These two good books resemble one another. Both are carefully written, nearly free of error, deeply learned in their subjects, everywhere sensible and judicious -- books one could unreservedly recommend. They share a respect, contrary to fashion, for the courtly, chivalric, mannerly, French, what used to be called polite side of Chaucer's writing, and they jointly, and fashionably, reveal a merely perfunctory interest in religion (and rightly so if, as Mr Pearsall says on p. 269, Christianity is a comprehensive, all-pervading, non-negotiable system of belief, a proposition that any of the Thomases might doubt), or what might roughly be called the Latin side of Chaucer's culture.

Both likewise give us a Chaucer, I think, that is most deeply the Chaucer of high New Criticism, an updated version of the Chaucer of Donaldson, Muscatine, Bronson, Bloomfield, Speirs (the last mentioned by neither), with its virtues of lively responsiveness to complexities of poetic texture and meaning, and its vices, nearly suppressed by Pearsall, of disregard for historical and social context and for cloaked or unconscious political force. Both writers salute and seem to respect feminism and New Historicism; neither engages with this or other recent literary theory with prolonged or hearty attention. In this arena Mr Windeatt stands resolutely and reasonably hors de combat; Pearsall throws the occasional dart from afar -- his lack of theoretical spoudaion sometimes looks like an effort to be with it or brusquely to put it down.

And both writers sharply describe what they are about at their beginnings. Windeatt aims "to give an up-to-date summary of what is known about Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde' and to interpret the poem in light of the accumulation of former study. This aim he achieves entirely. At one point Windeatt describes Chaucer's manner of narration' in Troilus as sociable, convivial, well-mannered, tacful, anxious not to bore, and finally deferential (18). These terms might describe Windeatt's own style: the book is long, and rarely does one meet a bold new opinion or a fiercely argued oppositional stance. Practically no new information about the poem appears, but that which is known (and a few sociably entertained ideas by other critics that are off the wall) is fully and artfully disposed into chapters on the poem's date, text (his own earlier contributions weighing heavily here), sources, genre (especially good on romance, lyric, and fabliau), structure (excellent by pure accretion of material -- Troilus must be second only to Dante's Comedy in structural art), themes (suggestive and most original on love (Pearsall appears to unlove love and marriage), pitee, and secrecy), and style (a Father flat finale, but good on diction). The book's arrangement into many short and well labelled essays will make it a useful Guide, certainly an improvement on Meech's already outdated Design in Chaucer's Troilus. The many charts and...
Troilus and Criseyde has a centuries' old backstory. Long before Renaissance dramas or realist novels, Chaucer wrote a love story set in a besieged city that was a deep psychological exploration of character and human relationships. Jenni Nuttall, author of Troilus and Criseyde: A Reader's Guide, shares her reading recommendations after over a decade of teaching the poem to Oxford undergraduates.