



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 29
Number 3

Article 5

4-15-2011

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Recommended Citation

Grybauskas, Peter (2011) "Dialogic War: From the *Battle of Maldon* to the War of the Ring," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 29 : No. 3 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol29/iss3/5>

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Abstract

Examines Tolkien's ability to hold two conflicting ways of thinking in creative tension, representing them through equally sympathetic characters each fairly having their own say, as he does in "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son." Grybauskas finds a parallel to this in the way *Battle of Maldon* balances its praise of Northern courage with its censure of the Earl of Maldon's *Ofermod*.

Additional Keywords

Ofermod in J.R.R. Tolkien; Ofermod in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Torhthelm; Tolkien, J.R.R. "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son"; "The Battle of Maldon"



DIALOGIC WAR:
FROM THE BATTLE OF MALDON
TO THE WAR OF THE RING

PETER GRYBAUSKAS

IN AN EARLY REVIEW OF *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*, C.S. Lewis offers a brief structural analysis of J.R.R. Tolkien's heroic romance:

On the one hand, the whole world is going to the war; the story rings with galloping hoofs, trumpets, steel on steel. On the other, very far away, miserable figures creep (like mice on a slag heap) through the twilight of Mordor. And all the time we know the fate of the world depends far more on the small movement than on the great. This is a structural invention of the highest order: it adds immensely to the pathos, irony, and grandeur of the tale. (88)

Lewis's sketch remains a perceptive summation of Tolkien's achievement, highlighting the disparity—between the epic battles waged in Books III and V and the anguished plodding of two Hobbits in Book IV and the early portion of Book VI—at the heart of the final two volumes of *The Lord of the Rings*. Yet neither Lewis nor later scholars of Tolkien's work have paid much heed to the dialogic nature¹ of this great "structural invention" or acknowledged its heavy debt to Tolkien's reading and criticism of the Old English poetic fragment, *The Battle of Maldon*. The key to recognizing the polyphonic aspects of *The Lord of the Rings* as well as its structural inheritance from the medieval poem lies in an intermediate step: Tolkien's "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth," first published in a 1953 volume of *Essays and Studies*. The implicit dialogue between the epic and the

¹ For instance, Tom Shippey's own summation overlaps somewhat with that of Lewis:

all the way through the later Books there is moreover a deliberate alternation between the sweeping and dramatic movements of the majority of the Fellowship, and the inching, small-scale progress of Frodo, Sam, and Gollum. The irony by which the latter in the end determines the fate of the former is obvious, remarked on by the characters and by the narrator. (*J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, 52)

While he adds the important detail of "alternation" he refers to a more basic sense of movement and pacing rather than representations of war and, like Lewis, ultimately emphasizes the deterministic importance of Frodo's quest over any notion of balance.

unglamorous in the last four books of *The Lord of the Rings* echoes the debate waged between the two speakers in "The Homecoming."

Although this overarching structural link has gone largely overlooked, some compelling recent scholarship has begun to address thematic connections between *Maldon* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Janet Brennan Croft, in *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*, contrasts the deeds of Beorhtnoth² at Maldon with those of several characters in Tolkien's fiction, including Gandalf and the Hobbits. In "Maldon and Moria: On Byrhtnoth, Gandalf, and Heroism in *The Lord of the Rings*," Alexander M. Bruce elaborates on Croft's references to Beorhtnoth, focusing on the Gandalf connection. Specifically, he explores Tolkien's adaptation and correction of a critical scene in *Maldon*—Beorhtnoth conceding the strategically crucial causeway to his enemies—through a striking analogue in *The Lord of the Rings*—Gandalf unyielding to the Balrog on the bridge in Moria.³ This crucial scene with Gandalf is again taken up and used as the starting point for Mary R. Bowman's recent article "Refining the Gold: Tolkien, *The Battle of Maldon*, and the Northern Theory of Courage." Bowman's piece examines Tolkien's efforts to extract or salvage from *Maldon* an acceptable heroic spirit to be used in *The Lord of the Rings*, placing particular emphasis on the character of Sam Gamgee and his engagement with various aspects of the *Maldon* retainers. In the process, she also articulates an important corrective to Tom Shippey's well-known reading of "The Homecoming" as symbolic "parricide" of heroic literature (Shippey, "Tolkien and 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth'" 337). Bowman argues convincingly that Tolkien sought "a way to reshape, not reject, Germanic heroism" (97). While Bowman offers a compelling look at Tolkien's efforts to transmute the heroic code in *The Lord of the Rings*, she does not take into account the ways in which Tolkien undercuts this refined vision of heroism in other aspects of his narrative, and thus her article falls short of encompassing the importance of Tolkien's *Maldon* criticism on the construction of his great work of fiction. Its full significance depends upon closer examination of the quasi-critical "Homecoming of Beorhtnoth."

² In the interest of clarity, as Tolkien's scholarship on *Maldon* is the primary concern here, I have chosen to use Tolkien's particular spelling of two important characters, "Beorhtnoth" and "Beorhtwold," throughout the paper, instead of the more common renderings, "Byrhtnoth" and "Byrhtwold." For the philological explanation of this, see Drout 161n95.

³ For Tolkien's discussion of this pivotal scene at Maldon, see "Beorhtnoth's Death," 77. For the scene involving Gandalf on the bridge see the end of Chapter 5, Book II of *The Lord of the Rings*, "The Bridge of Khazad-dûm." As scholars have noted, the difference is indeed marked: Gandalf, as the leader of his party, sacrifices himself in a refusal to yield the territory, while Beorhtnoth willingly cedes the causeway to the slaughter of both him and all of his men.

“The Homecoming” is actually a three-part work, though it takes its title from the dramatic verse dialogue at its center, a fictional work which acts as a sequel to the *Maldon* fragment.⁴ The verse drama is bracketed by two short critical essays, “Beorhtnoth’s Death” and “Ofermod.” In order to best illuminate the influential place *The Battle of Maldon* holds in the dialogic structure of the final four Books of *The Lord of the Rings*, I begin with a reading of “The Homecoming” before moving to a discussion of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Tolkien’s *Maldon* Reading

Before Tolkien’s publication of “The Homecoming” in 1953, scholarly attention to *The Battle of Maldon* focused on the poem’s seemingly flawless demonstration of the northern heroic ethos in action. In his 1937 edition, E.V. Gordon, Tolkien’s friend and collaborator, offers the poem a place beside *Beowulf* as “the only Old English poems in which the heroic attitude is fully realized and described” (Gordon 23). He follows this assertion with an even stronger one. Due to what Gordon claims to be *Beowulf*’s ultimately “elegiac” character, *Maldon* actually stands alone as “indeed the only purely heroic poem extant in Old English” (24). Gordon felt that, perhaps better than any other, the “poet of *Maldon* understood and emphasized the ascendancy of spirit over the weakness of the body required by this [heroic] code” (27). It is a code articulated most clearly through the declaration of Beorhtwold in the poem (lines 312-313), which Tolkien quotes and translates in “Beorhtnoth’s Death”:

*Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,
mod sceal þe mare þe ure mægen lytlað.*
Will shall be the sterner, heart the bolder,
spirit the greater as our strength lessens.’ (“Homecoming” 79)

In the “Ofermod” essay, Tolkien acknowledges Beorhtwold’s words to be “the best-known lines of the poem, possibly of all Old English verse” (102). But what did he make of them? The answer can be found in Tolkien’s short essay and the dramatic dialogue (“The Homecoming” proper) which precedes it.

One of the keys to his reading of *Maldon* lies in his liberal translation and interpretation of lines much earlier in the poem (89-90), which he offers in the “Ofermod” piece: “*ða se eorl ongan for his ofermode alyfan landes to fela laþere ðeode*, ‘then the earl in his overmastering pride actually yielded ground to the enemy, as he should not have done’” (102). This is of course the same scene which recent scholarly works discuss as analogous to Gandalf in Moria during *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien’s point is that Beorhtnoth is mistaken in offering a “sporting” gesture toward his enemies; the poet meets his “heroics” not with

⁴ For more on the peculiarities of this piece, see Nelson.

exultant praise but rather “severe criticism” (105). Beorhtnoth’s character was “moulded [...] by ‘aristocratic tradition’, enshrined in tales and verse,” and this upbringing, Tolkien surmises, contributes to his disastrous decision (105). In spite of the prefatory acknowledgement Tolkien receives in Gordon’s edition for his “many corrections and contributions,” the lengthy 1937 introduction to the poem makes no mention at all of Beorhtnoth’s concession at the causeway (Gordon vi). For this reason, Tom Shippey has suggested that Tolkien presents a “veiled attack on the opinions expressed in [Gordon’s] edition” (“Tolkien and ‘The Homecoming’” 333) Tolkien is, at any rate, the first to draw attention to the potential criticism in these earlier lines, and as Thomas Honegger states, “this condemnation of Beorhtnoth’s pride [...] brings a new aspect to the interpretation of *The Battle of Maldon* as a whole” (191).

But there is an added nuance to “Oferrmod”—one crucial to “The Homecoming” and, by extension, *The Lord of the Rings* as well—which many have missed. Critics have generally taken Tolkien at his word when, in the opening paragraphs of “Oferrmod,” he casually suggests that his short drama “may be said to be an extended comment on lines 89, 90,” but this is not strictly true (102). He was trying to justify the appearance of the creative “Homecoming” in an academic journal, in spite of it having been admittedly “composed primarily as verse, to be condemned or approved as such” (102). Tolkien’s comment about the poem as an extended discussion of the causeway scene was therefore a kind of coy concession, offering the obligatory occasion for writing by differing with the critics, but not, I think, properly summarizing the subject of “The Homecoming” or his feelings about the poem.

Still, if one had not yet read or digested “The Homecoming,” such a comment might seem reasonable enough; indeed it reinforces Tolkien’s apparent audacity when, a few lines further down, he suggests that Beorhtwold’s famous words were “of less interest than the earlier lines” (102). However, this iconoclastic confession is immediately qualified by what I regard to be the crux of his reading: “at any rate the full force of the poem is missed unless the two passages are considered together” (102). For Tolkien, then, the poem depends on a question of balance—of tension between two disparate ideas. Thus “The Homecoming” represents an extended comment not on one line or the other, but the tension between the two lines, 89-90 and 312-313.

It is this notion of balance, introduced in Tolkien’s criticism of *Maldon* and echoed by his craft in “The Homecoming,” that is so easily missed. Mary R. Bowman reminds us that “Tolkien still valorizes Beorhtwold’s speech and behavior,” but she seems to detect this element of praise only in “Oferrmod,” not in “The Homecoming” proper (96). She does not explore the poem itself in detail,

referring to Shippey's rather harsh reading⁵ as "compelling" (92). Instead, I find that both essay and poem betray a kind of sympathy on Tolkien's part, measured against the more obvious critique. While "Ofermod" is pioneering in its "severe criticism" of Beorhtnoth, Tolkien would be the first to admit that such criticism is "not incompatible with loyalty, and even love" (105). Indeed, even when "Ofermod" appears most plainly one-sided in its critique of the earl's heroism, Tolkien hedges, unwilling to equate Beorhtnoth's "application of the heroic code with that code itself," as Bowman says (95). Tolkien sums up his opinion of Beorhtnoth's reckless showmanship as "[m]agnificent perhaps, but certainly wrong," highlighting the tension between the deed's powerful appeal and its moral repercussions (105). Later, the same sort of qualification is added as if in effort to soften (to some extent) the rebuke. "Beorhtnoth was wrong, and he died for his folly," Tolkien writes plainly enough (106). "But it was a noble error, or the error of a noble," he adds (106). Tolkien knows that there is a great difference between a "noble error" and the "error of a noble," yet he does not want to clarify the ambiguity he raises. He feels the vacillating pull of both interpretations. If Tolkien condemned Beorhtnoth's behavior, he was also somewhat sympathetic; at the very least, he understood quite well the allure of such gestures, of how difficult it can be to efface the heroic impulse. Therefore, he is not surprised that the poet's lines of apparent criticism, which his own scholarship addresses, have hitherto been "little regarded, or played down" (105).

Totta and Tída: A Tug of War

The verse dialogue at the heart of "The Homecoming" is Tolkien's effort to expound upon the tension created by the two key passages in *Maldon*: the heroic praise (312-313) and the heroic critique (89-90). And, as in *Maldon*, the full force of Tolkien's poetic response is only felt when the two are considered together. In this "sequel" to *Maldon*, it is not two lines of verse but two characters, Torhthelm (Totta) and Tídwald (Tída), who stand in opposition. In the fictional setting of "The Homecoming," these two men are sent by the local abbot to recover Beorhtnoth's corpse in the aftermath of the battle. As they go about the task of locating the body and returning it to the abbey in Ely, the two engage in conversation and carry out a kind of debate on the nature of heroics and warfare. The intertextual relationship between *Maldon* and Tolkien's modern sequel emphasizes from the start the ambiguities involved in treatments of the heroic. The title of the drama itself shows Tolkien engaged in a process of simultaneously building up and undermining heroic matters; there is of course

⁵ Shippey calls the poem Tolkien's "act of ceremonial sacrifice" toward the northern heroic spirit ("Homecoming" 338).

irony in the grim reality of the manner of Beorhtnoth's "homecoming." It is a title more befitting a story of the duke's triumphant victory procession. But this is not the subject of Tolkien's piece; instead, he tells how Beorhtnoth's headless corpse is carted home by two exhausted and frightened peasants. Tolkien writes a "sequel" to what is remembered as the finest example of Old English heroic verse, gives it a fitting title for its epic context, then ironically undercuts both of these by focusing on the inglorious task of Tída and Totta. Even before the drama has begun, the author sets the stage for a dialogue between two voices in tension.

Totta is the poet, or "gleeman" as Tída refers to him (often pejoratively). He may be said to be an extension of *Maldon's* famous heroic lines 312-313—indeed he mutters them almost word-for-word in modern English during a dream (99). Totta is the spokesman for literary war and romance in "The Homecoming." He brings to the conversation frequent references to the legends and lays of old heroes. The young poet looks upon Beorhtnoth's death always with a glance back at the larger-than-life heroic legacy which he believes in. Totta's lines of alliterative verse are clearly the more poetic of the two, not only in their homage to old legends but in his own taste for song, and a tendency toward euphemism and hyperbole. He voices that side of Tolkien that he is perhaps best remembered for—idealized heroics certainly have a part to play in *The Lord of the Rings* as well.

I risk being overly reductive in simply unmasking in Totta's voice a particular side of Tolkien's argument. It is important to recall that Tolkien preferred to approach this conflicting sense of war and heroics through a creative rather than a critical work. Totta is, after all, a character in the drama, not merely a figurehead for one side of the author's mind. Indeed, his characterization colors what we understand about his romantic voice in interesting ways. He is the younger of the two, naïve and inexperienced. Looking at a body, he believes it looks back at him, likening its eyes to "Grendel's in the moon," suggesting that he has never before seen a dead man, though he has read, or heard, *Beowulf* (86). Though Tolkien experienced his share of both real bloodshed and its literary representations, I do not think he grudges the young man his poetic response—a valuable response in its own right. We come to know Totta through these crucial, but sometimes subtle moments in the drama. The excitement he expresses upon properly identifying Beorhtnoth's sword—"I could swear to it / by the golden hilts"—reflects his interest and love for legends, even those yet to be made (87).

Most importantly, we should recognize that Totta is no fool, no matter how many times Tída refers to him thus. Some critics have thought otherwise. Tom Shippey suggests that Tolkien's position is squarely behind Tída. For Shippey, the character of Totta is little more than a cowardly, murderous stooge to be "blackened" at every turn in the service of Tolkien's symbolic "parricide" of heathen Old English poetry (326, 337). If we are to trace a pattern of balance

between opposites in tension all the way from *Maldon* to *The Lord of the Rings*, Shippey's claim that "in this dialogue there was no doubt about who was right and who was wrong" is one which must be refuted (338). As such, I offer a brief defense of Totta in the verse drama, continuing, as Mary Bowman has begun with her reading of "Oferrmod," to offer an alternative to Shippey's reading.

The most obvious defense of Totta is the fact that Tolkien loved the Old English heroic verse which the young man represents. "The Homecoming" shows Tolkien undoubtedly wary of the dangers of "excess" and the misappropriation of the northern heroic ethos, but elsewhere he praised this code as "the great contribution of early Northern literature" ("The Monsters and the Critics" 20) and a "supreme contribution to Europe" (*Letters* 56). It seems unlikely that Tolkien would portray the spokesman for the literature to which he dedicated much of his life with the unremitting scorn that Shippey suggests—even if Totta proves at times a poor spokesman.⁶

More specifically, at one point during the dialogue, Totta's speech reflects an attitude of subordinate courage which Tolkien often praised and deemed in "Oferrmod" to be "the most heroic and the most moving" (106). The moment comes when Totta expresses his longing to have had a role in the battle.

[...] I wish I'd been here,
Not left with the luggage and the lazy thralls,
cooks and sutlers! By the Cross, Tída,
I loved him no less than any lord with him;
and a poor freeman may prove in the end
more tough when tested than titled earls
who count back their kin to kings ere Woden (85).

Totta expresses here plainly Tolkien's favored sense of the heroism of the little fellow. While Tolkien questions the rash heroics of leaders like Beorhtnoth, he simultaneously exalts the courage and loyalty of their unfortunate subordinates. It would be both unexpected and unlikely for Tolkien to attribute these lines to a character whose sole purpose is to look foolish. Totta's words may be boastful, naïve, even a bit absurd—nevertheless, they are redolent of a spirit Tolkien cared deeply for and thought crucial to his own work.⁷

⁶ Bowman's article in particular picks up on the crucial metaphor of the "alloy" in "Oferrmod" to describe treatments of the heroic code. Tolkien is very much concerned with subtleties of treatment and perspective in "The Homecoming."

⁷ It is a theme which Tolkien often remarked of as being close to his heart and central to his work, at one point going so far to as to call *The Lord of the Rings* "primarily a study of the ennoblement [...] of the humble" (*Letters* 237). Frodo and Sam are of course the most obvious examples. For more on Sam's connection to the retainers in Maldon, see Bowman's note on page 110.

Another critical element in a defense of Totta depends upon the above suggestion that “The Homecoming” is an extension of the tension and balance Tolkien saw between the two key *Maldon* lines. What we see in Tolkien’s creation of a modern sequel to the poem is one of many examples of his engagement in literary reconstructions, but the fact that *Maldon* is so plainly fragmentary may have intrigued and encouraged him even more than usual in this particular reconstruction.⁸ The poem’s damaged state affords Tolkien ample space, both before and after the extant “middle” which constitutes the *Maldon* we know, to test his hypothesis about the poet’s overarching vision and intent. He toys with a “before” option in the hypothetical epigraph he proposes for the poem at the end of “Ofermod”:

There could be no more pungent criticism in a few words of ‘chivalry’ in one of responsibility than Wiglaf’s exclamation: *oft sceall eorl monig anes willan wraec adreogan*, ‘by one man’s will many must woe endure’. These words the poet of Maldon might have inscribed at the head of his work.
(109)

But, in the end, he chose to focus his creative efforts on a coda instead. As such, we might see “The Homecoming” as not so much a sequel as a later portion of a hypothetical larger work of which *Maldon* is the only extant fragment—a work which was by no means clearly one-sided (as criticism before “Ofermod” would attest). With this in mind, we can see “The Homecoming” written to reflect the same balance Tolkien saw in *Maldon*, one which would require Totta to stand on his own and represent a legitimate case for heroic verse, not merely be propped up as a stooge.

This notion of “The Homecoming” as a reconstruction of a missing latter portion of the poem itself brings us to the most interesting indicator of Tolkien’s sympathy for Totta: I suggest that he is, in the fictive context of the drama, the future *Maldon* poet, a man whom Tolkien evidently held in some esteem. The clues which lead us to consider Totta’s potential role as poet are numerous in the published piece. Tolkien identifies him from the start as the “son of a minstrel; his head is full of old lays concerning the heroes of northern antiquity” (79). Another introductory comment, the assertion that “neither [Tída nor Totta] were actually in the battle,” is tantalizingly similar to E.V. Gordon’s own sketch of the anonymous poet: “The poet was probably not present at the battle” (Tolkien 79, Gordon 22). Totta’s presence at the aftermath also helps him fit into Gordon’s description of a poem “composed soon after the battle,” by a

⁸ As Tolkien says in “Beorhtnoth’s Death,” it is a fragment with “no end and no beginning, and no title” (78). For more on the idea of Tolkien’s reconstructions, see the introduction of Tom Shippey’s *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*.

poet “well versed in the old heroic and aristocratic traditions of poetry” who may have known “the heroes of his poem personally” (22). Finally, of course, there is Totta’s dream, mentioned above, in which he mutters a modern English translation of the most famous lines of *Maldon*, 312-313. It is at this point, knowing Tolkien’s propensity for such framing devices in his reconstructions,⁹ where we might feel Tolkien has given up on subtle hints and chosen instead to make Totta’s future role as poet blatantly obvious. In truth, he does not go quite so far. This is verified by Thomas Honegger’s manuscript research in “Philology and the Literary Muse,” which reveals that, in an earlier draft, Totta is *explicitly* identified by Tolkien as having composed *The Battle of Maldon* after returning Beorhnoth’s body to Ely. The revelatory note “is crossed out diagonally with black ink and did not make it into the final typescript” (197n17). Honegger mentions this discovery only in passing (it is relegated to his footnotes) and, following Shippey, glosses the excision as a denial of Totta’s role as the eventual poet, but this is not necessarily so.

Other explanations might account for his removal of this explicit reference to Totta as the *Maldon* poet. The decision is akin to Hemingway’s preferred tactic: “the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood” (75). Tolkien would not have learned it from Hemingway but from the suggestive powers of narrative construction utilized by the *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain* poets—in any case, he used it well.¹⁰ It is a move which, far from denying Totta’s role as poet outright, allows the careful reader to weigh the possibility, to empathize with his position and come to understand its value. If we keep an open mind about Totta, we find that his reliance on the old lays does not make him unthinking, and this fact is perhaps best reflected in his pensive statement after remembering the rules of mead hall vows as they are told in songs: “But the songs wither, / and the world worsens” (85). It is a testament to Totta’s honesty, though of course there may be, in his mind, a causal relationship between these two entropies.

Tída’s voice, on the other hand, might be said to ally itself with a voice of reason—not necessarily that of “reality,” as Shippey puts it, too great a burden for either of these voices to bear on its own. His character acts as the skeptical counterpart to Totta, an extension of the heroic critique found in lines 89-90 of *Maldon*. Fittingly, it is Tída who criticizes Beorhnoth’s deed at the causeway—“needlessly noble”—while Totta, echoing the critics, seems unable to come to terms with the situation (95). Totta can have his poetic flourishes; Tída prefers

⁹ For more on Tolkien’s framing conceits, see Flieger.

¹⁰ Shippey’s discussion of depth in *Author of the Century* is useful here: “the trick is an old one, and Tolkien learned it like so much else from his ancient sources, *Beowulf* and the poem of *Sir Gawain*, but it continues to work” (49).

“plain language” (98). He chides Totta for his ornamental diction, calls into question the nature and value of the old lays and heroes, and remains always fixed on the grim material and logistical reality of their task. If Totta’s voice soars at times to the heavens, Tída’s remains grounded in the dirt. “If you spent less in speech, you would speed better,” is a sample of the advice he has for Totta. He is brimming with such conventional wisdom and strong work ethic, setting the pace and keeping his young friend honest—“Now start again, and in step with me! / A steady pace does it” (89). Given Tída’s disposition, it is unsurprising to learn that he is the aging veteran who cannot be blamed if, after long years of toil and bloodshed, he has grown skeptical of the taste for romanticizing the heroic which his partner exemplifies.

We begin to get a sense of the tension which develops through the interplay of their two voices. These interactions, which both delineate the individual voices and illuminate the wider conflict Tolkien addresses, occur in varying degrees—from otherwise unremarkable one-line exchanges to lengthy poetic disquisitions. Whichever variation these interplays take on, the pattern is always the same: the two are engaged in a tug of war.

The moment in which Tída and Totta discover Beorhtnoth’s body is one such example of the pattern of interplays which structure the drama. Torthelm’s immediate reaction to the discovery of Beorhtnoth’s corpse is telling; he begins to chant, performing an elegiac verse on the spot for their lord: “just in judgement, generous-handed / as the golden lords of long ago. / He has gone to God glory seeking, / Beorhtnoth beloved” (87). Tídwald then offers some uncharacteristic praise of the young man’s verse: “The woven staves have yet worth in them / for woeful hearts” (87). But this encomium is immediately followed by practical reminders typical of his character. He plainly has no intention of allowing Totta to get carried away with sentimental songwriting. After all, he reasons, “there’s work to do, / ere the funeral begins” (87). The disparity in their dispositions is emphasized by differing reactions, like those described above, to all they encounter on the battlefield.

Through his creative continuation of Beorhtnoth’s story, Tolkien felt he could best emphasize his hypothesis about the *Maldon* poet’s message. After all, *Maldon* is only a fragment, with no beginning or end—little wonder, Tolkien might have thought, that critics have been so unsure of how to interpret it. Perhaps even more importantly, Tolkien’s dramatic extension of lines 89-90 and 312-313 led him to explore his own conflicted feelings, holding a dialogue about the relative virtues and vices of heroism and the literary and historical representation and reception of war—questions which, just a few years after the Second World War had ended, were of urgent concern.

Tolkien knew well the appeal of the heroic (in the works he loved and professed) but he also experienced firsthand the bitterness of modern war,

having served in the trenches during World War I. The tension between these two potentially incompatible understandings was of particular importance to him; he could probably empathize with both Tída and Totta. The earliest drafts of “The Homecoming” date back about twenty years before its eventual publication in 1953, and though its publication had been the culmination of a long labor, it did not mark the settling of the debate between Tída and Totta.¹¹ By October 1955, just two years after “The Homecoming” was published, all three volumes of *The Lord of the Rings* were in print.

Dialogic War in *The Lord of the Rings*

While the setting of Tolkien’s three-volume sequel to *The Hobbit* is a far cry from the historical battleground in Essex, the voices of Tída and Totta, creative extensions of Tolkien’s scholarship on *The Battle of Maldon*, continue their dialogue in Middle-earth—just not explicitly. *The Lord of the Rings* magnifies the situation, staging a similar sort of debate on a grand scale, a conflict between attitudes toward and representations of war. This debate is implicit in the structure of the last two volumes (Books III–VI) of *The Lord of the Rings*. Its structure, like “The Homecoming” and the reading of *Maldon* which inspired it, is built upon a tension between opposites—the “hoofs, trumpets, steel on steel” versus the “miserable figures” creeping which C.S. Lewis rightly praises in his review discussed in the opening of this paper. The final four Books alternate between epic and unglamorous portrayals of war, and the contrast is so pointed that we might be tempted to entertain the notion that Totta and Tída have not only survived in spirit but taken up writing fiction and each put his own stamp upon a major narrative thread in *The Lord of the Rings*. In this way, Books III and V might belong to Totta, being largely focused on the exploits of figures like Gandalf and Aragorn in an idealized presentation of literary heroics. On the other hand, Books IV and the early portion of VI counter with a portrayal of war more suited to Tída; the agonizing experiences of Frodo and Sam on their unlikely anti-quest in Mordor reveal an altogether inglorious side of battle.

Tolkien’s own comments on the book’s construction shed light on how crucial the structural separation of these two narrative threads is to the tale as a whole. In a biting critique of an early film script which garbled the design of *The Lord of the Rings*, he has this to say:

The narrative now divides into two main branches: 1. Prime Action, the Ringbearers. 2. Subsidiary Action, the rest of the Company leading to the ‘heroic’ matter. *It is essential that these two branches should each be treated in coherent sequence.* Both to render them intelligible as a story, and because

¹¹ Wayne Hammond dates the drafts from 1930–33 (303). For more on the development of “The Homecoming” drafts, see Honegger.

they are totally different in tone and scenery. Jumbling them together entirely destroys these things. (*Letters* 275, italics in original)

It is clear that Tolkien intended two distinct faces of war to be in tension—but largely unmingled—throughout his tale. What follows is an overview of the individual voices which participate in a dialogue of war in *The Lord of the Rings* and demonstrate the lingering influence of *Maldon* (via “The Homecoming”) on Tolkien’s fantasy classic.

Books III and V: Totta’s War

The Company’s split in “The Breaking of the Fellowship” coincides with the diverging visions of war which divide between them the last two-thirds of *The Lord of the Rings*. While Frodo and Sam flee alone to attempt the journey through Mordor, the more heroic figures of Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli welcome the reader into Tolkien’s epic narrative strand. The tone for what is to unfold in Book III (and later, Book V) is set at the end of this first chapter, as the Three Hunters set off to pursue the great host of Orcs who have captured Merry and Pippin. Before the chase begins, Aragorn declares:

But come! With hope or without hope we will follow the trail of our enemies. And woe to them, if we prove the swifter! We will make such a chase as shall be accounted a marvel among the Three Kindreds: Elves, Dwarves, and Men. Forth the Three Hunters! (III.i.420)

Tolkien seeks also to fit style to content in the romantic war of *The Lord of the Rings*; he treats much of the prose (and the verse) of this side of war in an elevated manner. During chapters like “Helm’s Deep” or “The Battle of the Pelennor Fields,” one can almost hear the voice of Totta ringing out in praise of the heroic exploits chronicled in Books III and V.

Fantastic individual feats of arms—moments of hyperbolic heroism—constitute one of the most striking aspects of the violent conflicts which take place in Books III and V. It is perhaps the most romantic notion in Tolkien’s varied portrayal of combat: that one man alone can turn the tide of battle. Aragorn and his sword Andúril are particularly indicative of these idealized heroics. While some at the Council of Elrond doubt the Ranger’s heroic pedigree, his weapon is still spoken of as a potential trump card in the wars against Sauron. Boromir posits: “Mayhap the Sword-that-was-Broken may still stem the tide—if the hand that wields it has inherited not an heirloom only, but the sinews of the Kings of Men” (II.ii.268). In Books III and V, Aragorn, with the sword re-forged, proves up to the task.

A hero’s weapon in Tolkien’s romantic war carries with it a powerful reputation; mere sight of a blade like Andúril both inspires allies and sends foes

fleeing. During the battle at Helm's Deep, Aragorn and Éomer lead their small forces against overwhelming numbers of enemies, but the immediately recognizable presence of their swords (like Beorhthoth's in the gloom) brings hope.

Charging from the side, they hurled themselves upon the wild men.
Andúril rose and fell, gleaming with white fire. A shout went up from wall and tower: 'Andúril! Andúril goes to war. The Blade that was Broken shines again!' (III.vii.534)

The incendiary properties of Aragorn's sword and the rousing battle cries of the men establish an awe-inspiring scene. Amid the presumed chaos of the battle, Tolkien isolates striking images of his protagonists to accentuate their heroism.

Built up in this epic vein, it is no surprise that the massive, sweeping battles recounted in Books III and V are nonetheless referred to as contests not between vast, impersonal armies but great individual leaders and heroes. Aragorn rightly believes that merely showing himself and his weapon in the *palantír* is enough to frighten Sauron and provoke a "hasty stroke" from the Dark Lord's armies (V.ii.780). In "The Siege of Gondor," Denethor speaks of a previous defense of Osgiliath as a one-on-one contest—"when Boromir denied [Sauron] the passage" (V.iv.816). Large-scale combat is again treated this way during the desperate attack on the Black Gate, when "little time was left to Aragorn for the ordering of *his* [my emphasis] battle" (V.x.891). Though the battles in Books III and V are often staged on a grand scale, Tolkien's epic portrayal of war is one where captains lead the charge rather than direct from a safe distance, and an individual can make all the difference.

Tolkien leaves little room to gainsay the feats of his heroes, practically quantifying their exaggerated worth at several points. In "The King of the Golden Hall," Théoden mocks Gandalf for not bringing an army with him to aid the people of Rohan. Gandalf offers a telling rebuke:

Has not the messenger from your gate reported the names of my companions? Seldom has any lord of Rohan received three such guests. Weapons they have laid at your doors that are worth many a mortal man, even the mightiest. (III.vi.513)

The heroes of Tolkien's epic war are no inexperienced conscripts, nor do they wield standard issue weapons. By the time Gandalf declares in "The Last Debate" that "there are names among us that are worth more than a thousand mail-clad knights apiece," we believe him (V.ix.882).

While it is not difficult to recognize a general affinity between the hyperbolic heroics in *The Lord of the Rings* mentioned above and the attitude of

Totta in “The Homecoming,” there is yet a deeper layer to the connection, glimpsed through some particular literary allusions refigured and idealized. Totta’s chief flaw is a kind of heroic myopia; he can see the power of Beorhtnoth’s gesture, but he fails to grasp its requisite folly. Many of the heroic scenarios throughout Books III and V, however, are idealized, cleaned up—indeed, many battles here are shown not as they are but as Totta might believe they *should be*.¹²

The most meaningful, and certainly the most Totta-esque, examples of this idealization come from “corrective” allusions to Old English classics in *The Lord of the Rings*.¹³ Though it falls outside the general parameters I have set from Books III-VI, the moment discussed earlier involving Gandalf on the bridge in Moria is, for its revision of certain aspects of *Maldon*, one such example of a scene transformed in a way which seems to accord with the young gleeman’s sensibility. While important, the Moria example is by no means unique, and I follow with another which does appear within the bounds of the four Book “dialogue” which is the subject of the present discussion.¹⁴

Two passages in Book III prove crucial not only in defining Aragorn’s prowess with a sword, but also offering subtle commentary through allusion on the build-up to the bare-handed battle with Grendel in *Beowulf*. Tolkien actually discusses this incident—Beowulf’s decision to eschew arms and engage in a “fair” fight against the monster—alongside Beorhtnoth’s deed in “Ofermod,” as an example of what may have been an equally foolish but perhaps less grievous act of chivalry; for Beowulf, at the time a young upstart, has “no responsibility downwards” (103). In *The Lord of the Rings*, the first echo of this legendary moment comes as Aragorn explains his rescue mission to Éomer in “The Riders of Rohan”:

The Orcs whom we pursued took captive two of my friends. In such a need a man that has no horse will go on foot, and he will not ask for leave to follow the trail. Nor will he count the heads of the enemy save with a sword. I am not weaponless. (III.ii.433)

¹² Bowman’s article is very much concerned with these revisions as well, although her study focuses on Sam in Book IV. In spite of this noteworthy display of refined subordinate courage in Sam, I maintain that, in Book IV, the overall tone remains at best lukewarm in its reception of heroics, traditional or refined. Not so in books III and V.

¹³ While the primary focus of this discussion is on the dialogic structures playing out within individual works, it should be noted that such “corrective” allusions are suggestive of another layer of dialogism—of an intertextual variety—made famous by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin.

¹⁴ For another interesting example of this sort of refiguring, see Shippey’s discussion of the discrepancy in attitudes toward mounted battle between the Rohirrim and the English in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, pg. 92.

His elaborate declaration ends on a line which is plainly indebted to the understated “heroic irony” of the litotes so prevalent in *Beowulf* (Chickering, *Beowulf* 10). Litotes is a common technique of understatement employed in Old English verse, but Tolkien uses it here to draw a telling contrast.¹⁵ Initially, Aragorn’s boast appears similar to those employed by Beowulf; both serve to exaggerate a sense of martial prowess. Like Beowulf’s glib assurance that he does not intend to “boast about” slaying sea-beasts during his swimming contest with Breca, Aragorn’s understatement is almost humorous—we know quite well how deadly is the sword he wields (*Beowulf* 585-586). The Ranger’s invocation of “weaponless” also calls to mind Beowulf’s hand-to-hand bout:

I have heard it said this evil monster
in his wild recklessness scorns all weapons.
I therefore decline, that Hygelac my lord
may be pleased to the heart, to take any sword
or broad-braced shield, yellow war-wood,
into this combat, but with my own hand-grip
I will meet this enemy and fight for life,
foe against foe. (433-440)

Ultimately, however, Aragorn emphasizes just the opposite—he is “not weaponless.” It is a subtle allusion, but one which has weight given our knowledge of Tolkien’s critical writing on the *Beowulf* scene. Unlike Beowulf, Aragorn has no intention of eschewing the use of his great sword in some misguided act of self-aggrandizement disguised as fair play. His behavior can thus be seen in dialogue with Beowulf’s. It is another example of Tolkien refiguring older works, rewriting Beowulf’s gesture, and further contributing to the idealized vision of war in Books III and V.

This same question of armed combat and heroic conduct is raised by the scene quoted above, in which Gandalf and his companions are asked to leave their weapons at Théoden’s gate. In this case, the allusion to *Beowulf* is more explicit, recalling the moment when Wulfgar demands that the Swedes surrender their weapons before entering Hrothgar’s hall: “let shields stay here, tightened war-wood / your battle-shafts wait the result of words” (397-398). In the Old English poem, the willing surrender of weapons anticipates the unarmed duel between Beowulf and Grendel. The critical difference in Tolkien’s text, apart from the aforementioned boast of quantifiable heroism in Gandalf’s rebuke, is

¹⁵ The technique, as in the example given of “not weaponless,” commonly appears as an understatement in the negative in order to assert, ironically, the opposite. For more on litotes in *Beowulf* especially, see Chickering pg 9-10.

that the weapons are not surrendered lightly at Théoden's door. Aragorn hesitates—"it is not my will [...] to put aside my sword"—before finally setting his blade down, but only after he has impressed upon the Doorward its worth (III.vi.510). Gandalf, of course, outright refuses to give up his staff, which he will indeed put to good use in the Golden Hall. The reluctance of Tolkien's heroes to yield their legendary weapons stands in contrast to the questionable behavior of Beowulf even as it recalls certain scenes from the Old English poem. These allusive scenes come to exemplify the idealized heroic behavior characteristic of Books III and V—behavior which would surely be met with Totta's approbation. Tolkien "rewrites" these scenes not only to highlight their heroic appeal but to heighten the contrast elsewhere in the narrative.

Books IV and VI: Tída's War

A far different face of war is shown when the narrative returns to Frodo and Sam in Book IV. The staples of Tolkien's epic war—the hyperbolic heroics of fearless leaders and the elevated prose style to match these deeds—drop away during Frodo's journey in Book IV and the early part of Book VI. This unglamorous depiction of war counters the conventions of Tolkien's epic war in much the same way as Tída counters Totta; it shows war demythologized and inglorious. After his first attempted route into Mordor proves impassable, Frodo himself plainly recognizes the discontinuity between the difficult realities of his own mission and the heroic possibilities glimpsed in Books III and V. "I wish we had a thousand oliphaunts with Gandalf on a white one at their head," he said. "Then we'd break a way into this evil land, perhaps. But we've not; just our own tired legs, that's all" (IV.iii.647).

The Hobbits' journey through the Dead Marshes early in Book IV provides a key departure from the epic of Books III and V: Sam and Frodo see nothing of the glorious battle out of the distant past that led to the swampy mass grave, but their tired legs must trudge through the rotting remains. Tolkien clearly found this situation effective; he employs a similar scene to call into question the alleged heroism of *Maldon* in the battlefield clean up reserved for Tída and Totta in "The Homecoming." During the passage through the Marshes, Sam voices his frustration with their filthy expedition. He barks at Gollum: "The stink nearly knocks me down with my nose held. You stink, and master stinks; the whole place stinks" (IV.ii.629). Gollum rightly appends Sam himself to the noxious list—"Yes, yes, and Sam stinks!"—though it does nothing to improve morale (629). The Hobbits are entrenched in the war's dirty, thankless work, far from the clash of swords in Helm's Deep.

The leadership and individual feats catalogued in Books III and V seem almost parodied along the way in Mordor. Frodo and Sam are "guided" through Mordor not by Gandalf or Aragorn but Gollum, whose qualities as a leader say a

great deal about the divide between Tolkien's epic war and his unglamorous one. Treacherous, malnourished, and altogether wretched, Gollum's dubious credentials have very little in common with the beloved Captains of the West. The best encouragement he can offer Frodo and Sam is: "Follow Sméagol very carefully, and you may go a long way, quite a long way, before He catches you, yes perhaps" (IV.ii.625). Gollum fails to inspire the confidence we might expect of the heroes, and indeed his incessant—"Now on we go!"—and often unpleasant instructions—"Wake up! No time to lose"—provide a bizarre reprisal of Tída's role as taskmaster and killjoy in "The Homecoming" (IV.vii.700).

The Hobbits find themselves in even worse straits after falling in with Orcs in Book VI, who are themselves more disorganized and disgruntled than menacing in Mordor. Some degree of order is maintained in the company Frodo and Sam fall in with, but it is bought with the whips of slave-drivers, not by trust or belief in those who lead. The Hobbits are driven on with brutality and derision.

'Where there's a whip there's a will, my slugs. Hold up! I'd give you a nice freshener now, only you'll get as much lash as your skins will carry when you come in late to your camp. Do you good. Don't you know we're at war?' (VI.ii.931)

They do indeed—and it is not the epic war of Books III and V. The Orc-driver's invocation of a kind of work song, a perverse riff on the typically inspirational adage, "where there's a will, there's a way," is another telling indicator of the stark narrative divide.

One might argue that Sam, at least, appears to tackle some epic encounters of his own in facing Shelob or rescuing Frodo from the Tower of Cirith Ungol. In fact, Mary Bowman is fairly convincing in her suggestion that Sam best embodies a heroic ideal Tolkien refines from *Maldon*.¹⁶ Yet if there is a strong element of the edited or transmuted Germanic heroism in Sam, his adventures also take on a distinct element of the *mock*-heroic, in scenes somewhat reminiscent of Tída's condescending gibes toward Totta in "The Homecoming." For it is Shelob's own overzealous misstep (her *ofermod*, perhaps), landing on Sam's blade with the "driving force of her own cruel will," which inflicts the grievous wound, not some moment of doughty swordplay by the hobbit

¹⁶ Though he states that *The Lord of the Rings* rejects "traditional heroism [...] decisively," George Clark also considers Sam to be Tolkien's "true hero," in large part for his display of subordinate courage similar to the *Maldon* retainers (44). Bowman, on the other hand, considers Sam's choices refinements of the heroic code as seen in *Maldon*. Both, I think, miss that the real tension between heroic ideals plays out in the contrast between the two primary narrative threads.

(IV.x.729). Likewise, the successful raid in the Tower is, though by all means a brave deed, due more to the in-fighting between the Orcs than the heroics of the gardener-turned-rescuer.

Tolkien parodies Sam's mock-heroics by building up ridiculous rumors of his deeds among the Orcs. Examining the signs of the battle with Shelob, Gorbag reckons "there's a large warrior loose, Elf most likely, with an elf-sword anyway, and an axe as well maybe" (IV.x.739). This humorous situation serves as a kind of ironic counterpart to the very real threat to enemies posed by Aragorn's blade in the romantic side of war. Sam is well aware of the irony, later referring to himself as "the great big Elvish warrior" (IV.x.742). The running joke is again picked up in "The Land of Shadow," when an Orc soldier refers to the confusion wrought by the spread of rumors about spies in Mordor: "First they say it's a great Elf in bright armour, then it's a sort of small dwarf-man, then it must be a pack of rebel Uruk-hai; or maybe it's all the lot together" (VI.ii.925). The occasional intrusion of the epic in Book IV and early Book VI is often undercut in this way, redolent of the ironic praise Tída lavishes on Totta in his struggle with the corpse strippers.

While I hope to have made clear some of the echoes of Totta and Tída which seem to permeate and at times even define the respective tones of the two major narrative threads in *The Lord of the Rings*, the sense of dialogue between the two threads is more difficult to express and to recognize than the banter between the two characters in "The Homecoming." Nevertheless, there remains in *The Lord of the Rings* this kind of dialogic tension developed not in quick bursts of speech but rather long periods of narrative deferral as the two threads alternate back and forth from Book to Book. At the end of Book III, readers are jarred from the back of Shadowfax as Gandalf and Pippin, fresh from battle at the Hornburg and Isengard, speed toward Minas Tirith "before the seas of war surround it" (III.ii.600). We must plod along with Frodo and Sam through ten chapters of Book IV until Book V grants a return to the epic defense of Gondor, but by that time we are equally engrossed in a very different side of war. The final line of Book IV, "Frodo was alive but taken by the Enemy" (IV.x.742), is as good a cliffhanger as any, and it is ten more chapters until we begin to learn his fate in Book VI. In this way Tolkien builds up a kind of dialogue through the tension which develops between these conflicting experiences of war, all the way until the tale's curious resolution on Mount Doom.

On occasion, Tolkien does break up the otherwise lengthy wait between narrative responses by injecting certain reminders of the implicit dialogue at work. The continuity between certain chapter titles is one such example. "The Black Gate is Closed" for Frodo in Book IV during the early stages of his hopeless quest, but "The Black Gate Opens" for the heroes of the romantic narrative strand later in Book V. Besides evoking a certain pleasure in knowing

readers, the interplay between chapter titles underscores the tension between the two threads and reminds us that they remain in conversation.

Many critics have praised the curious structural contrast at work in *The Lord of the Rings*, but the nature and extent of its close connection to Tolkien's *Maldon* criticism and the dialogue between Totta and Tída have gone largely unacknowledged. Tolkien's work is deeply engaged with themes of war and in this it is surely a product of its time, as the value of traditional heroics was called into question perhaps more than ever during the first half of the twentieth century. Tolkien knew the bitterness of World War I firsthand, but he did not think that current events entirely invalidated the heroic literature he professed. Rather than rejecting outright the work of his literary ancestors, Tolkien preferred to consider that these old poets had been struggling with the same issues that dogged him. Thus in *Maldon* and its "sequel" he imagines the poet trying to strike a balance between seemingly incongruous ideas about battle and heroism. Through the voices of Tída and Totta ringing out in the dialogic structure of *The Lord of the Rings*, we can also recognize Tolkien's body of work engaged in a larger conversation with the *Maldon* poet. He drew on the poet's old techniques and even attempted to patch up the fragmentary poem with a fitting dialogic coda, the lasting imprint of which can still be recognized in the far removed, but no less serious landscape of Middle-earth.

It is a muddy and seemingly self-contradictory vision of war, yet, in the end, I think, an honest one. If Tolkien had squelched the voice of either Tída or Totta in his writing, he might have produced work more easy to digest—but I do not know if we would still be reading it with the same vigor today. Wary as he was of the misappropriations of the old songs, he knew also that he could not let them go. Even Tída recognized that "the woven staves have yet worth in them" (87). Sage Gandalf makes a similar observation regarding the Last Alliance, the historic battle which makes up the fictive backdrop of *The Lord of the Rings*. The wizard calls it "a chapter of ancient history which it might be good to recall; for there was sorrow then too, and gathering dark, but great valour, and great deeds that were not wholly vain" (I.ii.52). In this way he seems to represent a compromise between Totta and Tída, between heroic praise and censure, striking the kind of balance at the heart of Tolkien's dialogic works. Though he is remembered best for his tales set in the sub-created world of *The Lord of the Rings*, such a world would not be wound so taut without his deep roots in medieval scholarship.



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