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"The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son": Tolkien as a Modern Anglo-Saxon

Abstract

Looks for evidence of the Anglo-Saxon influence on Tolkien's writings in his verse play "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," both in style and worldview.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Knowledge—Anglo-Saxon; Tolkien, J.R.R. "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son"

"The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son": Tolkien as a Modern Anglo-Saxon

J. Case Tompkins

THE recent success of Seamus Heaney's adaptation of the Old English *Beowulf* was a phenomenon as surprising to the literary world as to the publishing houses. As copies of this thousand year-old poem flew off the shelves and booksellers scrambled to find more of what had been a very modest print run, the shock was as great at the universities as it was at the *New York Times*. Why, everyone was suddenly wondering, was a musty old story about monsters and a hero in a strange old language more readable than Harry Potter?

Like the tip of the proverbial iceberg, the Heaney translation uncovers a vast and, for the most part, uncharted field of modern literature which takes its style and sentiment from the Old English poetic tradition. This literary tradition did not die with Harold at Hastings nor did it pass with the Middle Ages. Indeed, the Old English poetic style is something of a monster, or at least a mutant; it has somehow survived not only invasions and conquests of a millenium but also the evolution of a language to a form almost unrecognizable from its origins. As late as the turn of the twentieth century, poet Gerard Manley Hopkins claimed to draw his alliterative style from Old English poetry. The tradition surfaces again in the thought and works of the man who is arguably the century's most popular author, J. R. R. Tolkien.

As a student of languages and an enthusiastic Anglo-Saxonist, Tolkien was perhaps the best scholar of Old English in his time. He translated and edited the Old English poem *Exodus*, and the Middle English (but also alliterative) poems *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Pearl*. His paper, "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," is probably the most influential essay on Anglo-Saxon literature ever written. Indeed, Tolkien's letters indicate a personal interest in Old English so strong that he considered himself closer to the Anglo-Saxon period than his own time (65).

However, it is not for these (indubitably important) scholarly works that he is popularly known. Rather it is his novels *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* and

his other imaginative works that have made his popular reputation. He remains one of the most-read authors of the twentieth century.

Controversy has always dogged Tolkien's work, despite his popularity. Critics remain sharply divided as to the worth of works such as *The Hobbit* and to Tolkien's place in the English canon. Much of this debate stems from a misunderstanding of Tolkien's style and his approach to writing. Many critics, seeing him merely as a fantasist, are content to dismiss his work as escapism. Nothing could be further from the truth. Instead of focusing on the realism of modern fiction, Tolkien owes much of his sense and style to the Anglo-Saxon poets whom he knew and loved so well. If we cease to think of Tolkien as a "modern writer" and begin to see him as a "modern Anglo-Saxon," we come much nearer to a proper understanding of his work.

One poem by J. R. R. Tolkien, a short, obscure work entitled "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son" illustrates this point perfectly. Based on the fragmentary Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*, it tells the brief tale of the events occurring after the famous defeat for which the Old English poem is named. Purely as a work of literature, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son" is a fine piece of poetry; it tells its brief tale (concerning two men who have come in the dusk to look for Beorhtnoth's body) with care and style. Its sense of mood and atmosphere are well-developed, and its characters are, for the size of the piece, fully realized. However, when one examines the poem with a knowledge of Old English poetry, it quickly becomes clear that there is something truly incredible about "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son."

This paper explores the unique nature of Tolkien's poem "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son." In doing so it demonstrates that it is indeed a singular form of literature, the modern Old English poem, following the style of the Anglo-Saxon poets while at the same time making significant modern adjustments in both language and style. It is hoped that a careful study of this poem, showing how the poet has created an adaptation of the Old English style of poetry, will give important clues, not only into Tolkien's creative imagination, but also his place in English literature.

Tolkien's understanding and, indeed, mastery of the form of Old English poetry are clear when one examines the technical aspects of this poem. Michael Shapiro notes that "the alliterative tradition is more fully realized in [Tolkien's] work than perhaps in any other poet of the twentieth century" (208). As both a reader and a

translator of Old English, Tolkien was uniquely capable of creating a poem like “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son.” His care to preserve the Old English style, as well as his significant departures from that style, is worthy of consideration.

Although the topic of Old English prosody is complex (see Cable, Creed, and Pope), the line remains the fundamental building block of Old English poetry. That line contains a complex series of conventions, which may all be found, to one degree or another, in the lines of “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son.” The perfect line of Old English poetry has four stresses, with a caesura dividing the line into two staves, or hemistiches, each containing two stressed syllables. Further, the line is bound together not with rhyme, but with alliteration. The alliteration is determined by the first stressed syllable in the second staff of the line (called the headstaff); the fourth stressed syllable will never alliterate with the other stressed syllables. As edited in the *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, the most famous lines from *The Battle of Maldon* read:

Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,
Mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytla.¹ (ll. 312-13)

In line 312, the four stresses are on the words “hige,” “heardra,” “heorte,” and “cenre.” The caesura immediately follows “heardra,” and the three “h” words alliterate. In the second line the alliteration is found in the three words “Mod,” “mare,” and “mægen,” which along with “lytla” carry the four stresses. It is also worth noting that the Old English line may contain any number of unstressed syllables.

Compare these lines to some from Tolkien’s poem. Tídwald (Tída) speaks these lines as he and his companion Torhthelm (Totta) carry the body of their lord, Beorhtnoth:

“Too proud, too princely! But his pride’s cheated,
And his pryncedom has passed, so we’ll praise his valour.” (ll. 286-87)

Notice how here, as in the Old English lines, each line is divided by a pause, indicated by the exclamation point in the first line and the comma in the second line. Moreover, the first stressed syllable of the second staff in each line—“pride’s” in line 286 and “praise” in line 287—directs the alliteration in each line (“proud,” “princely,” and “pride’s” in line 286; and “pryncedom,” “passed,” and “praise” in line 287); and the fourth stressed syllable in each line does not alliterate with the

other stressed sounds. Finding modern English words to fit the conventions of the Old English rhythm is the work of the translator. Here, however, is not translation but poetry. Tolkien is not adapting these lines from an earlier source; he is creating them in the old tradition, but out of the modern language.

“The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son” does not, however, slavishly follow Old English poetic style in every sense. There is the theatrical, or antiphonal structure. The dialogue of the two characters and the presence of the “stage directions” (i.e. “*Tída lets out again the light of the dark-lantern*” [8]) throughout the poem is unheard of in the Anglo-Saxon period, such dramatic conventions belonging to later periods. Though works such as the Old English poem *Christ* show dramatic impulse, the stage proper was a later invention. In tandem with this is the action which the “stage directions” denote. This use of outside aids to tell the story, even more than the use of dialogue, distinguishes the poem from the strictly Old English forms.

Though these differences are noticeable, they are not harsh. Tolkien has used what he could of the Old English style, and used it well. But he has also added and adjusted, a process necessary after so long a time, using more recent conventions to add to the effect of the poem rather than simply following the original forms. Had he not done this, “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son” might be considered simply an exercise. As it is, it is something more.

Not only is “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son” fascinating in its technical aspects, its theme and mood deserve attention as well. Once again, Tolkien has both adhered to and departed from the Old English style, creating a fascinating admixture of both the old and the new.

What might best be called the “heroic sense” rings as clearly in “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son” as it does in any Anglo-Saxon poem. Central to much Old English literature is the vital relationship between the cyning (king) and his thanes, what is often referred to as the comitatus relationship. The king was to lead and protect his people, who were to support and be loyal to him. The importance of this relationship was paramount in the Anglo-Saxon mind, and its fulfillment and/or abandonment is the central tension in poems like *The Battle of Maldon*, *The Wanderer*, or *Beowulf*. As they search through the bodies of the slain for their lord, Tída remarks to Totta:

“My oath I’ll take
They fell in his defense, and not far away
Now master lies.” (“Homecoming” ll. 55-57)

This is the heroic way, the thane defending his lord unto the last. The reverse is also shown when Totta curses those who ran from the battle, saying:

"May the blast of Heaven
Light on the dastards that to death left them
To England's shame!" (ll. 61-63)

The *comitatus* relationship is developed, as it often is in Old English literature, by showing contrasts between those who fulfill their obligations and those who abandon them.

Hand in hand with this heroic relationship is the heroic stoicism of the Anglo-Saxons. As the two men approach Ely Isle and the monastery which is the end of their journey, Totta speaks lines which could have come from *The Wanderer* or *The Seafarer*:

"Thus ages pass,
And men after men. Mourning voices
Of women weeping. So the world passes;
Day follows day, and the dust gathers,
His tomb crumbles, as time gnaws it,
And his kith and kindred out of ken dwindle.
So men flicker and in the mirk go out.
The world withers and the wind rises;
The candles are quenched. Cold falls the night." (ll. 358-66)

This—the awareness of the passage of time, the ever-presence of death, and the fleeting nature of all earthly things—is the very essence of the warrior's consolation found in the great poems like *Beowulf*. This awareness creates some of the most poignant passages in poems like *The Wanderer*, as it does for "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," capturing the brooding pensiveness of the Anglo-Saxon *scop*.

Though Tolkien weaves the heroic theme masterfully into the poem, he nonetheless has a slightly different (one might say, more democratic) focus than his Anglo-Saxon predecessors. As has been noted before, the main characters are commoners, not the noble warriors of most of Old English poetry. This is important in relation to the poem's mood, for while Tída and Totta are not Beorhtnoth's thanes, they are nonetheless affected by his death. There is something in their sorrow for his death that is like that of the mourners at Beowulf's funeral: the dread of the future now that there is no lord to protect them. Rather than focus on

the brave deeds and brave deaths of those who died at the battle of Maldon, Tolkien focuses on the emotions of and the results for those left behind. It is a kind of “*Beowulf* from below,” raising to center stage the cares of the commoner while retaining a reverence for the heroic.

There are also the occasional moments of “conscious history.” In making references to figures like Beowulf (the hero, not the poem), Grendel, and Hengest and Horsa, Tolkien seems to remove for a moment the “suspension of disbelief” caused by his adherence to the Old English style. No poems from the Anglo-Saxon period, except *Beowulf*, mention Beowulf or any of the others, though it is almost certain Beowulf was a popular folk hero. Whether this tactic was a conscious decision to enhance the “common view” of the poem or simply a mistake is difficult to judge. Added to this is the rather “episodic” nature of the poem, with characters beginning *in medias res* and the poem ending rather suddenly; there is a feel rather like a short narrative, a self-contained episode. Though poems like *Beowulf* and *Andreas* may be considered “episodic,” the Anglo-Saxon poets never attempted the self-contained vignette. (Indeed, the only “episodes” one finds in Old English are episodes simply because the poem is incomplete.)

Thus we once again see a strange hybrid, but a workable one. Though an Anglo-Saxon audience may not have completely understood “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son,” they probably would have appreciated it. So too may a modern audience, though different conventions will sound strange to them.

Once we have established, however, the validity of this modern Old English poem, we are left with a question: What are we to do with it? This poem is in fact not some strange atavism of Tolkien’s thought; it is, rather, a key to his thought. If we may understand the important points of “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son,” especially the important bridges, or connections, to the Old English style and thought, then we may indeed understand much of Tolkien’s work as a whole.

Other Tolkien poems follow the Old English meter, but none so consciously as “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son.” Poems like “The Lay of the Children of Hurin” from *The Lays of Beleriand*, are certainly alliterative, but exist within the context of Middle-earth, not Anglo-Saxon England. At other times Tolkien’s mastery of the Old English language allowed him to compose poems in that tongue, as he did for W. H. Auden (*Letters* 378).

In *Inventing the Middle Ages* Norman F. Cantor notes that Tolkien’s love of the “Northern languages,” such as Old English, led him to attempt the writing *The Lord of the Rings* as if he were translating it from an earlier language. Cantor notes: “Tolkien claimed that he imagined first the language, then the story of long journey and quest (epic) in that language. Then he pretended that he was translating from that epic into modern English, retaining proper nouns and a few other key words” (226). This principle of “translated fiction” can clearly be seen in “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son.” Tolkien himself noted in the introduction that the poem was written in “a free form of the alliterative line, the last surviving fragment of ancient English heroic minstrelsy” (“Homecoming” 6). The connection here is obvious. Though the translated languages are different, one real and the other imagined, the idea is the same. The process of bringing forward through time a work of literature, of translating or adapting it, of writing something that is old and yet new, is obvious in “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son,” but may be seen indirectly in Tolkien’s other works. Thus we may say that though the Old English meter is not always on Tolkien’s page, it is ever on his mind.

This is not simply a stylistic desire for the “aroma of translation” around a work. The principles of the heroic tradition are amply evident in characters like Aragorn from *The Lord of the Rings*. However, like the two commoners Tída and Totta in “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son,” it is the peasant-like hobbits who take center stage. The heroic is ever-present, however. Alluded to in *The Lord of the Rings* and detailed in *The Silmarillion*, the characters of Tolkien’s Middle-earth move through a landscape full of history, of great heroes long gone, and glories long forgotten. “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son” contains in miniature the quintessence of these themes. This supreme consciousness of writing not only *from* a literary tradition but also *in* it is central to Tolkien’s imaginative work, and equally central to our understanding of its importance.

The increasing distance between the commoner of the twentieth century and the poetic literature of the modern world creates serious doubt as to the validity of the notion of “popular verse.” Tolkien seems to cross this widening gap, managing to be both profoundly literate and obviously popular. His Anglo-Saxon roots, rather than distancing him from his audience, instead manage to bring him closer to them. It is possible that a modern man who read *Beowulf* and then wrote a story may have captured, more than any modernist, the poetry and heroism which is our language’s oldest heritage.

Note

1. Tolkien translates these lines thus: "Will shall be the sterner, heart the bolder, spirit the greater as our strength lessens" (*Reader* 5).

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