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## Re-Enchanted: The Rise of Children's Fantasy Literature in the Twentieth Century (2019) by Maria Sachiko Cecire

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*Re-Enchanted: The Rise of Children's Literature in the Twentieth Century*, by Maria Sachiko Cecire. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2019. [6], ix, 345 pp. \$108.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9781517906573; \$27.00 (trade paperback) ISBN 9781517906580. Also available in ebook format.

Marie Sachiko Cecire is an Associate Professor of Literature and Founding Director of the Centre for Experimental Humanities at Bard College. She is also co-editor of *Space and Place in Children's Literature 1789-Present* (Routledge 2015). In this monograph Cecire offers a very detailed exploration of both the roots and influence of modern medievalist fantasy. Cecire argues that her research is “uncovering a new genealogy for medievalist fantasy” (viii) suggesting that this is as important to the history of English studies as it is to shaping beliefs across geographies and generations (viii).

Before setting out on her discovery and exploration of this new genealogy, Cecire gives some insight into what motivated her to write this book. She recalls when she was ten years old looking into a mirror and realising that given her Japanese-Italian descent she was never going to grow up to be “a blonde-haired, blue-eyed fairy tale princess” (vii). She wondered why a girl with “Asiatic Features and sun-browned skin” (vii) would not feel a part of fairyland—to be “a prized inhabitant of the faerie realm, as if castles, magic, true love and a premodern European landscape of adventure would unfold before me if my dark hair would just turn gold” (vii). *Re-Enchanted* thus became a project to search for the origins of Anglo-American fantasy and its special relationship to ideas about childhood, modernity, and the raced, gendered self (ix). Later on her introduction Cecire states “this book is interested in the popular pleasures of medievalist fantasy, especially how these ‘minor’ entertainments relate to the notions of precious childhood, the reach of institutional power, and the formation of identity in the Anglo-American world” (29).

This analysis can be split up into two major sections around the cause (Introduction and Chapters 1-2) and effect (Chapters 3-5) of this new genealogy of modern medievalist fantasy. In her introduction and first two chapters Cecire starts to build her cause argument. The shape of today's medievalist children's fantasy literature is the result of a very specific school of influence. This “school” which she calls “The Oxford School of Children's Fantasy Literature” (107) has its origins in the interwar years at Oxford University when two dons—J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis attempted to beat back the encroaching forces of modernism by developing a new English School curriculum which sought to re-enchant modernity by focusing on the “lit and lang” of Old English, Germanic and Medieval sources that had so influenced them in their own studies and fictional writings. Cecire provides a good survey of the medievalist works that influenced Tolkien—including the works of William Morris and George McDonald. Cecire characteris-

es these works of medieval literature and fantastical medievalisms as “examples of alternate modes of reading, writing, and thinking that favoured moral certainty, hierarchical structures, the spiritual power of imagination and which asserted pride in traditions of English identity” (83). This new curriculum, which went into effect in Oxford in 1931, replete with myths, fairy tales and Christian allegories would then become the syllabus that a group of students who would later go on to write their own medievalist children’s fantasy would study and become influenced by. This group includes the writers Susan Cooper, Kevin Crossley-Holland, Diana Wynne Jones, and Philip Pullman. Thus taking Tolkien and Lewis as the founders and this group and others who were subsequently influenced by them Cecire establishes the idea of a “school” and suggests that the body of medievalist children’s fantasy that has influenced modern culture (up to such texts as *Harry Potter* and *Game of the Thrones*) is the result of this school of influence. In establishing this “school” Cecire has certainly done her homework by going into the Oxford archives and reviewing handwritten PhD thesis reviews by Tolkien and Lewis (an area of research that still must have lots of interesting items to be discovered) as well as English department meeting minutes and the exams that Lewis and Tolkien set for their students. Many of these findings are found in the detailed notes Cecire provides and for me was one of the highlights and useful resources of this book.

However, in what is a very detailed and researched analysis, I was surprised to see that Cecire does not overtly mention, in her suggestion of the Oxford School, past research where this very idea of school of influence has been explored. While this book offers very detailed notes and an index it is unfortunately lacking a bibliography. A close review of Cecire’s notes seems to indicate that she has not included Jessica Yates suggestion of “Oxford Influences” found in her article “50 Years of Fantasy” in the September 1987 issue of the journal *Books for Keeps* where Yates explored the influence of the Tolkien/Lewis English syllabus on such writers as Susan Cooper and Diana Wynne Jones.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, Cecire does include another seminal work that suggests this school of influence—Catherine Butler’s *Four British Fantasists: Place and Culture in the Children’s Fantasies of Penelope Lively, Alan Garner, Diana Wynne Jones and Susan Cooper* (2006)—in her notes but on a very specific point about Susan Cooper (123) and given the extensive analysis Butler offers in her opening introduction “Oxford Fantasies” I would have liked Cecire to engage and contextualise this text somewhat more with her own suggestion and analysis of this “school”.

Cecire also emphasises this “schools” focus on medievalism and re-enchanting modernity by contrasting it with the English syllabus of Oxford’s aca-

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1. <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/46/childrens-books/articles/other-articles/50-years-of-fantasy> (last accessed 24/8/20)

demic rival Cambridge University. She shows at the time Tolkien and Lewis were crafting their English syllabus for Oxford, Cambridge University was focusing on a more modernist agenda and the kind of writing associated with literary fiction today. She spends some time exploring one fantasy author who did come out of the Cambridge English syllabus—T. H. White who published *The Sword in the Stone* in 1938 one year after Tolkien published *The Hobbit*. Although influenced by a medieval author who certainly influenced Tolkien and Lewis, Thomas Malory, Cecire suggests that the influence of the more modernist Cambridge literary agenda resulted in a work which reflected White's tenderness for England and Arthurian legend but also critiques the violent nationalism that tends to accompany nostalgic medievalism (118).

The chapters that follow offer different angles on the effect or influence of the medievalist children's fantasy that came out of this Oxford school and how it has impacted on modern popular culture. One key result of this influence that Cecire explores is the transmission into modern fantasy literature of some of the key tropes and themes found in medieval works. For example, she analyses one member of this school—Susan Cooper's use of the "christmas challenge" theme found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in her own medievalist fantasy *The Dark is Rising* series with the arrival of the mysterious visitor at Christmas. She makes this point (as did Tolkien) that the trope of the christmas challenge in *Gawain* reflects a much older tradition found in several medieval German, French and Irish sources that reflected an ancient fear of the liminal time of Christmas and the pagan winter solstice (139). Therefore having been influenced by *Gawain* in her own studies (and Cecire brings home this point by showing that on Cooper's final Oxford English examination Tolkien and Lewis set a question about *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*) Cooper continued the transmission of the themes and tropes of *Gawain* in her own medievalist fantasy literature. Another example is Diana Wynne Jones who in her modern fantasy tale *Howl's Moving Castle* adapted Chaucer's transformation of a desirable young woman into an outspoken old one in his *Wife of Bath's Tale*.

However, as Cecire indicates this legacy of influence on modern fantasy literature and popular culture also has had its negative effects. In Chapter 4 "White Magic—Racial Innocence and Empires of the Mind" Cecire returns to her original motivation as a ten year old looking in her mirror by investigating the exclusionary nature of modern medievalist children's literature and which children are allowed or expected to belong in realms of enchantment. She poignantly characterises this feeling as loving a genre that does not love you back. Here she argues that this genealogy of modern fantasy literature created "new imperial visions of white male heroism" (33) which can be seen in texts like Lewis's *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* to the more recent *Harry Potter* novels. She argues that the trope of the "monstrous saracen" which can be traced back to Geoffrey of Mon-

mouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*—in medievalist children's literature uses childhood to deploy past and present racial anxieties in “innocent” settings (33).

Cecire counters this in the last chapter by addressing the work being done to diversify the genre, with texts that insist that wonder belongs to *everyone* and that no culture has a monopoly on magic. She explores such texts as Junot Diaz's 2007 novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as well as the Akata Witch series by Nnedi Okorafor and Zen Cho's *Sorcerer to the Crown* books as ones that continue the project of re-enchantment through fantasy literature in their own way, drawing on a range of cultural traditions to build new bridges to magical other-worlds for children from all backgrounds. In her conclusion I thought Cecire did a good job at demonstrating that with the opening of modern fantasy to new and diverse voices through multiple platforms of transmission, Tolkien and Lewis's quest to re-enchant the world is still very much alive and evolving with each new voice that joins being a new potential member of a school of modern fantasy that will influence countless new readers and myth-makers.

I did grapple intellectually with this book. Cecire's research and analysis made me think and reevaluate my own ideas about modern fantasy. I was a bit taken aback to see in the vast research Cecire did for this monograph that there were seemingly overt omissions of past scholarship from Yates and Butler who have suggested the idea of an “Oxford School”. Overall I found Cecire's arguments interesting but the idea of influence seems to me to be a bit more nuanced than the direct cause and effect that she paints. I thought Butler's treatment of the idea of direct and indirect influence (Butler, pp. 16-24) was a lot more helpful and nuanced than the direct cause and effect model that Cecire seems to be suggesting. The search for influence is all very interesting but I wonder if we are we in danger of digging too deeply into the soup of influence without looking more specifically at what each author not only cooks from it but creates themselves. Based on Cecire's interesting analysis of where modern fantasy is heading today it happily looks like there are lots of very individual and interesting new soups on the boil.

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