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Tolkien's Lost Chaucer (2019) by John M. Bowers

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Tolkien's Lost Chaucer, by John M. Bowers. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. xvi, 310 pages £25.00/\$32.95 (hardcover) ISBN 9780198842675. Also available in ebook format.

One of the most basic counsels for a reviewer is to discuss the book that was written, not the book you wish had been written. While this is usually sound advice, it is difficult to follow when discussing *Tolkien's Lost Chaucer*. When I first heard news of this book as an upcoming project, I assumed that John Bowers was preparing an edition of Tolkien's *Selections from Chaucer's Poetry and Prose*. As far as I can tell, the Tolkien community at large shared this impression fully, and even Scull & Hammond, in the revised edition of their *J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide*, state confidently that '[a]s of this writing, Professor John M. Bowers of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, intends to publish the edition as *Tolkien's Lost Chaucer*' (2017, 223). It was a bit of a shock for many to later learn that *Tolkien's Lost Chaucer* is not, after all, an edition, but something else, somewhere between a scholarly monograph on Tolkien and Chaucer, and a description of and commentary on a set of texts. A question looming over the entire book is why Bowers took this approach rather than producing the expected edition. I will return to this fundamental question—but first I will go over just what we do have in Bowers's book, and attempt to review the book as it is on its own terms.

After the usual front matter, Bowers begins with a standard introduction (called a 'Prologue') outlining the purpose of the book, surveying the chapters to come, and indulging in some biographical reminiscences on the part of the author. Chapter two (titled 'Unexpected Journeys') is where the substantive discussion begins, offering an excellent history of the 'Clarendon Chaucer' from start to finish. This establishes, first of all, just what we're dealing with: a student edition of extracts from various works (mostly poems) by Geoffrey Chaucer—the most famous, and one of the best, authors in Late Middle English (specifically the later part of the fourteenth century). While the official title is as given above, the (projected) book, being a part of the Clarendon English Series of textbooks, has widely been referred to simply as 'the Clarendon Chaucer'. The introduction was assigned to George S. Gordon (not to be confused with E.V. Gordon, Tolkien's collaborator in editing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), while Tolkien was to prepare the texts proper, a glossary, and a set of explanatory notes: that is, Tolkien was allowed to wring the juice out of single sentences, while Gordon was tasked with potting the poet in a paragraph. In principle a fine arrangement, but in practice things did not work out: the project was never completed, and the materials ended up in the archives of the Oxford University Press. Though not quite wholly unknown, they were largely neglected for many years until Bowers took enough of an interest to examine the materials closely.

The story laid out in this chapter has been told and told well before (by Peter Gilliver [in Gilliver, Marshall, & Weiner 2008], integrated insightfully into Tolkien's intellectual career by Edwards 2014, 121-125, 153-155, 225-226, and by Scull and Hammond 2017, 220-223), but Bowers's treatment is lively and very full, giving a clear impression of all the ins and outs without getting bogged down in pedantic detail. There are only a few minor hitches: for instance, Bowers (pp. 1, 13, and other

places) seems to be under the impression that Tolkien's *Beowulf and the Critics* lectures were meant to be a book (and so an example of yet another 'unfinished' academic project), though there is no evidence for this at all, and it rather represents an unusual publishing success story for Tolkien as he brought these ideas into print in his famous 1936 lecture.

Having given the history of the Clarendon Chaucer, Bowers moves on in chapter three to give biographical sketches of 'Four Chaucerians', people who in some way had a major effect on the nature of the textbook. These were Walter Skeat (an earlier scholar whose standard edition of Chaucer was to supply the base-text of the Clarendon Chaucer), Kenneth Sisam (assistant secretary at Oxford University Press, and the man responsible for attempting to herd the philological cats, Tolkien and Gordon), George Gordon (whose attempts to complete the introduction were no more successful than Tolkien's efforts on the notes), and C.S. Lewis (who had no connection to the Clarendon Chaucer). While the conception of this chapter is unusual, it is effective in providing a good deal of useful context and background to both the project and to Tolkien's life. Even the inclusion of Lewis is made to work, irrelevant as he is to the nominal subject, by shedding light on Tolkien's scholarly habits and interest in later medieval literature (though there is little really new here). The one thing that really mars this chapter (otherwise a high point of the book) is a strange and fairly lengthy digression in the discussion of Skeat (pp. 46-52) that veers into a psychoanalysis of Tolkien's relationship to his predecessor through the lens of Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*.¹ This will prove to be something of an obsession of Bowers's, who periodically throughout *Tolkien's Lost Chaucer* argues that Tolkien in some way did a disservice to Skeat because of this 'agonistic' relationship with this earlier editor. Perhaps some readers will find this framework useful or interesting.

Bowers shifts gears in chapters four and five. These offer a close overview of the materials Tolkien wrote for the Clarendon Chaucer: chapter four on the text and glossary, five on the notes. The materials themselves are not edited in full, but they are closely surveyed, so that the contents of each surviving draft and proof are detailed reasonably clearly, and supplemented by fairly rich direct quotation and the photographic reproduction of several representative pages (though those on pages 98 and 110, in particular, are of too low resolution to be very useful). In both chapters (and in much of the remainder of the book), Bowers increasingly draws on his long experience with more recent Chaucer criticism to helpfully contextualize, frame, and sometimes update numerous points in light of the field as it stands today. This expertise can sometimes elide into bias, as when he calls Chaucer 'the founder of the English tradition' (p. 148), or condenses Caxton's history to portray the *Canterbury Tales* as the first book printed in English (p. 273)²—Caxton's first English book was,

¹ Bowers also has a more general tendency to draw strained and unlikely connections, such as linking the fact that Gordon enjoyed playing golf to Tolkien's comic etymology of *golf* in *The Hobbit* (p. 63).

² 'It is probably no coincidence that when William Caxton began printing in 1476, he set up his press in the precincts of Westminster Abbey and his first book was the *Canterbury Tales*.' Perhaps an 'in England' has simply inadvertently slipped out after '1476'?

in classic medieval fashion, rather *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, printed two or three years earlier in Bruges. In a book about Tolkien it might have been better to counterbalance such views with more attention to Tolkien's own (probably more accurate) characterization of Chaucer as 'autumnal' (mentioned on p. 209, in the context of Tolkien making the remark, but not integrated into Tolkien's wider views of Chaucer elsewhere).

Chapter four, on the text and glossary, is by far the briefer, and it sometimes seems that Bowers (who is avowedly not a 'specialist on Chaucer's language', p. 109) sometimes struggles to find things to say on such steadfastly philological materials. For instance, he picks up on Tolkien's careful use of diacritics to try and help the student scan Chaucer's metre correctly (p. 84): first Tolkien proposed to print the medieval form of *daisy*, etymologically 'day's eye', as *dayēsye* (to remind the reader that the middle syllable is pronounced, and not a 'silent e'), and then decided to favour *dayèsye* (apparently to emphasize that this middle syllable is subordinate in stress, or else to signal its non-silent status through a more aesthetic means). Bowers reasonably connects this with Tolkien's desire to clearly signal the pronunciation of his invented names with the help of diacritics,³ but after having made this point presses on to make more spurious connections, such as the idea that Tolkien might have been 'encouraged by spellings like *Väinämöinen*' to become 'more scrupulous' with his use of diacritics. Any connection between the Finnish use, where the marks indicate fronted vowels, and the use of the diaeresis to signal syllabification is superficial, and it is hard to see why Finnish in particular should be singled out when Tolkien was familiar with so very many philological writings thoroughly littered with dots and macrons and acutes and superscripts. Bowers should nonetheless be commended for making the attempt to engage with Tolkien's philological concerns, and even if things such as a discussion of Kentish dialect forms (p. 100) end up a bit thin, they are at least present, and on Kentish in particular Bowers has even gone to the trouble of asking Simon Horrobin (who does know Chaucer's language very well) for some advice (footnote 53).⁴

Bowers seems happy to move on to the meatier notes in chapter five, which is by far the longest section in the book, clocking in at some 81 pages (out of 277 pages of main text, so nearing a third of the whole). Bowers is again methodological, providing a section for the notes on each individual selection in the Clarendon Chaucer. This format, picking up (in a selective fashion) on certain of Tolkien's notes and using them as a jumping board for various discussions, naturally leads this chapter to consider a large number of detailed issues rather than to many general

³ Though he later misrepresents the acute as being a mark of stress rather than length in Sindarin and Quenya (pp. 119-120).

⁴ While Horrobin is entirely correct that the specific feature Tolkien uses to identify 'Kentish' forms—the change of older *ȳ to *ē (the philological litter here means that both long and short versions of each vowel are meant)—actually extends into parts of East Anglia as well, it is probably only fair to note that Tolkien was very much in line with the usual scholarship of his day in characterizing this as most prototypically a Kentish feature (cf. Jordan 1925, § 40, for instance), and noting the occurrence in East Anglia as, often literally, a footnote or further remark.

arguments or broad conclusions, but a few preoccupations of Bowers's do crop up repeatedly.

As a single example, Bowers repeatedly argues that Tolkien, sensitive to anti-Catholic prejudice, avoided treating religion in his scholarly work in order to protect himself from attack on this quarter (pp. 117-119). He even goes so far as to suggest Tolkien avoided working on Langland because of his Marian streak (p. 139). Langland's heavy use of allegory is a far more likely culprit, however, and Bowers's argument is somewhat undercut by the fact that Tolkien did not, in fact, shy away from religious and theological themes in his notes: Bowers himself quotes a good example on p. 137 (from Tolkien's commentary to *Gentillesse*).

Connections with Tolkien's fiction liberally pepper Bowers's commentary.⁵ This largely focuses on *The Lord of the Rings*, and to an extent *The Hobbit*, while *The Silmarillion* and related materials are relatively neglected. Particularly missed is more discussion of *The Book of Lost Tales*, which, as a collection of tales told within a 'frame device' by a variety of tellers, would seem an especially fruitful point of comparison. Bowers does mention the broad structural similarity with the *Canterbury Tales* (pp. 164-166, 244), but prefers to develop the less convincing thesis that Book I of *The Lord of the Rings* has 'a specifically Chaucerian quality' in the embedded stories and songs (pp. 244-245).⁶ His one concrete suggestion linking the *Lost Tales*

⁵ The number of minor slips, inaccuracies, and unlikely connections along the way is high enough to mention, though rarely overly troubling. A very minor sampling must serve to illustrate. Bowers's insistence on the 'intrinsic wickedness' of towers in Tolkien (p. 134) seems undercut by the existence of many 'good' towers in Middle-earth: Ingwë's Mindon Eldaliéva in Tirion, the two Minas Tiriths, the tower of Avallónë on Tol Eressëa, the three Elf-towers of the Tower Hills west of the Shire, Elwing's tower in Eldamar, and so on (also, note that the Towers of the Teeth and the Towers of the Black Gate are in fact the same things). Similarly, while song may indeed be generally a good thing for Tolkien (p. 172), some villains do sing: the Goblins in *The Hobbit* very readily burst into song, and Sauron himself (or at least his earlier incarnation Thû) contends against Finrod in the closest thing Middle-earth has to a dance-off. A different sort of issue concerns the idea that Galadriel remained in Middle-earth 'because Celeborn refused to leave' (p. 148): this does enter into one of the myriad versions of her history, but it was never the sole motivation and is not featured in most published versions (*Unfinished Tales* 228, 234). And, as a final example, concerning 'inspirations', there seem to be almost no points of correspondence at all between Henry V's retreat-turned-battle at Agincourt and Aragorn's diversionary assault on the Black Gate—Bowers only mentions the imbalance of numbers, but this is a classic technique, going back at least to Herodotus, for heightening drama by presenting the protagonists as underdogs (p. 137).

⁶ One striking detail that may indeed have significance is the link between Gandalf's report to Frodo in Rivendell that it is 'ten o'clock in the morning' and the Host's reckoning of the time as 'ten of the clokke' in the *Canterbury Tales* (p. 242). But Bowers presses his case too far, making a link between Gandalf's comments being in 'Book II' of *The Lord of the Rings*, and Chaucer's comments appearing at the start of what some scholars have labelled 'Fragment II' (the surviving text of the *Canterbury Tales* does not occur in a single definitive sequence, but there are a number of discrete chunks within each of the ordering of tales and linking prologues is set). Gandalf's words, however, were written many years before he began to divide the novel into six 'books', and earlier appeared merely in 'chapter 12' (*History of Middle-earth* VI, 362). Furthermore, following the Chaucer Society, Skeat's habit—which would presumably have been particularly familiar to Tolkien—was to label the fragments

to Tolkien's Chaucer work highlights another recurring issue with Bowers's analyses: chronological vagueness. He writes that 'it is probably no coincidence that [*The Book of Lost Tales*] dates from the same decade when he was teaching, editing, and drafting commentary on Chaucer's story collection [i.e. the late 1910s and early 1920s]' (pp. 165-166). But while much of this work did indeed take place within a ten-year span, Tolkien had largely set the *Lost Tales* aside before he began work on the Clarendon Chaucer, so what is the connection between them supposed to be? It is hard to think of an option other than 'coincidence'. Tolkien may well have taken the framing-narrative approach from Chaucer (there are other potential sources for this too, but I fully agree with Bowers that Chaucer at least stands out prominently among them), but Bowers over-eggs the pudding by adding this chronological impossibility. This is by not the only instance of chronological vagueness disguising an insupportable claim in *Tolkien's Lost Chaucer*.

There are a number of minor philological inaccuracies and slips throughout this chapter as well,⁷ one of which I single out here since I strongly suspect a form in one of Tolkien's notes has been misprinted (these are, however, generally accurately transcribed, as far as I can judge from the consistency, style, and philological detail of their forms in *Tolkien's Lost Chaucer*). In the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*, it is said that the Reeve rode on a *stot*. Tolkien is quoted as commenting that 'this word . . . is first found in late Old English in documents from Bury St. Edmunds where *stoltās* is glossed "equi viles"' (p. 183). Tolkien certainly wrote *stottas*, not *soltās*, and is probably directly referencing a 1928 article by D.C. Douglas, who published the texts in question in full.⁸

Regardless, much of the material included in the many quotations from Tolkien's notes is highly interesting, and will be of considerable value to anyone working on Tolkien and Middle English. Bowers notes that at least in one point, Tolkien seems to have been a pioneer (pp. 155-158): in identifying traces of alliteration in Chaucer, such as *ther shiveren shaftes up-on sheeldes thikke* in the great tournament in *The Knight's Tale* (Skeat 1900, 74, line 1747/2605). Those interested either in *The Pearl* or Tolkien's poetry may find it interesting to compare the translated stanza quoted by Tolkien in a note with the version published after his death, hardly three lines of which have escaped alteration of some sort (p. 112). Tolkien's comments on the Knight's *habergeoun* (p. 171) are not etymologically innovative, but are a model of

alphabetically, so that this phrase is there in 'Group B' (Skeat 1900, 130; the Host's words are in the the prologue to *The Tale of the Man of Law*, line 14).

⁷ A full list of such material would be long and not terribly useful, but here are three typical examples. *Bagmē Blōma* is not the only poem in Gothic, or even the first in modern times: Hans Ferdinand Maßmann, one of the giants of nineteenth-century Gothic philology, had composed alliterative poems in the language. Giles's dog Garm may get his name from the *Edda* (though the *Poetic* must claim primacy here over the *Prose*), but he is not there a 'talking dog' (p. 175), and it is Tolkien's joke to transform one of the harbingers of Ragnarök into such a silly character. The relationship between (later) Irish Núada and (earlier, though not directly ancestral) Brittonic Nōdens has been nearly reversed (p. 132).

⁸ The word was also cited earlier by Napier (1906), which Tolkien may also have known, but there is there no mention of Bury St. Edmunds as the specific provenance of the document, suggesting Douglas is Tolkien's immediate source.

compact clarity, and may also have some bearing on thinking about the material culture of Middle-earth.

The sixth of the eight chapters deals with Tolkien's extensive engagement with the language of *The Reeve's Tale*, which has three dimensions: the notes in the Clarendon Chaucer (treated briefly), Tolkien's article *Chaucer as a Philologist*, and his performance of the *Tale* at the Summer Diversions in Oxford in 1939. The basic contexts and contents of all of these is summarized well, with due attention paid to what was obviously Tolkien's primary interest in the *Tale*: Chaucer's mocking use of northern dialect forms in the speech of the two young clerks, and the textual implications drawn from the representations of these forms in the various manuscripts.

Bowers returns here in force to his theme of Tolkien's supposed 'anxiety of influence' about the eminent editor Skeat, and paints a picture of Tolkien as trying to one-up the earlier scholar and unfairly downplay his contributions. Bowers claims that 'Skeat had already done a thorough job identifying these dialect words' (p. 198), and had 'filled a whole page' with examples (p. 191). He says that Tolkien 'rather ungenerously . . . consigned Skeat's name only to an easy-to-miss footnote on the second page where he belittled the discovery' (p. 198). All this makes it sound as if Skeat had rather settled the matter in a substantial treatment, while Tolkien merely expanded things around the edges—while claiming for himself all the credit. An ungenerous portrait indeed, but not a very accurate one. Tolkien's citation of Skeat is the first in an article not exactly filled with references, and he simply notes that the overall picture was indeed 'plainly perceived by Skeat', though noting that 'his enquiry . . . did not proceed very far', exonerating Skeat with the reminder that this was a note in a substantial commentary in an enormous edition: Skeat had other things to do than follow every rabbit hole as far as it would go. Tolkien had fewer inhibitions about rabbit holes, and expands on Skeat's 'whole page' seventy-fold—but still with the apology that even this is but 'a preliminary essay' (1934, 11/2008, 116). Unless we are to suppose that Tolkien's article is 69 pages of fluff, it may be granted that he did have something to add to Skeat's 'thorough job' after all. Tolkien's comments seem more to be aimed at the potential complexity of the problem at hand, rather than disparaging Skeat in any way, and only the peculiar bias Bowers has toward seeing 'anxiety of influence' at any and every point of contact between the two could transform this footnote into the attack Bowers paints it as.⁹

If these (unfortunately recurringly emphasized) ideas about Tolkien and Skeat are set aside, the remainder of the better part of this chapter is generally sound and helpful.¹⁰ In particular, Bowers highlights that Tolkien's achievement is not merely to

⁹ A further example: Bowers notes concerning Tolkien's comment on the name of the Reeve's horse, Scot, that he 'took it verbatim from Skeat' (p. 183), but does not acknowledge that Skeat himself was merely quoting, verbatim, the earlier Chaucerian John Bell.

¹⁰ Though the etymology of *hougat* on p. 201 is wrong: this cannot be a contraction of 'how that', but is rather a grammaticalization of *hou* 'how' and *gāte* 'road, path, way' (from Norse *gata*). Anyone familiar with northern English cities will recognize this element from things like *Micklegate* 'great street' in York. Bowers's presentation of a short passage from *The Reeve's Tale* in both Tolkien's 1934 version (p. 201) and his 1939 text for the Summer Diversions (p. 212) highlights what may have been an oversight in the earlier article: in line

identify the northernisms as such, but to use the variations between the manuscripts (in a case where we have, or Tolkien thought we had, some independent checks on the original) as a gauge for scribal interference in transmitting Chaucer's forms—with the obvious conclusion that the 'best-text' approach to editing Chaucer (which remains popular to this day) is not really very well founded (pp. 202-203). (Tolkien's desire to re-edit the text of *Boece*, described on pp. 91-92, is also relevant to this subject.) There is perhaps less to say about the Summer Diversions, other than giving a relatively entertaining account of the event and its lead-up, except to expand somewhat on how Tolkien put a number of his editorial concerns into practice as he prepared a (nearly) full text of the *Tale* (minus a few of the naughtiest bits, central though these may be to the story). The final section of the chapter deals with a supposed parallel between *The Reeve's Tale* and *The Lord of the Rings*, which I will return to shortly.

The seventh and final main chapter is named 'Chaucer in Middle-earth'—a title one might read with some foreboding, indicating as it does that we are about to venture into the tangled Mirkwood of source analysis, where few scholars indeed fail to wander bewildered if they foresake the way. The first part of the chapter begins on safer ground, with a broad comparison of Chaucer and Tolkien as writers. If this is somewhat strained¹¹ (Tolkien's supposed aversion to battle-scenes, pp. 234-235, requires Bowers to ignore Helm's Deep and to act as if flash-back narration doesn't really count), it is also relatively harmless.¹²

The remainder of the chapter deals primarily with three points where Chaucer purportedly served as a source for Tolkien's fiction, especially *The Lord of the Rings: Troilus & Criseyde* as a model for Faramir and Éowyn (pp. 245-249), *The Wife of Bath's Tale* as a source for Tolkien's fairy-lore (pp. 249-254), and, at the greatest length, *The Pardoner's Tale* as a source for the 'core-story' of *The Lord of the Rings* as a whole (pp. 254-267). That the first of these fails to convince hardly needs to be argued, since Bowers himself puts in so many *thoughts* and *has no basis ins* that any skeptic's work is already half done, and he furthermore switches his model from Troilus, Criseyde, and Diomedes to Arcite, Emelye, and Palamon from *The Knight's Tale* halfway through the argument. The discussion of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is much better done, and if it echoes the work of scholars such as Verlyn Flieger, it is all the more convincing for this. Bowers's highlighting of the well-spotted phrase *un-to hir lyves ende* (p. 251) is particularly welcome, and its implications are nicely drawn out.

By far the longest discussion is given over to *The Pardoner's Tale*, partly because Bowers has new texts from Tolkien to introduce and draw on: a series of lecture notes for undergraduates from the late 1940s and early 1950s. There are, Bowers reports,

4039 (of Skeat's continuous lineation), Tolkien had allowed an instance of MS *hou þat* to stand, but in the later text restores *hougat*.

¹¹ We also find more psychoanalysis, this time of Tolkien's choice to treat the etymology of *losenger* (p. 224).

¹² Bowers does make at least one clear misrepresentation, if one of little consequence, in quoting *Letter #185* as if Tolkien were regretting the information-dense Prologue, when in fact he is referring to having put in so many references to *The Silmarillion* into the early parts of *The Lord of the Rings* (p. 237).

two very different versions of this lecture, the second one being much more negative in its appraisal of *The Pardoner's Tale* (p. 256): 'completing *The Lord of the Rings* in 1948 and proofreading the galley pages probably made [Tolkien] see the resemblances between his core narrative and Chaucer's', he claims. To substantiate this (very bold) claim, Bowers draws on Tolkien's attempts to break down *The Pardoner's Tale* into a skeleton structure of its main elements. Tolkien was able to do this because Chaucer's story has well-known (and translated) antecedents stretching back to a version in Pāli, from India, making it clear what elements were central, and what was local colour. Tolkien's telling of the 'typical shape' in six points is worth extracting from the highly abridged notes given on p. 261,¹³ both as a point of interest in his approach to narrative structure, and for comparing to what Bowers later makes of this. The story type begins with: (1) a wizard or sage who identifies a treasure, and sets the tone with an ominous warning to his 'disciple-companion' about how the treasure will lead to death; (2) subsequently two (or more) 'wicked men' join forces, and (3) find the treasure, which they agree to split evenly even as they each secretly covet the whole; (4) one of the wicked men leaves to get food or drink, leaving the other to guard the treasure, each plotting how to kill their companion: the one obtaining the provisions poisons them, while the one guarding lies in wait to attack the other; (5) the man with the food or drink returns, and is promptly killed, after which point the triumphant murderer (along with any companions) consumes the poisoned provisions and dies himself; (6) the story then closes with the sage or wizard from the beginning making a moralizing comment to his companion.

This may not seem very similar to *The Lord of the Rings*, but Bowers does his best to draw parallels. He does this entirely by making isolated connections between elements (Sméagol and Déagol quarrel over treasure; Gandalf is a wizard; Bilbo can be seen as a 'disciple-companion'; Frodo and Gollum—but not Sam, though Bowers seems to think otherwise on p. 263—also have a fight over a treasure), without making any attempt to argue that *The Lord of the Rings* shows any adherence to the full set of six points outlined by Tolkien, much less to the order and relationships between those elements. Further divergences (such as the disappointing fact that in Tolkien's version, we lack the thieves' quarrel in which all parties die—Bowers does not mention the Orcs at Cirith Ungol, which seems to me the closest candidate) are explained away as Tolkien 'improv[ing] upon' Chaucer to produce a eucatastrophic version of the same tale (p. 263). Part of this is because Bowers's understanding of Tolkien's careful plot skeleton is apparently boiled down further, to a single statement: 'three men struggling with each other to the death over a gold treasure' (p. 264), though even this is hardly a description of any part of *The Lord of the Rings* (or even of *The Pardoner's Tale*, since it is the manner of the death, the crossed arrows, as it were, that is the recurring heart of the story), much less a reasonable

¹³ There are a large number of elipses in the text as quoted, and there are entire elements – such as a fifth companion—referred to later, though their introduction has clearly been left out. Also, all mention of the poison, which Tolkien surely mentioned explicitly and prominently, and which is indeed one of the most famous and stable elements of the whole story, is left out—possibly because this central element cannot even with extreme violence be shoehorned into the plot of *The Lord of the Rings*.

characterization of its ‘core-story’. (Above, I passed over Bowers’s argument concerning *The Reeve’s Tale* and its supposed relationship to *The Two Towers*, since it is of precisely the same manner as this analysis: treated extremely schematically and ‘large-scale’, with some incorrect details, and even then with too great a latitude allowed in the correspondence of elements.)

Despite this extended argument failing to convince, the (partial) presentation of Tolkien’s lecture notes on *The Pardoner’s Tale* are valuable. His comments reveal the depth of his interest in this long transmission history, confirm that Tolkien did indeed (correctly) trace the history of the story to the Pāli language (p. 264), and not (incorrectly) to Sanskrit (Goering 2016, 8-9).¹⁴ It is also worth noting, for those who wish to grant Tolkien unlimited linguistic powers, that he explicitly avows that ‘I cannot myself read the Oriental languages required for a first-hand investigation’ (listing Pāli, a close relative of Sanskrit, along with Persian, Arabic, and Chinese as examples of languages he does not know) (p. 259). More generally, though I was not persuaded by most of the specific examples, Bowers is very likely right when he claims that ‘[i]f readers have not previously detected *Troilus* and the *Canterbury Tales* in Tolkien’s Middle-earth, it is because nobody was alert for noticing these ingredients’ (p. 226). It seems fair to expect that Bowers’s book will inspire some further ransacking of this particular spice-shelf.

The final chapter, eight, is represented as a ‘coda’ on ‘Fathers and Sons’, where Bowers compares the early textual history of Chaucer’s works (his son Thomas may have played an important early role in copying and disseminating texts) and the editorial labours of Christopher Tolkien. He draws particular attention to the fact that before embarking on posthumously publishing his father’s writings, Christopher Tolkien had experience editing medieval texts, including some of the *Canterbury Tales* (including two, *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* and *The Pardoner’s Tale*, which had been excerpted for the Clarendon Chaucer). In fact Christopher’s first step into editing his father’s writings was to an extent a continuation of his medievalist work, with his preparation of his father’s translations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Pearl* and *Sir Orfeo* for publication in 1975.

The book is rounded off with two short appendices, both containing material from the Clarendon Chaucer: the first is *An Introduction on Language*, the second the header to the glossary, containing both a note on spelling (closely resembling the comparable note in Tolkien’s *Middle English Vocabulary*), along with a numbered

¹⁴ Bowers then paraphrases Tolkien as saying that ‘the earliest texts were written in Sanskrit’, but this is in direct contradiction to what he quotes Tolkien as saying immediately above, and is probably due to a misconstrual of Tolkien’s phrasing. Bowers’s use of the term *Aryan* in the same discussion is slightly confusing: either he means the Indic version of the myth made its way across Mesopotamia to Europe (which is very different from what Tolkien seems to argue), or else he is using *Aryan* to mean *Indo-European*. If the latter, this is an inaccurate usage which has long been abandoned, due partly to the lack of any philological basis for such use (the original motivation for an Indo-European endonym of this type was the supposed equation of Sanskrit *ārya-*, a term with class, ethnic, and probably religious denotation, and Old Irish *Ériu* ‘Ireland’, but the Welsh cognate of *Ériu*, *Iwerddon*, shows the Celtic terms contained an old *w and cannot be related to the Indic word), and partly to the obscene corruption of the term by earlier scholars and ideologues. This was already becoming true in the 1930s, as Tolkien’s *Letter #30* attests.

list of the selections for reference. Amounting to less than four pages of print combined, these are the fullest extracts of Tolkien's original work that we find in *Tolkien's Lost Chaucer. A Works Cited* and moderately extensive index close the volume.

That is all for the book as we have it. As should be clear, all in all I have some significant reservations about certain sections and bees in Bowers's bonnet, but nonetheless feel there is a great deal of worth and use in the book, even beyond the many glimpses of new Tolkien material that it supplies. Bowers's writing is clear and engaging, and even where I feel his analysis is unconvincing, it never suffers from obscurity or muddled presentation, and he clearly has his reader in mind.¹⁵

But the question remains, how does this measure up against what might have been, the book that was generally expected: an edition of the Clarendon Chaucer in its own right? Or to put it bluntly, did Bowers write the wrong book? While *Tolkien's Lost Chaucer* as we have it has very considerable value, the better part of this does in my view lie in areas that could have been served just as well or better by an edition. The chapters where Bowers's own discussion is strongest are the second and third, on the history of the text, and on the 'four Chaucerians' who help contextualize it. Both chapters could (with some slight adjustment) have been reasonably included as introductory materials in an edition. Chapters four and especially five are already the lengthiest, and supply some of the greatest interest for Tolkienists by their extensive characterizations of and extracts from Tolkien's materials; this purpose would largely have been served better by simply presenting the materials in full. Bowers does of course make a real contribution by digesting Tolkien's work, and commenting the commentary, as it were. But could such a digestive aid not been included as a further section in an edition? Since Bowers would no longer need to summarize Tolkien's material, the page count of such an apparatus might not be so very great. Bowers says he is already working on a second book on Tolkien and Chaucer,¹⁶ which could provide a further outlet for points too substantial to fit comfortably into a commentary format.

Of course, not everything in this book would fit well into an edition. Tolkien's lectures on *The Pardoner's Tale* (from the end of chapter 7) could maybe form an appendix or additional section of an edition, though they might be more reasonably

¹⁵ The book is proofread well, and the text and formatting are refreshingly clean. A few minor typos and corrections may be noted:

p. 10: *An Edition of Þorgils and Haflið* > *An edition of the Saga of Þorgils and Hafliði* (cf. Cilli 2019, p. 346)

p. 132: *nat-r* > *naut-r*

p. 140: *shremes* > *stremes*

p. 146: *Wadga* > *Wudga*

p. 154: *Annæus* > *Annæus*

p. 210: *-ā* > *ā* [or *-ā-*]

p. 283: *ey a'* > *ey, ai* [cf. *A Middle English Vocabulary*, 'Principal Variatoin[s] of Form or Spelling', point 9]

In the bibliography and consistently in footnotes: *Story of The Hobbit* > *History of The Hobbit*
I dislike the abbreviation *TLOR* for *The Lord of the Rings*, but I assume this is convention rather than error.

¹⁶ See: <https://www.unlv.edu/news/article/interview-john-bowers>

expected to appear on their own, especially if they are of any real length. Sacrificing the glimpses we now have of them would be a loss, but one hopefully compensated for by their eventual full appearance. Tolkien's engagement with *The Reeve's Tale* (chapter six) would certainly have to be cut, but as a self-contained unit it would find ready publication as an article, or a chapter in his later book. The remainder of chapters seven and eight would also probably have to be jettisoned, but these could appear easily enough elsewhere, again either in article form or as part of his second book. These sections consist largely of literary or biographical criticism, and it is a not entirely obvious why the publication of such secondary material should be prioritized over the primary texts being referenced.

So what were Bowers's reasons for choosing the route he did? He does attempt to justify his decisions at the start of the book, where he comments that a 'doctoral thesis could follow the details of the ever-evolving project during the 1920s, and *Selections from Chaucer's Poetry and Prose* could be published as a hefty volume representing exactly what Tolkien did accomplish' (p. 4). Bowers rejects this approach because 'Michael Drout's heroic struggles with Tolkien's unfinished *Beowulf* and the Critics demonstrate how this undertaking would not be easy for an editor or attractive for readers', giving an example of one of the messier portions in Drout's edition. It is hard to see how far this comparison can be taken: Drout was editing lecture notes preceding an extant essay, and so was mostly interested in tracing the development of the work rather than capturing it in a presentable stage.¹⁷ But no serious attempt at diachronic evolution would be needed for the Clarendon Chaucer, beyond what the material made truly unavoidable. For a more apt comparison, we have an immense body of editorial work, from *Unfinished Tales* to magisterial *History of Middle-earth* to *The Fall of Arthur*, and perhaps most pertinently, scholarly material such as *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*. Bowers's own editorial efforts, as reflected in the numerous quotations included in *Tolkien's Lost Chaucer*, have in fact borne fruit, and he gives every indication of being a perfectly competent editor despite the real difficulties of the material (outlined on pp. 106-107). I have every expectation that a full edition from Bowers would, despite his protestations, have been more than sufficiently accurate and user-friendly.¹⁸

While good results may have been more expectable than Bowers grants, the difficulty in preparing such a text must be fairly acknowledged. If Bowers simply wished to avoid the harder edges of editorial labour (he could hardly have escaped all the pain, even in this volume), then the rest of us can hardly throw stones: no one else has stepped up to the plate. But it still seems a shame that after familiarizing himself

¹⁷ For much the same reason, the presentation of *The History of The Lord of the Rings* is more complex and dynamic, and poorer in coherent 'synchronic' texts, than the remainder of *The History of Middle-earth*.

¹⁸ Bowers also sets himself apart from Drout, and indeed also from other recent editors, in not trying to edit the material overly diplomatically. There is, as he rightly notes, no need to reproduce Tolkien's underlines as such, when they are intended to represent italics (p. vi), nor does every struck-through word need necessarily to be indicated. Christopher Tolkien, as so often, has led the way in providing a marvellously clear and principled editorial model for how to present his father's difficult materials in a readable fashion.

so much with the materials (basic groundwork which any future editor will have to duplicate), and armed with his prior experience in producing editions (p. 12), he could not have at least sought a partner to round out the drudgery of transcription.

Bowers attempts to add further justification to his decision by pointing to Tolkien's comments on the posthumous publication of Furnivall's *Hali Meidenhad*, where he had doubted that 'the best service has been rendered' to the deceased editor (pp. 4-5). But this is hardly comparable: Tolkien has a host of posthumous titles to his name already, to the general approval of his readers, and in any case, Furnivall's was a contemporary piece of academic work being judged as such, while Tolkien's *Chaucer* is clearly of interest not for its immediate contributions to Middle English studies, but rather as a primary source for Tolkien studies.

Perhaps sensing that he has not really answered the main question directly or satisfactorily enough, Bowers later again asks: 'the obvious question that arises when surveying the helter-skelter of *Selections from Chaucer's Poetry and Prose* is what to do with this lost, forgotten textbook by one of the most-read authors in literary history?' (p. 40). But this time he makes no attempt to answer: 'This is the question which the remainder of my book tries to address', and the matter is never raised again.

In my view, while recognizing that we readers have no right to demand more editorial work from Bowers than he chooses to undertake, I cannot help but remain fundamentally dissatisfied with his decision not to make the attempt to edit the Clarendon Chaucer in full. As it is, the single most significant reason Tolkienists have to read Bowers's book are such (fairly substantial) quotations and summaries of Tolkien's work as do appear. Furthermore, one might hope that an edition, with the planned extracts from Chaucer's writings, would have encouraged more readers of Tolkien to take a stab at Chaucer's rather friendly and easy form of Middle English. If done well, the book might indeed have served its original intended function as a first introduction to Chaucer far better today, with the name 'Tolkien' on the cover, than it would have if published on schedule a century ago. But the book is what it is, whatever satisfactions and dissatisfactions may be felt by reviewers.

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