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Tolkien's Lost Chaucer by John M. Bowers

Joe R. Christopher

Tarleton State University (professor emeritus)

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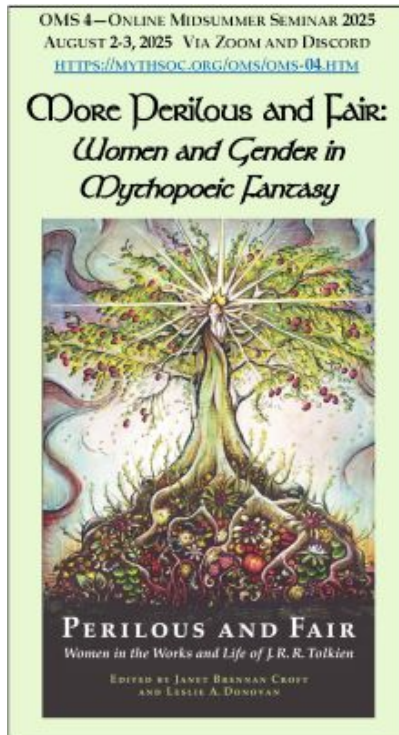
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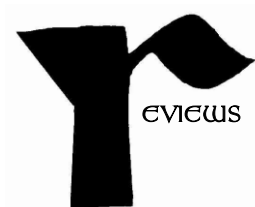
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TOLKIEN'S LOST CHAUCER. John M. Bowers. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2019. xvi + 310 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0198842675. ISBN-10: 0198842678. \$32.95.

JOHN M. BOWERS' BOOK IS LONG—OVER 300 PAGES IN SMALL PRINT—but it is important for its study of J.R.R. Tolkien's personality and for understanding aspects of his plots in *The Lord of the Rings* and some other works. In what follows, I skip the first, introductory chapter, and the last chapter, which has a comparison of probabilities about Geoffrey Chaucer's son, Thomas, and Christopher Tolkien. The second to seventh chapters will receive summaries of some portions and some specific examples of others, attempting to give a feel of the book. The basic, background facts are that J.R.R. Tolkien had a 1922 agreement with the Oxford University Press to provide a glossary of the Middle English of a collection of Geoffrey Chaucer's writings (selected by the Press) and to provide a number of explanatory Notes. The book was to be named *Selections from Chaucer's Poetry and Prose*. However, Tolkien had done much but not completed his part of the work by 1928, when progress stopped; and what he had finished was picked up by the Press in 1951 but not destroyed.

Chapters two and three reveal the complicated background of the people involved in the project. Walter W. Skeat, the Victorian editor of Chaucer's writings, is mentioned as the model against whom Tolkien struggled, in Bowers's treatment of Tolkien in terms of Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*—that is, Tolkien liked to point out Skeat's errors but otherwise, when possible, not mention him. Kenneth Sisam, working at the Press, had earlier taught Tolkien at Oxford and helped get him his job at Leeds University; they collaborated on *A Middle English Reader and Vocabulary* (although Tolkien was a year late with the *Vocabulary*), and they were the two finalists to be the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, which Tolkien received despite Sisam's publications on Anglo-Saxon works and Tolkien's lack of publications (at that time) on Old English. Sisam, after the plans for the Chaucer volume were ended, published essays disagreeing with Tolkien's by-then publication of "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*." George S. Gordon (more of an administrator than a scholar) was technically the co-editor of the

text they were doing—as part of that, he was to write the opening background on Chaucer and a reception history of Chaucer's poems, but he couldn't get them written. C.S. Lewis is discussed, but has no connection to the proposed book.

In Chapters four and five, Bowers considers the corrections Tolkien made to the texts intended for the book, the glossary of Middle English words used by Chaucer in the chosen works that Tolkien had worked on, and the "Notes" of points of interest. Tolkien's textual emendations were largely accepted, except for those on Chaucer's *Boece*. Tolkien first produced a glossary in thirty-eight pages, while Sisam had scheduled twenty pages for it. They compromised on twenty-eight; Tolkien got it down to twenty-seven, but he just shifted some of the materials to the Notes. Sisam had scheduled twenty-four pages for the Notes; Tolkien had one hundred and sixty pages. Tolkien asked for aid in shortening, but at that point everything stopped. (Although Bowers does not say this, I get the impression that it was really Gordon's failure that stopped the book—the Press did not want to cause a row with the Merton Professor by dropping him.)

The rest of the fifth chapter is spent on a long survey of the Chaucerian works intended for the *Selections*, with an emphasis on the Notes—those "which offer special insights into [Tolkien's] enterprises as poet, translator, and especially fiction-writer" (109). Two examples from one Chaucerian poem: in the discussion of "Complainte unto Pité" (116-117), (first) Tolkien expresses a dislike of Chaucer's personification of Pity (in the title and the poem)—but Bowers points out that Tolkien personifies Pity in *The Lord of the Rings*, in "It was Pity that stayed his [Bilbo's] hand"; and (second) Tolkien moves from Chaucer's poem (which is in rime royal) to mention *Troilus and Criseyde* (also rime royal)—then Bowers offers what seems to be his own point about Chaucer's *Troilus*: "In *The Hobbit* when Bilbo looks down from his flight with the Eagles and sees the 'little spot of earth', Tolkien was recalling how Troilus looked down from the eighth sphere [of Heaven] and saw the 'litel spot of erthe.'" The larger point is that Tolkien was influenced by a number of specifics from Chaucer.

The sixth chapter discusses "The Reeve's Tale," which led both to Tolkien's essay "Chaucer as a Philologist: *The Reeve's Tale*" (an odd publication for the Anglo-Saxon professor) and to, Bowers suggests, a double influence in *The Lord of the Rings*. The tale, about two Cambridge students in conflict with a miller, combined with Tolkien and his brother as children being frightened by the miller's son in a near-by mill, and a later visit to the area by Tolkien, upon which he discovered elm trees had been taken out, produced the story

when the younger hobbits Merry and Pippin stray into Fangorn Forest
(as Ronald and Hilary had wandered into the forest along the River Cole)

and they learn about the trees cut down by Orcs for no reason [...]. [T]he two hobbits join the attack [by the Ents] against the mill-master [Saruman] who had turned Isengard into an industrial wasteland. (219)

The second version of this plot occurs near the end of *The Lord of the Rings* when “the Hobbiton mill had been rebuilt as a steam-driven factory with its tall brick chimney belching black smoke, just as in Tolkien’s boyhood memories” (220). Other supporting details are in the book. (Let me add that the sexual second half of “The Reeve’s Tale” was not included in *Selections* and Tolkien, while of course knowing it, was not influenced by its plot.)

The seventh chapter is titled “Chaucer in Middle-earth.” After an introductory section comes a portion on affinities between Chaucer and Tolkien: both were book-lovers; both pretended major works were translations: *Troilus and Criseyde*, from the historian Lollius, and *The Lord of the Rings*, from the Red Book of Westmarch; both were men with cronies; friendships with John Gower and C.S. Lewis, respectively, cooled down later; they both served in wars and did not describe war in details in their writings; both started a number of written works that they did not finish; both had problems reaching a conclusion in their works: *Troilus and Criseyde*, with fifteen stanzas at the end, and “The Clerk’s Tale” with “L’Envoy de Chaucer”; *The Lord of the Rings*, with a series of possible endings (as have been pointed out by critics).

The next section is on Tolkien’s borrowings from Chaucer—at first, a variety of borrowings, and then a section each based on “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” and “The Pardoner’s Tale.” The latter shows a significant plot influence on *The Lord of the Rings* with also a striking influence on Tolkien’s university lectures. The plot of “The Pardoner’s Tale” is that of “three young men [who] went searching for gold and found only their own deaths” (255)—that is, they killed each other trying to possess all of the gold. Variations of the same story are wide spread, from Tibet westward. Bowers points to two plot parallels in *The Lord of the Ring*, both involving the titular ring. First, “Déagol found the lost Ring and was murdered by his friend Sméagol” to obtain it (259). Second, Bilbo has the Ring and decides to keep it; Gollum attacks, obtains the Ring, and dies. What makes these significant is that Tolkien, in 1950, changed his Oxford lectures on “The Pardoner’s Tale” which always, in the past, had consisted only in the study of the history of words—changed it to begin with the form of the story, with high praise for Chaucer’s story. Tolkien finished writing *The Lord of the Rings* in 1949, but Bowers suggests he did not yet see the parallel at the end. One assumes Tolkien was just thinking more highly of plots than before he finished *The Lord of the Rings*, so he added the discussion. But sometime after the 1950 version of his lectures—exactly when is not known—he reworked them with a six-step summary of the ideal version of the plot on this matter and he

changed his evaluation of Chaucer's Tale to poor. (For the six-step pattern, see p. 261.) Presumably, suggests Bowers, Tolkien suddenly saw how close to Chaucer's plot he had come and his negativity about competitors came out.

As the title of Bowers's book indicates, his basic argument is that the influence of Chaucer on Tolkien has not been properly evaluated in the past because the amount of work Tolkien did on Middle English—specifically on Chaucer—was not available. Bowers discusses the new evidence in detail, with citations of his many sources. Some may find it exhaustive. But Bowers has made his case that the influence of Chaucer on Tolkien was great. This is a very good critical analysis. It belongs on the shelf beside Tom Shippey's *The Road to Middle-earth*.

—Joe R. Christopher



TAROT. Edited and written by Jessica Hundley. Essays by Penny Slinger, Johannes Fiebig, and Marcella Kroll. Taschen, 2020. 520 pp. \$40. Hardcover ISBN 978-3-8365-7987-2. The Library of Esoterica, Volume I. Series Editor Jessica Hundley.

ASTROLOGY. Edited by Jessica Hundley. Essays by Andrea Richards. Foreword by Susan Miller. Taschen, 2020. 520 pp. \$40. Hardcover ISBN 978-3-8365-7988-9. The Library of Esoterica, Volume II. Series Editor Jessica Hundley.

To live in the world without becoming aware of the meaning of the world
is like wandering about in a great library without touching the books.

—Manly P. Hall, *The Secret Teachings of All Ages* (1928)

TUCKED AWAY IN BOTH *TAROT* AND *ASTROLOGY*, in the last paragraph under the last page title “For the Seekers: A Final Note on The Library of Esoterica,” this observation by Canadian-born author Manly P. Hall sums up the inspiration behind Taschen’s Esoterica series. It should rightly be its epigraph. The editor and publisher’s ambitious project has the stated goal of summarizing “ancient systems”—understood as “tools of the psyche” and “methods for self-exploration and meditation”—in order to inspire “readers to seek out knowledge, to study the teaching of scholars past and present [...] The hope is that The Library of Esoterica emboldens readers to begin their own journey down the dark halls of the arcane, to pull the dusty tomes from the shelves [...] to look up to the sky and read meaning in the movement of the