

Further notes on J. R. R. Tolkien's photostats of *The Equatorie of the Planetis* (MS Peterhouse 75.I)¹

Andoni Cossio

University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU)

Andoni Cossio proposes in a recent article the addition of *The Equatorie of the Planetis* (c. 1393) in MS Peterhouse 75.I to "Section A" of Oronzo Cilli's *Tolkien's Library: An Annotated Checklist* (2019). However, Cossio fails to specify the folios of MS Peterhouse 75.I to which the photostats in Tolkien VC 277 correspond. A detailed descriptive list of the photostats that J. R. R. Tolkien received from Derek J. Price could be useful in the understanding of the type of assistance Tolkien offered to Price and R. M. Wilson at the time they were preparing an edition of *The Equatorie of the Planetis* (1955). This note will supply that missing information as well as speculate about the nature of Tolkien's contribution to the project and its implications. Tolkien devoted considerable attention to the study of Geoffrey Chaucer's language, and he may have been aware, after careful examination of *The Equatorie of the Planetis*, that its attribution to Chaucer rested on inconclusive evidence. This view of course would have challenged Price and Wilson's assumptions and it may explain why we know so little about Tolkien's involvement.

Keywords: J. R. R. Tolkien; *The Equatorie of the Planetis*; MS Peterhouse 75.I; Derek J. Price; Geoffrey Chaucer; Middle English; Latin

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Andoni Cossio proposes in a recent article (2021: 1–3) the addition of *The Equatorie of the Planetis* (c. 1393) in MS Peterhouse 75.I to “Section A” of Oronzo Cilli’s *Tolkien’s Library: An Annotated Checklist* (2019: 1–326).² Cossio also provides the following information to be incorporated into the entry:

Notes: Twenty-five large photostats of individual pages of the manuscript which belonged to Tolkien are preserved at Special Collections of the Weston Library, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (Tolkien VC 277). Eight pages are tables, fifteen pages contain text, in some cases interspersed by circular diagrams, one contains a single line at the bottom and another is possibly a cover. (2021: 1)

However, Cossio fails to specify the folios of MS Peterhouse 75.I to which the photostats in Tolkien VC 277 correspond.³ A detailed

² An equatorium (pl. equatoria) is a medieval device that can roughly calculate, in a Ptolemaic conception of the universe that places Earth in its center, the positions of the sun, the moon and five planets known at the time when the treatise of *The Equatorie of the Planetis* (c. 1393) was written, those being Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. The particularity of this MS is that although it is a scientific treatise, it is written in English, not Latin. See Seb Falk for the reasons behind this authorial decision (2019: 329–60). See Derek J. Price for a historical account of the instrument (1955a: 119–33). Falk provides in a blog post a succinct and accessible list of differences between this device and an astrolabe, often confused with an equatorium: <https://www.sebfalk.com/post/what-s-the-difference-between-an-astrolabe-and-an-equatorium>.

³ There are two other points discussed in Cossio’s article about which I wish to provide further insights. The first concerns the following speculation regarding J. R. R. Tolkien’s books that Christopher Tolkien gave to Eric Christiansen before he left the United Kingdom for France: “The author of this paper conjectures that Christopher passed them on to Christiansen when he left his rooms because he thought them of standard value and of no future use to him” (Cossio 2021: 4). Douglas A. Anderson suggests, based on his recollections of a conversation with Christopher Tolkien, that Tolkien’s son had parted with duplicate copies of his and his father’s scholarly books before the permanent departure to France, which may explain the provenance of some of the volumes Christiansen received (2021: unpaginated), though it does not clarify why Christopher Tolkien gave them as gifts to a friend who would not use them. The second point is tied to the time when Christiansen sold J. R. R. Tolkien’s books. Cossio reports that “Christiansen is known to have sold the remainder at some unspecified date” (2021: 6). A recent email conversation with Rafael J. Pascual (Junior Research Fellow at New College) made Pascual recollect a more specific date for the sale of the books: “Eric retired at the end of the 2001–2 academic year—i.e. Sept. 2002. He got rid of the books when he was clearing out his room. So sometime in 2002, probably

descriptive list of the photostats that J. R. R. Tolkien received from Derek J. Price could be useful, I believe, in the understanding of the type of assistance Tolkien offered to Price and R. M. Wilson at the time they were preparing an edition of the manuscript published in 1955.⁴ This note will supply that missing information as well as speculate about the nature of Tolkien's contribution to the project and its implications.

The University of Cambridge has recently digitized MS Peterhouse 75.I, thus offering unrestricted access to its contents (<culdl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-PETERHOUSE-00075-00001/1>).⁵ This has allowed me to add, as readers will see below, the page numbers of the digital manuscript [DM] in square brackets for easy browsing on the University of Cambridge Digital Library website. I hereby provide MS Peterhouse 75.I folios, page numbers of its digitized form, descriptions of the content and annotations, if any, of each of the twenty-five photostats contained in Tolkien VC 277, which are further classified by sizes and languages:

*Twenty-three photostats (24.5cm x 19.5cm [the measurements are approximate as there are millimetric variations among them]). There are no annotations by Tolkien either front or back of the photostats, and all inscriptions on the back are probably in Price's hand, which are limited to the manuscript's foliation for Tolkien's reference. With regard to the manuscript itself, the computational section, which comprises tables supplemented by brief inscriptions,⁶ is written in Latin and the treatise on the equatorium in Middle English.

summer, is when he sold the books. That might possibly help in your search for them" (2021: unpaginated). After numerous enquiries, the dealer or private individual who purchased the batch of books, or part of it, remains unknown, though it is certain now, or at least according to their respective databases, that the volumes were not sold to St Philips Books (Oxford), Blackwells (Oxford) or Bennett & Kerr Books (Abingdon).

⁴ See Falk for a comprehensive biographical account of Price and his discovery of *The Equatorie of the Planetis* (2014: 114–17).

⁵ Even though Tolkien's photostats are in black and white, they reproduce MS Peterhouse 75.I's details better than the online digitization. Perhaps the reason behind this is the contrast employed for the photography.

⁶ Tables are, in a few cases, calendars. See "Table 1." in Falk for detailed descriptions of the contents of each of the ff. of MS Peterhouse 75.I (2016c: 10).

Mostly Latin⁷:

- (1) f. 5v [DM p. 12], tables and the 'radix Chaucer' inscription that Price employed as supporting evidence for his hypothesis that the MS was a holograph of Chaucer ("5v" written on the back).
- (2) f. 7r [DM p. 15], tables.
- (3) f. 30v [DM p. 62], tables ("30v" written on the back).
- (4) f. 38v [DM p. 78], tables ("38v" written on the back).
- (5) f. 62v [DM p. 126], tables ("62v" written on the back).
- (6) f. 63v [DM p. 128], tables ("63v" written on the back).
- (7) f. 64r [DM p. 129], tables.
- (8) f. 64v [DM p. 130], long inscription and diagram ("64v" written on the back).
- (9) f. 65r [DM p. 131], table.

Mostly Middle English⁸:

- (10) f. 71v [DM p. 144], text ("71v" written on the back).
- (11) f. 72r [DM p. 145], text.
- (12) f. 72v [DM p. 146], text ("72v" written on the back).
- (13) f. 73r [DM p. 147], text ("73" written on the back, the top stroke of '7' cut off).
- (14) f. 73v [DM p. 148], text and diagram ("73v" written on the back).
- (15) f. 74r [DM p. 149], text and diagrams.
- (16) f. 75r [DM p. 151], text.
- (17) f. 75v [DM p. 152], text ("75 75v" written on the back, the top stroke of the topmost '7' cut off).
- (18) f. 76r [DM p. 153], text.
- (19) f. 76v [DM p. 154], text ("76v 76v" written on the back, the top stroke of the topmost '7' cut off).
- (20) f. 77r [DM p. 155], text.
- (21) f. 77v [DM p. 156], text ("77v" written on the back, the top stroke of both '7' cut off).
- (22) f. 78r [DM p. 157], text.
- (23) f. 78v [DM p. 158], text ("78v" written on the back).

⁷ Some inscriptions coded in cipher are in Middle English with some technical terms in Latin.

⁸ Latin can be found within the treatise and some technical terms in Middle English are translated into Latin directly on the MS ff.

*One photostat (15.3cm x 11.1cm)

Middle English:

(1) f. 74v [DM p. 150], blank folio with a single line inscription.

*One photostat (19.7 cm x 15.6 cm)

(1) f. 79r [DM p. 159], no writing on it, some diffuse patterns imitate an equatorium, possibly the back of the original back cover of the MS.

The descriptions of the photostats confirm (as one may have suspected) that Tolkien's contribution to Price and Wilson's edition of *The Equatorie of the Planetis* was of a linguistic nature. Tolkien was a former Classicist and, at the time the edition was in the works (c. 1952–1955), the Merton Professor of English Language and Literature (1945–1959), lecturing on Middle English. This, coupled with his well-known expertise in fourteenth-century English, would have made Price and Wilson think of him as an obvious advisor.⁹ It is thus no surprise that the photostats of the folios Price sent him contain some of the longest inscriptions in Latin together with the Middle English treatise in full.

Kari Anne Rand debunked their hypothesis in 2014 proving the manuscript is in John Westwyk's hand (2014: 15–35),¹⁰ but, at the time (c. 1952–1955), Price and Wilson wished to demonstrate that *The*

⁹ In 1931, Richard Middlewood Wilson (1908–1995) completed an MA dissertation at the University of Leeds under the supervision of Tolkien's friend and former colleague E. V. Gordon (Wilson 1931; 1938: xlv). It is possible that Wilson first learned about Tolkien's philological prowess from Gordon during their meetings. In any case, Wilson acknowledged that the quotations used from the *Ancrene Wisse* manuscript to supplement his edition of *Sawles Warde* were extracted from reproductions borrowed from Tolkien (1938: xlv). Wilson also cites Tolkien's Middle English scholarly works several times in the edition (1938: xxv, xxxvii–xxxviii, xlvi, 53, 60, 75). Moreover, Wilson's professional career as a philologist began in 1931 when the University of Leeds appointed him as Assistant Lecturer (University of Leeds 1931: 81), and it seems likely that Wilson and Tolkien had continued to read each other, met in person or exchanged more letters until the early 50s given the decreasing number of philologists in the British Isles.

¹⁰ However, the tables in ff. 14r–62r were produced by a different scribe and other ff. contain additional material in a different hand, see Falk (2016c: 10).

Equatorie of the Planetis was a holograph of Geoffrey Chaucer.¹¹ It is therefore unsurprising that Tolkien's name appears in the acknowledgments of Price and Wilson's edition (Price 1955b: xvi). Given Tolkien's expertise and interest in the finding of the manuscript, motivated by the eventual discovery of Chaucer's own handwriting (Cossio 2021: 2), he was meant to get in touch with the editors at some point or another. Although Tolkien was not best-known for having extensive knowledge of Chaucer,¹² Price and Wilson must have known about his landmark essay "Chaucer as a Philologist: *The Reeve's Tale*" (1934),¹³ and they could have been cognizant of the fact that he lectured on the medieval author at Oxford (Cilli 2019: 366–68). Even if they were unaware of these facts, it is likely that they were referred to Tolkien to aid them with linguistic matters by "The Librarian and the Society of Merton College" given that both are mentioned in the acknowledgements of Price and Wilson's edition (Price 1955b: xv). It may also be possible that Tolkien was the one to approach Price and Wilson in the first place, considering his fascination with the discovery (Cossio 2021: 1–2).

¹¹ Had Price and Wilson proven this, *The Equatorie of the Planetis* would have become the first holograph of a Chaucerian work ever to emerge. Sadly, to this day, scholars can only rely on scribal copies. To understand the importance and implications of such discovery for our fragmentary knowledge of Chaucer's language and spelling see Simon Horobin (2003: 36–59).

¹² Tolkien and George S. Gordon's *Selections from Chaucer's Poetry and Prose* was never finished, though John M. Bowers argues that even if the volume had been completed and published, its impact on the field would have been minimal (2019: 13). Tolkien's acclaimed recitations of *The Nun's Priest's Tale* in 1938 and *The Reeve's Tale* in 1939 at the Oxford Summer Diversions, and the abridged edition he prepared for the 1939 performance, were soon forgotten with the coming of the Second World War (Tolkien 2008: 173).

¹³ See Horobin for a response to Tolkien's essay (2001: 97–105): "Study of Chaucer's representation of Northern dialect in the *Reeve's Tale* suggests that Tolkien's assumption that inconsistencies were due to the 'negligence and rape' of Chaucer's earliest scribes is unlikely, especially given the general accuracy of the Hg [Hengwrt] manuscript, and the widespread preservation of many of the Northern dialect features across the manuscript tradition. It seems more likely that Chaucer was concerned with imposing a flavour of the Northern dialect on the students' speech rather than achieving absolute philological accuracy or consistency" (2001: 104). See also Horobin for the relevance of Tolkien's essay for modern scholarship and a summary of the essay's main points and theoretical flaws (2007: 93–94).

On a side note, there were several reasons for Tolkien to believe that *The Equatorie of the Planetis* was an autograph of Chaucer initially.¹⁴ Of all the Oxford colleges, Merton was the one with which Chaucer was most closely associated, and it is precisely there where the oldest surviving equatorium from the Middle Ages has been kept (Price 1955a: 129; Falk 2016a: 123).¹⁵ Moreover, Tolkien's fellow Inklings J. A. W. Bennett, in a book published in 1974, espoused the view that *The Equatorie of the Planetis* was Chaucer's on the grounds of other treatises on astronomy stored at Merton (1974: 72–73). As Seb Falk explains, the belief that Chaucer was the author of *The Equatorie of the Planetis* also rested on the fact that he had written c. 1391 *A Treatise on the Astrolabe* (2016c: 7). Allan Chapman dates to c. 1350 the making of Merton's equatorium, which can be found on the back of an astrolabe preserved at Merton College (1992: 93–94; Price 1955a: 129; Falk 2016a: 121).¹⁶ It is not known with certainty when the artifact was brought into the college,¹⁷ but the astrolabe on the other side of the equatorium was designed to be used in the geographical position of Oxford in the years ranging from 1350 to 1450, which points towards a local maker and early local use possibly by fellows of Merton (Chapman 1992: 94).¹⁸

¹⁴ Tolkien's former student, fellow philologist and friend, S. T. R. O. D'Ardenne, held a similar belief in 1954 based on what Price had disclosed so far: "the evidence is becoming stronger that the newly discovered *Equatorie of the Planetes* [sic] is a holograph (after 1392) of Chaucer. However, that is still *sub judice* and the book on it not yet published" (1954: 6). Tolkien may have espoused a similar cautious stance.

¹⁵ Incidentally, this is a further reason that may have prompted Price to contact Tolkien as the main medievalist at Merton. On 22 May 1952, Price borrowed this device from Merton for his talk on the instrument described in *The Equatorie of the Planetis* for a *Conversazione*, a gathering where new discoveries were presented or showcased, held at the Royal Society in London (Falk 2014: 120–21). A reproduction of the equatorium preserved at Merton College serves as the frontispiece to Price and Wilson's edition. See Falk's DPhil dissertation for a high-resolution photograph of the Merton equatorium (2016b: 63, fig.19).

¹⁶ For a description of this instrument see Falk (2016b: 57–66).

¹⁷ See Falk for a plausible hypothesis of the donation of the equatorium to the college by the Merton Fellow William Rede c. 1374 (2016a: 125–26).

¹⁸ By the early 50s, it was widely accepted that 'philosophical Strode,' one of the dedicatees of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (c. 1380), was the Merton Fellow Ralph Strode (Gollancz 1949: 332), a fact that further strengthened the Chaucer-Merton-equatorium connection.

In the light of these considerations, Tolkien may have thought at first that *The Equatorie of the Planetis* was Chaucer's autograph.

The tables of the *The Equatorie of the Planetis* contain references to Oxford though its connection with London is greater (Falk 2016c: 14, 18), and the size of the equatorium described in the manuscript is six feet in diameter, but the equatorium at Merton has a diameter of just 14.25 inches (Chapman 1992: 93). Notwithstanding, during Tolkien's time, the association of the instrument with Chaucer was a natural one: "All that we can say is that if he [Chaucer] . . . did spend any time at Oxford, Merton must have been his Mecca" (Bennett 1974: 69) and "Thus one by one every astronomical trail in Chaucer leads us to Oxford, and in Oxford to Merton" (1974: 75). This and additional contemporary evidence would doubtless make Tolkien connect the device and *The Equatorie of the Planetis* with Chaucer, at least until he had had a closer look at the manuscript. Although, as it has been said earlier, Chaucerian scholarship was not the hallmark of Professor Tolkien, he devoted considerable time to the study of Chaucer's language in "Chaucer as a Philologist: *The Reeve's Tale*" (1934), "*The Reeve's Tale*: Version Prepared for Recitation at the 'Summer Diversions'" (1939), extensive lecture notes for the years 1947–1956 and the unfinished *Selections from Chaucer's Poetry and Prose*.¹⁹ What characterizes Tolkien's scholarly work on Chaucer is the scrupulous attention devoted to specific linguistic points. Thus, he may have been aware, after careful examination of *The Equatorie of the Planetis*, that its attribution to Chaucer rested on inconclusive evidence. This view of course would have challenged Price and Wilson's assumptions and it may explain why we know so little about Tolkien's involvement.²⁰ Given Price and Wilson's commitment to the hypothesis of Chaucerian authorship, it is reasonable to assume that Tolkien would have preferred to limit his participation in the project.

¹⁹ D'Ardenne confirms that Tolkien had profound knowledge of Chaucer (1979: 36). See Bowers for Tolkien's linguistic work in *Selections from Chaucer's Poetry and Prose* when preparing the texts and glossary (2019: 79–103). The files Tolkien VC Pamph (10), MS Tolkien A 13/2, MS Tolkien A 38/2 (ff. 96–126) and MS Tolkien A 39, preserved at the Weston Library, Bodleian Libraries (University of Oxford), contain a vast array of Tolkien's philological notes on Chaucer's language.

²⁰ Price could just have asked Tolkien about some minor language points, but this seems unlikely given he gifted twenty-five high-quality photostats, which would have been quite expensive in the 1950s, to the Oxonian professor.

It would be valuable to know more about Tolkien's contribution to Price and Wilson's edition of *The Equatorie of the Planetis* and his thoughts on the language of the manuscript, as during Tolkien's lifetime, Price and Wilson's claims were never unequivocally disproved and the debate around the manuscript's authorship was never settled. Unfortunately, until additional documents come to light, such as correspondence between Tolkien and Price, this matter is likely to remain unresolved.

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Author's address

Department of English, German, and Translation and Interpreting
University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain
C/ Paseo de la Universidad, 5
01006 Vitoria-Gasteiz (España)
e-mail: andoni.cossio@ehu.eus

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