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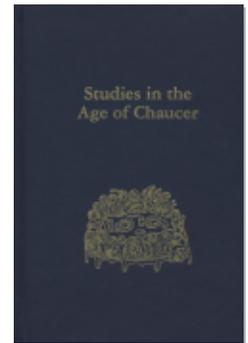
Chaucer: An Oxford Guide ed. by Steve Ellis (review)

Matthew Boyd Goldie

Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Volume 29, 2007, pp. 485-489 (Review)

Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2007.0002>



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Trotula is particularly insightful. But some may question Desmond's reading of the stories of Clytemnestra and Pasiphaë as exempla of "female agency and even sexual autonomy" (p. 139). Likewise her contention that the Wife "can knock [Jankyn] down; he can—and does—knock her out" misreads the Wife's Ali-esque ring mastery. For Desmond, that the Wife is ever "on top" is only a momentary illusion.

The last chapter explores Christine's "vehement correction to the textual tradition of misogyny" (p. 146). Desmond's study of Christine's relations with her sources and her peers displays first-rate scholarship on the *Querelle* and on medieval literary ethics. This excellent chapter (revising an earlier publication) has nothing to do with Foucault or with the modern "policing of S/M," though they return for an unearned bow in a two-page "afterword" that attempts to unify all the discrete chapters and bring home the thesis that the "erotics of sexual difference . . . achieves legibility through violence" in Roman culture (colonial, "slave-owning," and imperial) and in "medieval marriage and desire" (p. 166).

At its best, Desmond's book reveals details in the history of culture and erotic violence in Ovid and his medieval disciples, offering generous quotations from all the primary texts, useful to students and scholars alike. Those who see the function of criticism as the indictment of "heteropatriarchy" throughout time will likely agree with the narrative Desmond constructs in linking these amatory texts. But others might find that Desmond's book, with its reductive narratives and in its exclusionary discourses of antiheterosexuality, risks becoming an instance of what Frank Lentricchia has called "pre-reading," in which political and theoretical arguments, bound up with theory-speak and jargon, predetermine meaning and overwhelm the act of reading.

MICHAEL CALABRESE
California State University—Los Angeles

STEVE ELLIS, ed. *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp. xxiv, 644. \$38.00 paper.

Steve Ellis's hefty *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide* contains thirty-six essays plus an Introduction and Postscript, each by a different authoritative specialist. The essays are grouped in five sections: "Historical Contexts"

on biographical, historical, and cultural topics; “Literary Contexts” on sources and contemporary texts; “Readings” on theoretical approaches; “Afterlife” on editions and imaginative responses; and “Study Resources,” a guide to printed and electronic reference works. With a caveat or two, it is a useful reference anthology, and its reasonable price makes it a volume that students and others can afford.

The book’s essays sometimes are and sometimes are not a sign of the times. Saddam Hussein is in the *Oxford Guide* (under “The Carnivalesque”!), but Adam Pinkhurst is not. The writing acknowledges the calamitous war in Iraq but not torture in its unofficial or federally sanctioned forms. The new millennium also hovers behind the anthology in that several essays evaluate Chaucer with the confidence of the twentieth century completed while recognizing the continuing validity of arguments made then. However, some essays express interest in tales and topics that haven’t recently garnered much scholarly attention. For instance, the essayists most frequently discuss the *Canterbury Tales*, with *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue* and *The Pardoner’s Tale* mentioned often. The guide confirms that *The Parson’s Tale’s* reputation is firmly restored. If the guide is a register of critical interest, it’s therefore somewhat unusual that *The Knight’s Tale* is repeatedly discussed as a test case and example.

The “Historical Contexts” section voices the current refrain of how difficult it is to tie Chaucer, with any simple confidence, to specific historical events. The descriptions of other scholars’ historical studies and the essays themselves model the tentative and subjunctive language that’s necessary when we try to draw connections between Chaucer’s poetry and his contemporary world. The entry on “Nationhood” in this section is another register of recent interest (one that would now include David Wallace’s more recent work), while the chapter on “Chivalry” seems to belong to a former age.

The book also registers present-day sophisticated uses of literary theory to study Chaucer in section three, “Readings.” Some terms in this part of the book are now appropriately plural: “feminisms,” “sexualities.” It is odd that postmodernism has a chapter in “Readings” and is repeatedly mentioned elsewhere since it does not seem of importance to recent scholarly inquiry. Also, there’s some concern with the spirit of D. W. Robertson throughout, which reflects the age and training of the writers more than current criticism or the undergraduate reader’s expectations of Chaucer. It is also a sign of the present moment that

Jacques Derrida doesn't need mentioning, deconstruction is only invoked, knowledge of poststructuralism can be presumed, and Cultural Studies also doesn't need to be named.

The back cover (the only guide to the book's apparatus) doesn't quite make clear that "Readings" contains unpublished and provocative applications of theory to texts. These are new, brief essays that stand alone as contributions to the field of scholarship: Marion Turner discusses the *Parliament of Fowls's* polyphony, Sylvia Federico (coining the useful term "new Chaucerian historicism") provides a fascinating fresh reading of rape in Chaucer's works, Glenn Burger intervenes with a subtle historical interpretation of *The Shipman's Tale* in relation to marriage in the bourgeois household, Jeffrey Cohen offers a new reading of *The Prioress' Tale* in a chapter on "Postcolonialism," and Patricia Ingham analyzes the "uncommon wisdom" of psychoanalysis and *The Knight's Tale*. Part Four, "Afterlife," makes the study of the reception of Chaucer's works and reputation after his death in 1400 more accessible and organized.

Another register of present-day Chaucer studies is the common thread throughout the book—an attempt to reach across the divide between academic and popular receptions of Chaucer: adaptations, translations, guides, and other writings. For example, Stephanie Trigg employs Pierre Bourdieu's ideas about literature's institutional roles and cultural uses in order to discuss some recent appearances of Chaucer in popular culture, including the "now defunct but once very popular Chaucer's wedding reception and banquet venue in the Melbourne suburb of Canterbury" (p. 539).

A book with this much in it will inevitably have some faults. A few essays make tendentious and misleading points, which teachers are likely to find frequently and enthusiastically quoted in student essays. Can we really still assert that Chaucer's pilgrims "display a remarkable tolerance and generosity of spirit toward one another" (p. 94)? It's particularly unfortunate that the "Feminisms" chapter contains an eccentric history of feminism, inaccuracies, simplifications, and odd interpretations. Elsewhere, readings of the Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 61 *Troilus and Criseyde* are potentially deceptive, especially in the List of Illustrations and the label that accompanies the reproduced image (also on the cover, though flipped left to right), which suggest it shows "The Poem being read before a court audience" (pp. xix, 114). The "Chaucer's Language" section is intended to "help change a hurdle into a gate,"

but it is fairly technical, with perhaps necessary use of the International Phonetic Alphabet but also unexplained terms such as “fricative” and “fronting.” Titles of essays in the “Literary Contexts” section—“The English Background,” “The Italian Background,” and so on—are potential misnomers if the reader takes “background” to mean Chaucer’s use of sources rather than the more broad contemporary milieu of English, Italian, and other literatures, languages, and cultures. In a few places, including the introduction, there’s a slightly annoying defensiveness about teaching Chaucer at this moment in time. Four substantial online articles on pedagogy accompany the book, but these tend to be more on the current status of Chaucer in university and high school curricula rather than offering lesson suggestions or specific teaching plans and utilitarian suggestions for resources; these are included, but the emphasis is on politics. The Index contains no *sees*, only *see alsos*, so readers will not find the *Canterbury Tales* anywhere under the main heading “Chaucer, Geoffrey.” Separate headings for the tales do not distinguish between a pilgrim portrait and tale.

In terms of utility, the guidebook’s essays fall along a continuum of tones from the polemical to the more presentational. Past critics named and discussed in the essays are usually the more important ones. Many of the best entries contain excellent summaries of books, articles, and arguments; also, at the end of each essay is a “Further Reading” section, and in each case the books and articles are astutely selected and clearly reviewed. The length of every essay, about fourteen pages, feels just right; each is succinct but complex.

The volume is explicitly aimed at undergraduates. Each essay supposes knowledge of several of Chaucer’s texts, so students might read parts of it near the end of a course. The book is otherwise difficult to assign in the sense that it’s hard to pair the essays with individual poems or tales, and my guess is that most teachers have their students work through Chaucer’s texts one by one. Perhaps the thinking within Oxford University Press was that the Oxford Guides might take care of individual works; for example, Helen Cooper’s guide to the *Canterbury Tales* is helpfully organized by tale. Ultimately, the book suggests that students take one approach to a number of texts—a historical one, a study of literary influence, or an explicitly theoretical line—rather than studying an individual poem. Writing across Chaucer’s texts seems very fruitful and a move away from close reading, but it is a more accomplished

approach. The book fortunately provides several exciting models for how to read across works, and it might therefore be just as useful in graduate classes as well as of interest to other scholars.

MATTHEW BOYD GOLDIE
Rider University

LIANNA FARBER. *An Anatomy of Trade in Medieval Writing: Value, Consent, and Community*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006. Pp. x, 235. \$39.95.

Trade and deceit go hand in hand, according to early medieval commentators such as Cassiodorus, who proclaimed that merchants “burden their wares with lies even more than with prices” (p. 15). But, by the High Middle Ages, increasing commerce led to discourses challenging that negative stereotype of the deceptive trader. Typically drawing on Aristotle, writers increasingly affirmed the social benefits of trade, describing it as an activity that provides goods to individuals incapable of independently producing all necessities. Such justifications of trade constitute the likely primary reading for scholars interested in the history of economic ideas in the Middle Ages. But as Lianna Farber’s valuable book demonstrates, we would do wrong to rely only on such explicit discussions of trade. While accounts of trade may seem descriptive, they are actually “falsely reassuring” justifications (p. 2). Not unlike the dishonest merchant derided early on by Cassiodorus and others, later medieval commentators on trade also mislead.

According to Farber, commentators deceive in their uncritical stance toward three components that invariably constitute trade in official accounts: the *value* of the objects exchanged, the *consent* of the traders to the commensurate worth of those goods, and the *community* that trade makes possible. While value, consent, and community emerge in accounts of trade as unproblematic assumptions, they are subject to substantial critique in less predictable primary sources. Farber’s study exposes the deceptive qualities of medieval accounts of trade by moving from the texts that traditionally have informed the history of economic ideas across disciplinary lines to a rich variety of texts, among them legal