

Journal of Tolkien Research

Volume 4 | Issue 2

Article 2

2017

Tolkien, Self and Other: "This Queer Creature" (2016) by Jane Chance

Kristine Larsen

Central Connecticut State University, larsen@ccsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch>

 Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Medieval Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Larsen, Kristine (2017) "Tolkien, Self and Other: "This Queer Creature" (2016) by Jane Chance," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <http://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol4/iss2/2>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Library Services at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Tolkien Research by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.

Tolkien, Self and Other: "This Queer Creature," by Jane Chance. [no place]: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. xxxii, 290 pp. \$99.99 (hardcover) ISBN 9781137398956. [Also available in ebook formats.]

Jane Chance, the Andrew W. Mellon Distinguished Professor Emerita of English (Rice University), is well-known not only as a medieval and Tolkien scholar but the founding mother of the "Tolkien at Kalamazoo" sessions of papers at the annual Medievalist's Congress at Western Michigan University. Chance's most recent book-length contribution to Tolkien scholarship is part of the peer-reviewed Palgrave Macmillan series *The New Middle Ages* that emphasizes not only an interdisciplinary approach, but analysis done through a feminist or gender lens.

It may seem surprising that the quote from Tolkien that Chance selected to introduce her work is not one of the multiple quotes in which the word "queer" actually appears (including the subtitle). Instead, she gives the reader a snippet from the famous June 7, 1955 letter to W.H. Auden in which Tolkien offers "I do not think that I am frightfully important," but rather "the most modest (or at any rate retiring) of men, whose instinct is to cloak such self-knowledge as he has, and such criticisms of life as he knows it, under mythical and legendary dress" (*Letters* 211). But as the reader will come to understand, it is in the particular form of the "mythical and legendary dress" utilized by Tolkien (and the personal experiences that led him to embrace this literary dress) that he is signified as "queer."

But what, precisely, is the definition of "queer" that is utilized in this volume? To be queer is to be uncanny, unusual, or foreign. It can be monstrous and unnatural, or humble and unassuming. It can manifest as an intentional twist in a classical plotline (such as *Beowulf*) to achieve a eucatastrophe where there was originally only tragedy, or as a revision of a tragic Norse hero into a humble hobbit. To be queer is simply to subvert the norm or the expected. It is to be Other. Throughout this volume, Chance carefully demonstrates how Tolkien (the man and his works) fits this definition, and ultimately how, in her words, Tolkien "resists classification" except as "queer" (5).

Never one to mince her words, from the first sentences of the preface Chance makes no bones about her opinion of Tolkien's critics. In her words, Tolkien was "much more forward-thinking than has previously been considered. Key are his humanism and his feminism—his sympathy for and toleration of those who are different, unimportant, or marginalized—the alien, the rustic, the common, the poor, the female, and the other," in other words, his feeling for the queer (xi). Chance ascribes the genesis of this philosophy not only to traumatic and life-changing events (e.g. the death of Tolkien's parents and close friends), but Tolkien's "lifelong shyness" (xi). Together these led to an "[a]bjection and

diminution of self” that led Tolkien to integrate “aspects of the personal” into his medieval scholarship as well as his fiction (xi). It is for this reason that Chance relies on both Tolkien’s fiction and nonfiction in arguing that the “queer” played a central role in Tolkien’s works because that was how he ultimately saw himself—as the “queer creature” of the subtitle.

The reference might not be familiar to those who are not acquainted with his essay on the hobby of inventing languages “A Secret Vice” (although the excellent book-length critical study of the same name edited by Dimitra Fimi and Andrew Higgins published contemporaneously with Chance’s volume has undoubtedly greatly helped to correct this oversight). In this essay, the “queer creature” is a “little man,” a fellow creator of languages, whom Tolkien supposedly met in World War I. Chance is convinced that the little man is an apparent creation of Tolkien, and her first chapter is devoted to unpacking this “persona or doppelganger” of the author through the lenses of the queer (xii). In particular, she weaves together the theoretical frameworks of Lee Edelman and Alexander Doty as well as medievalist Tison Pugh in order to “identify what might be termed his aesthetic of a ‘queer medievalism’” (xii). As Chance notes, Tolkien’s professional fields of philology and medieval literature, as well as his medievalist fantasy fiction, are all queer by their very nature—they disturb some identity, and as such, represent the Other. The bulk of the work is semi-chronological, but with some overlap in years covered in each chapter, necessary because of how Tolkien worked and reworked his pieces over time. A chronology included in the book (listing the composition and publication dates of many of Tolkien’s major works as well as important events in his personal life) is a helpful aid for the reader.

The second chapter focuses on Tolkien’s life, scholarship, and fiction between 1914-1924, representing the first stage of both his scholarly and legendarium-related writings. Chance uses myriad examples from his personal and academic life to situate Tolkien as queer—that is, as abject and Other. Not unexpectedly, the theoretical scaffolding of Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject plays a key role here. While most of the relevant life events have been well-documented elsewhere (for example, the deaths of his parents and his relationship with Edith), Chance puts a fresh new spin on them as a collection of ingredients in the cauldron of story—in the cauldron of queer story, as she argues, through the examples of Kullervo and Túrin, among others. It is these “others” that gave the conclusion of this chapter a somewhat abrupt feel; she lists a number of “flawed heroes” from *The Silmarillion* that owe a debt to Kullervo, including Aüle, Feänor, and Eärendil. While the flaws in the first two examples are clear to anyone who has read *The Silmarillion*, it would be interesting to hear Chance’s argument as to why Eärendil (who certainly does fit this volume’s definition of “queer”) deserves to be considered in the same company as Feänor.

The remaining six chapters of the book are parallel in their construction. Each takes a one or two decade long period in Tolkien's life and investigates the connections between various works (both scholarly and creative) developed during that period, connections that label them as queer. For example, Chapter 3 not only describes how Tolkien altered the tale of Sigurd in his own retelling (in what became *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*), but contends that the abject Bilbo Baggins not only fulfills the "prototypical Tolkienian queer role as the other—unlikely, unsuitable in all ways, untrained, and absurd," but more importantly represents a queering of the tragic hero Sigurd (49). Chance's analysis is at its best in this chapter, as she successfully demonstrates how Bilbo's life and his journey simultaneously parallel and subvert those of Sigurd. Chapter 4 is devoted to all things *Beowulf*, and explores how Tolkien's revisions of this tale—one intimately marrying both his creative and his scholarly work—are queered versions of the original. Central to this queering is the conversion of the epic tragedy of *Beowulf* into a fairy-tale with a eucatastrophic—and typically Tolkienian—ending.

Chapter 5 focuses on *The Fall of Arthur*, and draws connections between this unfinished poem and Tolkien's retellings of *Beowulf* and *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*. It is unfortunate that Verlyn Flieger's critical volume on *The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun* was also published in 2016 and is therefore not referenced in this work, although the published version of the poem certainly could have been included in Chance's analysis. It would have been fascinating to see what Chance would make out of the obvious connections between *The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun* and *The Fall of Arthur*, particularly in their fay women, the Corrigan and Guinever. Such an assessment could have been particularly illustrative, given that both characters are certainly "queer" and Chance spends significant time in her work analyzing Tolkien's Guinever, who is "nearly as flawed as Mordred" (116). Chance's characterization of Arthur and Lancelot's relationship in Tolkien's unfinished poem is particularly interesting, painting it as not only homosocial but demonstrating deeper "desire and longing" than the relationship of either man with the Queen; in contrast, Chance describes Tolkien's Arthur and Lancelot as resembling "separated lovers" (123). The chapter seems to take a hard turn near the end, when a discussion of the connections between Tolkien's Arthur and the legend of Tol Eressëa shifts to an examination of the future of the Elves through the lens of Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. This dense theoretical formalism apparently requires more explanation than was offered in this volume for this reviewer to understand its relevance to Tolkien's Elves.

"*Apartheid in Tolkien*," the sixth chapter, begins by tackling the second of the most commonly leveled charges against Tolkien (the first being his supposed misogyny): "Was Tolkien a racist or an anti-Semite?" (133). After dismissing the

second part of this accusation with Tolkien's own words, Chance turns the first part of the question on its head by referencing the Valedictory Address from his retirement ceremony from Oxford in 1959. In particular she reflects upon Tolkien's very deliberate invocation of the politically charged word *apartheid*, not only in reference to the country of his birth, but the countless other types of "apartness" that plagued his personal and professional lives. These include the fact that he was not only a medievalist, but an influential writer of the subversive genre known as fantasy. Chance lays out a thought-provoking analysis of class relations between the hobbits as a proxy of a wider discussion of the evils of apartheid in its wider sense—labeling individuals as Other and therefore inferior. The connections drawn between Tolkien's work on *The Lord of the Rings* and his various Chaucer projects at the time felt somewhat forced, but fortunately this is not a serious distraction from the main thrust of this significant chapter.

Chance's emphatic statement in her preface that Tolkien was not a misogynist is revisited in Chapter 7, where Chance discusses Tolkien's attraction toward medieval women. She sees this not only manifested in his original fictional characters (Éowyn, Arwen, Gudrún, Entwives) but in his version of Freawaru. Continuing her earlier discussion of Tolkien's queered Beowulf texts, Chance also offers her opinion on the significance of (and reasons for) Tolkien's non-treatment of Grendel's Mother in his versions of *Beowulf*. Chance also discusses Tolkien's forty-year relationship with the 13th-century text *Ancrene Wisse* (The Anchoress's Guide). This chapter will undoubtedly be of particular interest to scholars and readers who wish to further explore Tolkien's female characters, as well as those who (like this reviewer) had not known about *Ancrene Wisse* and Tolkien's connection to it.

Chapter 8 turns the microscope on how Tolkien illustrates the failure of stereotypical (perhaps even hyper) masculinity in a set of darker works, particularly the second half of *The Lord of the Rings*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son*. Chance utilizes these works to explore the line between the homosexual and the homosocial, tying both terms to the larger category of the queer. A particularly interesting example is the relationship between Gollum and the One Ring; in Chance's words, "What is Precious is queer desire" (227). In her analysis of the relationship between the Orcs and the Hobbits, Chance draws upon Tison Pugh's work, in particular in relating "queer" with "relations of power" that "disrupt a character's and/or the reader's sense of self by undermining his or her sense of heteronormatively inscribed sexuality" (229).

The book concludes with a short discussion of Tolkien's affection for and serial use of humble heroes and the importance of intermarriages and peace-weaving (in particular Arwen and Lúthien). Her point here is not specifically to

connect these themes within Tolkien's work to the queer in general, but rather specifically with a fantastical, modern—therefore queered—medievalism. In the end, it is his work's emphasis on "love and toleration of difference" that most clearly illustrates what it means to embrace the queer.

Given the sheer volume of Tolkien's fantasy and scholarly work, a single volume could never be an exhaustive study of "queer" Tolkien. Therefore this work leaves tantalizing dangling threads for others to unravel (or connect to form other threads). Of particular interest to this reviewer is Chance's decision to not include the later work on *Silmarillion* texts (where he queers his own cosmological myth from itself in his experimental revisionings, most especially in the versions included in *Morgoth's Ring*). It is expected that *Tolkien, Self and Other* should generate a mass rereading of many of Tolkien's works through the lens of the "queer" (not the least being the relatively recently published *The Story of Kullervo*, *Beowulf*, *The Fall of Arthur*, and *The Legend of Sigurd of Gudrún*) and will therefore join others of Chance's works as a highly influential and often cited volume of Tolkien research.

Kristine Larsen
Central Connecticut State University