

Windeatt, Barry. 2023. *Oxford Guides to Chaucer. Troilus and Criseyde*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 480. ISBN 9780198878810.

Reviewed by Ana Sáez-Hidalgo 
University of Valladolid
ana.saez.hidalgo@uva.es

Almost four decades ago, Helen Cooper, A. J. Minnis and Barry Windeatt put together a series of guides to Chaucerian works, the *Oxford Guides to Chaucer*, as a result of a sense that “medieval studies in general and Chaucerian studies in particular had advanced to a point where a reappraisal of his poetry was both possible and necessary” (vii). Three volumes resulted from that endeavor, one guide to *The Canterbury Tales* (Cooper 1989), another one to the *Shorter Poems* (Minnis, Scattergood, and Smith 1995), and the third one, to *Troilus and Criseyde* (Windeatt 1992). Published during what Larry Benson called an “age of commentary and of commentary upon commentary” (Benson 1991, 183), Benson nonetheless singles them out for their “wit, learning, intelligence, and, the rarest of critical virtues, good judgement” (Benson 1991, 183). Doubtlessly, all those qualities are behind the fact that the trio of volumes has remained for decades not only an essential primer for those approaching Chaucer, but also a reference and a starting point for researchers of medieval literature. Until now, only Coopers’ guide to *The Canterbury Tales* had seen a second and a third edition, the latter published in 2023. Now Windeatt’s guide to *Troilus and Criseyde* follows in its footsteps, keeping the series’ initial aspiration of reappraisal.

Since the first edition of this *Oxford Guide to Troilus and Criseyde*, Windeatt stated that its purpose was “to give an up-to-date summary of what is known about Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* and to offer interpretation, with the aid of that diverse accumulation of modern scholarship and criticism represented by the Bibliography” (1). This description might be somewhat misleading, however, inasmuch as it falls short of the thoroughness and richness with which Windeatt surveyed Chaucer’s narrative of the Trojan story. In this, the *Guide* has largely benefited from his experience preparing an edition of *Troilus*, with Chaucer’s main source, Boccaccio’s *Il Filostrato* in facing pages (Windeatt 1984). Thus, Windeatt’s expertise editing the text has doubtlessly colored this guide, both in its content and in the didactic design of its structure. The main sections in the book—identical in both editions—survey the date, text, sources, genre, structure, themes and style of the poem, with a final chapter on “Imitation and Allusion, c. 1385 to 1700,” that is, its afterlife. It is largely in the elaboration of some of these

aspects, the design of new sections and in the updating of research that this second edition differs from the first one.

As there is no clear evidence establishing a date for *Troilus*, the discussion in the first section relies on indirect reference (“Date,” 4–15): contemporary events and contextual allusions. In addition to those cited in the first edition, the new version incorporates evidence published in the last decade or two, with a special focus on details about Chaucer’s life and the currency of seeing London as the New Troy.

Windeatt’s approach to the Text offers a good instance of how this new edition has been updated (16–45). In the first edition, this section was highly philological, with significant attention paid to manuscripts, textual families and variant readings. In the second edition, the section opens with a discussion of the reception of Chaucer’s text, its early audience and the voice of the poet (“Text, Voice and Performance”) built around the well-known frontispiece picture to the poem in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 61. Although this image appeared in the first edition as a prompt for the discussion on the audience of the poem and Chaucer’s narrative voice, here, by opening the section with this point rather than with the list of manuscripts, Windeatt takes a more cultural approach to the dissemination of Chaucer’s text. He sees the frontispiece as “an exercise in retrospection, postdating both Chaucer’s death and the deposition and murder of Richard II. The frontispiece therefore may form part of a posthumous legacy construction of Chaucer as the great poet in English, romancing his role as a public poet” (19). In this, as in the rest of the volume, the second edition not only brings in a new and sophisticated approach, but it also incorporates the latest research, exploring both the Continental connections of this illustration, and the various dimensions of Chaucer’s narratorial voice.

The section on Sources (46–144), also benefits from Windeatt’s editorial work. It is a highly detailed examination and cross-checking of the numerous texts Chaucer presumably knew and used for *Troilus* (from Dares and Dictys to Machaut, including Benoît de Sainte-Maure, Guido de Columnis, Boethius, Ovid, Dante, among others). The textual correspondence with Boccaccio’s *Filostrato*, the English poet’s main source, which he translated and rewrote, is scrutinized book-by-book and line-by-line, a meticulous work largely distilled from Windeatt’s own parallel edition. The analysis of other sources, like Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, presents users of this *Guide* with a valuable catalogue of *Troilus*’s intertextualities. The second edition offers bibliographical updates.

The survey of the poem’s “Genre” (145–90), or rather genres, starts with the famous lines in which Chaucer sends his work to the world at the end of the poem:

Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye,
 Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye,
 So sende myght to make in som comedye! (vv. 1786–88)

These lines cue Windeatt to examine the poem as innovative in how it combines various genres deriving from intertextualities, that Windeatt presents as “responses to the same *matière* and of the expectations Chaucer’s audience would consequently have of a work addressing that subject-matter” (145). Both in the first and the second edition, this section examines no fewer than ten genres, as diverse as epic, romance, history, tragedy, drama, debate, lyric, fabliau, allegory, and comedy—this last identified as a separate subsection in the second edition.

The section examining the Structure of the narrative (191–224) focuses on the architectural design of *Troilus* as “an important aspect of the poem’s interpretation of its subject” (191). Even if Chaucer is very closely following Boccaccio’s stories, Windeatt guides us to identify the poem’s symmetrical connection of structures: of settings, of time and of the stars.

The section on Themes, now retitled “Themes and Ideas” (225–331) is one of the largest and most comprehensive. This should surprise no one: to cover, organize and digest the critical tradition underlying the themes of a literary text as complex as *Troilus and Criseyde* is challenging enough. Doing it to the very different needs of students and scholarly researchers is even more difficult. Windeatt succeeds at both levels, charting a very helpful presentation of some of the central topics of the story—love, time and freedom—as well as an analysis of the characterization of the four main characters (Troilus, Criseyde, Pandarus and Diomedes). In the second edition, this material has been thoroughly updated and reoriented at the same time. A good example is the sub-section treating the poem’s characters. Originally entitled “Characterization,” it is presented in the second edition as “Subjectivities” (285–317), an exploration of Chaucer’s depiction of his personages. As Windeatt sees it, “to let readers feel so near to the very flux and continuum of the protagonists’ existence and inner life is the special accomplishment of *Troilus*” (285). Inasmuch as Chaucer was faced with the challenge of retelling an old story—of, essentially, providing new bottles for old wine—he and Windeatt, in his re-titling of this section, find similar solutions to a similar problem.

The sections on “Style” (332–77), and “Imitation and Allusion” (378–412), in their study of, respectively, linguistic-rhetorical usages on the one hand, and the posterity of *Troilus*, have seen a noteworthy updating effort without critically altering their content. This same effort is visible throughout the whole volume, as it has been repeatedly pointed out in this review. The result is a *Guide to Troilus and Criseyde* that has recovered its original currency, after almost three decades since its first edition. Thus, Windeatt’s *Guide* is an indispensable preliminary read for students or anyone with a scholarly interest in *Troilus and Criseyde*. It continues to be the most comprehensive critical and interpretive introduction to Chaucer’s poem.

References

- Benson, C. David. 1991. Review of *The Canterbury Tales* by Helen Cooper. *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 13: 183–86.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. 1984. *Troilus and Criseyde: A New Edition of "The Book of Troilus."* Edited by Barry Windeatt. London: Longman.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. 1998. *Troilus and Criseyde*. A New Translation by Barry Windeatt. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. 2003. *Troilus and Criseyde*. Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Barry Windeatt. London: Penguin Classics.
- Cooper, Helen. 1989. *The Oxford Guide to The Canterbury Tales*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Minnis, A. J., V. J. Scattergood, and J. J. Smith, eds. 1995. *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Shorter Poems*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Windeatt, Barry. 1992. *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: Troilus and Criseyde*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

(Received 08/06/2026)