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Tolkien, "The Battle of Maldon," and "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth": Poetic Allusions and the Experience of Time

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J.R.R. Tolkien's alliterative verse play, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," is his critical and creative response to the Old English poem "The Battle of Maldon." "The Homecoming" illustrates some of Tolkien's scholarly ideas about alliterative verse and the alliterative tradition in English. The play includes allusions to *Beowulf*, "The Battle of Brunanburh," and "The Battle of Maldon," as well as revises some Middle English verses attributed to Canute, and concludes with a Latin dirge. Tolkien also appends to his play a short, influential essay titled "Ofermod" in which he sets out his views of acceptable and unacceptable heroism, positioning "The Battle of Maldon" between the older Old English poem *Beowulf* and the later Middle English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. A sense of movement through time, then, in looking back to the past and forward to the future pervades both the play and the critical essay, as Tolkien uses "The Battle of Maldon" as the nexus that expands to encompass some of his important thinking mainly in the 1940s and 1950s on heroism, history, and poetic tradition and style.

While critical commentary has focused on Tolkien's ideas about heroism and pride based on his translations of a couple of words in "Maldon" or applications of those concepts to texts such as *The Lord of the Rings*, Richard West in his last article on the play, "Canute and Beorhtnoth," draws attention to the two-line verse allusion to Canute at the end of "The Homecoming" and finds that it suggests a more ambivalent ending to "The Homecoming" and the historical drama represented in "The Battle of Maldon" than is usually supposed.[1] Following West's lead, we can take a closer look at the various kinds of poetry in Tolkien's play that reveal how allusions to medieval poetry within "The Homecoming" point to times past, present, and future, positioning readers or audiences in multi-layered time frames through their experience of poetry.

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[1] Richard West, "Canute and Beorhtnoth" in *A Wilderness of Dragons: Essays in Honor of Verlyn Flieger*, edited by John D. Rateliff (Wayzota, Minnesota: Gabbro Head Press, 2018), 350-53.

Tolkien and "The Battle of Maldon"

The foundation for the development and expression of Tolkien's ideas is the Old English poem known as "The Battle of Maldon." This poem represents a fight between the English, led by Byrhtnoth, against Viking invaders in Essex, likely in 991 CE. The poem as we have it does not record the outcome of the battle, as we are missing both the beginning and ending of the text. In fact, the original manuscript is no longer extant, and our knowledge of the poem relies on a transcript made in the eighteenth century by David Casely. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, however, does note that Byrhtnoth was defeated at Maldon, and twelfth-century historical chronicles pay tribute to Bryhtnoth as a powerful and devout nobleman.[2]

Judging by codicological evidence, not many lines are missing from the 325-line Old English poem. The text as we have it begins with the English arranging themselves for battle, instructed by Byrhtnoth, who finally dismounts from his horse to stand with his close band of household retainers. A Viking messenger demands a ransom in exchange for peace, but Byrhtnoth angrily rejects what he considers a shameful offer and declares his resolution to defend his land and the country of his king, Æthelred. Arrayed on both sides of an estuary, the two armies cannot reach each other because of the high tide. With the ebbing of the tide, only a causeway connects the two groups, and Byrhtnoth positions three archers to guard the causeway and prevent anyone crossing alive. When the Vikings realize that they cannot get across safely, they ask that Byrhtnoth allow them to cross so that both sides can engage in battle. Byrhtnoth agrees, and fighting and subsequent slaughter on both sides ensue. The poet names the English warriors but never the Viking raiders. Byrhtnoth fights furiously, thanking God for his success, but eventually an enemy arrow hits him, wounding him severely. Nevertheless, he continues to fight off an attacker until so wounded that he can no longer hold a sword, but still, he encourages his men. In his final moments, he prays to God, thanking him for the joys he has experienced and asking for grace for his final journey. He and his nearest companions are hacked to death. This sight prompts some English cowards, named as the sons of Odda, to take flight, including one who flees on Byrhtnoth's horse, and other men follow.

The rest of the poem consists of named Englishmen of various social status

[2] Historical accounts and contexts for the battle are discussed in Donald Scragg's edition, *The Battle of Maldon AD 991* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991). See also Mark Atherton, *The Battle of Maldon: War and Peace in Tenth-Century England* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

and ages uttering formal speeches in which they declare their lineage and their resolution to continue fighting, beginning with the nobleman Ælfwine, a kinsman of Byrhtnoth's. Almost at the end of the text, an old retainer, Byrhtwold, speaks lines that have become well-known: "Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,/ mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað.[3] In the introduction to his play, Tolkien translates these lines as "Will shall be the sterner, heart the bolder, spirit the greater as our strength lessens." [4]

"The Battle of Maldon" commemorates an historical event, and although we don't know the author's name or the exact date of composition, it was probably within a few years of the battle in the political context of the 990s.[5] Using conventional Old English alliterative metre, though somewhat looser in style than in *Beowulf*, for example, the poet represents the scene in a traditional heroic style. Warriors make formal speeches, vowing to avenge their lord in an evocation of the *comitatus* ideal. However, as Donald Scragg points out, the comitatus system "had no place in the legal and social structure" of England by the tenth century.[6] The poet, then, represents contemporary history using traditional imagery and vocabulary to evoke an idealized image of heroic combat. Even in this Old English poem, the present is given meaning by being viewed through the lens of the past.

The first scholars of the poem in the nineteenth and early twentieth century focused on this representation of heroism. W.P. Ker wrote in 1908 that "the poem of Maldon, late as it is, has uttered the spirit and essence of Northern heroic literature."[7] Later in his 1937 edition of the poem, E.V. Gordon, Tolkien's former colleague at the University of Leeds, calls it "the only purely heroic poem extant in Old English."[8] In the Preface, Gordon acknowledges Tolkien's "many corrections

[3] "The Battle of Maldon," in *The Battle of Maldon A.D. 991*, ed. Donald Scragg (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) 30, lines 312-13.

[4] J.R.R. Tolkien, "Beorhtnoth's Death," in *The Battle of Maldon together with The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son and 'The Tradition of Versification in Old English'*, ed. Peter Grybauskas (London: HarperCollins, 2023) 6.

[5] John Niles surveys various proposals for the dating of the poem in "*Maldon* and Mythopoesis," in *Old English Heroic Poems and the Social Life of Texts* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 205-206, fn 6.

[6] Donald Scragg, *The Battle of Maldon AD 991* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 33.

[7] W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature* (London: MacMillan, 1908), 57.

[8] E.V. Gordon, ed., *The Battle of Maldon* (Methuen 1937; Manchester: Manchester UP,

and contributions,"[9] stating that "Professor Tolkien, with characteristic generosity, gave me the solution to many of the textual and philological problems discussed in the following pages."[10] Tolkien would have consistently engaged with "The Battle of Maldon" since his days as an undergraduate, as Stuart Lee's survey of Tolkien's textbooks attests,[11] and he continued thinking about the poem in his teaching at the University of Leeds and at Oxford.[12]

Several unpublished lectures on Old English poetry and on Tolkien's particular interest in alliterative verse are held in the Bodleian Library. Recently, Tolkien's prose translation of "Maldon" with selections from his commentary, which were probably designed in preparation for teaching, have been published in an edition by Peter Grybauskas, including a selection from Tolkien's lecture on the poem.[13] It is noteworthy, as Stuart Lee points out, that even in his line-by-line notes, Tolkien does not gloss the word *ofermod* that he would later highlight in the 1950s and make the title of a short essay. Although Grybauskas does not indicate Tolkien's manuscript revisions, presenting his text simply as "overconfident chivalry,"[14] Lee points out that in Tolkien's translation, he writes that Byrhtnoth "in his confident chivalry conceded too much land" but then inserts "over" above the word "confident,"[15] possibly indicating a reconsidered intensification of his

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1976), 24. Citations refer to the 1976 edition.

[9] Gordon, *The Battle of Maldon*, vi.

[10] Ibid., vi.

[11] Stuart Lee, "*Lagustreamas:* The Changing Waters Surrounding J.R.R. Tolkien and *The Battle of Maldon*," in *The Wisdom of Exeter*, ed. E.J. Christie (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2020), 158.

[12] See Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond, *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion & Guide: Chronology, Revised and Expanded Edition*, (London: HarperCollins, 2017), 1:109, 156, 165; Thomas Honegger, "*The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*: Philology and the Literary Muse," *Tolkien Studies* 4 (2007): 189. doi: 10.1353/tks.2007.0021; Peter Grybauskas, "Introduction" in *The Battle of Maldon together with The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son and 'The Tradition of Versification in Old English'*, ed. Peter Grybauskas (London: HarperCollins, 2023), xviii – xx.

[13] Peter Grybauskas, ed., *The Battle of Maldon together with The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son and 'The Tradition of Versification in Old English'* (London: HarperCollins, 2023).

[14] Grybauskas, "The Battle of Maldon," 60.

[15] Lee, "Lagustreamas," 165. Lee is quoting from Oxford Bodleian Library Tolkien MS A30/2, fol 127r.

initial translation of *ofermod*.[16] What Tolkien means by *ofermod* and its association with the anachronistic term "chivalry" applied to the early medieval period is explained in his essay "Ofermod."

Tolkien and Ofermod

Tolkien appends to his play "The Homecoming" a short essay titled "Ofermod" that, uncharacteristically for him, an inveterate niggler, exists only in the final typescript of the play.[17] Because he had promised to submit something to the scholarly journal *Essays and Studies* at a very busy time,[18] Tolkien sent his play but felt the need to add some critical commentary, as he himself admits: "But to merit a place in *Essays and Studies* it must, I suppose, contain at least by implication criticism of the matter and manner of the Old English poem (or of its critics)." [19]

In this short essay, Tolkien attempts to shift the focus away from critical approbation of Byrhtwold's famous heroic words and to consider them in relation to lines 89-90:

> Ða se earl ongan for his ofermode
> alyfan landes to fela laþere ðeode [20]

Tolkien translates the lines somewhat loosely: "Then the earl in his overmastering pride actually yielded ground to the enemy, as he should not have done."[21] The final clause, "as he should not have done" is Tolkien's own interpretation and emphasis, not a translation of any specific Old English words. The word *ofermod* now

[16] It is noteworthy that Tolkien refers to these lines with no criticism of the concept of Northern courage in an earlier essay, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 18.

[17] Honegger, "The Homecoming", 189-90 wonders if a draft of the essay might have been lost, as it is unusual for Tolkien not to work on multiple revisions of a work.

[18] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, eds. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 165, Letter 135.

[19] J.R.R. Tolkien, "Ofermod," in *The Battle of Maldon together with The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhtnhelm's Son and 'The Tradition of Versification in Old English'*, ed. Peter Grybauskas (London: HarperCollins, 2023) 27.

[20] "The Battle of Maldon," 20, lines 89-90.

[21] Tolkien, "Ofermod," 27.

becomes "overmastering pride" instead of the earlier "\over/confident chivalry" with more negative connotations in "overmastering" as opposed to "overconfident."

While readers might expect "chivalry" to be a term belonging to the later medieval age of romance narratives, Tolkien extends the idea to refer to earlier Old English poetry as well.[22] He defines chivalry as "pride, in the form of the desire for honour and glory, in life and after death."[23] An excess of this pride is the defect that Tolkien finds in Byrhtnoth's motives and actions in granting passage to the Vikings, thus "making a 'sporting fight' on level terms; but at other people's expense."[24] Heroism, according to Tolkien, always contains an element of this pride or chivalry, which he finds acceptable in subordinates who show loyalty to their superiors and have no responsibility for the lives of others. But it is unacceptable to Tolkien when a leader such as Byrhtnoth gambles the lives of his men in order to gain glory for himself, which is how Tolkien reads the lines about Byrhtnoth's *ofermod* and his granting of "too much" land to the enemy. In this redefinition of "northern heroism" Tolkien complicates earlier views such as those of E.V. Gordon or W.P. Ker by injecting degrees of disapproval into the concept of heroism which, as he states, "is never quite pure."[25]

Having examined Byrhtnoth in "The Battle of Maldon," Tolkien then expands his thinking on chivalry and heroism to look further back in time to *Beowulf*, a poem that he believed was composed much earlier, and then ahead to the fourteenth-century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Sir Gawain is "the exemplar of chivalry," [26] yet he falls short of the ideal as he accepts the green "luf-lace" from the Lady of Hautdessert when he is told it can protect him from death and fails to render it to the lady's husband Sir Bertilak as promised. Nevertheless, Gawain is exonerated because he acts as a subordinate in loyalty to King Arthur, who is subjected to some mild criticism by the poet. As for Beowulf, Tolkien points

[22] Tom Shippey points out this anachronism in "Tolkien and 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth'" in *Roots and Branches: Selected Papers on Tolkien by Tom Shippey*, (Zollikofen, Switzerland, 2007), 332. Amber Dunai finds that the term's aristocratic associations suit Tolkien's emphasis on leaders rather than subordinates in "Ofermod and Aristocratic Chivalry in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*," *Journal of Tolkien Research* 8, no. 1, article 1 (2019): 4.

[23] Tolkien, "Ofermod,"28-29.

[24] Ibid., 30.

[25] Ibid., 28.

[26] Ibid., 33.

out that in his youth he acted in allegiance to his lord Hygelac, but in his old age he chooses to fight the dragon for the sake of honour and glory, thereby risking the lives of his people by leaving them unprotected in the event of his death. In this poem too, the character Wiglaf expresses some criticism of Beowulf's actions.[27] In his comments, then, Tolkien posits a continuous alliterative poetic tradition, from *Beowulf* to "Maldon" to *Sir Gawain*, in which medieval poets explore the theme of heroism and chivalry: "It is not surprising that any consideration of the work of one of these leads to the others."[28] One could argue that in choosing to write in alliterative metre in "The Homecoming" while exploring the same themes of heroism and chivalry, Tolkien was also claiming his place in a continuous alliterative poetic tradition that stretched from the early medieval period to the twentieth century.[29]

Tolkien's view of "The Battle of Maldon" represents what becomes a common modern perspective. John D. Niles identifies a "post-romantic cult of suicidal devotion"[30] that influences interpretations of the poem that focus on the last stand of heroic warriors willing to sacrifice their lives in order to die by their fallen lord. Niles traces its earliest proponents to Charles Kennedy's *The Earliest English Poetry* and Frank Stenton's *Anglo-Saxon England*, both published in 1943, ten years before "Ofermod" appeared.[31] Niles names this modern myth "Balaklava syndrome," that is, the praise of suicidal military actions such as those in the disastrous battle at Balaklava in 1854 which were commemorated in Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade." Niles points out that such readings ignore the historical and political context of "The Battle of Maldon" and assume without evidence from the text that all of the warriors named would be dead by the end. In fact, Tolkien posits just such a transhistorical praise of the heroism of subordinates, including an allusion to Tennyson's poem: "It is the heroism of obedience and love

[27] Tolkien, "Ofermod," 34-35. As Mary Bowman points out, there is no such note of criticism in Tolkien's earlier *Beowulf* essay. Mary Bowman, "Refining the Gold: Tolkien, *The Battle of Maldon*, and the Northern Theory of Courage." *Tolkien Studies* 7 (2010), 96. doi:10.13 53/tks.0.0074.

[28] Ibid., 32.

[29] Tolkien switches from rhyming couplets to alliterative meter in Version E of his "Homecoming" manuscript drafts.

[30] John D. Niles, "*Maldon* and Mythopoesis," in *Old English Heroic Poems and the Social Life of Texts*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 231.

[31] Ibid., 230, n. 60, traces the influence of this view in later criticism from the 1970s to 1990s.

not of pride or wilfulness that is the most heroic and the most moving; from Wiglaf under his kinsman's shield, to Beorhtwold at Maldon, down to Balaclava, even if it is enshrined in verse no better than *The Charge of the Light Brigade*."[32] In his introduction to the play, Tolkien asserts that all of Byrhtnoth's household warriors "fought on, until they all fell dead beside their lord."[33]

While Tolkien may not have been the first to publish such views of the poem, his influence on subsequent criticism of "Maldon" has been marked. As Tom Shippey points out, critics hardly ever commented on lines 89-90, which include the word "ofermod," before Tolkien drew attention to them.[34] In 1979, George Clark examined the way subsequent critics followed Tolkien's lead in their critique of Byrhtnoth,[35] and Shippey states that in a 1981 edition of the poem by D.G. Scragg, "the Tolkien view is utterly dominant."[36] In a later assessment of Tolkien's influence in 2007, Michael D.C. Drout points out that critical attention has been moving to other considerations but that

> The greatest long-term benefit of Tolkien's study of *Maldon* is that he ended up convincing many readers that the poem was far more subtle than a simple celebration of "Northern Courage" but was instead an examination of some of the complexities—political, moral, legal, and emotional—of battle and loss.[37]

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[32] Tolkien, "Ofermod,"32. See also D.G. Scragg, "The Battle of Maldon: Fact or Fiction?" in *The Battle of Maldon Fiction and Fact*, edited by Janet Cooper (London: Hambledon Press, 1993), 29-31 for Scragg's comparison of the similar tone of *Maldon* and *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. Niles, in "*Maldon* and Mythopoesis," 228-29, also points to Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson's *Guide to Old English*, which makes the same comparison.

[33] Tolkien, "Beorhtnoth's Death," 4.

[34] Shippey, "Tolkien and 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth'," 331.

[35] See George Clark, "The Hero of *Maldon*: Vir Pius et Strenuus," *Speculum* 54, no. 2 (1979): 257-82 for a detailed critique of Tolkien's points and the way they had been taken up and elaborated by subsequent critics.

[36] Tom Shippey, "Tolkien's Academic Reputation Now" in *Roots and Branches: Selected Papers on Tolkien*, (Zollikofen, Switzerland: Walking Tree, 2007), 206.

[37] Michael D.C. Drout, "J.R.R. Tolkien's Medieval Scholarship and its Significance," *Tolkien Studies* 4 (2007): 141. doi:10.1353/tks.2007.0013. For an example of a positive evaluation of Byrhtnoth's character, see Mark Atherton who argues that Byrhtnoth is a "Christian hero worthy of emulation at a time of national crisis." Mark Atherton, *The Battle of Maldon: War and Peace in Tenth-Century England*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 14.

While it is possible to trace Tolkien's varied and significant influence on "Maldon" criticism, his views on *ofermod* have also shaped his own fiction. For example, Janet Brennan Croft finds that Tolkien's views on the loyalty and courage of subordinates offer a model for Sam, Merry, and Pippin.[38] Alexander Bruce contrasts Gandalf's actions and motivations on the Bridge of Khazad-Dûm, forbidding the Balrog to pass, with Byrhtnoth's decision at the causeway, allowing the Vikings to cross. As Alexander points out, "Gandalf acts as Byrhtnoth should have acted—to save his loyal companions, not to jeopardize them," and he further considers how "Frodo and Sam enact the very words of Byrhtwold as they make their way through the plains of desolation and despair."[39] Mary Bowman contrasts the sons of Odda in "Maldon," who flee the battlefield to save their lives, with Frodo in the Barrow and at the Ford and with Gandalf in Moria, both of whom do not flee but act to save others. Furthermore, she examines the choices of Samwise as the antithesis of various speakers in "Maldon": "he does not flee, he does not seek revenge, he does not take up a military battle he cannot win, he does not do what will make the best song. He does whatever will best serve his "purpose and duty," and in the end succeeds."[40]

Amber Dunai explores how Boromir and Denethor exhibit "chivalric pride" in their motivations and actions, ultimately disregarding the welfare of those subordinate to them, while Faramir makes decisions with the goal of saving his people and others in Middle-earth. In this way, Dunai expands Tolkien's concept of *ofermod* beyond the battlefield: "These exploits need not be martial or strategic; they can also be ethical or moral in nature."[41] Peter Grybauskas takes a broader view as well, identifying the interplay between heroic critique and heroic praise in Tída and Totta and suggesting that the structure of the last four books of *The Lord of the Rings* creates a similar "tension between opposites" in both their "epic and unglamorous portrayals of war."[42] Richard West extends the concept of *ofermod* to

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[38] Janet Brennan Croft, *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2004), 20.

[39] Alexander Bruce, "Maldon and Moria: On Byrhtnoth, Gandalf, and Heroism in *The Lord of the Rings*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* 26, no. 1, article 11 (2007): 157. https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol26/iss1/11.

[40] Bowman, "Refining the Gold," 103.

[41] Dunai, "Ofermod," 15.

[42] Grybauskas, "Dialogic War," 47.

the broader legendarium, commenting on how Tolkien's "ambivalent view of the heroic ethos" applies to Túrin's story.[43] These readings demonstrate the way in which Tolkien's interpretation of *ofermod* in "The Battle of Maldon" provides a productive lens through which to judge his representations of acceptable and unacceptable heroic action in his fiction mainly in the 1940s to 1950s.

"The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son"

While the "Ofermod" essay seems to have been a late addition designed to satisfy the expectation of a scholarly journal for a critical commentary on "The Battle of Maldon," the play that Tolkien wrote, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son"[44] is a piece that evolved over many drafts and a long period of time. Scull and Hammond posit that the earliest parts of it were in existence as early as 1931.[45] By its publication date of 1953, it had been revised through ten drafts and one typescript, now held at the Bodleian Library, and an additional draft in the Brotherton Library at the University of Leeds.[46] Tolkien declares his intentions in writing the play in the first sentence of the "Ofermod" essay: "This piece, somewhat larger than the Old English fragment that inspired it, was composed primarily as verse, to be condemned or approved as such."[47] Although the first drafts of the play are written in rhyming couplets, Tolkien revises the play into alliterative metre in Version E of the Bodleian manuscripts and continues working on subsequent drafts in order to create, as he explains in a letter, "real alliterative verse (of various styles)."[48] In composing "real alliterative verse," Tolkien demonstrates that modern

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[43] Richard West, "Túrin's *Ofermod*: An Old English Theme in the Development of the Story of Túrin," in *Tolkien's Legendarium: Essays on* The History of Middle-earth, eds.Verlyn Flieger and Carl F. Hostetter (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2000), 236.

[44] Tolkien altered the West Saxon spelling of "Byrhtnoth" to "Beorhtnoth," a form that more closely represented the eastern dialect of Essex. I will use Tolkien's spelling when discussing "The Homecoming" and the West Saxon spelling "Byrhtnoth" when referring to "The Battle of Maldon." See Michael D.C. Drout, "J.R.R. Tolkien's Medieval Scholarship," 161, fn 95.

[45] Christina Scull and Wayne Hammond, *Chronology*, 167.

[46] Thomas Honegger, "The Homecoming," has examined the Bodleian manuscripts, and my discussion of the Brotherton Library draft was presented in an online conference in May 2021; my essay based on that presentation, "Tolkien the Playwright: Manuscript Drafts and Faërian Drama in 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth'" is forthcoming in the Fall 2024 issue of *Mythlore*.

[47] Tolkien, "Ofermod," 27.

[48] Scull and Hammond, *Chronology*, 414. See Grybauskas, "An Early *Homecoming* in Rhyme, "150-61 in *The Battle of Maldon together with The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*

poets could take up Old English alliterative techniques, a belief that he expressed in his lectures.[49] In creating alliterative metre in "various styles," he illustrates the flexibility of this poetic form and his skill as a poet. Further, in composing an alliterative drama, Tolkien creates a modern theatrical piece that goes beyond the dialogues written by Old English poets. Unfortunately, as Shippey comments, most critics have paid attention to the "Ofermod" essay and ignored the play,[50] even though the drama incorporates some of Tolkien's scholarly theories about Old English alliterative poetry and metre.[51]

One could argue that, in writing in alliterative verse, Tolkien places himself in the continuum of alliterative poets that he discussed in "Ofermod," who stretched from the composers of *Beowulf* to "Maldon" to *Sir Gawain*. With "The Homecoming," Tolkien brings that poetic tradition into the twentieth century, contemplating the nature and limits of heroism, as did his predecessors, but with elements of a modern perspective.

We know that Tolkien was writing and revising "The Homecoming" throughout the Second World War, and his letters attest to how his concerns for his two sons serving in the military gave rise to memories of his own experiences in the war in which he fought decades earlier. It should not be surprising, then, that in "The Homecoming" his contemplation and critique of heroism and leadership ring similar notes to other Great War writers even while being integrated with traditional heroic praise stemming from the early medieval period.

Elsewhere, I have outlined the characteristically modern features of "The Homecoming" in both subject and style: unlike Old English dialogues, Tolkien writes a play designed to be performed in a theatre,[52] with two servants as the

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Beorhthelm's Son and 'The Tradition of Versification in Old English', (London: HarperCollins, 2023) in which Version D from the Bodleian manuscripts is published for the first time.

[49] See Anna Smol and [G.] Foster "J.R.R. Tolkien's 'Homecoming' and Modern Alliterative Metre," *Journal of Tolkien Research* 12, no.1, article 3, (2021): 16. https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol12/iss1/3.

[50] Tom Shippey, "Boar and Badger: An Old English Heroic Antithesis?" *Leeds Studies in English* 16 (1985): 233.

[51] See Smol and Foster, "J.R.R. Tolkien's 'The Homecoming'." Stuart Lee also discusses Tolkien's metrical practice and theory in "*Lagustreamas*," 170-74.

[52] Anna Smol, "Tolkien the Playwright: Manuscript Drafts and Faërian Dramas in 'The Homecoming,'" *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and*

central characters, not the noble warriors one would expect in a medieval tale. As in many Great War descriptions, the scene is the ghostly aftermath of a battle, with the field piled high with slaughtered men. And like World War One poets who often focused on gruesome details of physical disability and death, Tolkien writes dialogue that consistently reminds us of the dismembered corpse of Beorhtnoth.[53] This is not to propose a simplistic reading such as Stuart Lee objects to: "(First World War = Bad Leadershp = Futile Deaths = Byrhtnoth)" [54] but to point to features of the play that mark a more characteristically modern rather than medieval perspective. As Lee points out, Tolkien's ideas about Byrhtnoth became more critical over time, but I would argue that that fact does not preclude the possibility that "The Homecoming" draws on some of Tolkien's earlier war experiences, remembered and mulled over thirty to forty years later, which were incorporated into his later writings, such as *The Lord of the Rings* and "The Homecoming. [55]

In "The Homecoming," Tolkien creates two characters, Torhthelm or Totta for short, and Tídwald or Tída, both of whom discuss war and its aftermath, including the motives of their leader. They each represent contrasting views, though the boundary between their ideas tends to blur at some points. Tolkien's two characters are most certainly subordinates; they are servants of the local abbot who are sent out after the battle to find the body of Beorhtnoth. Their task is to bring the body home to the abbey for burial. They search among the dead in the dark night, identifying some of the warriors who are named in "The Battle of Maldon."

Mythopoiec Literature, Fall 2024, forthcoming. For a modern context in which to view Tolkien's play, see Janet Brennan Croft, "'Giving Up Their Dead': *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son* and *A Sleep of Prisoners*," *Journal of Tolkien Research* 19, iss. 1, article 13 (2024). https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol19/iss1/13.

[53] Anna Smol, "Bodies in War: Medieval and Modern Tensions in 'The Homecoming'" in *"Something Has Gone Crack": New Perspectives on J.R.R. Tolkien in the Great War*, ed. Janet Brennan Croft and Annika Röttinger (Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree, 2019), 263-83.

[54] Stuart Lee, "*Lagustreamas*," 163.

[55] Critics such as Paul H. Kocher, *Master of Middle-earth: The Fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien* (New York: Ballantine, 1972); Tom Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2001); Janet Brennan Croft, *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2004); Brian Rosebury, *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); and John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth* (London: HarperCollins, 2003) are some of the earliest scholars who established the influence of Tolkien's World War One experiences in his later work, especially in *The Lord of the Rings*, which was written over the same period of time as "The Homecoming." For more recent scholarship on this topic, see the essays in *"Something Has Gone Crack": New Perspectives on J.R.R. Tolkien in the Great War*, ed. Janet Brennan Croft and Annika Röttinger (Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2019).

Eventually, they find Beorhtnoth's body, beheaded, as is described in one of the chronicles, and heave it into a wagon for transport. Their progress is interrupted by corpse-robbers, but after a brief scuffle, the thieves run away, and the two characters proceed while contemplating the actions of Beorhtnoth and the whereabouts of the Viking invaders.

The two characters are mainly contrasted in their actions and views. Totta is the younger man, the son of a minstrel, whose "head is full of old lays."[56] Tída is the older man, a farmer who, unlike Totta, has experienced battle in the past. The criticism of Beorhtnoth that Tolkien finds in "The Battle of Maldon" is expressed in Tída's voice, though Tolkien extends this view beyond what the "Maldon" poet expressly said. For example, Tída represents Beorhtnoth as a proud, "chivalrous" leader, who is "Too proud, too princely!" and "Needlessly noble."[57] Tída makes the negative view of their leader explicit: "our lord was at fault, / or so in Maldon this morning men were saying."[58] As Shippey points out, Tolkien has Tída describe Beorhtnoth's motives in a way that the "Maldon" poet never did: "He let them cross the causeway, so keen was he / to give minstrels matter for mighty songs."[59] Although one can assume that a desire for glory would involve an expectation of "mighty songs" about one's exploits, this is not pointed out by the "Maldon" poet.

Those heroic songs are the stuff that colours Totta's vision. He is ready with heightened rhetorical verses on a couple of occasions which are noteworthy in demonstrating Tolkien's skill in writing alliterative metre, as he can switch from an informal, conversational register to a more highly crafted style of verse reminiscent of the *Beowulf*-poet. For example, when the men find Beorhtnoth's body, and to mark a moment of respectful silence, Totta chants, "His head was higher than the helm of kings/ with heathen crowns...."[60] -- a set piece in praise of Beorhtnoth.[61]

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[56] Tolkien, "Beorhtnoth's Death," 5.

[57] Tolkien, "The Homecoming," in *The Battle of Maldon together with The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son and 'The Tradition of Versification in Old English'*, ed. Peter Grybauskas (London: HarperCollins, 2023), 20.

[58] Ibid., 20.

[59] Ibid., 20.

[60] Ibid., 13.

[61] For an analysis of the metre in this and other passages, see Smol and Foster, "J.R.R. Tolkien's 'The Homecoming'."

Moments later, Totta continues chanting,

> Now mourn for ever
> Saxon and English, from the sea's margin
> to the western forest! The wall is fallen,
> women are weeping; the wood is blazing
> and the fire flaming as a far beacon.[62]

In the description of this scene of devastation and insecurity after their leader's death, the tone and situation are similar to the end of the Old English poem *Beowulf*, when warriors and a Geatish woman lament their fallen lord. Totta calls on his countrymen to "Build high the barrow his bones to keep!," [63] and he enumerates what should be buried with their leader, a traditional list of treasures belonging to heroic warriors, including "helm and sword," "golden corslet," rich raiment and rings gleaming," and "wealth unbegrudged" before moving to a conclusion that describes Beorhtnoth with superlatives that echo the superlative qualities attributed to Beowulf at the end of his poem.[64] Tída recognizes the skill and effort that went into the composition – "Good words enough, gleeman Totta!"[65] – although he thinks it wiser just to get a good night's sleep. He also recognizes the allusion to Beowulf's pyre, but being very literal-minded (a consistent feature in his character), he points out that no one is going to build a barrow and bury treasures in it:

> Beorhtnoth we bear not Béowulf here:
> No pyres for him, nor piling of mounds'
> And the gold will be given to the good abbot.[66]

Of course, Totta knows this as well, but he is composing in the way that oral formulaic poets composed, using well-known themes for their metonymic value.

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[62] Tolkien, "The Homecoming," 15.

[63] Ibid., 15.

[64] Ibid., 15. For a comparison with *Beowulf*, see Tolkien's prose translation in *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary, together with Sellic Spell*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (HarperCollins, 2014), 104-105.

[65] Ibid., 15.

[66] Ibid., 15.

Such poetry has what oral theorist John Miles Foley calls "communicative economy," which occurs when even the mention of a familiar theme or phrase is enough in traditional oral poetry to give rise to emotional associations and expectations in a knowing audience.[67] In this case, Totta is using the images of a pagan burial, echoing *Beowulf* to elicit feelings of loss in a lament for a beloved leader. He sees the present situation through the poetry of the past, working as an alliterative poet in a traditional continuum. The allusions to the past create a layered view of time, a palimpsest in which the past seems to merge with the present.

Later, an allusion to the Old English Chronicle poem, "The Battle of Brunanburh" occurs (though not marked by a direction for chanting), which offers a sweeping historical vision in referring to Beorhtnoth as the last in a line of "Saxon lords long-descended"[68] who once conquered the island. As Peter Grybauskas comments, this allusion is a "recognition of the cyclical irony to the depredations of the Danes in this time." [69] The Saxons were once the successful invaders of Britain; now, under Beorhtnoth's leadership, they have been defeated by other Viking invaders. The Brunanburh poem, however, celebrates a victory of the English against Vikings in 937, and it is in the hope of such images of victory from the past that Totta hopes the present will live up to. In other words, Totta has traditional heroic poetry ready to hand through which to comment on and understand the present that he sees before him, in much the same way that the "Maldon" poet could recreate a version of the ancient *comitatus* ideal to describe a contemporary event.

The two voices of Tída and Totta, expressing different views of the events at Maldon, are held in tension in what Peter Grybauskas has called a "dialogic war."[70] I have similarly argued[71] that they illustrate what Verlyn Flieger sees as Tolkien's tendency to hold two contradictory positions in his writing, where he "seems to toggle between diametrically opposite positions.[72] Neither Grybauskas

[67] John Miles Foley, *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic*. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991), 6-7.

[68] Tolkien, "The Homecoming," 21.

[69] Peter Grybauskas, "Notes," in *The Battle of Maldon together with The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son and 'The Tradition of Versification in Old English'*, ed. Peter Grybauskas (London: HarperCollins, 2023), 45.

[70] Peter Grybauskas, "Dialogic War," 37-56.

[71] Anna Smol, "Bodies in War," 277-79.

[72] Verlyn Flieger, "The Arch and the Keystone,"*Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S.*

nor I accept Tom Shippey's extreme view that Tolkien represented the poet Totta as a boastful fool and "simply a stooge" in order to reject heroic poetry and condemn the theory of Northern courage.[73] Tída, after all, finds some comfort in poetry ("Brave words, my lad!/ The woven staves have yet worth in them/ for woeful hearts"),[74] and Totta does not reject criticism of Beorhtnoth's failed strategy. In Tolkien's fiction, Totta will compose the poem that we all know as "The Battle of Maldon" which will include – as Tolkien saw it – both criticism of the leadership of Beorhtnoth as well as lines extolling heroic will in the words of his subordinate, Byrhtwold. The poem will be composed of the images and opinions that Totta saw, imagined, or heard in his conversation with Tída on the battlefield, as well as through an extraordinary vision that he experiences near the end of the play.[75]

The dream vision occurs as Totta is riding in a wagon with Beorhtnoth's body, lulled by their forward movement until he speaks "drowsily and half dreaming." [76] In this liminal state, he narrates his experience, beginning with the near future: "I hear mass chanted for master's soul / in Ely isle." He then sees much further ahead into the future:

> So the world passes;
> day follows day, and the dust gathers,
> his tomb crumbles, as time gnaws it,
> and his kith and kindred out of ken dwindle.[77]

The vision intensifies as the scene goes dark and we hear Totta with "the voice of one speaking in a dream"[78] but now he is speaking as if he is present in an

Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature, 38, no. 1, article 3 (2019): 7. https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol38/iss1/3.

[73] Shippey, "Tolkien and 'The Homecoming,'" 329.

[74] Tolkien, "The Homecoming," 13.

[75] For discussions of Totta as the "Maldon" poet, see Anna Smol, "Bodies in War," 278-80; Peter Grybauskas, "Portrait of the Poet as a Young Man: Noteworthy Omission in The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," *Tolkien Studies* 17 (2020): 163-78 as well as Anna Smol and [G] Foster, "J.R.R. Tolkien's 'The Homecoming,' 14-15.

[76] Tolkien, "The Homecoming," 23.

[77] Ibid., 24.

[78] Ibid., 24.

urgent scene, witnessing a gathering of men, who appear "Out of the mists" and "through darkling doors."[79] Totta is vividly experiencing in the present a scene from the past, as he hears voices and then chants well-known lines that will appear in "The Battle of Maldon," though with two lines added by Tolkien:

> 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. [80]

Tolkien calls the first two lines "an ancient and honoured expression of heroic will."[81] These lines from past heroic tradition enter Totta's present dream state, and they will become the lines used in his future composition of "The Battle of Maldon." We have here a longer passage than appears in "Maldon," suggesting that this was the more complete original passage out of which Totta found his inspiration. In other words, we could call this an "asterisk-poem," to adapt a term coined by Tom Shippey, who explains that just as philologists recreate the origins of words and mark them with an asterisk, so too Tolkien sometimes recreates a lost origin in an "asterisk-reality." [82] The experience of time in the passage, from heroic past to Totta's present, is even more layered for readers or listeners, who, if they recognize the lines that will be spoken by Byrhtwold in Totta's future poem, can simultaneously understand past, present, and future in the allusion.

A bump on the road puts an end to Totta's dream vision, and soon the sound of the cart fades away and the two characters disappear from view. However, the play is not over yet. Richard West draws attention to the last citations of poetry in the drama that are rarely discussed and suggests how Tolkien is playing with time perspectives here through the experience of poetry. After Tída and Totta's conversation is over and their wagon rumbles away, and after a period of silence, chanting voices eventually are heard, either by the audience of the play or by imaginative readers of the text. The voices start chanting faintly a Latin office of the dead, "Dirige, Domine, in conspectu tuo viam meam," but then "A Voice in the

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[79] Ibid., 24.

[80] Tolkien, "The Homecoming," 24.

[81] Tolkien, "Beorhtnoth's Death," 6.

[82] Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth: How J.R.R. Tolkien created a new mythology* (London: Grafton, 1992), 17-19.

dark" recites a rhyming couplet:

> Sadly they sing, the monks of Ely isle!
> Row men, row! Let us listen here a while![83]

Tolkien's explanation is that these lines are "presaging the fading end of the old heroic alliterative measure"[84] and with that concept, he suggests a movement forward in time in the reader's understanding. He also identifies the lines as an echo of verses referring to the future King Canute in the *Historia Eliensis*:

> Merie sungen ðe muneches binnen Ely,
> ða Cnut ching reu ðerby.
> 'Roweð, cnites, noer the land
> and here we ther muneches saeng' [85]

In transforming this twelfth-century source with monks singing "merrily" to monks singing "sadly" in this play set in the tenth century, Tolkien is positing an earlier version of the poem that in another way presages a future transformation.

The most familiar use of citations in a literary work is to point towards a previous source in time that is repeated in a later time. Totta's allusions to *Beowulf* and "The Battle of Brunanburh" work in this way within the fiction of the play; situated in 991, Totta alludes to earlier works, thereby connecting Tolkien's fictional world with primary world texts. Just as with the "Maldon" lines in Totta's dream vision, so too these lines alluding to Canute complicate the temporal framework. In other words, this is another "asterisk-poem." Tída and Totta are no longer on the scene, but when the mysterious voice in the dark recites the couplet, we as readers or listeners might hold in our minds the later verses simultaneously with this asterisk-version in an earlier fictional time. The actual allusion is to verses in the future, not to verses from the past. [86]

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[83] Tolkien, "The Homecoming," 25.

[84] Tolkien, "Beorhtnoth's Death," 6.

[85] Ibid., 7.

[86] For a similar reading of Tolkien's allusions in the Eowyn asterisk version of *Macbeth*, see Owen Dugan and James Krasner, "Soup, Bones, and Shakespeare: Literary Authorship and Allusion in Middle-earth," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* 40, no. 2, article 8 (2022):114-16. https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol40/iss2/8 .

However, in the tenth-century fictional timeframe, Canute is not specifically mentioned; in fact, he may not have been born yet. The verses recorded in the twelfth century are thought to represent a popular oral tradition commemorating Canute's visits to the abbey at Ely, which in that time was only accessible by boat.[87] Just as Totta hears his mysterious voices in the dark that speak from a poetic and proverbial heroic tradition, so too we, as the audience or readers, hear a voice in the dark giving us access to an older poetic tradition in the form of an asterisk-verse.

As Richard West comments, these lines are appropriate for indicating gradual change from one period to another, and by introducing the deliberate anachronism of Canute, Tolkien reminds us that although Canute was a descendent of the Vikings who defeated the English at Maldon, he was also a Christian king who eventually ruled over England. As West states,

> Tolkien's invoking King Canute at the end of *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* is thus rich in allusion but quite ambivalent. His reign did bring peace and stability to England and to the Christian Church, in that respect negating the fears for the future of the characters in the poem, though there would be more than two decades of warfare and suffering in the interim.[88]

Beorhtnoth in the tenth century, Canute in the eleventh century, both travelling to Ely Abbey (and both patrons of the Abbey) – Tolkien layers these parallel personages and events as in a palimpsest to suggest a historical context that knowing readers or audiences can understand.

Briefly before the rhymed lines are spoken by an unseen voice, and louder and more clearly afterwards, we hear the Latin verses, "Dirige, Domine, in conspectu tuo viam meam," the Latin office for the dead, to close out the play. The imagery of calling on God to direct one's path applies to Beorhtnoth's journey not only to the Abbey but also to his Christian eternal life, as Tolkien believed it applied to us all. The play, then, looks ahead in time once again to the ultimate end of time for all.[89] In Tolkien's view, everyone's path is forward to this future, but poetry can

[87] For a discussion of the verses and their historical context, see Eleanor Parker, "'Merry sang the monks': Cnut's Poetry and the *Liber Eliensis*," *Scandinavica* 57, no. 1(2018): 14-38. doi: 10.54432/scand/GXOR9440.

[88] Richard C. West, "Canute and Beorhtnoth," 353.

[89] For a discussion of apocalyptic themes and allusions at the end of the play, see Kristine Larsen, "'The world withers and the wind rises": Apocalyptic Language in 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth' and 'The Fall of Arthur'," *Journal of Tolkien Research* 18, iss. 2, article 9 (2023).

show us the way back along a lost road, as in Totta's vision, or, as in the concluding verses of the play, expand our historical awareness and immerse us in a multilayered experience of time.

Conclusion

Tolkien's engagement with the Old English "Battle of Maldon" -- as student, professor, and creative writer -- proved to be a catalyst for the development of his thinking about heroism and medieval poetry. His influential "Ofermod" essay allowed him to survey a tradition of heroic alliterative verse before and after "Maldon," and his knowledge and skill in writing alliterative verse himself suggests that he, as a modern alliterative poet, should be counted as part of that tradition. His play, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth," in just over 350 lines, packs in dialogue, action, poetic allusions, and a visionary scene enacted by two distinctly drawn characters who contemplate the past, comment on the present, and consider the future. His poetic allusions typically look to the past, bringing its relevance into the present, but in the case of two asterisk-poems, the allusions point to future works for knowing audiences or readers, who are thus left contemplating multiple historical levels through their experience of poetry.

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