rare and recent case against this thesis is then examined in detail. As this essentially rests on the recognition and assessment of the rhetorical technique abbreviatio, a brief survey of medieval rhetorical theory is then made. This is followed by an attempt to set the work in its wider medieval context as a counter to prejudice against the Legend due to a modern perspective.

It is possible then to endeavour to look at the poem from Chaucer's viewpoint. It is concluded that the poem was essentially an experiment for him. Also, the smallness of scale and repetitious theme of the legends must have bothered Chaucer as much as they do modern critics. This comes out in the ambivalent position of the narrator and it is here that a possible reconciliation of the opposing theses is suggested. Finally, Chaucer neglected the rather flat Legend for the infinitely more varied and human Canterbury Tales.

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