



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 39
Number 2

Article 13

4-23-2021

***Re-Enchanted: The Rise of Children's Fantasy Literature in the Twentieth Century* by Maria Sachiko Cecire**

T. S. Miller
Florida Atlantic University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>

Recommended Citation

Miller, T. S. (2021) "*Re-Enchanted: The Rise of Children's Fantasy Literature in the Twentieth Century* by Maria Sachiko Cecire," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 39: No. 2, Article 13.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol39/iss2/13>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSUTM

Online MidSummer Seminar 2025
More Perilous and Fair: Women and Gender in Mythopoeic Fantasy
August 2-5, 2024

Via Zoom and Discord

<https://www.mythsoc.org/oms/oms-04.htm>



Re-Enchanted: The Rise of Children's Fantasy Literature in the Twentieth Century
by Maria Sachiko Cecire

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

the right sense is to *be* more fully than a person has ever been” as part of the self’s journey in life (402), which resonates with his other work. Appropriately following Salvey’s essay, Aren Roukema in “The Shadow of Anodos: Alchemical Symbolism in *Phantastes*” goes beyond the view that Anodos’s shadow is “merely a ‘negation of good’” (407) or “a symbol of darkness” (421). Instead, the author evaluates *Phantastes* “as an alchemical fable in which Anodos, the subject of transmutation, undergoes a journey toward reunification with an immanent God” (407). This approach casts new light on understanding elements of the novel, and it can help readers see “the novel as a cohesive whole rather than the collection of scattered dream scenes it has been accused of being” (421).

Because the essay collection is large, it would have been helpful if Pennington had included short abstracts, or even some keywords if space was an issue, to summarize each essay and its approach. That way, readers could have a quick highlight of the content to know whether an essay’s particular angle or main themes might interest them beyond the general subject of *Phantastes*, as well as whether the subject matter was similar to other essays in the collection. Otherwise, reading through several essays on the same topic can get overwhelming or tedious, unless the reader is interested enough to read them all from start to finish in due course. Though affordable, this book will likely have limited appeal, primarily for those in the field of fantasy or curious to read more perspectives on MacDonald, his novel, and select works related to it. The collection could also provide teaching examples for applying various forms of criticism to the same text, which could be more illuminating after students have read *Phantastes* first.

—Tiffany Brooke Martin



RE-ENCHANTED: THE RISE OF CHILDREN’S FANTASY LITERATURE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY. Maria Sachiko Cecire. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019. 336 p. 978-1-5179-0658-0. \$27.00.

TO TELL THE COMPELLING STORY about the relationship between fantasy and modernity’s construction(s) of childhood that she does in *Re-Enchanted: The Rise of Children’s Fantasy Literature in the Twentieth Century*, Maria Sachiko Cecire first posits and then centers an “Oxford School” of children’s fantasy writers. This “school” would include the famous dons Tolkien and Lewis as the foundational figures, but also four authors from the next generation who, while

undergraduates at Oxford, all studied the medieval literature curriculum that these two celebrity scholars themselves shaped: Susan Cooper, Diana Wynne Jones, Kevin Crossley-Holland, and Philip Pullman. Although readings of key works by these six authors do form the backbone of the book, it would be a mistake to understand Cecire's as a conventional monograph seeking to cover such a school as its primary end. Instead, in pursuit of the many ways that medievalist children's fantasy has—if sometimes surreptitiously—come to structure Anglo-American culture, Cecire does not confine herself to any canon of fantasy novels, but ranges across everything from Mariah Carey lyrics and century-old faculty meeting minutes to Tumblr blogs and the self-help industry. The Harry Potter franchise also looms large in this account, as do several other familiar fantasy properties that have achieved mass cultural impact. Surveying all of these materials, on the one hand Cecire celebrates the radical potential for fantasy to re-enchant a disenchanting and dehumanizing modernity, but simultaneously her book documents with admirable rigor many of the instances in which the striving of medievalist children's fantasy towards re-enchantment relies on and indeed seeks to reproduce certain regressive ideological positions, even those that define and drive the capitalist engines of late modernity (consumerist, nationalist, anti-feminist, colonialist, white supremacist). Above all Cecire provides a captivating if necessarily incomplete critique of the intimately connected roles of the child and the medieval in modern fantasy, and as such it should appeal to scholars working in a broad spectrum of fields and subfields.

I view the introduction and first two chapters of the book as a single interrelated unit that charts how Tolkien and Lewis deploy “the minor”—specifically, “the unlikely weapons of medievalism and childhood”—in their shared antimodernist project (3), and also how the other four authors of the “Oxford School” “carr[y] forward the central concerns of Tolkien's and Lewis's careers: the role of the medieval past in present experience, the possibility of using books to find enchantment in the modern world, and fiction's ability to reveal truth where facts alone cannot suffice” (4). The major insights structuring this first and more genealogical act of the book lie in Cecire's unpacking of medievalist children's fantasy's reliance on “the modern idea that childhood serves as a special bridge across time and a reserve of enchantment in an otherwise disenchanting world” (4); thus, in their shared and uniquely positioned medievalism, “Oxford School fantasy has recast medieval literature and legend in light of modern childhood” (158). Throughout the book Cecire pays close attention to the political work that childhood accomplishes and (for one) its role in the idea of the nation; to this end the introduction offers a stunning close reading of the London 2012 Olympic Opening Ceremony, also setting the stage for the many different kinds of cultural texts, institutions, and

objects that Cecire will subject to the same kind of analysis, often unexpectedly woven into her accounts of strictly literary fantasy. Scholars already well-versed in the lives and works of the Inklings will likely find these early chapters less groundbreaking than the latter chapters, but Cecire nevertheless makes several important and original points about how Lewis and Tolkien “flexed their administrative powers at Oxford” to preserve their curriculum against modernity’s encroachment (13), and also “aligned themselves with popular and ‘childish’ reading insofar as it serves a cultural space where archaism, moral certainty, and the fantastic imagination has room to thrive” (53). In framing Tolkien and Lewis as staunch allies against modernism in the 1920s and 30s—their antagonist epitomized in Cambridge’s reforms to the English syllabus (Chapter 2 is a fine piece of disciplinary history in itself)—Cecire does perhaps miss an opportunity to reflect on Lewis’s move to Cambridge later in life, his notorious rift of sorts with Tolkien, and his writings for adults, more on which to come.

Although the first two chapters lay the groundwork for the remainder of the book more than competently, I found the third chapter, “‘Where Are You, Christmas?’: Spaces of Childhood, Bridges to Enchantment,” especially revelatory, and not only because I happened to be reading the book over the winter break with three young children underfoot: “Christmas is perhaps one of the most striking instances of widespread cultural agreement that fiction is a source of essential truth in contemporary life” (160). Cecire offers an unexpectedly thorough but wholly persuasive account of Christmas’s imbrication with medievalist children’s fantasy, identifying them as two phenomena reliant on the same ideological underpinnings and indeed mechanisms of operation, promising re-enchantment and disruption of the typical yet readily subordinated to perfectly hegemonic ends. This reading does not rely on yet profoundly illuminates direct references to Christmas in Oxford School fantasies, including the perhaps jarring appearance of Father Christmas in Narnia; the centrality of the holiday to Susan Cooper’s *The Dark Is Rising*; and even—though Cecire does not comment on it—the existence of Tolkien’s own *Father Christmas Letters*, fantasies originally spun for his children at the very same time that Gondolin was growing in his mind and Middle-earth was slowly unfurling itself. Tolkien, of course, infamously did not think highly of the Narnia books, and in fact objected specifically to the appearance of Father Christmas in Lewis’s rather more hodgepodge secondary world: Cecire has finally and unequivocally demonstrated why Saint Nick very much belongs in Narnia, even if for reasons unperceived by the midcentury Tolkien or Lewis. I did not open this book expecting a close reading of Christmas, but Cecire makes it fit seamlessly into her account of children’s fantasy literature, demonstrating throughout *Re-Enchanted* how Oxford School fantasy, like Christmas, lays claim

to a timelessness using far more recent technologies of enchantment and understandings of childhood, and more generally how “imaginary and ritually created spaces can indelibly shape individual experience and broader culture” (181).

Cecire’s fourth chapter, “White Magic: Racial Innocence and Fantasy’s Empires of the Mind,” may be the monograph’s most timely and necessary, and it can serve as a highly useful companion piece to Ebony Elizabeth Thomas’s celebrated 2019 monograph *The Dark Fantastic*, published only slightly earlier in the year and indeed referred to by Cecire in a footnote added late in the editorial process. Like Thomas, Cecire critiques how “[t]he expectation of whiteness in Anglo-American cultural spaces” subtends the fantasy genre (182), and, like Thomas, she is also interested in reception studies and fan spaces as particularly suited to exploring racial dynamics. Cecire distinguishes her own perspective, however, with a much greater emphasis on the colonialist dimensions of 20th-century medievalist children’s fantasy and its successors, for example the way in which “fantasy relocates the colonialist bildungsroman into pseudo-medieval and otherworldly settings” (190), and how the genre promotes “iconic white Englishness as emblematic of the child’s heroic and future-saving potential” (212). Moreover, the concept of “racial innocence” expounded at length here is also fundamentally connected to argumentative threads begun in earlier chapters, and I was consistently impressed by Cecire’s ability to build and cleave to a consistent through-line for the book despite the dizzying scope of the different eras and cultural texts she covers. According to Cecire’s argument about racial innocence, medievalist children’s fantasy succeeds so well at encoding colonialist and racist narratives into the later 20th century partly because of its ability to “fly under the radar” as children’s literature. Similarly, one of Cecire’s (many) important insights in the book as a whole is that the very framing of medievalist children’s fantasy as children’s fantasy is in fact not medieval, but rooted in Romantic and later conceptions of childhood: even so, Cecire persuasively argues that this same framing is enabled precisely by the form’s medievalism, reliant on the post-medieval association of the Middle Ages with “childishness” and the primitive or originary more broadly.

Chapter 5, “‘Your Inner Child of the Past’: Fantasy Revisions and the Twenty-First-Century Postironic Turn,” uses Jones’s novel *Howl’s Moving Castle* and Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* books as a springboard to trace how fantasy in the Oxford School mold continues to resonate as “an important aspect of contemporary adult self-making” (242), culminating in brilliant contextualizations of Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Lev Grossman’s *Magicians* trilogy in an arc of fantasy’s psychological secularization since Tolkien and Lewis: “magic comes instead from within the emotionally realized self” (260). This chapter’s larger cultural argument is again entirely

unanticipated and undoubtedly provocative—“the expansion of self-help and recovery discourse in the face of late capitalism’s increasingly precarious conditions has been key to medievalist fantasy’s rebirth in adult literature” (237)—but overall I was less convinced by the historical narratives of genre fantasy given here, when Cecire must range farther afield from children’s literature per se. For instance, Cecire begins a section titled “Feminine Revisions and the Power of Love” in this way: “Starting in the 1980s a number of authors bent to the task of approaching medievalist fantasy from women’s perspectives, imagining quests and outcomes that look to reconcile traditional signs of success in the genre [...] with the expectation that feminine identities must also reflect a robust relationship to romantic and nurturing love” (225). Such a narrative frames Cecire’s analysis of the emphasis on heroic love in *Howl’s Moving Castle* well, but also crucially overlooks, for example, other kinds of “revisions” in monumentally important adult fantasies from the same era, particularly those by queer authors including Joanna Russ, Ellen Kushner, and Samuel R. Delany (who is mentioned once as a science fiction author). Also, Cecire speaks in this chapter of “fantasy’s newfound acceptability for adult consumption” while neglecting various pushes for fantasy’s respectability among adults far earlier in the 20th century (222), including for instance the conscientious framing of the enormously influential Ballantine Adult Fantasy series and even, say, W.H. Auden’s midcentury advocacy on behalf of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Indeed, if there are any cracks at all visible in Cecire’s generally well-oiled argumentation in *Re-Enchanted*, my own sense is that they risk appearing only where she insists too firmly on her own picture of 20th-century fantasy based on a relatively small subset of texts. For example, Ursula K. Le Guin’s name is invoked in passing, but properly taking into account more potentially progressive counter narratives like *A Wizard of Earthsea* would have complicated some of the more sweeping claims Cecire makes largely on the basis of the Oxford School dataset and a handful of other popular works. But Cecire enters the most perilous territory of all when her argument appears to position medievalist children’s fantasy as emblematic of all fantasy: it is not always clear to the reader how she wishes us to understand the nature of the relationship between children’s fantasy and the broader fantasy genre, or specifically fantasy written for an adult audience. What references to something like George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series (usually via HBO’s *Game of Thrones*) that we get may frustrate more than they clarify, and we find scant references to *The Lord of the Rings* itself or to Lewis’s novels for adults (such as *Till We Have Faces*, or the fundamentally medievalist *Space Trilogy*), with *The Hobbit* and the Narnia books perhaps doing far more work than they should to stand in for these authors’ personal perspectives and wider influence.

Tellingly, Cecire frequently writes “medievalist fantasy” or “children’s fantasy” or—most dangerously of all—simply “fantasy” where it seems the text should more safely read “medievalist children’s fantasy”; note, also, that the word “medievalist” is missing from the book’s title, where it likely belongs. At times Cecire appears to be avoiding the complete phrase with its two polysyllabic adjectives simply for purposes of euphony and stylistic variation: certainly the unwieldy phrase can read awkwardly after frequent repetition. And yet I am not sure that the book as conceived and written always supports the argumentative leap from “medievalist children’s fantasy” to “fantasy” writ large that it sometimes seems to be making, whether offhandedly when Cecire writes “fantasy” for “medievalist children’s fantasy” or more purposefully in occasional extended reflections on the larger genre. Of course, the fact that fantasy itself has struggled to free itself from an association with childhood theoretically permits Cecire some elision of children’s and adult fantasy, but in practice that too-easy slippage can lead the book into advancing somewhat grander claims about the genre than a single study of this length and specific purview can really support.

If, then, *Re-Enchanted* has much more to say about some specific subsets of fantasy than fantasy as a whole, any deficiencies finally result from a little overreaching and an excess of ambition: despite any of this Cecire’s is an important and endlessly engaging book that will provoke much further thought and discussion. Its brief but optimistic conclusion brims with references to a more progressive present and future for the fantastic mode, gesturing to Twitter hashtags from Black fan communities, queer fan fiction, the wider recognition and accolades earned in recent years by nonwhite authors, and more. Cecire’s critiques of the Oxford School and its legacy never position the fantasy genre’s historical limitations as snuffing out its possibilities and potentialities, and the conclusion really quite poignantly admits that striking a balance between critique and our own (if unadmitted) desire for “re-enchantment” as scholars of the fantastic represents where her “own pleasure in fantasy and belief in the importance of demystificatory scholarship meet” (273).

—T.S. Miller

