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Cover Page Footnote

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J.R.R. Tolkien's "Homecoming" and Modern Alliterative Metre

Anna Smol and Rebecca Foster

J.R.R. Tolkien's verse drama "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son" is an alliterative tour de force. Based on events recounted in the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon* and in early English historical chronicles, this drama, along with an attached essay, was first published in the academic journal *Essays and Studies* in 1953. Tolkien's discussion of heroism in the Old English poem and his translation of one word in particular, *ofermod*, as "overmastering pride" (HBBS 143)¹ has fuelled critical commentary on *The Battle of Maldon* for decades. But as Tom Shippey (2007, 209) has remarked, medieval scholars have typically focussed on the essay and barely looked at the drama, even though Tolkien himself tries to point us in the direction of his poetic play: "This piece, somewhat larger than the Old English fragment that inspired it, was composed primarily as verse, to be condemned or approved as such" (HBBS 143). And, indeed, if we look at "The Homecoming" "primarily as verse," we will discover much to approve. While illustrating some of Tolkien's theories about Old English alliterative poetry and poetic tradition in general, his "Homecoming" also proves the versatility of this old metre, demonstrates the originality of Tolkien's handling of it, and supports our claim that Tolkien should be counted among the foremost of those Chris Jones (2010) calls the New Old English poets of the modern era. Carl Phelpstead (2013, 52) points out that "given the popularity of Tolkien's writings, his must be the most widely read alliterative verse of the twentieth century, if not of all periods."

Throughout his scholarly work and his fiction, Tolkien demonstrates a strong interest in versification. In *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, we find verses of various styles and metrical patterns. As a medieval scholar, Tolkien also had a deep interest in and understanding of the alliterative metres of Old English, Old Norse, and Middle English verse. His unpublished papers in the Bodleian Library at Oxford contain numerous drafts of lectures on alliterative metre, which he evidently taught in scrupulous detail. With E.V. Gordon, he edited the Middle English alliterative poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and translated that poem and another from the same manuscript, *Pearl*. Tolkien did not publish a book on alliterative metre, although we do have some of his comments in "On Translating *Beowulf*" and in the posthumous publication of *The Fall of Arthur*. Rather than publishing conventional scholarship on the topic, Tolkien seemed to prefer putting his theories into practice by writing alliterative poetry in what could be called his "poetic scholarship." He certainly wrote a number of alliterative poems in both Old and modern English throughout his lifetime. Tom Shippey (2013, 11-12, n. 1)

¹ All references to "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son" will be to the *Tree and Leaf* edition and abbreviated as HBBS in the text.

estimates at least twenty-three in modern English and ten in Old English, plus additional fragments. “The Homecoming,” in our opinion, is one of his best examples of modern Old English alliterative poetry.²

What are the marks of Tolkien’s skill and originality in the use of alliterative metre? First, the choice of genre: “The Homecoming” is a play, a dramatic piece for two voices, suitable for a dramatic reading, as in a radio play or for presentation on stage. The play is Tolkien’s only published work in this genre, although we do know that he wrote plays as family entertainments and that he acted in plays and recited parts in dramatic readings.³ As J. Case Tompkins (2002, 70) notes, the early English did not write plays. Although he identifies the Old English poem *Crist* as exhibiting a “dramatic impulse” (70), he points out that plays, at least as we think of them — as texts with stage directions external to the dialogue — are not evident in early medieval English literature. “The Homecoming,” in contrast, has dialogue in various styles, dramatic action, characterization, and even stage directions on lighting and sound. As Marie Nelson (2008, 65) points out, it has performance potential as a one-act play. At least its potential as a radio play was recognized by BBC Radio, which broadcast a performance in 1954 and 1955 (Scull and Hammond, *Reader’s Guide* 2017, I. 546). Other known performances include a 1975 and 1991 staging, and in 2008 a reading of the play took place at the International Congress on Medieval Studies.⁴ No doubt there have been many other private amateur and scholarly readings and performances since its publication. Tolkien himself recorded the play at home, doing both characters’ voices and adding in some homemade sound effects; his acting abilities are ably demonstrated in this recording, in which he manages to deliver the lines with gusto while

² Critics have praised several of Tolkien’s alliterative poems as being his best. T.S. Sudell (2017, 88) makes the claim for *The Fall of Arthur*, and Shippey (2013, 26) for Tolkien’s epitaph poems. This article argues our case for “The Homecoming.” Clearly, one can choose from several excellent examples of Tolkien’s alliterative art.

³ Scull and Hammond (*Reader’s Guide*, 2017, I. 313-17) report some plays that Tolkien took part in and/or wrote when a young man. John Bowers (2019, 208-211) describes Tolkien’s acting in and editing of dramatic presentations of Chaucer’s work at Oxford in the late 1930s.

⁴ Marie Nelson (2008, 65) cites the *Descriptive Bibliography* by Wayne Hammond which lists a staging in 1975 and 1991. Scull and Hammond (*Reader’s Guide*, 2017, I. 548) report a 1991 performance. The 2008 reading took place as part of the “Tolkien Unbound” session at the 43rd International Congress on Medieval Studies. The conference program is available here: *International Congress on Medieval Studies Archive*. 3. https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/medieval_cong_archive/3

differentiating the voices of the older and younger characters and chanting the Latin verses at the end of the play.⁵

But it is not only in the choice of genre that we can identify Tolkien's originality. Scull and Hammond (*Chronology* 2017, 414) report that in a letter Tolkien refers to "The Homecoming" as composed "in real alliterative verse (of various styles)." The first phrase to note is "in real alliterative verse," which may be easily overlooked if one is not aware of the technical requirements of the metre. Writing alliterative metre is not simply a matter of sprinkling alliterating words here and there as ornaments or as nods to an older poetic tradition. In the case of "The Homecoming," what Tolkien considers to be "real alliterative verse" follows the metrical rules of Old English poetry with specific rhythmical half-line patterns and alliterative placements.

It is also important to note the second phrase in Tolkien's statement about the play, that its alliterative verses are "of various styles." Tolkien's originality as a modern alliterative poet lies not only in the fact that he adhered to the verse types used in Old English poetry but also that he was able to flex and shape those verses to create various styles, from colloquial and conversational passages to highly styled set pieces.

Before moving on to a more detailed discussion of Tolkien's alliterative verses, however, perhaps a quick summary of *The Battle of Maldon*, the Old English poem on which Tolkien bases his "Homecoming," is in order. Consisting of 325 lines, it is a fragment, though believed to be missing only the beginning and the end of the poem. Commemorating a battle in 991 between the English and invading Vikings, the poem obviously must have been composed after that date. The English are led by Beorhtnoth (or Byrhtnoth, in normalized West Saxon spelling), a powerful lord who rejects a Viking demand for tribute. The attack begins with selected English warriors defending a causeway that the Vikings have to cross to get to the English troops. Eventually Beorhtnoth agrees to a Viking request to be allowed to cross the causeway in order to engage in full battle with the English, a crucial moment in Tolkien's assessment of Beorhtnoth's character. In the course of the fight, Beorhtnoth is cut down and prays to God before he dies while several English cowards take flight. The remainder of the poem consists of speeches by various of Beorhtnoth's loyal men, who vow not to leave the battlefield and the side of their dead leader even though they expect to die in the attempt. Some memorable heroic lines are spoken by one of the older men, Byrthwold, translated in the introduction to the play as: "Will shall be the sterner, heart the bolder, spirit the greater as our strength lessens" (HBBS 124).

⁵ Tolkien recorded the play in 1954 at his home using a tape recorder (Scull and Hammond, *Reader's Guide*, 2017, I.547). The recording was later produced by HarperCollins in 1992, with Christopher Tolkien reading the prose introduction and concluding essay, and with limited distribution to the participants of the Tolkien Society conference that year.

Tolkien alludes to the events described in the Old English poem, supplemented by facts recorded in historical chronicles about Beorhtnoth's patronage of a local abbey, his height, and the fact that he was beheaded in the battle and his body brought back to the Abbey of Ely. Tolkien's drama takes place after the battle at Maldon, at night. He invents two characters, the older Englishman Tídwald or Tída for short, a farmer, and the younger Torhthelm or Totta, a "son of a minstrel" (HBBS 123) who are sent by the abbot to the battlefield to retrieve Beorhtnoth's body. They search among the dead, identifying some of the warriors named in the poem who lie there as they discuss events of the battle and what people back in the town are saying about it. Once they find Beorhtnoth's body, they heave it into a wagon, although they are frightened momentarily in the process by some other men creeping among the shadows. The young, impetuous Totta kills one of these corpse-robbers thinking that he is one of the invaders, and Tída disapproves. Totta finally rests in the wagon with the body as they move along. He has a dream vision in which he chants a version of the often-quoted heroic verses from the Old English poem: "Heart shall be bolder, harder be purpose,/ more proud the spirit as our power lessens!" (HBBS 141). The drama ends with the wagon rumbling away to the sound of Latin chanting in the distance.

According to Christina Scull and Wayne Hammond, Tolkien might have started writing the play as early as 1931 to 1933 (*Reader's Guide*, 2017, I. 547). Christopher Tolkien (1993, 106-7) published in *The Treason of Isengard* just over 25 lines of an early version that was written on the back of a page containing a draft of the poem "Errantry." He also notes that an even rougher version of the play, with no ascription of the speeches to speakers, is preserved with Tolkien's pictures. In the Bodleian Library manuscripts in Oxford (MS. Tolkien 5), we find ten complete drafts of the play: labelled by Honegger (2007) as A to I, one fragment (J), and a final typescript (K), which still contains minor revisions, that was sent to *Essays and Studies* for publication in 1953. Another draft of the play is held in the Special Collections at the University of Leeds.⁶ Tolkien's biographer Humphrey Carpenter believes that "The Homecoming" was in existence by 1945 (Carpenter 2000, 218). Revision of "The Homecoming," then, might have taken place over approximately twenty years, from 1931-33 to 1953 if not longer. The manuscripts reveal another striking feature: in version E, Tolkien completely rewrites the play from its original rhyming couplets, a style of verse not used by the early English, into alliterative metre. Tolkien's choice to revise the play in order to write in alliterative metre is a deliberate step back in time metrically in order to participate in an older poetic tradition. But what Tolkien also does with that poetic tradition is to exercise it in new and diverse ways.

⁶ The Leeds manuscript has not been previously discussed in relation to the Bodleian versions and is the subject of Smol's current research.

Unfortunately, most scholarly attention has been directed to the short essay that Tolkien appends to the play, titled "Of ermod." This essay appears only in the typescript sent to the journal, giving it the appearance of a last-minute addition to the whole piece.⁷ In fact, Tolkien gives that impression in the essay when he explains its appearance: "to merit a place in *Essays and Studies* [the Homecoming] must, I suppose, contain at least by implication criticism of the matter and manner of the Old English poem (or of its critics)" (HBBS 143). As the title of the essay suggests, Tolkien's ideas focus on pride and the nature of heroism, applying his distinctions not only to *Maldon*, but also *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. While these are crucial questions for understanding Tolkien's views in the 1950s, unfortunately, the essay distracts from appreciating Tolkien's accomplishment in composing the alliterative styles of the play.

To understand the alliterative verses, we can look to Tolkien's "On Translating *Beowulf*," where he explains that a line of alliterative metre consists of two half lines, each half adhering to one of the verse patterns named by the nineteenth-century scholar Edward Sievers and now known as the Sievers Five Types (although they also contain sub-types). Prosodists since Tolkien have extensively refined and revised Sievers' system, but the Five Types are still taught as a basic descriptive system of Old English alliterative metre,⁸ and they certainly provide the framework for Tolkien's thinking about and use of alliterative verse.⁹

The metrical patterns can be indicated with their "lifts" or long stressed syllables as a slash (/) and their "dips" or unstressed syllables as an x. Secondary stresses, or "half-lifts," are marked with backslashes (\). The following is a summary of the Sievers Types:

Type A. Lift — dip — lift — dip / x / x
 Type B. Dip — lift — dip — lift x / x /
 Type C. Dip — lift — lift — dip x / / x
 Type Da (or D1). Lift — lift — half-lift — dip / / \ x

⁷ Honegger (2007, 190) comments on how unusual it is for Tolkien not to have written drafts of the essay and hopes one may eventually come to light.

⁸ See, for example, John C. Pope and R.D. Fulk (2001, 129-58); Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson (2012, 156-62); Jun Terasawa (2011).

⁹ Mark Hall (2006) discusses some thematic and stylistic influences of Old English alliterative texts on Tolkien's work, including brief comments on "The Homecoming." Carl Phelpstead (2004) also points out Tolkien's use of alliterative metres in several poems. J. Case Tompkins (2002) analyzes the basic stresses and alliterations of a couple of lines in the play and discusses the influence of the metre on Tolkien's other works. James Shelton (2018) focuses on Eomer's verse in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Type Db (or D2). Lift — lift — dip — half-lift / / x \
 Type E. Lift — half-lift — dip — lift / \ x /

Tolkien provides examples in modern English of these types (syllables with no accent marks should be read as dips in the following): Type A can be represented by “kníghts in ármour”; type B: “the róaring séa”; type C by “on hígh móuntains”; Da as “bríght árchàngels”; Db as “bóld brázenfàced” and E as “híghcrèsted hélms” (“On Translating *Beowulf*” 62).

In one line of alliterative metre, the first half line, the a-verse or on-verse, would adhere to one of the above patterns, while the second half line, the b-verse or off-verse, would likely follow a different metrical type. As Tolkien describes it, “The line was thus essentially a *balance* of two equivalent blocks. These blocks might be, and usually were, of different pattern and rhythm. There was in consequence no common tune or rhythm shared by lines in virtue of being ‘in the same metre’” (“On Translating *Beowulf*” 63). Tolkien’s extensive descriptions of the metre, not only in this essay but also in his lectures and notes on the subject, go beyond these basic types to discuss ways to describe the use of allowable extra syllables, secondary stresses, and substitutions.

As examples of his adherence to Old English metrical patterns, take a look at this line from the play: “Owls are omens. But I’m not afraid” (HBBS 126). “Owls are omens” is a type A verse (lift, dip, lift, dip), with stresses marked by a slash and capitalization:

/ x / x
 OWLS are Omens

The period in the line emphasizes the caesura or pause that occurs between two verses. “But I’m not afraid” is an example of a type B verse, which has the basic pattern of x / x/ (with an extra unstressed syllable before the last lift, which is one of the allowable extra syllables in the Five Types patterns.¹⁰

x / x (x) /
 But I’M not aFRAID

As Tolkien defines it, the full line consists of “building blocks” of varying verse types; in this case, we have a type A verse followed by a B verse, connected, as usual, through alliteration. Tolkien, however, points out that the metre is the

¹⁰ See, for example, Pope and Fulk 2001, 140-48; Mitchell and Robinson 2012, 156-62; or Terasawa 2011, 35-47 for outlines of the allowable extra syllables in sub-types.

defining characteristic of this type of verse, and not the alliteration ("On Translating" 66)

Tolkien nevertheless follows the early medieval practice of alliterating any vowel with another, as in "Owls" and "I'm" although typically it is the stressed consonant sounds that alliterate. (The first syllable in "afraid" does not alliterate because it is not stressed). In Old English, pronouns can alliterate, as Tolkien does here with "I," though it is not the norm; in this case, the personal pronoun is used emphatically and can merit the alliterative emphasis. We can also see illustrated in the line the general rule that only lifts can alliterate and that only the first lift of the second verse can alliterate with one or two lifts in the first verse.

Tolkien maintains other Old English alliterative practices in his modern verse. He consistently alliterates *sp* and *st* sounds with each other, as did Old English poets. For example, "If you spent less in speech, you would speed better" (HBBS 132) and in the line "and as staunch as steel. Stern-tongued at times," (HBBS 128). According to T.S. Sudell (2017, 79-80), this practice is also consistently followed in Tolkien's *Fall of Arthur* verses. In addition, the Old English consonant cluster *sc*, pronounced as in modern English *sh*, usually alliterated only with another word beginning with *sc*. Tolkien uses the modern *sh* initial consonants in the same way: "When your shield is shivered, between shame and death" (HBBS 129). None of these consonant clusters would alliterate with initial *s* only.

Perhaps one unexpected sequence is Tolkien's treatment of *h* and *wh* as equivalent alliterating sounds: "if your head be heavy, or the wheels grumble." (HBBS 140). Sudell (2017, 78) finds the same alliterating sounds in *The Fall of Arthur* and explains that this is an example of Tolkien's archaism, which "harks back not only to an increasingly archaic pronunciation from a century past but all the way to the *hw*- form familiar to the reader of Old English, giving Tolkien's poem a momentary crackle of Old English phonetics."

Tolkien emulates in "The Homecoming" another feature of alliteration which he studied in *The Battle of Maldon*. In various drafts of his lecture titled "Alliteration on g in Maldon" (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Tolkien A30/2) he discusses the way in which the *Maldon*-poet distinguished between front and back "g" when alliterating. By the time that *Maldon* was written, the "g" could be pronounced in two different ways, depending on its placement in a word: as a palatal *g* (as in the first sound in "yet") or as a velar *g* (as in "get"). Tolkien points out that the *Maldon*-poet alliterates "by ear not by book" (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Tolkien A30/2, fol. 70v), because he only alliterates *g* with the same type of *g* sound, unlike the *Beowulf*-poet. In "The Homecoming," Tolkien alliterates velar *g* sounds in "He has gone to God glory seeking" (HBBS 130); and using the modern pronunciation of the affricative *g*, he too alliterates by ear, not by spelling, in "just in judgement, generous-handed" (HBBS 130).

The lines quoted above also demonstrate another feature of alliterative verse: each full line has a varying number of syllables. In modern English, accentual-syllabic metres require the same number of syllables, following the same rhythmical pattern in each line. For example, scanning the first couple of lines of Shakespeare's Sonnet 73 would give us ten syllables per line in the same iambic rhythm of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one: "That time of year thou mayst in me behold/ when yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang/...." Although Tolkien frequently experimented with accentual-syllabic metres elsewhere, in one of his lectures, he called this kind of rhythm "stuttering" (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Tolkien A30/2, fol. 71r).

Descriptions of this alliterative metre take *Beowulf* as their main exemplar to outline what might be termed "classical" metre. Although the dating of *Beowulf* currently has proponents of either an early or a later date, Tolkien favoured an early date in the eighth century. Because *Maldon* is composed after 991, late in the Old English period, and because it does not adhere strictly to all of the Beowulfian metrical rules, it had sometimes been considered defective in its metre. Tolkien, however, objects: "It does not follow that lines in Maldon, for instance, that do things never done in Beowulf, were necessarily 'bad lines' ... made by a bungler or a man in a hurry." (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Tolkien A30/2, fol. 35v). Tolkien acknowledges the looser, freer form of *Maldon*, but he points out that other late works, such as the *Chronicle* poems, use the stricter metre of *Beowulf*. He believes, then, that the differences between stricter and freer uses of the metre most likely amount to differences in purpose rather than in historical period (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Tolkien A30/2, fol. 36r). Tolkien concludes, "Maldon, then, as we have it, is probably to be regarded not as a piece of uncertain metrical skill, but as a survival by fortunate chance of the kind of less polished and compacted verse that was made to celebrate events while the news of them was still hot — and was accepted for what it was: a poem in a freer mode" (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Tolkien A30/2, fol. 38v). Tolkien writes "The Homecoming" mainly in that popular, freer style of *Maldon*, but he also uses his play to illustrate that poets could still compose in the Beowulfian style if the occasion warranted.

Recalling once again Tolkien's letter, we can see that he is able to create not only "real alliterative verse" but also "in various styles" just as he imagined early medieval poets could do. For example, he creates dialogue in a lively, colloquial style. *The Battle of Maldon*, like some other Old English poems, does include two characters speaking to each other in the form of a Viking messenger and the English leader Beorhtnoth, but they do so in alternating, formal speeches. Tolkien's original treatment pushes the alliterative verses into representing dramatic, informal speech as in this example, as the two men carry Beorhtnoth's body:

TÍDWALD.

Torhthelm halts suddenly

You stumbling dolt,
Look where you're going!

TORHTHELM.

For the Lord's pity,
Halt, Tída, here! Hark now, and look!

TÍDWALD.

Look where, my lad?

TORHTHELM.

To the left yonder, (HBBS 133)

In this instance as elsewhere, Tolkien divides the lines between speakers; for example, "Look where you're going! For the Lord's pity" (type A and type C) is the full alliterative line. These lines are delivered in sentences that are in normal English word order, delivered with conversational speed, not slowing down to add special ornamental effects.

Just as in the looser style of *The Battle of Maldon* verse, Tolkien relaxes certain classical metrical rules. For example, type A verses do allow for the addition of an unstressed initial syllable, which is called anacrusis, but this kind of verse often appears in *Maldon* in the off-verse (or second half of the line), which is not the rule in *Beowulf*. Tolkien follows the *Maldon* model in lines such as "Not far did he fall from friend and master" (HBBS 127). One can read "from friend and master" as a type A verse with anacrusis, (marked as +A). The extra unstressed syllable at the beginning in the form of the preposition "from" illustrates how modern English has lost the inflected endings of Old English and requires more words such as prepositions and pronouns for sentence meaning. Carl Phelpstead also finds that Tolkien followed the later style in his Old English poem for W.H. Auden by writing type A verses with anacrusis in the off-verse without double alliteration (2013, 51-52).

As for another of Tolkien's modern alliterative poems, *The Fall of Arthur*, T.S. Sudell (2017, 76-77) finds that type A with anacrusis accounts for nearly a quarter of the type A verses in that work, although not many occur in the b-verse. Sudell points out that type A with anacrusis illustrates the difficulty of finding lift-initial words in modern English, in which iambic feet (dip, lift) are easier to write. Sudell's analysis discusses some of the difficulties in scanning alliterative verse, particularly of the dip, lift, dip, lift, dip (x / x / x) pattern: is it A with anacrusis or

B with a “resolved” syllable? Resolution, or “breaking” as Tolkien calls it in “On Translating Beowulf,” occurs in Old English when a stressed syllable is a short vowel or diphthong closed by only one consonant, followed by a weak syllable (/ x); in these conditions, it can be counted as one lift in the metre (/). In some instances in *The Fall of Arthur*, Sudell (2016, 83-84) finds the choice unclear between reading the verse as A with anacrusis or B with breaking. This illustrates the difficulty of analyzing modern English alliterative metre definitively, which is also shown in Shippey’s discussion of some of Tolkien’s modern poems, in which Shippey (2013, 15-18) posits various scansion of certain lines. While resolution has clear parameters in Old English vowel length and spelling, Sudell (2016, 81-84) suggests that in modern English, consonant sounds rather than written consonants can serve as a better guide in making decisions about metrical types, as can etymologies and even aesthetic judgements.

An interesting case of pronunciation and the influence of etymology occurs in “The Homecoming” in the word “causeway,” which occurs three times in the play. In modern pronunciation, we would treat the word as a compound, the second element with secondary stress, as is common in compound words: “cause-way” (/ \). In fact, this is how Christopher Tolkien pronounces the word in his recording of the play’s introduction. However, in his father’s reading of the play, he pronounces the word each time as “causey” (/ x) even though “causeway” is the spelling Tolkien used from the first draft to the last. A “causey,” (with variant Middle English spellings), can be dated to the fourteenth century according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and came to be used with “way” in the fifteenth century, as in “Cawcewey” (*OED Online* “Causeway, n.”). According to the *OED*, “causey” is “now less used” or obsolete, though nineteenth-century attestations list it as a dialect word, and “chiefly Scottish” (*OED Online* “Causey, n.”). One can imagine Tolkien’s relishing the etymology of “causeway” for its own sake, but for metrical reasons, “causey” is easier to handle as a lift/dip rather than a lift/half-lift compound in the verses where it occurs: “We’ve come to the causeway.” (HBBS 136); “How they came across this causeway here” (HBBS 137); “He let them cross the causeway” (HBBS 137). Did Tolkien intend to revise his play yet one more time? Did he recognize the better scansion only as he was reading the play aloud? Or did he simply know or use the older form of the word whenever he saw “causeway,” as many others might have done?

While Tolkien follows the metrical types of Old English poetry, he does admit that *Maldon* is written “in a free form of the alliterative line” (HBBS 124) and that he too uses such a looser style. As Shippey points out (2013, 20-21), some of the lines in “The Homecoming” can (and have been) easily mistaken for prose.¹¹

¹¹ Manfred Zimmerman (1981) explains the basic stresses and alliteration patterns of “The Homecoming” in order to demonstrate how the Ballantine *Tolkien Reader* misprinted some of the lines of the play.

The following lines by Tída, for example, are written in prose syntax, with minimal alliteration, and with extra unstressed syllables in the verses, thereby lengthening the line and losing the compactness of classical metre: “I have cares of my own / in my heart, Totta, and my head’s weary./ I am sorry for you, and for myself also” (HBBS 140). Tída’s speech in this passage ends with internal rhyme -- “for the monks are kind. Put the miles behind!” (HBBS 140) -- which is not a regular feature of Old English poetry but which occurs intentionally several times in *Maldon*.

Although Tolkien reproduces these features of the freer style of *The Battle of Maldon* in his play, pushing that style even further into colloquial drama, he also illustrates his scholarly belief that the stricter Beowulfian metre was not forgotten in the later Old English period. Using the same alliterative verse types, Tolkien is also able to convey a change of register to high-sounding poetry. Here is Totta chanting a poem in praise of Beorhtnoth:

TORHTHELM.

(*His voice rises to a chant.*)

His head was higher than the helm of kings
with heathen crowns, his heart keener
and his soul clearer than swords of heroes
polished and proven; than plated gold
his worth was greater. From the world has passed
a prince peerless in peace and war,
just in judgement, generous-handed
as the golden lords of long ago.
He has gone to God glory seeking,
Beorhtnoth beloved. (HBBS 130)

Tolkien signals the changed style with the stage direction that Totta’s voice should rise into a chant, but even without that note, the style of the passage sets it apart from the surrounding dialogue. There are the inverted word orders: “than plated gold / his worth was greater” and the adjective placed after the noun it modifies: “Beorhtnoth beloved.” The common technique of using compound words can be seen in “generous-handed.” As in the stricter or classical metre of *Beowulf*, the lines tend to be enjambed, not end-stopped. The piled-on appositions of classical metre are here as well: “a prince peerless”; “just in judgement”; “generous-handed”. The alliterative patterns are also more complex: “With heathen crowns, his heart keener” is an example of crossed alliteration, usually represented thus: a x a x. “As the golden lords of long ago” is an example of transverse alliteration: a x x a. Linked alliteration over more than one line occurs in the first two lines of the above passage as well as in the eighth and ninth lines.

Totta's other set pieces are similarly distinct in style from their surrounding informal dialogue. Beginning at "Now mourn for ever / Saxon and English, from the sea's margin/ to the western forest!" (HBBS 131), this piece continues with reference to building a barrow for Beorhtnoth and proceeds with a summary of his character: "of the friends of men first and noblest, / to his hearth-comrades help unfailing, / to his folk the fairest father of peoples. / Glory loved he; now glory earning" (HBBS 132). The inverted word order, the nod to compound words in "hearth-comrades" and "well-beloved," the enjambment of lines in apposition detailing his "wealth unbegrudged" are some of these elements of a high style. The prevalence of lines with three alliterating words when only a minimum of two is required further adds to the sonorous chanting quality. This composition echoes the end of *Beowulf* in a number of elements: the widespread grief over the death of the hero, in which a woman weeps at his funeral pyre; the building of a high mound in which his treasures are buried along with his body. The superlatives near the end of Totta's poem echo the superlatives describing Beowulf at the very end of *his* poem: he was the mildest, most beloved, to his kin the kindest, and in Old English "lofgeornost," most eager for praise or glory (*Beowulf* lines 3180 - 82). In Tolkien's play, Tída recognizes the allusion, commenting that "Beorhtnoth we bear not Beowulf here:" (HBBS 132).

Some of the same features can be found in Totta's final set piece, "So the last is fallen of the line of earls" (HBBS 137), echoing the historical vision of the Old English "The Battle of Brunanburh" poem.¹² Tolkien comments on Totta that "his head is full of old lays" (HBBS 123). In addition to being able to compose alliterative metres in a high style, Totta occasionally quotes proverbial wisdom, a frequent feature of Old English verse, from his traditional store of poetry. For example, when discussing what Offa had said previously in council, Totta comments, "As lays remind us: / 'What at the mead man vows, when morning comes / let him with deeds answer, or his drink vomit / and a sot be shown'" (HBBS 128). His chanting of the famous verses from *Maldon* in his visionary dream — "Heart shall be bolder, harder be purpose, / more proud the spirit as our power lessens!" (HBBS 141) (with a couple of extra lines added by Tolkien) also illustrates, according to Tolkien, the proverbial force of such lines that must have been often repeated as "an ancient and honoured expression of heroic will" (HBBS 124). This young poet, who can make comparisons with Grendel (HBBS 129), knows his stuff.

And he can compose in Beowulfian metre. How would a young man of such lowly status learn to compose high-minded poetry? The early medieval English did not write a guide to poetic metres, as far as we know. And, as Tolkien points out, "It is unlikely that there was any definite 'profession' of minstrelsy, which one

¹² Shippey (2013, 20); see Tolkien's translation of "The Battle of Brunanburh" in alliterative meter in *The Fall of Arthur*, Appendix 224-225.

entered by apprenticeship and by which one after gained one's sole livelihood (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Tolkien A30/2, fol. 49v). He posits that verse-making was learned at home and that "A boy — *ex hypothesi* having some bent for these things — can quickly grasp the scheme of even fairly intricate rules, though he will need much schooling in the art of words before he can write even derivative verse within that scheme...." (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Tolkien A30/2, fol. 39r). As the son of a minstrel, Totta would have heard plenty of good poetry at home, and he obviously has an ear for it. By creating stricter metre for Totta's set pieces alongside a more informal and colloquial use, Tolkien also illustrates how the perceived early and late styles of *Beowulf* and *Maldon* could co-exist; one is not a debased version of the other but a different style used for a different purpose.

Although not a poet, Tída is not entirely ignorant of this poetic tradition either. He recognizes the allusion to *Beowulf*, and he comments on Totta's singing of the subjects of old battle poetry such as *Beowulf* and the *Fight at Finnsburh*: "when Froda fell, and Finn was slain" (HBBS 131). Tída, however, has a cynical attitude to poetry — "Let the poets babble" (HBBS 138) — but even he can try his hand at alliterative verses. So Tída offers a few lines of poetry, introducing them with "If a poet sang you" (139) before providing his own impromptu composition:

'I bowed my head on his breast beloved,
and weary of weeping woeful slept I;
thus joined we journeyed, gentle master
and faithful servant, over fen and boulder
to his last resting and love's ending' (HBBS 139-140)

Tída maintains the correct placements of alliteration, but he doesn't vary the verse types in each half line. He begins with two type B verses in the first line, the second verse with an extra allowable syllable in the initial dip. The second line could be read as two type A verses as well, with the second half line or off-verse in a variety of type A referred to as A2, in which a dip may be replaced by a secondary stress or half-lift. Tolkien's "woeful slept I" can be scanned in the same way as the examples he uses in one of his lectures as type A2: "misty moonshine" or an Old English example in: "Grendles guðcræft" (/ x / \) (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Tolkien A17/2, fol. 25r). Tolkien points out in this lecture that A2 types "give weight and sonority to the epic style" (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Tolkien A17/2, fol. 25r), and that they normally occur in the on-verse and carry double alliteration. Clearly, this is not the case with "woeful slept I," which occurs with single alliteration in the off-verse, another breach of the stricter metrical rule. The following two lines are also type A verses, but with the exception of "gentle master" all have extra dips added at the beginning of the verse, including the second half line "over fen and boulder" which is a characteristic of *Maldon* but not typical in

Beowulf. The last line contains two type C verses. In other words, Tída's poetry does not exhibit the same rhythmical variety as Totta's. Tída's verses slide into a unified rhythm over each full line, similar to later syllabic-accentual metres. In contrast, although Totta does include the same verse types in some of the lines of his set pieces, he is capable of more variety. Take, for example, the first three lines of Totta's chant praising Beorhtnoth:

His head was higher than the helm of kings
 With heathen crowns, his heart keener
 And his soul clearer than swords of heroes (HBBS 130)

We can read these lines as type +A and B, type B and C, and type C and A. Both men have heard good poetry, but only one of them has a bent for that kind of thing. Tída is not quite as skilled as Totta in his verse-making, but then again, he is not like the younger Totta who "laboured long" as Tída imagines, "in the watches of the night" (HBBS 132) to compose his verses.

While Tolkien successfully demonstrates real alliterative verses in various styles, he also uses "The Homecoming" to illustrate certain of his scholarly beliefs about how Old English occasional poems might be composed. "The Homecoming" is often mistakenly referred to as the sequel to the Old English *Battle of Maldon*, but it is only a sequel if one is considering the events of the Old English poem (the battle) followed by the events of Tolkien's verse drama, a few hours after the battle. But *as a poem*, *The Battle of Maldon* does not yet exist at the fictional time of "The Homecoming." Tolkien's conceit is that it is composed only after Totta surveys the battlefield and considers what happened there — and Totta is its author. "The Homecoming," then, is meant as a prequel to *The Battle of Maldon*, which he believes was composed "to celebrate events while the news of them was still hot" (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Tolkien A30/2, fol. 38v). In his characteristic manner, Tolkien is creating an asterisk explanation for a surviving artefact, the Old English poem. Working backwards, as it were, from the poem, Tolkien has Totta and Tída name the dead men they find: Wulfmær, Wulfstan's son, although he is momentarily confused with Beorhtnoth's nephew by the same name; Ælfnoth, Wulfmær's young friend; then Ælfwine, "a brave lordling" (HBBS 128); before discussing, but not finding, the outspoken counsellor Offa. The *Battle of Maldon* names more men than this, but the order of their appearance in the Old English poem corresponds to the order in which Tída and Totta find them on the battlefield, with the exception of a reference to Offa coming just before Ælfwine in *Maldon* (Nelson, 2008, 74-75). It is as if Totta has viewed the battlefield and the positions of the dead warriors near Beorhtnoth and will use this first-hand examination to recreate their actions and speeches in the battle he will represent in the poem that he is going to compose.

Furthermore, Totta surveys the terrain, wondering why more enemy bodies were not evident at the causeway connecting the English and Viking armies: "It's strange to me / how they came across this causeway here, / or forced a passage without fierce battle" (HBBS 137). What he sees is the result of the crucial decision by Beorhtnoth to let the Vikings cross the causeway to engage fully in battle, which Tolkien believes is criticized by the *Maldon* poet. Tída explains to Totta: "Alas, my friend, our lord was at fault, / or so in Maldon this morning men were saying." (HBBS 137). This opinion is one that Totta will incorporate into his poem, reflecting a criticism that Tolkien also expresses in his "Of ermod" essay.

Finally, Tolkien provides an explanation of how those proverbial lines from *Maldon* came to be in the Old English poem. In a characteristic Tolkienian scene of poetic vision, Totta speaks in a half dreaming voice as he travels back to the Abbey in a wagon with Beorhtnoth's body. His vision of doomed men includes hearing them chanting in the hall these words, and as with a couple of his earlier set pieces, Totta also chants: "Heart shall be bolder, harder be purpose, / more proud the spirit as our power lessens! / Mind shall not falter nor mood waver, / though doom shall come and dark conquer" (HBBS 141).¹³ A version of those first two lines will also appear near the end of the *Maldon* text as we have it, just as they appear near the end of Tolkien's play.

In other words, Tolkien is providing a fictional explanation for how a popular and occasional poem could have been composed in the Old English period, with the poet working with his eyewitness survey of the dead and the terrain, incorporating current opinions on what happened, and being inspired by his own visionary capacities in reconstructing actions and speeches and drawing on poetic traditions. Tolkien's intentions are evident in a couple of marginal notes in the manuscript drafts, one in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Tolkien 5, fol. fol.63v and a similar note a couple of pages later: "It is here supposed that Totta afterwards becomes the author of the poem the fragment of which survives. It is based (on this theory) partly on survivors' reports, partly on imagination & epic tradition" (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Tolkien 5, fol. 65v). Both of these notes are written in drafts of "Beorhtnoth's Death," part of the introductory material in the play, and both of these pages are entirely crossed out in their draft versions, though elements of them continue to be used in later drafts. Honegger's argument is that Tolkien changed his mind about ascribing the *Battle of Maldon* to Totta, but we contend that Tolkien did not alter the character of Totta or his poetry to indicate that he later rejected the idea of Totta being the *Maldon*-poet, for the reasons we discuss below. Peter Grybauskas (2011, 45) also argues for Totta as the *Maldon*-poet and suggests that removing the explicit identification from the drafts could have been a deliberate move.

¹³ See Honegger (2007) for a discussion of Tolkien's revisions of these lines in various drafts of the play and in his lectures.

But it is not just Totta who is an alliterative poet of some skill. Tolkien is writing not only to illustrate how an early English poet could have composed verses but also to demonstrate how a twentieth-century poet could compose a variety of verses in modern English. He frequently advocates for the use of alliterative metre in modern English. In one of his lectures on alliterative verse, he tells his audience, “It is indeed possible that modern verse could with profit refresh its weariness, or enrich its variety, with a study of this careful technique elaborated long ago...” (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Tolkien A17/2, fol. 5r). In another draft of a lecture on alliterative verse, he similarly claims that alliterative metre “is quite worthy of study by poets today as a technique” (*The Fall of Arthur* Appendix, 227; from Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Tolkien A30/1, fol. 71r). One way that Tolkien’s study of the technique is demonstrated is through his scrupulous attention to detail. In a couple of pages in “The Homecoming” manuscripts, he works out the rhythms of over 100 words beginning with a stressed syllable in both Old English and modern; starting with the simplest example of a single stressed syllable as in OE “hús” and modern English “house” and proceeding to more and more complicated examples, such as OE “weligost” equivalent in rhythm to modern English “litigant” or “elephant” in that the first two short vowels are resolved into one strong stress and the final vowel is not strongly stressed: WELIGost or LITigant. (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Tolkien 5, fol. 90r). A list of approximately the same number continues with compound words. For example, OE “scioldburg” is listed as equivalent to modern English “household” to be scanned as a strong stress followed by a secondary stress (/ \) (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Tolkien 5, fol. 91r). The list continues with increasing complexity, evidence of Tolkien’s attention to how modern English can suit the requirements of “real alliterative verse.”

It is not surprising, then, that Tolkien was upset when BBC Radio broadcast the play with actors who, according to his biographer, annoyed Tolkien because they ignored the alliterative metre and read the lines as if they were in iambic pentameter (Carpenter 2000, 218). Unfortunately, these BBC recordings no longer exist, as far as we know. Tolkien’s own reading of the play, however, is not stilted or artificial and illustrates well his argument that the verse types represent the natural rhythms of English speech even in the modern period (“On Translating Beowulf” 62).

While Tolkien argues for maintaining the tradition of alliterative verse, his play is also an illustration of and meditation on the eventual passing of that tradition as it gives way to new themes and styles. From the very first draft in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Tolkien 5, the metaphor of a road heading into the future ends the play, as Beorhtnoth’s body is on a cart travelling towards the Christian monks, and Latin singing is heard in the background, “Dirige, Domine, in conspectu tuo via meam...” (HBBS 142). The last English words in the play consist of a rhyming couplet — a form not used in Old English poetry: “Sadly they sing, the

monks of Ely isle! / Row men, row! Let us listen here a while!" (HBBS 142). As Tolkien says in the introduction to the play, these rhyming lines are "presaging the fading end of the old heroic alliterative measure" (HBBS 124). We can hear where the poetic road is heading.

Totta, the inexperienced, imaginative, and optimistic young poet and Tída the experienced, literal-minded, and cynical older man provide two distinct views of the value of the old alliterative heroic poetry. One could say that they look in different directions along this poetic road. Tída is focused on following the road that leads forward, into the future, turning his back for the most part on traditional poetry. Totta, on the other hand, is the one who has a dreamlike visionary ability to see into the past and the future through his connection with poetry. He resembles some of Tolkien's other visionary characters who through a dreamlike state can see beyond their present, either into the future (as Frodo does on occasion) or into the past, as characters in Tolkien's unfinished "Notion Club Papers" do.

While Totta imaginatively connects with past and future, Tída mostly recognizes that the world has changed and that time moves forward, or that things never change for poor people as they plod along the road. This basic difference is maintained in their characterization, and one of the ways in which it manifests itself is in Tída's belief that the old songs no longer represent the world that he is living in. After Totta's dreamlike vision in the wagon, Tída doesn't like what he's just heard: he calls the words "fey and fell-hearted,/ and heathenish too" and says "I don't hold with that" (HBBS 141). His reaction is to point to the literal reality before him: "It's night right enough; but there's no firelight: / dark is over all, and dead is master" (HBBS 141). We can't help hearing the echo of Ted Sandyman here, talking to Sam about the truth of the old stories in *The Lord of the Rings*, rejecting anything he hasn't seen with his own eyes. Tída rejects Totta's imaginative experience through his direct connection to an older poetic tradition because it doesn't match his immediate reality that there is no literal firelight. All through the play, from the very first draft, Tída has been mocking Totta on his imagination of "barrow-wights and bogies" (HBBS 125). He tells him to "Think less, and talk less/ of ghosts" (HBBS 126) connecting this tendency in Totta with his poetic art: "Forget your gleeman's stuff" (HBBS 126). Moreover, Tída blames traditional heroic poetry for Beorhtnoth's mistake in letting the Vikings cross the causeway: "so keen was he/ to give minstrels matter for mighty songs" (HBBS 137). As Shippey (2007, 330) points out, Tolkien invented this detail, which does not appear in *The Battle of Maldon*, further supporting Tolkien's view that Beorhtnoth suffered from excessive pride, caring more for his poetic reputation than the lives of his people.

Even though Tída is mainly pessimistic and seems to reject the old poetry, he does find value in Totta's verses a couple of times. Totta's song about Beorhtnoth comforts Tída who admits "the woven staves have yet worth in them /

for woeful hearts” (HBBS 130) and after Totta’s next chant he says, though perhaps sardonically, “Good words enough” (HBBS 132). In a similar way, while Totta can be optimistic, hoping (mistakenly) that Æthelred will prove to be as effective a leader as “Wyrtegeorn” (Vortigern), he also acknowledges that “the songs wither, / and the world worsens” (HBBS 128-29). Yet he doesn’t give up on the old songs, and his participation in a dream vision puts him in company of some of Tolkien’s other positive poetic or visionary characters. In creating two characters with predominantly different views, did Tolkien favour one or the other? Shippey (2007, 326-29) argues that Tolkien created Totta to be seen as a negative character, “cowardly, boastful, and murderous” -- a “stooge” -- and that Tída represents Tolkien’s views. However, we see more of a balance between competing tensions or perspectives, between medieval and modern views of war (Smol 2019) or in the dialogic tension between “heroic praise” and “heroic critique” (Grybauskas 2011, 41). Verlyn Flieger (2019) outlines a general view of Tolkien that encompasses such readings. She examines several contradictions in Tolkien’s writing and concludes that it is best to let such contradictions live in opposition rather than trying to reconcile them. In her image of the keystone and the arch, Tolkien is the keystone that holds two sides of the arch together through friction. In “The Homecoming,” such a contradictory tension is evident between old poetic views of heroism and new realities, between medieval and modern perspectives on war.

It is worth noting that Tolkien also did not forget the “gleeman’s stuff” that he so carefully learned and reproduced in this play and elsewhere. In one of his lectures, he states that metres “can persist as long as poets find pleasure in them or have a purpose for them” (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Tolkien A30.2, fol. 36 v). In “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son” Tolkien has a purpose. He uses the alliterative metre to illustrate his ideas about Old English versification, early medieval poets, *The Battle of Maldon* in particular, and the potential for writing alliterative verse in the present day – his poetic scholarship, if you will. But more than that, “The Homecoming” is an impressive achievement of original alliterative art by a poet who demonstrates how he still finds pleasure in the metres.

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