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THE WISDOM OF EXETER

ANGLO-SAXON STUDIES IN HONOR OF PATRICK W. CONNER

Edited by E.J. Christie

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The Wisdom of Exeter

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6 *Lagustreamas*: The Changing Waters Surrounding J. R. R. Tolkien and *The Battle of Maldon*

The Battle of Maldon was described by John Holmes as (along with *Beowulf*) “the Old English poem that most influenced Tolkien’s fiction.”[1] Whilst this may be a contentious statement, and an equally strong case could be made for Tolkien’s engagement with *The Wanderer*,[2] there is clearly an element of truth here. This article will, using Tolkien’s fiction and his published and unpublished papers (especially those held in the Bodleian Library at Oxford), demonstrate that he continually engaged with the challenges in the poem throughout his career. Most importantly though, like the waters of the Blackwater, his views on *Maldon* were not always consistent and changed with the flows and eddies of time.

Student, Lecturer, Editor

One can feel relatively safe in the assertion that *The Battle of Maldon* always was, and still is, a core poem in the Old English literary canon. As is well known, it depicts the defeat of the Anglo-Saxons, led by Byrhtnoth,[3] at the hands of the Vikings in 991 near to the settlement of Maldon in Essex. It is as widely taught now in Old English courses as it was during Tolkien’s lifetime. Indeed, Tom Honegger’s observation that Tolkien “probably knew the poem as an undergraduate,”[4] is undeniably true and it is very simple to eliminate the

1 John R. Holmes, “The Battle of Maldon,” in *J. R. R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment*, ed. Michael C. Drout (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 52–54.
2 Stuart D. Lee, “Tolkien and *The Wanderer*: From Translation to Adaptation,” *Tolkien Studies* 6 (2009): 189–211.
3 Tolkien, in his writings, often changed this to the dipthongized “Beorhtnoth” to reflect his views on how it would have been pronounced in Late West Saxon.
4 Thomas Honegger, “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth: Philology and the Literary Muse,” *Tolkien Studies* 4 (2007): 189–99 at 189. See also Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond, *The J. R. R. Tolkien Companion and Guide*, 3 vols. (London: HarperCollins, 2nd ed. 2017), I:46.

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"probably." A quick glance at Tolkien's personal edition of *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader*[5] from 1908 (the 8th edition) shows that this was the book he used as a student (the flyleaf is inscribed "JRR Tolkien // Coll. Exon. // Oxon // Michaelmas 1911"). On pages 120–30 which contain *Maldon*, the young Tolkien made numerous pencil annotations in the margins as he worked his way through the text. This early volume (in terms of his career) also serves to illustrate the precocious talent that Tolkien was to display in later years. Even at this early stage he was not afraid to take Sweet to task (p. viii) by noting that the editor had not corrected all the references in the glossary as a result of removing the chapter "Ælfric on the Old Testament" which had been present in previous editions.

Pursuing this further, Scull and Hammond observe that in Trinity term 1915, Tolkien, by now having moved to studying English Language and Literature, sat exams which included *Maldon*.[6] A closer examination of the actual papers shows that although *Maldon* was not explicitly mentioned the exam questions or translation exercises, any student worth their salt would have had to have referenced it when answering one of the contextual essays. No doubt the poem also formed a core part of the tutorials Tokien sat.[7]

After graduating, Tolkien's interactions with *Maldon* are evidenced by the books that survive from his personal library. First, in his own copy of Sweet's *A Second Anglo-Saxon Reader* (Oxford, 1887)[8] which has on the fly-leaf "JRR Tolkien // 1919," and second in his copy of Sweet's *Reader* (9th edition, 1922). The latter is completely disbound and one could conjecture from this that it was possibly used in teaching (the pages being passed around for comment) when Tolkien was at the University of Leeds.[9] When looking at the pages on *Maldon* we can see that Tolkien noted the following:

> p. 120 hyssa l. 2 – "once B[*eowulf*] 1317"
> p. 124 gegrundene – "[grimme] // cf Ruin 14 // cf Pearl 654 // Þe glayne so // grimly grounde // grimly growndyne // gare Isumbras // 453"

This is far from controversial, and adds little to our understanding of Tolkien's thoughts on the poem, but the additional references to *Pearl* and *St. Isumbras*

5 Bodley, Tolkien MS E16/40. All the manuscripts cited in this article are in the Bodleian Library.
6 Scull and Hammond, *Tolkien Companion and Guide*, I:46. The exam papers are available online (http://poppy.nsms.ox.ac.uk/woruldhord/contributions/235).
7 Tolkien's tutors at Oxford were K. Sisam for English and W. Craigie for Scandinavian.
8 Bodley, Tolkien MS E16/39.
9 Bodley Tolkien MS E16/41.

are interesting and will be discussed later, showing at the very least that Tolkien wanted to place the poem in its wider context.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note what is *not* there. Notably, in all three books, there is no note, gloss, or mark for the key word *ofermod* which was to occupy his thoughts so importantly later on as we shall see. It is amusing also to note that Tolkien, like every student and teacher since, resorted to notes in the margins to get him out of problems when translating, or for aide-mémoires when teaching. This is somewhat ironic when set alongside a comment he makes in his later (unpublished) 1928 lecture entitled "The Germanic Verb." Picking up a cause which was one he was to come back to again and again, namely the defence of language in the English syllabus at Oxford, he drew on *Maldon* as a rallying cry for defenders of philology and Old English, but perhaps forgetting his own practices as an undergraduate:

> It is with this faith that an attempt is made still to keep alive a "language" side in our swollen school. But to such a standard it is no good rallying fainthearts who will not work and dullards who cannot. If even the few who rally cannot work we should leave the absurd English School in peace to the simple throngs who groan over an Old English Reader (*well-glossed in pencil in their witless way*)[10] having bibliography as their hope, and chat about Chaucer as their recreation. In this University linguistic studies have almost reached their Maldon. If you don't gallop off after the poltroon son of Odda,[11] if you stay upon the field of battle where the best should be, then for heaven's sake let it be felt. You might save the School and yourselves as well.

Returning to Oxford in the 1920s to take up the Chair of Anglo-Saxon, Tolkien continued his interaction with the poem. Again Scull and Hammond provide us with a useful summary, noting that the evidence shows he taught *Maldon* more or less up to his retirement.[12] *Maldon* seemingly rose in importance over the years when it replaced Ælfric's *Life of St. Oswald* and *The Assumption of St. John* as a set text on the English syllabus Prelims paper.

Of course, as is well known, Tolkien never personally produced an edition of *The Battle of Maldon*, but his colleague at Leeds University—E. V. Gordon—did just that in 1937.[13] The collaboration between Tolkien and Gordon is a

10 Emphasis not in the original.

11 Godric, who deserts the English at the height of the battle in *Maldon*.

12 Scull and Hammond, *Tolkien Companion and Guide*, I:156, 165 and *passim*; II:109. Tom Honegger ("Homecoming," 189) notes that the *University Gazette* 59 (1928–29), 55, records Tolkien as giving lectures on "The Battle of Maldon, Brunanburgh, and verse from the Chronicle" (Michaelmas Term 1928).

13 E. V. Gordon, ed., *The Battle of Maldon* (London: Methuen, 1937; reprinted in 1964).

matter for longer discussion, but it was clear that for both sides it was fruitful. The frustrating aspect though is that despite their best intentions it actually led to very little published output, mainly due, it would appear, to Tolkien's inability to close a project or meet a deadline. In this instance though, in the foreword to his edition of *Maldon*, Gordon specifically thanked Tolkien for having offered considerable assistance, and for helping out on all kinds of textual problems.[14] He expressed his gratitude to his colleague for proof-reading, making "many corrections and contributions," and providing solutions to "many of the textual and philological problems."[15]

Moreover, it is interesting to note that it was around this time (the late 1930s) that Tolkien was working on his famous *Monsters and the Critics* lecture (which he delivered in 1936 and published in 1937). Here, in the section that discussed the heroic spirit and "undefeated will," Tolkien drew our attention to Byrhtwold's exhortation at the end of *Maldon* as a summative "doctrinal expression" of the ideal.[16] Putting this together then, in terms of a chronological progress, it is clear from the lecture and the assistance he gave to Gordon that Tolkien was actively looking at the poem in the mid- to late 1930s in some detail. This helps to substantiate the commonly held view that it was around this time that Tolkien also began his most ambitious engagement with *Maldon*—the alliterative poem/drama *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son* (hereafter *Homecoming*).

The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorththelm's Son

Before considering the chronological placement of *Homecoming* in Tolkien's published output, it is worth recapping the main details of the work. It is a verse drama, or "essay-cum-poem" as Shippey called it,[17] reconstructing the events that might have taken place immediately after the defeat at Maldon.

14 Gordon's edition of 1937 was the fifth book in the Methuen series, and his last. See Douglas Anderson, "'An industrious little devil': E. V. Gordon as friend and collaborator with Tolkien," in *Tolkien the Medievalist*, ed. Jane Chance (London: Routledge, 2008), 15–25.
15 Gordon, *Maldon*, vi.
16 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), 18 and 45.
17 Tom Shippey, *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 294.

Scull and Hammond suggest a date of between "?1931—Trinity Term 1933" as when the activity on this began,[18] noting a first set of notes appearing on the back of an "early 1930s" draft of Tolkien's poem "Errantry."[19] What is also clear from the manuscripts in Bodley is that *Homecoming* began life in simple end-rhyme but as has been noted by many others Tolkien then chose to use alliterative verse throughout.[20] The play was eventually broadcast on the BBC Third Programme on the 3rd of December 1954 (10.15–10.45 pm),[21] and if one accepts Scull and Hammond's dating noted earlier it had therefore been twenty years in the making. The play that was aired had also been published along with a foreword entitled "Beorhtnoth's Death" and an extensively referenced final piece entitled "Ofermod" in *Essays and Studies* in 1953.[22] In hindsight it is remarkable it was accepted, and even Tolkien was a bit embarrassed. Tom Shippey summarises the now confirmed view that collectively these three pieces, and in particular the essay on "Ofermod,"

> firmly rejected the view of *Maldon* put forward by previous scholars, including Tolkien's old colleague and collaborator E. V. Gordon . . . and W. P. Ker, who had called it "the only purely heroic poem extant in Old English" . . . Tolkien argues that Gordon, Ker, and the rest, were completely wrong.[23]

18 Scull and Hammond, *Tolkien Companion and Guide*, II:406–10.

19 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Treason of Isengard (The History of the Lord of the Rings, Part Two)*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, *The History of Middle-earth*, vol. 7 (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 85–6, 106–7.

20 Elsewhere Tolkien noted that alliterative verse is not to everyone's liking (Bodley, MS Tolkien A17/2) and may seem "curious stuff" (fol. 5r). He defined it as verse where alliteration is part of the rules or the "essential recipe of the cook, and not salt, pepper or spice 'to taste'." Tom Honegger has fortunately provided a detailed analysis of the various drafts of *Homecoming* with specific reference to the theme of pride ("Homecoming").

21 At the time it was described by the BBC's magazine *Radio Times* as an "epilogue." In 1954 Tolkien made his own private recording as he was not happy with the BBC's version which ignored the alliterative metre favouring iambic pentameter. He always wanted to bring it together with his lectures on *Beowulf* and *On Fairy-stories* from the 1930s. In a letter from 1964 to Anne Barrett at Houghton Mifflin he noted "Myself, I had for some time vaguely thought of the reprint together of three things that to my mind really do flow together: *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*; the essay *On Fairy-stories*; and *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*. The first deals with the contact of the 'heroic' with fairy-story; the second primarily with fairy-story; and the last with 'heroism and chivalry'" (see J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (London: HarperCollins, 1995), Letter #259, 350).

22 J.R.R. Tolkien, "Ofermod," *Essays and Studies* 6 (1953), 1–18.

23 Shippey, *Author*, 294–95.

Underpinning this was Tolkien's belief that the poem was in fact a "deep critique of [the heroic spirit] . . . and of the rash and irresponsible attitudes it created";[24] and that the *Maldon* poet was criticising the so-called heroism that led to Byrhtnoth's disastrous decision to allow the Vikings to cross the causeway. Tolkien developed this idea within *Homecoming* at several points (by way of example see Tídwald's statement that Byrhtnoth was "Too proud! Too princely!" and "doom he dared, and died for it"—Bodley, Tolkien MS 5, fols. 1–4). Tolkien also argued that the poet was not just criticising Byrhtnoth, but rather the societal values that led to his decision, a direct attack therefore on the idea of "Northern Courage" which Tolkien had probably first encountered in Ker's *The Dark Ages* and repeated in Gordon's *Introduction to Old Norse*.[25] Byrhtwold's speech towards the end of the poem, which Tolkien was drawn back to again and again, was in many ways a clear representation of these values.[26] In his line-by-line notes to the poem Tolkien stated:

> These 2 lines are deservedly famous—in O.E. they are vigorous and sum up in curiously (?) compact and forceful way [del. all the vague feeling one has about] the special quality of Northern heroism:—unless you admit defeat you are not beaten, a cold grim and desperately hard creed, but [del. a good one?] a noble one, and not one that is at present in danger of being overpopularized and exaggerated. In fact said attentively one can hardly escape the impression that these lines are older and go back further than the texture of the context —a fact that Byrhtwold prob. spoke these exact words, because they were either proverbial or a familiar quotation.
>
> (Bodley, Tolkien MS A 30/2, fol. 123)

Notably, Tolkien found this (along with Byrhtnoth's decision to yield the ground) a form of double-edged heroism which he struggled to find defensible (and even admirable). Again in an unpublished note on the topic he declared it may well have been how men "fought on after their gods faded" but "as far as it goes and as a working theory it's absolutely impregnable" (Bodley, Tolkien MS A30/1, fol. 88v).[27] In other words the sentiments expressed in *Maldon* were a throw-back to a pre-Christian attitude of death and glory, which had no place in the 990s or for that matter the twentieth century, and whilst one could admire the death of the

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24 Shippey, *Author*, 294.
25 William P. Ker, *The Dark Ages* (London: Blackwood, 1904), 57–58; and E. V. Gordon, *An Introduction to Old Norse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), xxix–xxx.
26 In one draft of *Homecoming* (Bodley, MS Tolkien A5, fol. 12) the famous couplet "Hyge sceal . . . mægen lytlað" is heard off-stage and Torthlem (Tolta) declares: "Well said the scop! That will not be forgot // For many an age . . . an age . . . an age." See also Bliss who notes a similar "proverb" in a later life of Edward the Confessor—J. Bliss, "An Anglo-Norman Nun: An Old English Gnome," *Notes and Queries* 254.1 (2009): 16–18.
27 It is possible that Tolkien was actually referring more to Ker's explanations in his book *The Dark Ages* than the overall concept of heroism.

retainers it was this flawed attitude to heroism that had directly influenced Byrhtnoth. The poet of *Maldon* had recognized this, and therefore he was not celebrating the heroic spirit but instead he was actively criticising it.[28]

Keeping to his guns, in the "Ofermod" essay Tolkien provided a direct character assassination of the ealdorman whom he described as being "wholly unfitting" (for leadership), owing to a "defect of character, no doubt."[29] He noted Byrhtnoth's decision was "Magnificent perhaps, but certainly wrong. Too foolish to be heroic."[30] This has led many scholars to suggest that the views that Tolkien expressed in 1953 were shaped not only by his Christianity, but more importantly by his own experiences of war—notably those in the trenches in 1916. What he said of the Essex lord, he may also have thought of the generals of the war who established "their command posts many miles behind the front lines" and who, like Byrhtnoth, sought fame and glory above "worthwhile duty through morally acceptable means."[31]

Yet, despite the attraction of this argument (First World War = Bad Leadership = Futile Deaths = Byrhtnoth) it does not seem to stand up to scrutiny. There is no doubt that Tolkien must have witnessed some horrific scenes on the Western Front. He had enlisted in 1915 and became a Signaling Officer with the Lancashire Fusiliers. Although he did not fight on the 1st of July 1916—the first day of the Battle of the Somme (in which the British Army lost around 50,000 men in less than twenty-four hours)—he was in the vicinity and went up to the front on the 5th of July. The next few weeks were spent going in and out of the trenches as attack after attack slowly pushed the Germans back, or ended in bloody stalemate (occasionally due to perceived blunders by commanding officers). Not only did he witness the "animal horror" of trench warfare,[32] he also discovered that he had

28 Discussions of Tolkien's essay and his criticism of Byrhtnoth are widespread—see for example Sir George Clark, "J. R. R. Tolkien and the True Hero," in *J. R. R. Tolkien and His Literary Resonances*, eds. G. Clark and D. Timmons (London: Greenwood Press, 2000), 39–52.

29 See J. R. R. Tolkien, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," in *Tree and Leaf, Including the Poem Mythopoeia [and] The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 146. Originally published in 1953 in *Essays and Studies*, 6:1–18.

30 Tolkien, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," 146. Tolkiens phrase calls to mind Bosquet's observation of the Charge of the Light Brigade as "C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre."

31 Janet Brennan Croft, *War and the Works of J. R. R. Tolkien* (Westport: Praeger, 2004), 77. See also 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*, eds. J. B. Croft and A. Röttinger (Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2019), 263–83.

32 Tolkien, *Letters*, Letter #61, 72.

lost friends from his schooldays.[33] As Tolkien records in his Foreword to *The Lord of the Rings*:

> [I]t seems now often forgotten that to be caught in youth by 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939 and the following years. By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead.[34]
>
> (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, Foreword, xxvi)

To argue though that what Tolkien, the young soldier, witnessed on the Somme directly influenced Tolkien, the academic, when he read *The Battle of Maldon* is a stretch. There are two clear problems with this. First, if this was the case then it is inconsistent with the fact that Tolkien's criticism of Byrhtnoth was far from evident at first and seemed to develop as the years went on. He does not appear to have come back from the front raging at the conduct of the war as Siegfried Sassoon did in 1917, or reflected on it with bitter irony as Robert Graves and others did in the mid- to late 1920s. Tom Honegger notes that the criticism of Byrhtnoth in *Homecoming* is not in the first two (albeit quite short) versions of the play and only starts to appear in "text C," and this observation is substantiated if we consider material held in Tolkien's other unpublished manuscripts.[35] In Bodley Tolkien MS 5, for example, in the various drafts of "Beorhtnoth's Death" (fols. 13–13v) dating from the 1930s, Tolkien described the ealdorman as "redoubtable" and "an old man of great vigour, commanding stature and renowned valour." Again in MS 5 on fol. 63 in a later draft of the same essay he declared "The Northmen asked for leave to cross the ford, so that a fair fight could be joined, and Beorhtnoth allowed them to do so" but actually crossed through an original comment of "in his pride" preferring instead to note "But this act, whether of (misplaced) chivalry, or of pride, proved fatal." Chivalry clearly then is not synonymous with pride. Elsewhere (Bodley, Tolkien MS A29(a)1, fol. 100v), as part of an essay and notes on Wulfstan's *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, he also felt at ease in describing Byrhtnoth as "the great duke" complete with "his valiant knights."

It is often the case that in the unpublished manuscripts of Tolkien we encounter full or partial translations of Old English texts, or his own glossaries made to accompany them, and *Maldon* is no exception. Whilst it has been noted elsewhere that any temptation to derive from these "Tolkien's undiscovered edition" must be

33 For the most comprehensive account of Tolkien's experiences in the War see John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth* (London: HarperCollins, 2003).
34 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*. 3 vols (*The Fellowship of the Ring, The Two Towers, The Return of the King*). 50th anniversary edition. London: HarperCollins, 2004, xxvi.
35 Honegger, "Homecoming," throughout.

resisted,[36] taken as a whole they can be seen as very useful indications of how his thoughts progressed in relation to a specific text. For example, in Bodley, Tolkien MS 30/2 (fols. 124v following) there is a full translation of the poem, and with specific reference to the issues surrounding *ofermod* Tolkien provides the following translation of the lines 89–90:

> Then the chief \Earl [in pencil]/ (B.) in his \over/ confident chivalry
> (90) conceded too much land to the hateful people . . .
>
> (fol. 127)

Note here the curious translation of *ofermod* as "confident chivalry" and then at a later stage "over confident." Again the term "chivalry" can at best be taken as ambiguous in this context but certainly this does not have the weight of criticism of a term like "pride."

Finally, in Tolkien's unpublished lecture entitled "Anglo-Saxon Verse" (Bodley, Tolkien MS A30/1),[37] which is a survey of Old English poetry and some of its major themes (written and redrafted over many years from the late 1930s to the 1940s and delivered on the radio), he never explicitly criticized Byrhtnoth in the (albeit brief) section he devoted to *Maldon*. He noted Byrhtnoth was a "Christian Duke" greatly honoured by the Church (fols. 3, 8, 15–16, 27), and "a tall (6 ½ feet) white-haired vigorous old warrior man" (possibly derived from Gordon's edition).

Bringing this all together, where exactly does it leave us? It is undeniable that by the time of his contribution to *Essays and Studies* in the 1950s Tolkien had clearly cemented his views on Byrhtnoth and how we should consider *ofermod*. But to suggest that this is because Tolkien was imposing or applying his personal experiences from the Somme some thirty years before seems to be fanciful. This also presupposes that we can be certain that he was critical of the way the war itself had been conducted – many soldiers were not.

The brief survey of evidence above, alongside Honegger's study, would suggest that Tolkien's (and by extension the original poet's) condemnation of Byrhtnoth is a later conclusion he (Tolkien) came to and was not evident in the 1920s–30s. One can read into this several possibilities of course. First that the younger Tolkien of the post-war years did not feel confident to propose this negative, and for its time, radical interpretation of Byrhtnoth's actions, and only felt comfortable publishing it when his career was firmly established. However,

36 Lee, "The Wanderer."

37 Later becoming "The Beginnings of English Poetry" (fol. 41). The various drafts of this are contained in Tolkien MS A30/1, fols. 1–40 from ca. 1937–41; fols. 41–68 1942; fols. 69–82 1943–48 (see Lee, "The Wanderer"; a version is also reprinted as "Old English Verse" in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Fall of Arthur* (London: HarperCollins, 2013)).

anyone who has studied Tolkien would find it hard to imagine him ever holding back on expressing his views (witness his comments on Sweet as a student noted earlier). An alternative, simpler view, and a more realistic one, is that as he studied the poem over the years he thought more on what the poet was saying, developing his own thinking, but based on literary, linguistic, and historical evidence not personal experience. In terms of the 1914–1918 war then, for such a meticulous scholar as Tolkien (especially when it came to philological studies), it is hard to believe that he would allow events that he experienced as a soldier to influence his academic analysis of a text from 900 years earlier. The link then between Tolkien's interpretation of *ofermod* and his own military career should, at the very least, be treated with extreme caution.

A Wider Engagement

Understandably, because of the article in *Essays and Studies* scholarly attention concerning Tolkien's engagement with *Maldon* has naturally focused on his play and discussion of *ofermod*. However, this is only a part of the story. As one would expect from a scholar of Tolkien's ability, his discussions on the poem (held in Bodley, Tolkien MS A30/2 dating from the 1930s and 40s) were far more wide-reaching.

First, there was the question of authorship and the identity of the poet. Tolkien, at a couple of points, mused that he "may have been an Essex man" (Bodley, Tolkien MS A30/2, fol. 75)[38] and in one version of his drama ("Beorhtnoth's Death," Bodley, Tolkien MS 5, fol. 63v) he even toyed with the idea of making one of his fictional characters—Torthelm—the eventual poet composing "from his own knowledge, from surviving reports, and from imagination and epic tradition."

Like many scholars Tolkien was acutely aware of the issues surrounding the survival of *Maldon* (in transcript form only) which he observed had been exacerbated by the "errors of an 18th c. antiquarian whose knowledge of O.E. was very small" (A30/2, fol. 75). Tolkien discussed the overall transmission issues of Old English poetry in a separate essay entitled "O.E. Textual Criticism" (MS A15/1) where he explained that a key challenge scholars faced was around the basic

38 Tolkien suggested (A 30/2, fol. 117) that this was because of a reference to Sturmer in Essex which provided "a grain of evidence of Essex origin of the poem." He observed that Leofsunu could not be the author as he died in the battle, but to have an Essex placename as the only one mentioned in 325 lines "might" point to an Essex poet.

relationship of "A (Author) – R (Reproducer) – C (Critic)," whereby "C only knows A through R." This could be even more complex in Old English where we may have "A – R – R – R – C" (the last R being the transcriber of the poem in the modern period). For *Maldon*, Tolkien asked:

> How did Maldon, for instance, reach a written form? It may have come straight to the author. Some clerk reverencing the memory of Byrhtnođ may have heard (or heard of) the poem celebrating his last battle, and knowing its maker have taken pains to take it down. But it is more probable that it had already gained some currency and passed through several mouths before this happened.
>
> (A30/2, fol. 58)

He concluded that "the meaning survives rather than the exact expression." This could, according to Tolkien, lead to several issues such as "substitution of synonyms," "disarrangement of words," and "patching" (ibid.). Examples of these will be considered later but it is worth noting that under the heading of the "sins of omission," for l. 109a Tolkien proposed *[grimme] gegrundere garas* (Tolkien MS A15/1, fol. 29). He justified this by citing *Pearl* l. 654; *Sir Isumbras* l. 453; and *grimme gegrunden* in *The Ruin*,[39] and it is interesting to see that later editors such as Scragg[40] accept *grimme* (attributing it to Holthausen), as indeed did Gordon citing the exact same examples of *Pearl* and *Sir Isumbras*.[41]

Tolkien was also interested in the characters of the poem (on A30/2, fols. 78–80 he provided notes on all the named protagonists), the wider manuscript tradition (A30/2, fol. 82), and its original length (which he suggested was "400 lines long at the very least . . . possibly much longer," A30/2, fol. 59v). As noted earlier he even provided line-by-line notes for the entire poem and a translation (A30/2, fols. 84–110).

Of particular interest to Tolkien though was the language and poetic style of *Maldon*. Throughout his unpublished papers there are constant clues to his work in this area:

- MS 21/5, fol. 13 (headed "Byrhtnoþes déaþ æt Mældúne")—This contains a list of thirty-five words of interest in the poem that are odd, or need glossing, with cross-references to other Old English texts—probably providing extra material to accompany a textbook such as Sweet's *Reader*;
- MS A15/1 (the essay on "O.E. Textual Criticism" noted above), fol. 65—A further set of line notes for *Maldon* (on the back of exam papers) concentrating on thirty possible emendations, e.g. l. 33 *ulde hilde*, l. 103 *fohte feohte*;

39 As noted previously these were the comments noted in his 1922 edition of Sweet's *Reader*.
40 *The Battle of Maldon*, ed. Donald Scragg (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), 75.
41 Gordon, *Maldon*, 50.

- MS E16/45, fol. 138—A letter from W. J. B. Owen, dated 20/2/42, to Tolkien referring to discussion of *fealo-* (l. 166) in a lecture Tolkien must have given in 1941.

Added to these notes are two major pieces of unpublished work that deserve more attention. First there is his lengthy study "Alliteration on 'g' in Maldon."[42] In this Tolkien paid particular attention to the troublesome (or so it was considered at the time) l. 192—*Godwine and Godwig, gūþe ne gýmdon*—which he argued was actually "quite satisfactory." Tolkien suggested that it demonstrated that when the poem was written "front and back g had so far diverged that the ear refused to recognize them as alliterating consonants" (fol. 70)[43] and thus this line does not actually break the "rule" that in Old English verse the second half-line should contain one alliterating stress. This was proof to Tolkien that by the time of *Maldon* the front *g* had moved towards the semi-vocalic (he cited twenty-three other examples in *Maldon* to support this view). This is now commonly agreed upon and feeds into dating theories (e.g. that velar and palatal *g* did not alliterate in later verse).[44] This also led Tolkien to make the assertion that Old English verse was "written by ear not letter" even in the late tenth century, and that even in this later period the rules of alliteration were still being passed on "by ear not by book." Conversely, the fact that front and back *g* are seemingly equivalent in the earlier longer poems of Cynewulf, and in *Beowulf*, suggested a common early dating for both where the *g*s "were actually similar phonetically" allowing Tolkien to restate his belief that *Beowulf* dated from the seventh/eighth century (fol. 70v).

Returning to the discussion on how poets learnt their craft, Tolkien elaborated on this in another major piece—his unpublished essay "The Tradition of Versification in Old English//With special reference to the *Battle of Maldon* and its alliteration" (A30/2, fols. 35 following). This is a complicated and far-reaching work which appears to have been written well before *Homecoming* was finalized, and therefore was possibly sparked by being asked to assist Gordon with his 1937 edition.

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42 A further copy is contained in fols. 137–39, with extra notes (some deleted) in A30/2, fols. 149–54v, 155–59, 161–61v.

43 In his edition Scragg (*Maldon*, 29 and 52 n. 137) suggested "it is possible that the poet no longer recognized the identity of the sounds [g, /g/, and /j/] for alliterative purposes as his predecessors did."

44 See J. Terasawa, *Old English Metre: An Introduction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 104.

Whilst rejecting the idea of a professional "minstrelry" with some form of apprenticeship, he did feel that poets would have learnt their skill through absorbing what they had heard "in the home, where people recited verse," which he argued "must have been common because Cædmon is ashamed he is an exception." This in turn was important, for the poem as a poem "perishes even as it is being uttered" and thus to survive, almost in a Darwinian sense, it needed to be popular and regularly recited:

> To live it must be preserved in memory and be often repeated. And men die quicker than pictures or monuments, and the time soon comes when the memory must pass into a different mind and the repetition to another mouth \or person/.
>
> (fol. 45)

On hearing these poems then the aspiring poet would also develop an understanding and familiarity with metre, and though they may not have known the technical terminology surrounding their art, they would have abstracted from what they had heard a recognisable set of metrical rules (fols. 48–50). Using these the poet could then write their own verse, which Tolkien likened to a cook using ingredients in a recipe. The ingredients, in this case, being: length of syllable (time duration); stress (loudness) "of which at least three grades were consciously distinguished primary, secondary, atomic"; "alterations in rhythmic pattern of line syllables"; and alliteration on opening sounds. "Only vocalic structure (rhyme) was left 'unconsidered'" he concluded "and handed over to the individual 'cook' as a seasoning to be employed according to need and taste." Tolkien then turned his attention to the verse forms in *Maldon* which he noted were from a period before "metre sank to stuttering, and good spelling was overthrown by bad French to its lasting confusion" (A30/2, fol. 71).

The main problem with *Maldon*, as is well known, is that at times it does not seem to adhere to the strict rules of metre witnessed in earlier Old English verse. The reasons put forward are varied, but tend to fall into two general theories: that *Maldon* is either bad/not-very-good verse by a bad/not-very-good poet (in terms of technique, not sentiment); and/or that it is demonstrating an erosion of the formal rules of Old English poetry that happened towards the end of the tenth century (the rules that Sievers and others described that are so evident in the earlier "better" verse of the *Beowulf*-poet or Cynewulf).

Baum referred to the poem's "bad meter,"[45] Gordon stated the "verse does not always follow the strict rules formulated by Sievers."[46] Scragg described it

45 P. F. Baum, "The Character of Anglo-Saxon Verse," *Modern Philology* 28.2 (1930): 151.
46 Gordon, *Maldon*, 28.

as “less taut than that of earlier Old English poems,”[47] and more recently Fulk and Cain noted the text’s many “idiosyncracies of alliteration and meter” which would not have satisfied the formal expectations of an audience even “half a century earlier.”[48]

Tolkien, however, decided to look at the issue from a completely different angle by concluding that comparing *Maldon* with other earlier Old English poems (what McIntosh termed “classical verse”[49]) was not what was called for. In effect he argued that when considering Old English verse one needed to recognize that there were “separate prosodic varieties of composition” (A30/2, fol. 35), as opposed to the traditional view of separate chronological periods (i.e. early verse = classical/good, later verse = debased/bad). Tolkien suggested that these varieties could, and did, co-exist, just as Aldhelm knew both Latin and vernacular verse, and could compose in both.

Tolkien did not shy away from considering the anomalies within *Maldon*. In fact in a detailed analysis he met each problem head on. To begin with he proposed that of the 325 lines in the surviving poem, only ll. 45, 75, 224, 271, and 288 broke “essential rules.” He argued that ll. 45, 75, and 288 were simply due to a misplaced head stave (for example, he suggested *se Wulfstan wæs haten* for l. 75, arguing it was “good idiom and lasts into ME. Cf opening lines of Lazamon”).[50] For all three examples “an Anglo-Saxon would need hardly a minute’s thought each, if we asked him to put these lines right” (A30/2, fol. 62). Line 271 he felt was probably not by the poet but was perhaps the first example in English where rhyme replaced alliteration. He felt it had a Middle English ring to it and might have come from some popular recitation or semi-metrical *gieddas* pointing tentatively to the *giedd* passages in the *Chronicle* of 959, 975, 979, 1011, 1036, and 1075. Finally, those lines which had caused scholars problems due to the alliteration on weak words (e.g. 127, 128, 189, 240, 242) he attributed to being more “colloquial” (see below) and argued were “perfectly genuine” (fol. 61v). But what did he mean by “colloquial”?

Tolkien provided a classification of Old English verse into (A30/2, fol. 39):

1) “Strict epic” or “fornyrðislag”—written by monks, with notable characteristics of the reduction of anacrusis in the off-verse to a minute percentage, and “rigid observance” of the head stave rule. Tolkien gave *Judith* and *Beowulf* as examples.

47 Scragg, *Maldon*, 28.
48 R. D. Fulk and C. M. Cain, *A History of Old English*, 2nd ed. (Chichester: Blackwell, 2013), 319.
49 Angus McIntosh, “Wulfstan’s Prose,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 34 (1949): 110ff.
50 Bodley, Tolkien MS A30/2, fol. 96.

2) “Poetic or emotional prose”—noted as “Prose with verse elements in varying degrees,” citing the *Chronicle* entries for 957 and 979 as examples.
3) “Chronicle poems”—with the most striking example being the entry for 1065 on Edward the Confessor which Tolkien stated was in “perfect agreement with the rules.” Under this heading he also listed “Competent poems” such as *Brunanburgh*, the *Five Boroughs*, and *Eadmund*; and “incompetent” ones such as the verse entries in 959, 975, 979, 1011, and 1057.
4) “Freer verse”—again written by monks, but with greater freedom in the off-verse. For Tolkien *Maldon* was a clear example of this.

It is this last point that is the most interesting for this analysis. “Freer verse” he noted was a “more hasty, or rather less formal manner than the long poems that have survived from an earlier age” (A 30/2, fol. 35). However, that did not mean that the lines in *Maldon* “that do things never done in *Beowulf*” were necessarily “bad lines . . . made by a bungler or a man in a hurry” (fol. 35v). Instead they were simply of a different style written by a “minstrel plain” as opposed to a “minstrel turned scholar (or scholar turned minstrel)”[51] which he characterized the *Beowulf* poet as. *Maldon* presented to us a surviving example of a form of verse that could easily have existed for some time. This then sheds light on Tolkien’s comment in “Beorhtnoth’s Death”:

> The old poem is composed in a free form of the alliterative line, the last surviving fragment of ancient heroic minstrelsy.[52]

So what led Tolkien to this conclusion? First, he rejected Sievers’s claim that the *Maldon*-poet was poor because he either did not know the rules or did not have the skill to conform to them. As Tolkien pointed out, evidence in the poem elsewhere indicated that this was not the case. Instead he believed that the *Maldon*-poet was perfectly adept at his art, it was just a different slant on the art Sievers was looking for.

Second, Tolkien argued that it did not follow that differences between later poems (such as *Brunanburgh* or *Maldon*) and poems “credibly conjectured to be 200 years or more older (such as *Beowulf*)” are due simply to the passage of time “with the breaking of rules as an inevitable result” (fol. 35v). If so then this would imply that “metre and alliteration such as that of *Beowulf* could no longer be done in the tenth century, and metre like *Maldon* would have been scorned in

51 Eden uses the term “bard” for a minstrel when discussing this essay. See Brad Lee Eden, *Middle-earth Minstrel: Essays on Music in Tolkien* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co, 2010), 1–2.
52 Tolkien, “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son,” 124.

the eighth" (fol. 35v). This seemed to Tolkien completely implausible. For it to be true it required that the rules of poetry were not properly understood in the later period, or that there had been some change (social or linguistic) that led to their popular demise. There was simply no evidence to support either of these, Tolkien argued. After all, strict metre was found later than *Maldon*, e.g. *The Death of Eadward the Confessor* from 1065 (see above)—with the only line "that is not in strict form" being *se froda swa þeah befæste þæt rice* (fol. 36). Metrical patterns, Tolkien argued, should be seen as an abstract form "like a triangle" which did not simply change in shape (fol. 36v):

> Once consciously recognized as a rule, a system of regulations—and this conscious recognition is an essential for the existence of metre in composer and audience—they can persist as long as poets find pleasure in them or have a purpose for them.

Tolkien also believed that metre, and metrical rules, could not have simply been forgotten as there would have a been a continuous flow of learning and performance over the generations. A rupture could only happen, he felt, if there had been a major catastrophe, but even the Viking wars would not have impacted so much that they could have broken poetical continuity in England. Metre could change, he noted, due to phonetic factors and poets would adopt different metres if required to do so due to this linguistic pressure. By way of example he suggested that anacrusis at the beginning of the second hemistich would have become more common if Old English poetry had continued to develop, pointing to the rise of the indefinite article, e.g. "a host of warriors" replacing *hæleđa mengo*.[53] But even then any new metre would be related to an old one, and the old one, as the *Chronicle* poems demonstrated, was still there. Either way, none of this supported the accepted contemporary theory that somehow Old English metre had suffered from a "slow disintegration over time," which is what many critics thought had led to the oddities of *Maldon* (fol. 36v).

Returning to "freer verse" Tolkien argued that it was perfectly possible that this form, as evident in *Maldon*, existed quite happily cheek-by-jowl with the more "Epic verse" in the earlier periods. In answer to the obvious question of why none of it survives, Tolkien argued that this was due to chance, the "wrack and ruin of the North," and the later "havoc of the sixteenth century" (fol. 35v). It would be folly, he believed, to see omission as proof of non-existence. If we

53 Tolkien noted that in earlier verse anacrusis was allowed in the first half-line more readily (citing *Beowulf* l. 109). There is a similar idea in Geoffrey Russom, "The Evolution of Middle English Alliterative Meter," in *Studies in the History of English Language II: Unfolding Conversations*, ed. Anne Curzan and Kimberly Emmons (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), 294–95. Russom presents an analysis of anacrusis in Old Saxon which matches Tolkien's observation.

accept that the early English must have written verse that covered real contemporary "stirring events" where "beloved men (such as Byrhtnoð) met victory or death," then it was highly probable it would have been in a different style to the formal poetry of *Beowulf*—i.e. in the freer verse mode. It was possible too that this was considered more ephemeral, tied to a time or place which then passed, and abandoned. *Maldon* he felt may simply owe its fortuitous survival to the fact the lead protagonist was a notable patron of the Church.

Tolkien concluded that the apparent variation of metre between early and late was entirely "illusory" (fol. 36). The differences perceived were more a "matter of purpose rather than period" (fol. 36) and would have been accepted for what they were, verse in this "freer mode" (fol. 38v) an "intentional divergence of prosody" (fol. 54). This mode may "all along have existed" (fol. 54), but simply was not recorded, was recorded and lost by chance, or was discarded by choice:

> 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 . . . A kind that was seldom committed to writing at all. In a sense it was a "popular" kind—and for that very reason it's more in the direct line of ancestry to Middle English alliterative verse.
>
> (A30/2, fol. 38v)[54]

What Tolkien was saying then was quite profound, certainly for the mid-twentieth century, and actually tallies with more recent scholarship. For example, in 2008 Yakovlev argued that the Sievers system which emphasized stress had diverted attention away from metrical structure patterns, and if we focused on the latter we would see a more continuous flow through Old English verse to Middle English.[55] Prior to that Bredehoft was arguing for a recognition of different types of verse "which changed over time" and "probably varied across the social spectrum."[56] However, with the latter, Bredehoft and Tolkien still differed. Whilst they both questioned the stranglehold of the Sievers-Bliss scansion method (as did Yakovlev) and rejected the view that later verse showed signs of decay, Bredehoft felt this was because later verse "had rules of its own."[57] Tolkien on the other hand was

54 This brief summary does not do justice to the complete essay which also includes a detailed analysis of the so-called "bad lines" in *Maldon* stretching over several folios (fols. 39–41).

55 Nicolay Yakovlev, "The Development of Alliterative Metre from Old to Middle English" (Ph.D. diss., Oxford, 2008). See also Ian Cornelius, *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse: The Pursuit of a Medieval Meter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 44–66 for a good overview of the scholarship in this area from the early eighteenth century onwards.

56 Thomas Bredehoft, *Early English Metre* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 33.

57 Bredehoft, *Early English Metre*, 7.

arguing that what we witness in *Maldon* was in fact a survivor of a long-standing form of verse of a more popular variety that could have been contemporary with *Beowulf*. *Maldon* was "a good poem" in the free mode, and in effect an Old English equivalent of the Old Norse conversational type of verse—*málaháttr*.

Maldon and Tolkien's Fiction

As with so much of his academic study Tolkien's work on *Maldon* also eventually found its way into his creative fiction, possibly subliminally. Starting with *The Silmarillion* it could be suggested that there is a clear link between the actions of Túrin Turambar and Byrhtnoth as the former also makes a series of ill-fated choices, more often than not due to pride.[58]

Bowman notes a few possible links with the poem and *The Lord of the Rings*. She suggests (following previous scholars) the stance taken by Gandalf against the Balrog is akin to the comitatus at the end of *Maldon*,[59] and Sam's reluctance to leave his (assumed) dead master in Shelob's Lair is a manifestation of the dilemma facing Byrhtwold and the other retainers.[60] Sam though does decide to take a more pragmatic route when he resolves to take the Ring himself and see the Quest through, thus effectively abandoning his master.

On a larger thematic scale one can point to the fact that throughout Tolkien's legendarium one of the clear faults identified in the characters who fail is a sense of *ofermod*. This gets the better of Thórin on several occasions in *The Hobbit*, and whilst he undoubtedly has courage his pride overcomes his wisdom. Smaug the Dragon too falls to pride, exposing his physical weakness as a result of Bilbo's flattery. In *The Lord of the Rings* the Ring itself plays on the vainglory of various protagonists—Boromir notably fails this test (as does Frodo to a degree); whereas Faramir, Gandalf, Galadriel, and Sam pass. Ultimately, it is pride that lead to both Saruman's and Sauron's downfall.

As with the retainers at *Maldon*, many of the heroes in Tolkien's fiction fight on often with no hope of success or survival. Sam and Frodo can see no

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58 Though it has to be said that any similarity between the tale and the Old English poem fades in comparison with the influences of the story of Kullervo in the Finnish *Kalevala*.

59 Mary R. Bowman, "Refining the Gold: Tolkien, *The Battle of Maldon*, and the Northern Theory of Courage," *Tolkien Studies* 7 (2010): 91–115, at 91. This scene was also noted by Alexander Bruce who saw the refusal to cede the bridge by Gandalf as direct opposition to Byrhtnoth allowing access across the causeway—Alexander M. Bruce, "Maldon and Moria: On Byrhtnoth, Gandalf, and Heroism in *The Lord of the Rings*," *Mythlore* 26.1/2 (2007): 149–59.

60 Bowman, "Refining the Gold," 101.

way back from their mission and expect to die in the attempt; the Ents march to their doom at Isengard; and the entire host of the Allies assault the Black Gates at the end of the book with seemingly no chance of success.

Perhaps most interesting are the events at the Battle of Pelennor Fields. The death of Byrhtnoth has parallels with the death of Théoden at Pelennor. The latter is felled by the Witch King, but Éowyn and Merry rally around to defend his body. Following this the comitatus of the Rohirrim, upon discovering the death of their lord, ride recklessly to what they assume to be their doom.[61]

Endnote

It is undoubtedly true that many Old English scholars will have filing cabinets of notes, and annotated books in their cellars, which if collected would form an interesting journey through their interactions with *The Battle of Maldon*. So what makes Tolkien so special? Why does he deserve the attention this article has awarded him? By way of justification I offer the following. First, Tolkien was a great scholar and his views were often (as demonstrated above) ahead of their time and sometimes controversial. Second, for the most part these have never been published and remain hidden in the archives of the Bodleian Library and contain ideas (albeit sometimes not fully developed) that can perhaps lead to new areas for modern scholars to follow. Finally, his creative reactions to *Maldon* in *Homecoming* and Middle-earth—so well known, and studied—seem worthy of constant revisiting, especially if new insights into their development are discovered. Even if, as with the waters of the Blackwater, these ebbed and flowed over time.

61 See Stuart D. Lee, and Elizabeth Solopova, *The Keys of Middle-earth: Discovering Medieval Literature through the Fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2015), 296–324.