the assumption that Chaucer intended Fragments VIII–X and the Retractions to be read as a sequential unified group, and never mind that it levels the Retractions to a topos: just more literary play.

Johnson is most bracing, however, in her work on *Troilus and Criseyde*. Here she argues that Chaucer critiques the Boethian project by alternating emotive lyric with rational dialogue in a way that provokes psychological transformations, the very changes that become tainted by manipulation and ultimately lead to tragedy. Emotions are also key in the analysis that grows out of this, especially the crucial Aristotelian emotions of ‘drede’ and ‘pite’. The argument goes that Chaucer wrote the poem’s narrative/narrator dialectic as a mixed-form protreptic in which the narrator cultivates pity for the main characters and fear for their ultimate end. Chaucer does this, Johnson claims, as a defence of Aristotelian tragedy against Boethius’ understanding of tragedy as being ethically unhealthy. Chaucer may have been exposed to Aristotelianizing commentaries on Boethius, and exposure to these texts might have encouraged him to write *Troilus* as a ‘versified Aristotelian commentary on the ethical utility of tragedy’ (p. 120). Readers will have to decide for themselves what to make of that.

Christ’s College
Cambridge

JAMES WADE


In *Reading Literature Historically*, Greg Walker both revisits and re-examines territory that he has previously made his own. The title suggests that his new book will align seamlessly with his established practice of reading fifteenth- and sixteenth-century literature ‘in dialogue with historical events and the political cultures of the communities which produced it’. Yet although this approach has previously proved a productive one, Walker here sets himself the task of examining its dangers as well as its benefits. Prefacing the book with a discussion of text as the occasion for ‘conversation’ with and among its readers, he argues that his interest is less in the straightforward idea that a text is a means of delivering a ‘message’, than in the notably more complex possibility that it invites its readers – both historical and contemporary – to engage in interpretative work of their own. To explore this further he presents five case studies, some that build on familiar territory, and others that represent something of a departure from his previous work: the first part of the book contains chapters on *Godly Queen Hester* and Lindsay’s *Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*, while the second consists of chapters on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the *Plowman’s Tale*, and Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale*.

Each of these reflects the theme of the book in a slightly different way. The *Godly Queen Hester* and Lindsay chapters are classic Walker: scrupulous and
frequently subtle investigations of the ways in which these plays are informed by multiple sets of historical circumstances, the indirect as well as direct ways in which they might have served as advice to princes and – in the case of the Thrie Estaitis – its experimentation with an entirely new kind of representation of extra-textual reality. The latter chapter is particularly illuminating, providing a lucid and nuanced reading of a challenging play. Of the remaining chapters, that on the Plowman’s Tale takes the form of a detailed investigation of the textual history of the poem which demonstrates that its authorship is infinitely complex: that it is not just a Tudor framing of a fifteenth-century text, but that it was redrafted and revised multiple times over the 130 years between first composition and first printing in 1532. This matters because – as Walker argues – it means that ‘the 1390s, the 1410s and the early 1530s are all contexts for this poem’, thus directly challenging the validity of the kind of historical reading which he has made his own. By comparison, the Gawain and Miller’s Tale chapters seem less square to the project of the book; they are skilful close readings that demonstrate how attention to cultural and literary contexts enables reinterpretation of the nature of chivalry in Gawain and the character of Absolon in Chaucer’s tale – but although they are interesting as examples of the kinds of interpretative engagement required of present-day readers of medieval texts, and the kinds of reward it may reap, they contribute less directly to Walker’s ‘conversation’ with his own earlier thinking, which is one of the most attractive features of this book. Reading Literature Historically shows a scholar who is unafraid publicly to examine his own thought-processes and who himself performs the kind of work he seeks to encourage in others.

Wadham College
Oxford

JANE GRIFFITHS


Reading and War explores developments in textual production, circulation, and reception in the context of fifteenth-century English military politics. Through this lens, Catherine Nall is able to go beyond basic observations about the ownership and popularity of military treatises to explore how readers adapted, translated, and annotated military texts in response to changing political and military circumstances throughout the fifteenth century. In doing so, she helpfully shows how the reception and adaptation of military texts reveals active participation in a wider political discourse pertaining to war. Nall’s study also takes in the multilingual context of fifteenth-century textual production and adaptation, providing an apt reminder that the much-emphasized rise of English during this century was not coupled with the neglect of England’s other literary languages. English textual production and reception unfolded in a vibrantly multilingual context.