

Bowers, John M., and Peter Steffensen. 2024. *Tolkien on Chaucer, 1913–1959*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. xii + 368. ISBN 9780192848888.

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John M. Bowers' 2019 book, *Tolkien's Lost Chaucer*, shed new light on J. R. R. Tolkien's relationship with Geoffrey Chaucer by examining, alongside lecture notes and other Tolkienian scholarship, work-in-progress materials for his unfinished *Selections from Chaucer's Poetry and Prose* for Clarendon Press, discovered in 2012 in the Oxford University Press basement. Bowers has since returned to that topic with a new monograph, *Tolkien on Chaucer, 1913–1959*, co-authored with Peter Steffensen. This book presents a more ambitious undertaking, one that does not simply continue the earlier project but repositions it within a more comprehensive exploration of Tolkien's career-long dialogue with the medieval author. The work encompasses Tolkien's academic trajectory, from his studies at Oxford to his retirement speech in 1959. Each chapter adopts a range of presentational strategies for the materials analysed, moving from quotations of source materials to selective publication of previously unpublished documents or, in some instances, full reprints of complete articles.

Chapter 1, "Chaucerian in Training, 1913–23," opens with Tolkien's formative years as a philologist at Oxford. In particular, the chapter draws on tutorial essays and scholarly notes concerned with Chaucer, with attention to both his work under Kenneth Sisam as his tutor and his intellectual divergence from Professor Walter Raleigh. The chapter further traces Tolkien's connection to Chaucer during his time as an assistant lexicographer for the Oxford English Dictionary and, later, as Reader in English at Leeds. Although the analysis is extensive, selective quotations constitute the sole access to the archival sources provided for the reader.

Chapter 2, "Editing Chaucer, 1924–28," surveys Tolkien's work on the *Selections*. Here, for the first time, eight letters from the correspondence between Tolkien and Oxford University Press are made available, each accompanied by a brief contextual note. A more significant contribution in this chapter is the publication of the Glossary and Headnotes for the Clarendon Chaucer. This highlight, however, is diminished by the regrettable decision not to publish these materials more extensively, particularly since Bowers had already provided an extensive survey of them in his *Tolkien's Lost Chaucer* (2019).

Chapter 3, “The Reeve’s Tale, 1928–44,” details Tolkien’s interest in “The Reeve’s Tale.” It traces his work from the 1934 scholarly article “Chaucer as a Philologist: The Reeve’s Tale” (Tolkien 1934) to his more practical applications of the text. These include his 1939 recitation of the tale at Oxford’s Summer Diversion, which he later adapted into a didactic edition for teaching Navy Cadets in 1944. The chapter also reprints Tolkien’s scholarly article in its entirety, with additional notes by Bowers and Steffensen. Furthermore, it presents an “experimental edition” of “The Reeve’s Tale” based on “all the elements which Tolkien might have combined if the teaching of cadets had not ceased with the end of the Second World War” (181).

Chapter 4, “Menton Professor of Chaucer, 1947–54,” covers Tolkien’s necessary didactic transition to Middle English, presenting selected passages drawn from his teaching notes. Chapter 5, “The Middle English *Losenger*,” traces the evolution of Tolkien’s research on the ME word *losenger*, culminating in his 1953 article “Middle English *Losenger*: Sketch of an Etymological and Semantic Enquiry” (Tolkien 1953), which the chapter reprints in full. Chapter 6, “The Pardoner’s Tale: The Story and its Form, 1955–56,” documents Tolkien’s shifting appraisal of “The Pardoner’s Tale” by means of his lecture notes, and provides a transcription of the fair copy that the authors of this book identify as the final version intended for classroom delivery. Preceding the concluding Coda is the brief Chapter 7, “Valedictory to Chaucer, 1959,” which essentially reprints excerpts from Tolkien’s Valedictory Address delivered on the occasion of his retirement and first published in 1979 in *J.R.R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller: Essays in Memoriam* (Tolkien 1979).

Tolkien on Chaucer charts a clear trajectory of Tolkien’s interest in Chaucer and provides interesting insights into the reverberations of the medieval poet into Tolkien’s private life and literary works. One illuminating instance is the parallelism observed between the protagonists of *Troilus and Criseyde*—which Tolkien ranked, alongside *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as the finest Middle English poem—and Faramir and Éowyn in *The Return of the King*, a comparison examined in light of Tolkien’s self-identification with Faramir (27–29). These instances indubitably offer a more nuanced portrait of Tolkien’s engagement with a major author such as Chaucer.

However, while *Tolkien on Chaucer* organises its content in a well-pondered and internally cohesive architecture, the overarching scope of the book proves difficult to ascertain. As Bower’s second book-length study of Tolkien and Chaucer, it offers a more comprehensive overview of Tolkien’s Chaucerian scholarship, both published and unpublished. Yet the volume would have benefited greatly from the inclusion of additional transcriptions of unpublished materials, a feature that might have set it apart more clearly from its predecessor. Combined with the interpretative arc traced by the authors, such materials would

have afforded readers a more detailed picture of Tolkien's indebtedness to his medieval predecessor. Instead, the authors weave together a fragmentary selection from the archives, their choices shaped by a range of factors that do not always align with scholarly priorities, such as the intended readership's interest.

The relatively inattentive attitude toward the transcription of source materials reflects a broader ambivalence in Bowers and Steffensen's handling of philological methodologies, both in theory and in practice. Seemingly unenthusiastic about the philological orientation of Tolkien's approach, the two authors characterise his method as "leapfrogging from one word to the next" (25) and as presenting "pedestrian remarks on individual words" (66). Concomitant with this philological disregard is the rationale guiding the selection of new material for publication, which includes "general illegibility as one criterion for omitting passages" (7–8)—a justification reiterated throughout the volume (e.g., 10, 216–217)—which evidences poor philological practice. The research process would have undoubtedly benefitted from a more sustained philological endeavour: after all, problematic handwritings are integral to the discipline, and had textual critics abandoned texts on account of such difficulties, we would never have seen the publication of many medieval poems.

Moreover, the two authors justify omitting passages deemed of little interest because "the volume's scope is limited" (7). Nonetheless, the book devotes considerable space to fully reprinting Tolkienian contributions that have already seen publication. The most notable example is the seventy-page-long article "Chaucer as a Philologist" which the authors—referencing the Tolkienian scholar Michael C. Drout (2007, 125)—consider for the most part "so dense in linguistic evidence that it makes for difficult reading even for someone with philological training, but is nearly impenetrable for others interested in poetry and storytelling" (108). Also reproduced in its entirety is "Middle English *Losenger*" (Tolkien 1953), Tolkien's last published academic work, described as an "exhaustive—and exhausting—lecture" (247). A different approach has been taken, however, with unpublished materials: for instance, certain *Selections*' headnotes, deemed "needlessly pedantic" (3), have not been transcribed. This inconsistency in editorial practices is difficult to reconcile and the fact that sources remain unpublished significantly impedes the readers' ability to assess the authors' reworking of raw data into a cohesive narrative. As a scholar, therefore, while I acknowledge the contribution of Bowers and Steffensen, I find myself regarding the journey they trace and the resulting account with careful scepticism.

It is not, of course, mandatory for the scholar to hold appreciation for the authors and materials under investigation. It is, however, incumbent upon said scholar to produce a work that not only is methodologically sound but also advances knowledge within the field. Although the quality of the approach to the

primary sources is, at least in part, debatable, *Tolkien on Chaucer, 1913–1959* admittedly achieves the goal of expanding our knowledge regarding Tolkien by discussing the extent and depth of his engagement with Chaucer. However, any comprehensive evaluation of *Tolkien on Chaucer, 1913–1959* must reckon with *Tolkien's Lost Chaucer*. Given the prior publication of *Tolkien's Lost Chaucer* (Bowers 2019), the advancement of knowledge this new book offers proves rather limited.

Overall, although the style and content seem pitched to appeal to both scholars and long-time Tolkien enthusiasts, the editorial decisions underpinning *Tolkien on Chaucer* seem to lean decidedly more towards captivating the latter group than satisfying the needs of the former. Nevertheless, it is to be observed that neither audience segment will depart from this reading experience entirely empty-handed. For scholars, this book will hopefully act as a catalyst for future endeavours concerning Tolkien's evolving relationship with the work of Geoffrey Chaucer.

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