

## Book Reviews

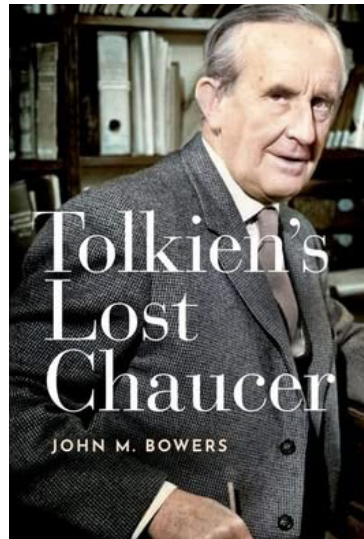
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**John Bowers.** *Tolkien's Lost Chaucer*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), \$32.95 (hardcover).

*Tolkien's Lost Chaucer* by John M. Bowers is both an archival mystery story and an exploration of Chaucer's influence on Tolkien. Bowers, an established scholar of Middle English, combines his considerable professional expertise with a keen appreciation for Tolkien as both writer and scholar. The result is a thoughtful and engaging book aimed at an audience of Tolkien enthusiasts and scholars that contains much of value for Medievalists at a cheap price. I recommend it for all, but especially for those keen to learn more about Tolkien's medieval inspirations. *Caveat lector*: some knowledge of Chaucer's work will help readers get the most out of this book.

In chapter one, "Prologue," Bowers lays out his plan for the book, beginning with his discovery of Tolkien's abandoned Clarendon Chaucer—a student edition of selections from Chaucer to be published by Oxford University Press—in the Press's archives. Chapter two, "An Unexpected Journey," may be the best chapter in the whole book: it reconstructs the process by which Tolkien's proofs were created, returned to the Press in 1951, and languished, unnoticed, until Bowers discovered them in 2013. Bowers's scholarly expertise shines through as he explores how the materials illuminate, and are illuminated by, Tolkien's life and work.

"Four Chaucerians," the third chapter, compares Tolkien to other Chaucerians of his day: Walter Skeat, Kenneth Sisam, George Gordon, and C.S. Lewis. This is one of the most interesting chapters for Medievalists, as it concerns some of those who superintended the field's development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Skeat is the key figure in this chapter: though he and Tolkien had never met, his magisterial edition of Chaucer's *Complete Works* had set the bar high for subsequent editors. Skeat had also published a student edition against which the Clarendon Chaucer would compete (46). As formidable as Skeat's legacy was, the chapter



displays a tendency to psychologize Tolkien's relationship to Skeat that is sometimes off-putting: the argument that Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* explains Tolkien's abandonment of the Clarendon Chaucer as an act of *kenosis* seems a bridge too far (48). The Clarendon Chaucer was far from the only project Tolkien left unfinished; Skeat's looming influence may not have been the deciding factor.

Tolkien's philological contributions to the Clarendon Chaucer are examined in chapter four, "Tolkien as Editor." Bowers reconstructs the editorial process in detail, making the chapter fascinating reading for those interested in textual criticism. This chapter continues the story of Tolkien's subconscious wrestling with Skeat, often to good effect. For example, Bowers notes that Tolkien emphasized words left out of Skeat's glossary and took pains to challenge Skeat's readings.

Ironically, the longest and most difficult chapter is "The Chaucerian Incubus." In this fifth chapter, Bowers examines Tolkien's voluminous notes to the Clarendon Chaucer, which, though unfinished, run to 160 pages—despite a demand for brevity from the Press. While Bowers points out that the notes and the low price of the Clarendon Chaucer would have made it very attractive to students, this chapter illustrates how difficult Tolkien's desire for thoroughness made his life as a scholar (106). Bowers also records in this section a series of somewhat impressionistic arguments about Chaucer's influence on Tolkien's fiction—a herald of the chapters to come.

Bowers discusses in the sixth chapter, "Tolkien as Chaucerian," Tolkien's most significant scholarly work on Chaucer: the essay "Chaucer as Philologist: *The Reeve's Tale*", which subsumed much of his work on the Clarendon Chaucer. Bowers draws parallels between Tolkien's work on the Tale and his life and writing: Chaucer's doltish and violent miller Simkin is connected to both the "White Ogre" of Tolkien's childhood and to the mean-spirited Hobbiton miller, Sandyman (194-95).

In the seventh chapter, "Chaucer in Middle Earth," Bowers explores Chaucerian parallels to Tolkien's fiction. The suggestions range widely over both Chaucer and Tolkien, and their overall impression is that Chaucer was a source for just about every major idea, and a host of minor ones, in Tolkien's fiction. Though provocative, these suggestions do not always consider alternative sources. For example, Bowers writes:

Dame Nature in her garden in *The Parlement of Foules* joined with Queen Alceste in *The Legend of Good Women* to provide important models for Galadriel in the Golden Wood. C.S. Lewis had noted that Chaucer inserted a stanza in his *Parlement* describing a far more paradise-like garden than in Boccaccio—"No man may ther wexe seek ne old"—making it an additional source for Lothlórien where sickness and deformity held no sway (*FR* II.6). (242-43)

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However, a vision of Paradise in which people and things did not age was a medieval commonplace, traceable to the Classical *locus amoenus*. This literary topos was derived for the Christian centuries from Revelation 21:4, then worked out in apocalyptic writings and Patristic exegesis before arriving in medieval literature (Blake 14-15). The same issue attends in Bowers's contention that the Wife of Bath's prologue inspired Tolkien's own interest in fairy lands (249-54). Other claims, however, are more persuasive: Bowers's argument that the Pardoner's Tale inspired Tolkien's treatment of greed is worked out well with reference to Tolkien's handwritten lecture notes (254-67). While not all of the parallels are equally convincing, Bowers is right to insist that Tolkien's source critics keep Chaucer in mind: Tolkien clearly did.

The coda, "Fathers and Sons," extends the parallel between Tolkien and Chaucer developed throughout the book to include their sons, Thomas Chaucer and Christopher Tolkien, both of whom served as literary executors for their fathers. The parallels are pleasing, and Bowers is to be commended for highlighting the labors of these two editors, without whom our knowledge would be poorer than it is.

There is no doubt that *Tolkien's Lost Chaucer* sheds new light on Tolkien's career and *oeuvre*, and that Bowers has taken great care with the materials he discovered. Bowers has given Tolkien enthusiasts and medievalists alike a great gift in sharing them, aided by the excellent production value of the volume. The professional medievalist in me hopes for a full edition of the materials; the amateur Tolkien enthusiast is grateful for a new look at an old favorite.

Benjamin Weber  
Assistant Professor of English  
Wheaton College  
Wheaton, IL