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Abstract

A close look at “The Battle of Maldon” and how Tolkien’s opinion of Bryhtnoth’s actions echoes through his *Beowulf* essay, “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son,” and even into the character of Gandalf.

Additional Keywords

“The Battle of Maldon”; Heroism in J.R.R. Tolkien; Military ethics in J.R.R. Tolkien; Ofermod in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Beorhtnoth; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Gandalf; Tolkien, J.R.R. “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics”; Tolkien, J.R.R. “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son”

MALDON AND MORIA:
ON BURHCNOCH, GANDALF, AND HEROISCH
IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*¹

ALEXANDER M. BRUCE

"You cannot pass!" [Gandalf] said.

With a bound the Balrog leaped full upon the bridge. Its whip whirled and hissed.

"He cannot stand alone!" cried Aragorn suddenly and ran back along the bridge. "*Elendil!*" he shouted. "I am with you, Gandalf!"

"Gondor!" cried Boromir and leaped after him.

At that moment Gandalf lifted his staff, and crying aloud he smote the bridge before him. The staff broke asunder and fell from his hand. A blinding sheet of white flame sprang up. The bridge cracked. Right at the Balrog's feet it broke, and the stone upon which it stood crashed into the gulf, while the rest remained, poised, quivering like a tongue of rock thrust out into emptiness.

With a terrible cry the Balrog fell forward, and its shadow plunged down and vanished. But even as it fell it swung its whip, and the thongs lashed and curled about the wizard's knees, dragging him to the brink. He staggered and fell, grasped vainly at the stone, and slid into the abyss. "Fly, you fools!" he cried, and was gone. (Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] II:5 322)

SUCH IS THE FALL OF GANDALF at the bridge of Khazad-dûm in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, a powerful moment in *The Lord of the Rings* wherein the fortunes of the Fellowship seem lost, their hearts and hope diminished, and they must carry on without their original leader. And this moment is not original to J.R.R. Tolkien but can be traced, as can many of his characters and situations, to an Anglo-Saxon source.

This moment of two parties separated by a narrow bridge of course brings to mind the Anglo-Saxon "The Battle of Maldon," the poem that recounts

¹ A version of this essay was read at the 40th International Congress on Medieval Studies held at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, in 2005. My thanks to Douglas Anderson, Verlyn Flieger, and Marjorie Burns for their constructive comments at that conference. Marjorie Burns also kindly let me see portions of a proof copy of her forthcoming *Perilous Realms*.

in sometimes tragic, sometimes heroic language the events at Maldon in AD 991, when an English force led by ealdorman Byrhtnoth fought—and lost to—a party of Vikings. As such, “The Battle of Maldon” may easily be considered an analogue, a source for the episode at the bridge of Khazad-dûm, except that Tolkien adapts the situation: he takes the occasion to “correct” the behavior of the self-serving Byrhtnoth through the actions of the self-less Gandalf.² The comparison—or rather, contrast—between the two leaders has not gone unnoticed, as Janet Croft recently (2004) noted in her *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* (93-94). Yet Tolkien’s exploration and adaptation of the issues presented in “Maldon” extends beyond the inclusion of an analogous moment of a hero at a bridge. Though Tolkien critiques one aspect of “Maldon” through Gandalf’s actions, elsewhere in *The Lord of the Rings* he celebrates the Germanic heroic code as so powerfully stated in the Anglo-Saxon poem. In a way, Tolkien takes the mixed message of “Maldon”—with its positive and negative *exempla* of heroic action—and shapes a unified presentation of heroic responsibilities in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Let us begin with the parallels of situation. According to the poem “The Battle of Maldon,” a force of Vikings occupied Northey Isle in the estuary of the river Blackwater along the southeast coast of England.³ These Vikings, led by a

² I do not mean to suggest that “The Battle of Maldon” is the *one and only* source for the episode at the bridge of Khazad-dûm. David Day in *Tolkien’s Ring* (35) and Marjorie Burns in her *Perilous Realms* (58-59) point out that Tolkien’s bridge is closely related to Bifrost, the rainbow bridge of Norse mythology, across which the fire giant Surt comes to battle Freyr in the battle of Ragnarök. In that battle, Odin, leader of the Norse gods (and a figure on whom Tolkien modeled, at least to some degree, the character Gandalf), also perishes; see Snorri Sturluson, *Edda* 52-55. Gandalf’s language may even reflect the orders reportedly given to the French at the Battle of Verdun in June 1916; they were told “Vous ne les laisserez pas passer, mes camarades” (“You will not let them [the Germans] pass, my comrades!”) (*Historique du 25eme Bataillon de Chasseurs a Pied pendant la Grande Guerre*).

³ The river is named the “Panta” in the poem, but other documents, including *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and *The Life of Saint Oswald*, help us identify the “Panta” as the “Blackwater.” Such documents also help identify the names of the people involved; see Bately, “The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle” and Lapidge, “The Life of Saint Oswald.” Tolkien may have had the “Blackwater” in mind when drafting the chapters on Moria, for according to *The Treason of Isengard*, the river Silverlode was for a while the “Blackroot” (see 166-67 and 174, note 22). Additionally, that volume of *The History of The Lord of the Rings* clarifies that Tolkien had drafted portions of “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth” some twenty years before the work was published; Christopher Tolkien writes,

On the back of the page [of a draft of a section C. Tolkien calls “Bilbo’s Song at Rivendell”], with every appearance of having been written at the same time, is a section of a dramatic dialogue in rhyming verse that preceded by more than twenty years *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhtelm’s Son* in *Essays and Studies*, 1953. The Englishmen who took the body of Beorhtnoth from the

certain Olaf, were bloodthirsty, vicious, trained to kill. They had come to collect tribute—given voluntarily or not. Facing them across the river were the English, led by Byrhtnoth; with him are some who are indeed well trained in war but mostly men who are untrained, as early in the poem Byrhtnoth must show them “hu hi sceoldon standan and þone stede healdan [...] hyra randan rihte heoldon, / fæste mid folman, and ne forhtedon na” (“how they should form up and hold the position,” how to “hold their shields properly, / firmly with their fists, and not be at all afraid”) (19-21).⁴ Joining the island to the mainland is a causeway or land bridge accessible only at low tide, and so narrow that three men alone can guard it successfully.

Now the scene within *The Fellowship of the Ring*: the party has been detected by orcs just shy of the eastern gates of Moria; they have to race through the halls until they finally reach the bridge of Khazad-Dûm, which is so narrow that “[t]hey could only pass across it in single file.” The Fellowship races across, so that we have on one side the orcs, bloodthirsty, vicious, trained to kill, and on the other the Fellowship, among whose number are indeed warriors but also those who have little experience in war.

And of course there is a Balrog on the side of evil. Upon first seeing the Balrog just before crossing the bridge, members of the party lose hope; Legolas and Gimli are nearly paralyzed with fear, and even Gandalf “faltered and leaned heavily on his staff [saying] ‘What an evil fortune! And I am already weary’” (II:5 321). It takes the heroic voice of Boromir’s horn to bring the party back to its senses and they cross the bridge⁵—all but Gandalf.

The Balrog turns Gandalf’s focus from escape to confrontation. Obviously, challenging and defeating the Balrog would better insure the Fellowship’s escape and safety. Yet the scene assumes a more cosmic importance, as Tolkien’s language allows us to see the fight between wizard and monster as a greater contest between the powers of good and evil. The struggle is presented in clear terms of “light” and “dark”: Gandalf orders the Balrog to “Go back to the Shadow!” and thwarts its “dark fire” with the “white fire” of Glamdring (322). The evil the Balrog embodies must not be left unchallenged and unchecked—even if confronting it will mean death.

battlefield at Maldon are here called Pudda and Tibba. –*Panta* (Old English) is the river Blackwater. (106n10)

⁴ Text and translation of “The Battle of Maldon” by Donald Scragg in *The Battle of Maldon AD 991*, 1-36. Line numbers will be noted within the body of the essay.

⁵ Further connecting the bridge of Khazad-dûm with the battle of Ragnarok is Boromir’s blowing of his horn; at Raganarok, Heimdall blew his horn Giallarhorn to warn the Norse gods (Snorri Sturluson 54).

So too did the Vikings have to be confronted and stopped or they would be free to raid elsewhere in England. Certainly the conflict between the English and the Vikings lacked the cosmic overtones of Gandalf's battle with the Balrog: the Vikings were not demons conjured by the powers of darkness but mere mortals. Yet they were particularly bloodthirsty and violent mortals who were very skilled in their arts of war. They did pose a genuine and immediate threat to the English—so they had to be challenged, as “The Battle of Maldon” chronicles. The poem suggests that the mostly untrained English forces, once they perceived the full nature of the Viking threat, indeed did feel despair and fear, just as the members of the Fellowship despaired upon seeing the Balrog. Byrhtnoth attempts to ease his men's fears with his bold stance and language, as in his disdainful reply to the Vikings' demand for tribute: “Ne sceole ge swa softe sinc gegangan: / us sceal ord and ecg ær geseman, / grim guðplega, ær we gofol syllon” (“You will not gain treasure so easily: / spear and sword must first arbitrate between us, / the grim game of battle, before we pay tribute”) (59-61). Then Byrhtnoth commands three trained warriors to guard the bridge and keep the Vikings from assaulting the English. Those three—Wulfstan, Ælfhere, and Maccus—“noldon æt þam forða fleam gewyrca, / ac hi fæstlice wið ða fynd weredon / þa hwile þe hi wæpna wealdan moston” (“refused to take flight from the ford; / rather they defended themselves staunchly against the enemy / for as long as they could wield weapons”) (81-83). They give the English a chance for survival, for in fact they are so effective that the Vikings had to change tactics:

Þa hi þæt ongeaton and georne gesawon,
þæt hi þær bricgweardas bitere fundon,
ongunnon lytegian þa laðe gystas:
bædon þæt hi upgangan agan moston,
ofer þone ford faran, feþan lædan.

(When [the Vikings] recognized and saw clearly
that they had come up against unrelenting guardians of the
causeway there,
then the hateful visitors started to use guile:
they asked to be allowed to have passage,
to cross over the ford, to advance their troops.) (84-88)

And that is where the tide turns, for Byrhtnoth agrees to their request—he allows them to come to the English shore. As the poem reads, “Ða se eorl ongan for his ofermode / alyfan landes to fela laþere ðeode” (“Then because of his pride the earl set about / allowing the hateful race too much land” (89-90). Byrhtnoth yields his position, allows the Vikings to cross, and the slaughter of the English ensues. According to the poem, Byrhtnoth is among the first to be killed, and he dies with a prayer in which he thanks God “ealra þæra wynta þe ic on worulde

gebada" ("for all the joys which [he] experienced in this world") and asks God to "minum gaste godes geunne" ("grant grace to [his] spirit") (174-176).

In *Fellowship*, Gandalf has assumed in part the role of the three defenders who block the causeway but more the role of Byrhtnoth—or of the role Byrhtnoth should have played. He issues a challenge to the Balrog, just as Byrhtnoth challenged the Vikings. He holds off the Balrog's first attack, as the three Anglo-Saxon defenders held off the Vikings. And then the parallel ceases, for Gandalf does not yield his position. He personally stands his ground and saves the party by destroying the bridge and casting the Balrog into the abyss—though he himself is unwillingly dragged down in the process. His final words: no prayer, no consolation, no lamentation, just an order: "Fly, you fools!" for they are indeed fools not to act on the occasion and flee immediately.

So why did Byrhtnoth change the rules? The Old English reads "for his ofermode." That word *ofermod* has prompted a variety of translations. They all center on *pride*, but they differ in the degree of pride, whether it is best understood as clearly negative, perhaps even to the point of sinful pride ("heart's arrogance" or "insolence") or something less negative and potentially even positive, such as "over-confidence" or "excessive spirit."⁶

Tolkien knew what he thought of *ofermod*. He does not excuse or apologize for Byrhtnoth, as he reveals in his 1953 "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," which is actually a play plus two essays. Tolkien begins with an introductory essay, "Beorhtnoth's Death" (with background on the battle and a description of the setting and action of the play), then has the play as named, before closing with the critical essay "Ofermod." In "Homecoming," Tídwald, an older veteran-turned-farmer, and the young Torhthelm (the son of a poet who considers himself a poet) are sent to collect the body of Beorhtnoth for burial. Contemplating the events of the battle, Tídwald comments on the fall of the ealdorman:

Alas, my friend, our lord was at fault,
or so in Maldon this morning men were saying.
Too proud, too princely! But his pride's cheated,
and his pryncedom has passed, so we'll praise his valour.
He let them cross the causeway, so keen was he
to give minstrels matter for mighty songs.

⁶ For example, Alexander translates *ofermod* as "heart's arrogance" (104); Donaldson, as "overconfidence" (106); Gordon, as "pride" (330); Hall, as "pride, insolence" (257); Hill, as "pride" (117); Muir, as "excessive spirit, pride, arrogance, over-confidence" (138); Pope and Fulk, as "pride, overconfidence" (202); and Scragg, as "pride" (21). Matto proposes a more psychological and neutral reading, that Byrhtnoth allowed his *mod* or emotions to exceed (or "go *ofer*") "the firmness of his outer mind" (70).

Needlessly noble. It should never have been:
bidding bows be still, and the bridge opening,
matching more with few in mad handstrokes!
Well, doom he dared, and died for it. (16)

Tídwald's comments may strike us as harsh and overcritical, but as Tolkien argues in the essay "Ofermod," Beorhtnoth's actions clearly warrant criticism, not sympathy. In Tolkien's words, Beorhtnoth suffered from "excess," a character trait that had to be tempered. Tolkien explains "excess":

[The] element of pride, in the form of the desire for honour and glory, in life and after death, tends to grow, to become a chief motive, driving a man beyond the bleak heroic necessity to excess—to chivalry. "Excess" certainly, even if it be approved by contemporary opinion, when it not only goes beyond need and duty, but interferes with it. ("Homecoming" 22)

Tolkien offered Beowulf as an example to illustrate what constitutes "excess"—and what the wages of excess are. When Beowulf fought Grendel for personal glory (even making sure it was a "fair fight" so there would be no question as to his deserving credit), he does not commit any sin of "excess" for "Beowulf has no duty to the Danes, he is still a subordinate with no responsibilities downwards" and in fact his success will add "credit to the lord of his allegiance, Hygelac." At the end of the poem, Beowulf does exhibit the sin of excess when he personally challenges the dragon that threatens his land and people, the Geats. At that point in his career, Beowulf did have "responsibilities downward"; his entire people needed him alive as their lord and leader. But he ignored these responsibilities, gave in to excess, and gained victory only "by the loyalty of a subordinate," Wiglaf ("Homecoming" 22-23). And of course Beowulf dies and his leader-less people are shortly erased from history by Swedes, Franks, Frisians—the very tribes Beowulf had kept at bay.

Tolkien thought "Maldon" thus offered "severe criticism" (24; emphasis his) of Beorhtnoth—to the point we should find him guilty of sinful "excess." His responsibilities downwards to his men (and for that matter upwards to his own lord Æthelred, who would, we assume, have preferred the slaughter of the Vikings to the loss of an ealdorman and his men) should have weighed more upon him than his own desire to "give minstrels matter for mighty songs." Tolkien continues: "Beorhtnoth was chivalrous rather than strictly heroic. Honour was in itself a motive, and he sought it at the risk of placing his *heorðwerod*, all the men most dear to him, in a truly heroic situation, which they could redeem only by death. Magnificent perhaps, but certainly wrong. Too

foolish to be heroic. And the folly Beorhtnoth at any rate could not wholly redeem by death" (24).

As if to emphasize the extent of Beorhtnoth's "folly," Tolkien provides the figure of Gandalf at the bridge of Khazad-dûm as a model of correct behavior. Gandalf understood his responsibilities. He had responsibilities "downward" to the Fellowship; they needed an opportunity to escape, and he fought to give them that opportunity. And on a grander scale he had responsibilities "upward" to the greater common good. Just as Byrhtnoth was bound to his lord Æthelred and to the security of England, so too is Gandalf the Maia bound to the Valar and to the security of Middle-earth. So Gandalf fought the Balrog not just for the Fellowship's benefit but for the benefit of all Middle-earth: the creature of evil formed by the ancient enemy Morgoth had to be destroyed. Nor did he commit Byrhtnoth's sin of excess by challenging the creature for his own glory; as Croft has stated, "[h]is ego did not enter into the equation" (94). There is no hint that he sought battle so that he might "give minstrels matter for mighty songs." Certainly such songs were possible—we need think only of the account of the battle between Glorfindel and a Balrog as told in "The Fall of Gondolin" from *The Book of Lost Tales Part 2* (194-97), and in fact the Elves of Lórien may well have sung of Gandalf's battle in their lamentations—but we cannot be sure, for Legolas "would not interpret the songs" (*LotR* II:7 350). What is clear from the scene on the bridge is that Gandalf faced the Balrog neither for fame nor heroism but out of his immediate need to defend the Fellowship, especially those who did not know the arts of warfare and should not be sacrificed, and out of his greater duty to fight against the forces of evil.

With this argument that Tolkien used Gandalf at the bridge to demonstrate what Beorhtnoth should have done, I do not mean to suggest that Tolkien meant to condemn the entire message of "The Battle of Maldon." Far from it. In fact, Tolkien shared in his "Ofermod" essay how much the heroic language resonated with him; he wrote, "The words of [the veteran retainer] Beorhtwold [at lines 312-313; "Maldon" names him Byrhtwold] have been held to be the finest expression of the northern heroic spirit, Norse or English; the clearest statement of the doctrine of uttermost endurance in the service of indomitable will" (21). The Anglo-Saxon sentiment, Tolkien argues, "appears in this clarity [in 'Maldon'] [...] precisely because it is put in the mouth of a subordinate, a man for who the object of his will was decided by another, who had no responsibility downwards, only loyalty upwards. Personal pride was therefore in him at its lowest, and love and loyalty at their highest" (22). Those lines stand out to any who have given the poem even a cursory reading: "Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre, / mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað" (312-313). Tolkien placed his translation of them into the mouth of Torhthelm in

“The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth”: “Heart shall be bolder, harder the purpose, / more proud the spirit as our power lessens!” (19). To be fair, the fact that Torhthelm speaks those lines presents some challenge; Tom Shippey, notably, does not believe that Tolkien’s character Torhthelm speaks for Tolkien himself. In *The Road to Middle-Earth* and, more extensively, in “Tolkien and ‘The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth,’” Shippey argues that Torhthelm is a poor spokesman for the heroic as he himself is cowardly, given to empty boasting, and murderous (7-8); so negative is the depiction of Torhthelm that having him speak the translation of lines 312-313 of “Maldon” amounts to an attack on the heroism outlined in those very lines—lines that Tolkien “did not like” (13). Shippey points out that Torhthelm cannot truly understand the lines for he speaks them half-asleep (14); in a similar way, Shippey continues, people of Tolkien’s own day had only half-understood the call of heroism, that they had misappropriated the lines and must be corrected:

I am sure that Tolkien was also thinking in a way of the resurgence of self-consciously Nordic or Germanic attitudes in Nazi Germany. He felt that the heathen spirit of the Vikings and the berserks had come back in his own time, and had to be fought again. To fight it [...] [h]e had in fact to take the northern heroic spirit and sacrifice it. That was what he was doing in “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth.” (15)

However, Shippey’s argument that Tolkien “did not like” lines 312-313 and their expression of Germanic heroism must be balanced by the fact that Tolkien repeatedly and positively wove the message of those lines into *The Return of the King*, even to the point of quoting his translation of the lines essentially verbatim.

Again, Tolkien had considered these lines from “Maldon” to be “the finest expression of the northern heroic spirit.” He had earlier (1936) outlined this “northern heroic spirit” in his landmark essay “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics” wherein he defined his Northern “theory of courage” as the “creed of unyielding will”—the ability to face imminent death with a resolution and strength of spirit that refuses to see death as defeat (70). It is this sort of courage that drives a number of characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. For example, in *The Return of the King* Éowyn and Merry face the Witch-King to protect the fallen Théoden; later, Aragorn chooses to lead his reduced forces right to the very gates of Mordor expecting death but not defeat, for he knows he is giving Frodo more time to destroy the Ring. More specific to the episode at the bridge of Khazad-dûm, by surging forward to protect Gandalf (unsuccessfully), Aragorn and Boromir display the “positive and heroic values of love and loyalty for his lord [...] by a subordinate warrior” (Chance 79). As Robert Boenig, Steven Deyo, and John Holmes have noted, Aragorn and Boromir are acting just as Byrhtnoth’s faithful retainers Ælfwine, Offa, Leofsunu, Dunnere, and Byrhtwold acted; they

are seeking to fulfill their obligation to their leader, fighting for him even unto death.⁷ To their credit, Aragorn and Boromir are saved the shame of “allowing” their lord to die, for before falling Gandalf releases them from their duty to die in his service with the command, “Fly, you fools!”

Tolkien makes his point about valuing the heroism of the North as expressed in “Maldon” even clearer by incorporating echoes and variations of Byrhtwold’s definition of heroism into the passages describing Frodo and Sam’s journey through the desolation of Mordor. In their approach to Mount Doom across the plain of Gorgoroth, Sam comes to terms with the reality of their situation: “Never for long had hope died in his staunch heart, and always until now he had taken some thought for their return. But the bitter truth came home to him at last: at best their provision would take them to their goal; and when the task was done, there they would come to an end, alone, houseless, foodless in the midst of a terrible desert. There could be no return” (*LotR* VI:3 912-13). But after considering their imminent death, Sam feels not defeated but resolute: “But even as hope died in Sam, or seemed to die, it was turned to a new strength. Sam’s plain hobbit-face grew stern, almost grim, as the will hardened in him” (913). Sam refuses to give into despair, for “[h]is will was set, and only death would break it” (919). We can compare Sam’s stern, grim countenance and hardened will to Byrhtnoth’s “Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre.” Nor is there *ofermod* but rather *mod* in Sam’s response, that sense of absolute dedication to a cause greater than his own glory or fortune—that love and loyalty Tolkien valued.⁸ And while the focus is much more on Sam at this moment, Tolkien does note that in that dark, hopeless time, determination grows in both Frodo and Sam, just as it did in old Byrhtwold, for even as the hobbits’ “strength lessened” (or “mægen lytlað”), “their wills did not yield, and they struggled on” (914, 918).

Thus in *The Lord of the Rings* we can see that Tolkien presents a unified perspective on heroism rather than the mixed commentary found in “The Battle of Maldon,” with its examples of flawed heroic spirit in Byrhtnoth (at least in Tolkien’s eyes) and of true heroic spirit in Byrhtwold and the other faithful retainers such as Offa, Leofsunu, and Dunnere. Gandalf acts as Byrhtnoth should have acted—to save his loyal companions, not to jeopardize them; Frodo and Sam enact the very words of Byrhtwold as they make their way through the plains of desolation and despair. And through Tolkien’s powerful characters and

⁷ See Boenig 11, Deyo 60, and Holmes 251-53. Dunnere’s brief lines encapsulate the self-sacrificing sentiment of the loyal retainers: “Ne mæg na wandian se þe wrecan þenceð / frean on folce, ne for feore murnan” (“He must never flinch who thinks to avenge / his lord in this body of men, nor be anxious about life”) (258-59).

⁸ Clark has noted that in deciding to rescue Frodo from the orcs at the tower of Cirith Ungol, “Sam unconsciously models his intended course of action on the heroic deaths of the heroes remembered in the song or poem *Maldon*” (46).

moments we have a more profound sense of the heroic spirit—or of heroic responsibilities—and are emboldened to hold fast in mind and will . . . even when the Balrog comes.

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