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## Tolkien the Playwright: Manuscript Revisions and Faërian Dramas in "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth"

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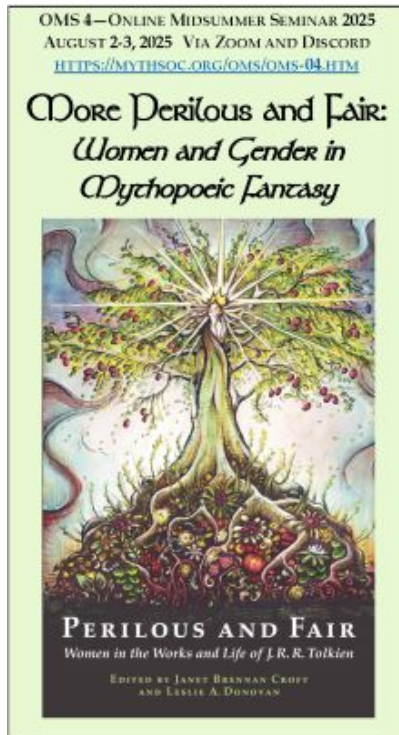
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## Tolkien the Playwright: Manuscript Revisions and Faërian Dramas in "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth"

### Abstract

Tolkien is not usually considered a playwright, even though his verse drama, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," is a unique example of the genre. It is Tolkien's only published play and historical fiction, as well as a unique poetic - dramatic genre, a modern alliterative verse play, which Tolkien developed over many years in numerous drafts, now held at the Bodleian Library in Oxford and the Brotherton Library in Leeds. These manuscript drafts allow us to trace Tolkien's stage directions, which reveal that he imagined this to be a play for presentation on stage. This essay examines Tolkien's statements on and experiences of drama, and traces the revisions in the manuscripts, in Tolkien's personal recording of the play, and considers possible revisions in the BBC Radio broadcast, with the aim of demonstrating different modes of dramatic presentation, including faërian dramas affecting characters and audiences alike.

### Additional Keywords

The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth; modern alliterative verse; verse play; drama; Bodleian Library; Brotherton Library; stage directions; poetic recitation; Faërian drama; audience; Humphrey Carpenter; On Fairy-

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stories; manuscript revisions; The Homecoming recording; BBC Radio broadcasts; The Battle of Maldon; Cnut's Song; Dirige domine; Dies Irae; asterisk-verse

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TOLKIEN THE PLAYWRITER:  
MANUSCRIPT REVISIONS AND  
FAËRIAN DRAMAS IN  
"THE HOMECOMING OF BEORHTNOTH"

ANNA SCOLL

TOLKIEN IS NOT USUALLY CONSIDERED A PLAYWRITER, even though his verse drama, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," is a unique example of his work in the genre. As Richard West points out, Tolkien's play "appears to be his only published drama and his only work of historical fiction" (340). It is, furthermore, a unique poetic and dramatic genre, a modern alliterative verse play, which Tolkien developed over many years in numerous drafts. These revisions reveal that Tolkien early on imagined this to be a play for presentation on stage. Several factors, though, have mitigated against this recognition: the play's original place of publication; the scholarly interest in Tolkien's attached essay on "ofermod"; the downplaying of Tolkien's interest in drama in Carpenter's biography; and the impression given by the BBC Radio production and even Tolkien's own comments. However, an examination of the manuscript revisions allows us to trace Tolkien's stage directions and his development of different kinds of dramatic presentation, including poetic recitation and faërian drama, within the play itself.

First of all, consider the place of publication: the play was originally published in a scholarly journal, *Essays and Studies*, in 1953. In typical fashion, Tolkien had been drafting and revising "The Homecoming" possibly as early as 1931, or earlier (Scull and Hammond, *Chronology* 167).<sup>1</sup> When he was due to submit something to *Essays and Studies*, as he had promised to do, he sent them "The Homecoming," which was inspired by the Old English poem, "The Battle of Maldon." Tolkien added a commentary on the historical battle in the introduction and a brief essay on one Old English word in "Maldon," *ofermod*, which he translated as "overmastering pride" ("The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth" [HB] 27). This essay, titled "Ofermod," does not appear in earlier

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<sup>1</sup>The Brotherton Library special collection bought the B2 draft from the Gordon family and date it circa 1925. Scull and Hammond, however, believe that the Brotherton dating is incorrect and should be dated in the 1930s. If it is indeed datable to 1925, then of course the first two drafts in the Bodleian would have to be dated earlier than 1925.

drafts but is only evident in typescript in the last draft of the play—it has the appearance of a last-minute addition. As Honegger notes, it would be unusual for Tolkien not to have any other drafts of the piece, although no other copies have come to light (189–90). Tolkien explains his reason for adding the essay: “to merit a place in *Essays and Studies* it must, I suppose, contain at least by implication criticism of the matter and manner of the Old English poem (or of its critics)” (HB 27). This critical essay drew medievalists’ attention, not the play itself. The focus on Tolkien’s interpretation of “ofermod,” as part of the “northern heroic spirit” (HB 28) and his application of that idea to “The Battle of Maldon,” *Beowulf*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* became the centre of decades of scholarly debate, particularly about “Maldon.” George Clark has outlined the ways in which Tolkien’s ideas had been accepted and repeated by subsequent critics (257–82), and Tom Shippey states that in a 1981 edition of “Maldon,” “the Tolkien view is utterly dominant” (“Academic Reputation” 206).

While medievalists were mainly interested in Tolkien’s view of “ofermod” rather than the play itself, Tolkien’s official biographer, Humphrey Carpenter, consistently downplayed Tolkien’s interest in drama, despite some evidence to the contrary. For example, when Carpenter mentions a play that Tolkien wrote in 1912 for his relatives’ entertainment, he added, “Later in life he professed to despise drama” (67). However, when the biography arrives at Tolkien’s later life, Carpenter summarizes the memories of Tolkien’s children, including “Visits to the theatre, which their father always seemed to enjoy, although he declared he did not approve of Drama” (162). We do have Tolkien’s reactions to a couple of his visits to the theatre that indicate his critical engagement with the genre, and sometimes even his enjoyment of it. When he was a young man of eighteen, he saw J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* on the stage with Pauline Chase and exclaimed in his diary: “Indescribable but shall never forget it as long as I live. Wish E. had been with me” (qtd. in Carpenter 55). Later, in 1944 when he was in his fifties, he saw John Gielgud perform his acclaimed Hamlet and commented that “it was a very exciting play” with a “young rather fierce Hamlet” and “the most moving” scene of mad Ophelia (*Letters* 126, #76). It is interesting that in his assessment of the Shakespeare play, Tolkien opines that it is always preferable to see Shakespeare acted on stage rather than just read as a text. For example, he writes that he always found Ophelia’s mad scene “boring” in reading, but not when enacted in this particular production (*Letters* 126, #76). In the same year, however, Tolkien saw George Bernard Shaw’s *Arms and the Man* at the Oxford Playhouse and declared it to be “a v. poor production” (*Letters* 135, #82), and in 1940 he attended a performance of *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, though we don’t know his opinion of it (Scull and Hammond, *Reader’s Guide* I. 313). As Scull and Hammond point out, “attending plays, whether performed by professional actors or by college or university dramatic societies,

was a part of social life" (*Reader's Guide* I.313). In general, then, we know that Tolkien attended plays, and we can point to some instances spanning several decades in which his reactions suggest his interest in and occasional enjoyment of the dramatic art form.

However, Tolkien's reactions to drama are certainly mixed, and a letter written in 1950 to his young fan Hugh Brogan can corroborate Carpenter's assessment. In this letter, Tolkien expresses a negative opinion about drama, although the context in the excerpted letter is unclear about whether Tolkien is writing about the genre of drama in general, or about reading the text of a drama instead of seeing it in production, or about composing a drama himself. In any case, he writes, "As for the Drama: I am sorry, but that is one of my blind spots: a lone man in a stage-struck age. I find it a bore—all except (of course) acting oneself. That is good fun" (*Letters* 201, #130a).

We have plenty of evidence at least that Tolkien enjoyed the fun of acting. In school, for example, he performed in plays (Scull and Hammond, *Reader's Guide* 1. 313–17) and participated in debates, often in humorous speeches which required embodying a distinct persona while taking a position in argument (Scull and Hammond, *Chronology* 16–66). Outside of his time in school, Tolkien also wrote plays in his youth as entertainments for his relatives (*Chronology* 42). As John Garth has pointed out, "By thus limbering up in his early exercises as a writer, he was later able to apply the same skills—more finely tuned, of course—to the most serious topics and with the utmost gravity" (11).

Even later in life, we have evidence of Tolkien's dramatic flair. Picture him at the Oxford Summer Diversions in 1938 reciting from memory Chaucer's comic Nun's Priest's Tale: "On the merrymaking occasion in summer 1938, Tolkien strode upon the stage costumed as Chaucer in a green robe, a turban, and fake whiskers parted in the middle like the forked beard shown in early portraits like Ellesmere's" (Bowers 208). The performance received good reviews in the *Oxford Mail*. In the following year, Tolkien returned to perform Chaucer's Reeve's Tale, this time producing a shortened version of the story, reprinted in a 2008 issue of *Tolkien Studies*, taking care to produce a text that emphasized the northern dialect of the characters (Bowers 208–211). In his prefatory remarks, Tolkien identified some of the features of this "comic dialect" ("Reeve's" 173), which presumably he imitated in his delivery.

Tolkien's recitations of Chaucer aren't the only performances that his audiences remember. Although students did complain that during lectures he mumbled and was hard to understand, he was capable of creating memorable dramatic moments. For example, when Tolkien recited lines from *Beowulf* in a lecture, W.H. Auden recalls, "I was spellbound" (qtd. in Jones 70). Similarly, Nevill Coghill describes the opening of Tolkien's Valedictory Address: "he entered the lecture-hall shouting, in full spate, the opening lines to *Beowulf*" (qtd.

in Glycer 26n42), a speech which the *Oxford Mail* described variously as “very vigorous” with “deflating asides, or melodramatic declamation in Anglo-Saxons [sic]” (Scull and Hammond, *Chronology* 572).

And we only have to listen to Tolkien’s reading of “Riddles in the Dark” to hear his skilful performance of Gollum’s voice, or, more aptly, his reading of “The Homecoming,” a recording given to Tolkien conference attendees in 1992 and now more widely available in Peter Grybauskas’s edition published last year, in which a CD copy is packaged in the slip-cased edition. Łukasz Neubauer points to Tolkien’s performance skills in “The Homecoming” recording, describing how Tolkien distinguishes between the two characters’ voices along with the addition of a few sound effects (222-227). Tolkien’s experiences, then, throughout his life in debating, theatrical performance, lecturing, and, no doubt, reading to his children and engaging in many different club activities—presenting essays, singing songs, performing recitations—indicate a dramatic flair and some skill in performance, and an enjoyment of some theatrical performances, making Carpenter’s assessment that Tolkien despised drama somewhat questionable.

Carpenter’s negative assessment has its basis in his reading and, I would argue, misapplication of Tolkien’s views on drama in the Appendices in “On Fairy-stories.” When describing Tolkien’s successful public performances reciting Chaucer in 1938 and 1939, Carpenter states, “He was not enthusiastic about drama as an art-form, considering it to be tiresomely anthropocentric and therefore restricting” (218). Tolkien did claim that “Drama is anthropocentric” in Appendix F of “On Fairy-stories,” but there is nothing in the tone or content of the passage to indicate that he thought it “tiresome.” In Appendix F, the comparison between genres is clearly stated: “Drama is anthropocentric. Fairy-story and Fantasy need not be” (“On Fairy-stories” [OFS] 82). Here Tolkien is explaining his view that Fantasy is not suitable for dramatic presentation, not that drama in general is to be despised. He concludes this Appendix by positing that drama “cannot well cope” with either a scientific theory or a fairy-story—it must be about human beings, thus giving us insight into why Tolkien did not write more plays—or any plays about Middle-earth—as he was preoccupied with developing his fantasy world, which he did not consider appropriate subject matter for the dramatic genre. Consider, for example, his responses to proposals to adapt *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings* for theatre, radio, or film. Although he allowed a number of these to go ahead for financial reasons or to acquiesce to his publishers’ requests, he was never very pleased with the results (Scull and Hammond, *Reader’s Guide* I, 8–26). As he wrote to Terence Tiller, the producer of a 1955 radio adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*, the tale was “not conceived dramatically but (for lack of a more precise term) epically” (*Letters*

366, #194). Tolkien conclusively states, "Here is a book very unsuitable for dramatic or semi-dramatic presentation" (*Letters* 365, #194).

In contrast, "The Homecoming" is actually conceived of dramatically and is also about the actions of men in the Primary World, not in a fantasy realm. Tolkien bases the historical facts of his drama on the Old English poem, "The Battle of Maldon," and on early English chronicles. According to the chronicles, a battle took place in 991 C.E. at Maldon on the east coast of Britain, between English forces led by Byrhtnoth<sup>2</sup> and an invading Viking army, which defeated the English in the ensuing battle. The Old English poem imagines Byrhtnoth's death in battle, the flight of some cowards on the English side, and the heroic last stand of some of Byrhtnoth's most loyal followers. Tolkien bases his play on this historical event, using details from this poem and the chronicles to imagine the battlefield at night after the fighting is over and the Vikings have moved on.

In his fiction, he creates two servants who were not in the battle, one a younger son of a minstrel named Torhthelm, or Totta for short, and one an older farmer named Tidwald, or Tida, who are sent to search for and retrieve the body of their leader Beorhtnoth to bring him back to the abbey at Ely for burial. Tolkien's play, consisting of just over 300 lines of verse, deals with these two men and their actions and discussions as they search for their leader among the dead warriors, fight off some corpse-robbers, haul Beorhtnoth's body into a wagon, and head back on the road to the abbey. Except for the development of one visionary scene experienced by Totta, "The Homecoming" presents realistic actions in a historical setting, and, as I have pointed out elsewhere, includes features that are common in WWI writing and that might have been influenced by Tolkien's own war experiences ("Bodies in War," 263–65).

Of course, Carpenter is correct in believing that Tolkien found drama to be "restricting" when it attempts to represent fantasy. In Appendix E, Tolkien discusses the representation of Fantasy in the "'pictorial' arts" in which he includes drama. He compares what he calls "true literature" with these "'pictorial' arts," pointing out that such art "imposes one visible form" whereas literature "works from mind to mind and is thus more progenitive" (OFS 82).<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, I believe that Carpenter overemphasizes Tolkien's disapproval with repeated statements in the biography that Tolkien disliked or

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<sup>2</sup> References to the Old English poem will use the West Saxon spelling, *Byrhtnoth*, which is commonly found in editions of the poem, and Tolkien's spelling of *Beorhtnoth* when referring to "The Homecoming." Tolkien altered the spelling of the name to represent the eastern dialect of Essex.

<sup>3</sup> However, as Jeffrey MacLeod and I have argued, Tolkien expressed himself in visual art throughout his life, representing aspects of his Secondary World in visual form and using pictorial sketches to aid his literary imagination (MacLeod and Smol 116–18).



despised drama. The repetition of these views in an authoritative biography could very well dampen any interest in Tolkien as a playwright. Certainly, Carpenter somewhat downgrades “The Homecoming,” calling it a “radio play” (217) and a “dramatic recitation of verse” (218) rather than according it the status of a fully developed, albeit brief, drama.

Carpenter is correct in one way by calling “The Homecoming” a radio play, as it was performed on BBC Radio in 1954 and rebroadcast in 1955. However, as far as we know, that original recording is no longer extant. Tolkien was reportedly unhappy with the actors’ delivery of their lines, which are written in alliterative metre but were spoken as if in iambic pentameter (Carpenter 218). He preferred his own recording of the play, distinguishing between the voices of the two characters while speaking into a tape recorder and using a creaky office chair for some sound effects. The BBC production and Tolkien’s own recording reinforce the impression that “The Homecoming” is, as Carpenter termed it, a radio play or a “dramatic recitation of verse,” which, according to Carpenter, Tolkien exempted from his general dislike of drama (218).

Tolkien reinforces the impression that his play is a dramatic recitation by writing in a footnote to the 1953 published version that his play “was indeed plainly intended as a recitation for two persons, two shapes in ‘dim shadow’, with the help of a few gleams of light and appropriate noises and a chant at the end” (HB 27) <sup>4</sup> The sound effects, chant, and recitation are certainly appropriate for a radio play or recitation, but the two figures standing in “dim shadow” and the “few gleams of light” indicate that Tolkien imagined the play as it might appear on the stage to a viewing audience. A closer examination of the manuscript drafts and the stage directions contained within them reveals the development of Tolkien’s thinking about the possibilities for staging the play. <sup>5</sup>

Thomas Honegger has examined the drafts of the play held at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, labelling them versions A to the final typescript K, including version J, a typed fragment. An earlier fragment, possibly from the late 1920s or early 30s, has been published in *The Treason of Isengard* (106–107). Pointing out that the early drafts were written in rhyming couplets and that in Version E Tolkien rewrote the play in alliterative metre, Honegger focused his

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<sup>4</sup> It is curious that in this footnote inserted in the essay “Ofermod” that is appended to the play, Tolkien seems to forget that in the introduction to the play, he identifies a “third English voice in the dark” (HB 6).

<sup>5</sup> In a 2008 article, Marie Nelson pointed out that “Homecoming” has potential as a one-act play (65) and more recently Janet Brennan Croft in “Giving Up Your Dead” has discussed its performance potential and compared it to Christopher Fry’s 1951 play which shares similar themes.

discussion on the development of Tolkien's idea of pride, or "ofermod" in these versions. However, several years after Honegger's article, another draft of the play was acquired in 2015 by the Brotherton Library Special Collections at the University of Leeds for the Tolkien-Gordon collection, and this draft is particularly interesting for its stage directions. This carefully written-out version (unlike some of the illegible scrawls of other drafts) belongs to the earlier group of rhyming drafts of the play, versions A to D in the Bodleian Library. Revisions in Bodleian version B are incorporated into the Brotherton draft, while Bodleian version C adds new revisions that are then continued in subsequent versions. Thus, I will refer to the Brotherton draft as version B2 in order to place it in relation to the development of the Bodleian manuscripts, a relationship that is also accepted by Joseph Ricke and Peter Grybauskas<sup>6</sup>

Version A is a brief draft that will be fleshed out in subsequent versions, but it does contain four scene or section markers, labelled I to IV, which are divisions carried through versions A to C, including Brotherton B2. Bodleian version B adds some stage directions, but they are mainly crammed into the margins as if added later than the play text. In contrast, Brotherton B2 contains the same directions (sometimes revised only by a word or two), as well as adding a couple of new ones, but in this draft, in almost all cases the directions are not in the margins or between lines but written out neatly in pencil alternating with the text written in pen (Brotherton Library MS 1952/2/1, fols. 1r-6r). The spacing and careful writing in this version gives the impression of it being written out as a good copy.

The Brotherton B2 version begins with similar wording to Bodleian version B indicating what the stage should look like: "Scene almost entirely dark. Dimly seen are bodies lying, and a man fumbling with them. Another comes up behind with a lantern, covered so that hardly a gleam shows" (Brotherton MS 1952/2/1, fol. 1r). These directions explain what an audience would see on stage as well as indicate the blocking of an actor's movement who "comes up behind." Similar directions for actors' movements continue, sometimes as simple instructions for the actors to lift Beorhtnoth's body, or put it down again, or for the cart to move along. However, at times the directions specifically mention movement blocking on a stage, suggesting that Tolkien had in mind a theatrical production. For example, Tída (who at this early stage is called Tudda) "goes off to the back of stage and out" (Brotherton MS 1952/2/1, fol. 4r). At the beginning of scene II, this new stage direction reads "The head of

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph Ricke and I have independently come to the same conclusion about the place of Brotherton B2 in the manuscript stemma, having presented our findings in separate papers for the Tolkien Symposium sponsored by the Tolkien at Kalamazoo group in 2021 and 2022. Peter Grybauskas, in his recent edition, agrees with this placement as well (xvii).

a bridge at back can just be seen (though scene is still in dark), and a ~~waggon~~ small cart [...] with horse—but this can be dispensed with if scene is quite dark. T & T come onto scene again from back over bridge” (Brotherton MS 1952/2/1, fol. 4r). The different direction at the beginning of the scene—the two characters have gone off stage to the back, and then return on stage from the back in Scene II—expresses a shift in the audience’s perspective on the characters’ movements or a break in time. One has to wonder what kind of a horse Tolkien was imagining—real? pantomime? puppet? But it is significant that he thinks the horse can be dispensed with “if scene is quite dark.” From the beginning, the play is imagined as taking place at night, and in this respect, Tolkien is possibly trying to appeal to the audience’s imagination, moving away from the “one visible form” that he claimed drama (and other visual arts) imposed on the viewer (OFS 82). The darkness with only dim shapes of the dead lying on the ground also contributes to the horror of the scene, keenly felt by the younger character Totta at the beginning of the play through all of its drafts.

The darkness at the beginning of the play and throughout is emphasized in every version of the drafts, whether it be described as “almost half dark” (Bodleian Tolkien MS 5, fol. 5r), “almost entirely dark” (Brotherton MS 1952/2/1, fol. 1r), or “Complete darkness” (Bodleian MS 5, fol. 9r), or “in the darkness” as stated in the published version (HB 8). What the audience would first experience, then, would be the sound of Totta moving about in the darkness and breathing heavily as the play begins, but then he uncovers the lantern light, followed moments later by Tida quickly urging him to cover it up again. The lantern light goes on and off in subsequent moments, adding to the frightening uncertainty of this scene amidst dead bodies. The two characters are on edge, especially the younger Totta who is frightened by an owl hooting, which is mentioned only as a sound in versions C and D. It is then developed into a visual image starting in version E (Bodleian MS 5, fol. 23r) and continuing in subsequent versions, with various wording indicating the shape of a bird flying through a beam of light, up to the final published version, when a “dark shape flits through the beam of light” upsetting the lantern which has been set on the ground (HB 9). Later in the play, as the cart moves along with Totta and the body of Beorhtnoth in it, “lights glimmer in the distance” (HB 23) as Totta launches into expressing his visionary experience. Whether the lights continue to glimmer or disappear varies in each version, but from version H to the final publication, the glimmering light goes out again as Totta’s dream-vision intensifies with the lines “It’s dark! It’s dark, and doom coming! / Is no light left us?” (HB 24). Without any other directions, the final passages of the play may be spoken in the dark or near darkness. After coming out of his vision, Totta says, “It’s dark and cold” (HB 24) and Tida describes the scene: “It’s night right enough; but there’s no firelight: / dark is over all” (HB 25). However, some light

must be available for the penultimate direction to be made visible; the final publication includes the visual stage direction that "Monks bearing a bier amid tapers pass across the scene" (HB 26). This visual direction is developed from version B in which "In the gloom a boat comes by" (Bodleian MS 5, fol. 8); in Brotherton version B2, "a boat with several men in it comes in gloom past front of stage" (Brotherton MS 1952/2/1, fol. 6r). In versions F and G, "Monks bearing a bier and tapers pass across the back of the scene" (Bodleian MS 5, fol. 45r) or more simply "pass across the scene" (fol. 61r), while subsequent versions from H onwards change the "and" to "amid" to match the final published version cited above.

Of course, a professional lighting designer creates stage lighting to interpret a playwright's directions and can suggest various levels of light or darkness, controlling the clarity or dimness of audience perceptions of the figures on the stage. Tolkien's stage directions are obviously not based on professional experience, but they are indicators of how he imagined his play as it might appear to the eye, not just the ear, and explicitly so when he refers to an actual stage, such as the directions in Brotherton B2 or in Bodleian version C which states, "There is a pause in speech while they move back from front of stage" (Bodleian MS 5, fol. 10v).

It is interesting to see the development of these visual directions as well as those for tone of voice or other sounds through the drafts to the published version. In some drafts, especially in Brotherton B2, Tolkien writes out directions for the actions that he imagines on stage; in other drafts, he embeds in the dialogue of the two characters more of that information, eliminating the need for explicit directions. Take, for example, the fight scene with the corpse-robbers. In Bodleian version A, only the dialogue indicates what action is taking place. Totta spots the intruders and exclaims, "Hey! There goes one, look! One! Two! / Two men!" (Bodleian MS 5, fol. 2). Tída reacts by telling his companion to put Beorhtnoth down and by shouting, "Out sword, out!" He instructs Totta, "Go on, trip him up!" and then tells us "I've run mine through" before asking Totta, "Yours dead?" (Bodleian MS 5, fol. 2). In version B, the stage directions are difficult to read at times, but they do indicate that "men are seen approaching" and "two men come up with swords into gloom from below" (Bodleian MS 5, fol. 6). Brotherton B2 elaborates by describing a more precise choreography for Totta and Tudda/Tída: As Totta is picking up Beorhtnoth's sword, which was dropped by his companion, "A man comes on him in the act; he catches his leg [...] and then stabs him" (Brotherton MS 1952/2/1, fol. 3r). The directions continue for Tudda/Tída: "At same time Tudda has crossed swords with a second—who [knows/turns?] to run as soon as he sees his companion is down. Tudda stabs him from behind" (Brotherton MS 1952/2/1, fol. 3r). In a few subsequent versions, the directions are more minimal, for example, in version

C, a “noise of scuffling” (Bodleian MS 5, fol. 10v), or in version D, a “blow and a shriek” (Bodleian MS 5, fol. 18r), or just “scuffle” in version E (Bodleian MS 5, fol. 26r). However, the fight is prefaced by a longer stage direction in version F and continued in similar wording to the final publication, as quoted here: “They crouch on the ground. The sound of stealthy steps grows louder and nearer. When they are close at hand Tídwald suddenly shouts out” (HB 17). Even without this explicit direction for action, sound, and speech in the earlier drafts, we can still understand much of the action in general through the dialogue when Totta spots the men, Tída tells him to put down Beorhtnoth’s body, calls for his sword, tells Totta to trip one of the robbers, and expresses satisfaction he’s killed one of them. However, it should be noted that although both Tudda/Tída and Totta fight with the thieves in every version, a significant change in the action occurs in version D after Totta cries, “I’ve run mine through, / with master’s sword!” (Bodleian MS 5, fol. 18r). For the first time in the drafts, Tudda disapproves, unlike in the earliest drafts when he kills one of the intruders himself and says he is glad Totta killed the other. The change illustrates a clarification of the differences between the older experienced Tída and the impetuous younger man. In keeping with this shift in character, from version C on, when Totta declares that he wishes he could have been in the battle, the older Tída responds in words similar to the final publication: “You can talk, Totta! Your time’ll come, / and it will look less easy than lays make it” (HB 12). Tída’s knowledge of battle and his discouragement of unnecessary killing of one’s own people (although he approves of the killing of attacking invaders) more clearly signify his war-weary sentiments based on experience contrasted with Totta’s inexperience and idealism.

Whether both men kill their opponents or not, their dialogue, along with various stage directions, usually give us some idea of what actions are taking place. When the play was to be performed for BBC Radio in 1954, the producer Rayner Heppenstall asked Tolkien if he wanted to add some lines of dialogue in order to explain the lighting of the scene, but Tolkien responded that the directions could be disregarded (Scull & Hammond, *Chronology* 463). Indeed, when Tída says “Hide the lantern!” (HB 17) or Totta cries out, “It’s dark! It’s dark” (HB 24) we know what should be happening without a stage direction.<sup>7</sup> Some directions that appear only in one version, such as Totta “wrings his hands, standing helplessly” (Brotherton MS 1952/2/1, fol. 1r), are dropped in subsequent versions, presumably because the character’s nervousness could be clearly expressed in his words. One consistent direction, though, from version E

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<sup>7</sup> Only in Bodleian version C is there mention of a “green light” seen among the dead bodies (Bodleian Tolkien MS 5, fol. 9v). This detail would not be evident without a stage direction or a revision of the language of the play to point it out.

to final publication, concerns the poet Totta's voice, and it signals where poetic recitations within this drama take place.

Version E marks a major revision in the play, as it is where Tolkien shifts from rhyming couplets to alliterative verse, a metre that was written by Old English poets. From this point on, Tolkien is not only writing about the events described in the Old English poem "The Battle of Maldon" but also using the style of that poetry in his modern English composition. Early medieval English poets did not leave a written record of how they composed this metre, but the nineteenth-century scholar Eduard Sievers inferred models of metrical types, now known as the Sievers Five Types. Revisions to Sievers's system have been published by subsequent prosodists, but in Tolkien's day it was the accepted mode of analysis, and, in fact, the Sievers Types are still taught today in most introductory texts and courses as a model for scanning Old English metrical half-lines. Tolkien's play is written in a similar loose style as is "The Battle of Maldon," and he also displays his metrical skill by creating set pieces for Totta to recite in a more highly rhetorical style of alliterative metre (Smol and Foster 11–13). In Tolkien's play, Totta is attuned to this style of poetry. Once the drafts switch to alliterative metre in version E, he recites set pieces with allusions to actual Old English poems: *Beowulf*, "The Battle of Brunanburh," and "The Battle of Maldon." These moments of poetic recitation, with the exception of the "Brunanburh" passage, are distinguished by the stage direction that he should chant the lines, from version E onwards.<sup>8</sup> Tída grudgingly accepts the first two recitations alluding to *Beowulf* by commenting, "Brave words, my lad!" (HB 13) and "Good words enough, gleeman Totta!" (HB 15). The third chanting of lines adapted from "The Battle of Maldon," discussed below, is set within a strange visionary experience, which Tída finds more disturbing. In his recording of the play, Tolkien corroborates his idea that these more rhetorical set pieces should be delivered differently from the surrounding alliterative lines by himself chanting Totta's pieces in his recording, changing his tone and pacing in delivery of the words. The chanting seems to be reserved for special compositions of poetry or song, including the Latin lines that close the play in the published version, the "Dirige, Domine." The chanting, then, is another form of stage direction that marks poetic recitations within this drama.

Most of the play aims to represent the primary world, with a recognizable historical event at its foundation and allusions to primary world texts by human beings that we see and listen to—an "anthropocentric" art, as Tolkien defines it (OFS 82), but a shift near the end of the play to a visionary

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<sup>8</sup> Although the "Brunanburh" allusion is not marked by a stage direction to chant the lines, in his recording, Tolkien changes his pace and tone slightly to suggest special delivery of the lines.

experience by Totta comes close to fantasy. I contend that in this visionary scene Tolkien is conveying Totta's experience of a faërian or elvish drama, thus pushing to the limit Tolkien's own criteria for what is acceptable in the genre of drama.

Tolkien defines faërian drama in two places; both definitions often leave readers mystified by what he actually believes. In "On Fairy-stories," he explains that this kind of drama is created by elves and makes humans go beyond secondary belief: "If you are present at a Faërian drama you yourself are, or think that you are, bodily inside its Secondary World. The experience may be very similar to Dreaming and has (it would seem) sometimes (by men) been confounded with it" (OFS 63). A similar belief is expressed by characters in "The Notion Club Papers" when they discuss "a sort of realized drama" or "Elvish Drama" (193) which is described in this way: "the whole story as it is told becomes visible and audible, and the composer is inside it [...]. The scenes *look* real, but are feigned; and the composition is not complete like a 'slice of life': it can be given in selected scenes, and compressed (like a drama)" (193).

In her examination of several stories that could qualify as faërian dramas, Janet Brennan Croft extracts some common features. First of all, the goal is "to awaken in the witness/participant an openness to Fantasy, Escape, Recovery, Consolation, and the possibility of Eucatastrophe" and to include a "specific moral teaching purpose" ("Tolkien's Faërian" 41–42). Second, the "participant/witness must be in a liminal and receptive state" ("Tolkien's Faërian" 42). Third, the "participant must believe fully in the reality of the experience while within it. The dreamer is always an acting character in the drama" ("Tolkien's Faërian" 42). Finally, "The experience of faërian drama cannot be dismissed as a mere dream. [...] The experience must also have addressed something that troubled or disturbed the dreamer" ("Tolkien's Faërian" 42).

We can examine Totta's experience more closely in the light of these criteria. He is, first of all, in a liminal state, speaking from the wagon "drowsily and half dreaming" (HB 23). Lying there with the beheaded corpse of his beloved leader, Totta has been trying to comprehend everything that he has seen in his first view of a battlefield and has understood about the actions of the men there. He has been disturbed, surprised, and frightened in the course of the play, and now there is only the subdued rattling of the wagon and sound of horses to lull him into a receptive, dream-like state. Although according to the stage directions there are some glimmering lights in the distance, Totta's words indicate that he is seeing and hearing more close-up details, likely in the near future: "There are candles in the dark and cold voices. / I hear mass chanted for master's soul/ in Ely isle" (HB 24). This observation of things seen and heard that are still far beyond the wagon leads into a wide-ranging vision of how "the

world withers" (HB 24), a vision described in the present tense that reaches into the future.

As Totta's voice grows louder, the stage directions tell us that "it is still the voice of one speaking in a dream" (HB 24). Totta describes what seems to be his direct experience of a scene. As readers or audience, we do not see the scene enacted; we understand it only through Totta's words. To show the scene on stage in a material way would be to take the drama, according to Tolkien's views, one step too far beyond secondary belief. We don't enter that tertiary world directly, but there is no doubt that Totta sees himself inside it as a participant: "It's dark! It's dark, and doom coming!/ Is no light left us?" (HB 24). He hears voices in the present moment: "Hark! I hear them in the hall chanting" (HB 24). At this moment, Totta himself starts chanting as if the voices in the hall are coming through him directly as he speaks a version, slightly longer by two lines, of the famous passage from "The Battle of Maldon":

*(He chants)* Heart shall be bolder, harder be purpose,  
more proud the spirit as our power lessens!  
Mind shall not falter nor mood waver,  
though doom shall come and dark conquer. (HB 24)

What kind of moral or eucatastrophe could these climactic lines point to? Janet Brennan Croft's view of the eucatastrophe in another work applies equally well to "The Homecoming" in that we get "a glimpse of an odd, tragic eucatastrophe in witnessing our heroes doing the right thing and defying a cycle of oppression, even when it ends in the destruction of all things" ("Binding" 11). Because Tolkien identifies the first two lines as "an ancient and honoured expression of heroic will" (HB 6) we can assume that Totta is hearing what Tolkien calls "a summing up of the heroic code" (HB 6) in a more complete version. Tolkien has, in other words, created an asterisk-poem in these lines, constructing what is meant to be understood as an earlier version of verses that we might recognize in the later, pared-down composition of "The Battle of Maldon."<sup>9</sup>

This idea of a faërian drama was evident from version A, though not as fully developed as later. In the earliest versions, A, B, and B2, Totta is drowsily speaking, "Ay! yes, I hear them – good the words, and stout./ Well said the scop!" (Bodleian MS 5, fol. 4), but we don't actually hear the words until versions C and D, when the two lines from "Maldon" are spoken in Old English by a "solemn voice," –not Totta's voice (Bodleian MS 5, fol. 12r and 21r). By

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<sup>9</sup> The idea of an "asterisk-poem" adapts a term coined by Tom Shippey in *The Road to Middle-earth*, pp. 17-19, where he points out that Tolkien sometimes recreates a lost origin in an "asterisk-reality" analogous to how philologists recreate the origins of words, marking these reconstructions with an asterisk.



version E, the first alliterative revision, the “Maldon” lines appear in modern English, with three extra lines added to the chant, and the passage is spoken by Totta directly.

[chant] Let heart be prouder, harder be purpose,  
more stern the will, as our strength weakens!  
Mind shall not falter nor mood waver;  
though doom shall come and dark conquer,  
and our flesh fail us, fire we kindle!

(Bodleian Library Tolkien MS 5, fol. 29r)

This version persists except that in versions F, G, and H, the last line is deleted. In version I and following, the verses are the same as in the final published edition, as quoted above.

In other words, from the very beginning, Tolkien imagined that Totta was going to hear traditional heroic verses that were being spoken elsewhere, and as the scene developed, Totta became the channel for those voices to be heard by the audience, who witness him participating in a faërian drama. This drama in which Totta is immersed is not directly presented to the audience as a fantasy scene, which would contradict Tolkien’s criteria for anthropocentric drama. As Tolkien states in Appendix F in “On Fairy-stories,” “Drama can be made out of the impact upon human characters of some event of Fantasy, or Faërie, that requires no machinery, or that can be assumed or reported to have happened” (OFS 82). Totta is reporting what he is involved in without the aid of any theatrical machinery or artificial magic. And the verses that he hears coming from the past heroic tradition into his present will be the ones that he will give to Byrhtwold in the near future when he goes on to compose the primary world poem, “The Battle of Maldon.”<sup>10</sup>

As Croft points out, it is also possible for an audience to share the experience of a faërian drama (“Binding” 1), and that is just the opportunity that Tolkien provides at the end of his play. After Tída and Totta leave the scene, and after a period of silence, the audience gets to experience something very like Totta’s vision, though calmer in nature. First, there is the faint chanting of the Latin office of the dead calling on God to direct the way to him: “Dirige, Domine, in conspectu tuo viam meam” (HB 25). Then we hear directly “A Voice in the dark,” a moment where the audience could easily exclaim, as did Totta, “Hark! I hear them” (HB 24). Whose voice is this? The audience hears two lines of verse,

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<sup>10</sup> For discussions of Totta as the “Maldon” poet see Grybauskas, “Portrait of the Poet” 163-78 and “Dialogic War” 44-45; Smol, “Bodies in War” 278-80; and Smol and Foster, “Tolkien’s ‘Homecoming’” 14-15.

and sees, according to the stage directions in the final version, the monks passing along the scene (HB 26) until the chanting of the Latin verses becomes louder and closes the play. The audience experiences a visual and audible drama that is not conveyed through the two characters' words or actions; the audience is experiencing it directly in the dark, like Totta. And again, like Totta who hears an earlier version of "The Battle of Maldon" lines, the audience hears a rhyming couplet: "Sadly they sing, the monks of Ely isle! / Row men, row! Let us listen here a while!" (HB 25). This couplet predates the later version in the primary world *Historia Eliensis* referring to King Cnut. Tolkien points to the future by constructing this passage, as he explains in his introduction that its use of rhyme is "presaging the fading end of the old heroic alliterative measure" (HB 6).

In other words, through the medium of this vision, Tolkien provides the audience with another asterisk-verse. In the play's introduction, he makes sure that we can identify the twelfth-century passage alluding to King Cnut travelling by boat to the abbey at Ely, even citing the original lines that begin "Merie sungen" (HB 7). Instead of "merrily" however, in "The Homecoming" the monks sing "sadly" for Beorhtnoth's journey to the abbey. In this faërian drama, the audience can detect the possibility for eucatastrophe: as Richard West points out, the allusion to Cnut makes the ending of the play ambiguous (353). Yes, the Danes are to be feared and the land defended, as our characters understand, and war and upheaval will persist for years to come, just as they fear, but what they cannot foresee is that a Danish king will become a Christian and eventually bring peace for a time. A recognition of the allusion to a future, 12<sup>th</sup>-century verse that describes the 11<sup>th</sup>-century King Cnut journeying to the abbey at Ely, where he was a patron, can be overlaid on the image of 10<sup>th</sup>-century Beorhtnoth, also an Ely patron, being taken there. This kind of historical palimpsest that allows the audience's minds to travel through time will provide a potential turn to eucatastrophe through the audience's experience of the last scene in the play. Like Totta in his faërian drama, the audience can travel through time in their recognition of the poetic tradition that they are shown.

The published play ends with the Latin office of the dead which asks the Lord to guide one's path at the end of life, and in this way, it is appropriate for Beorhtnoth's upcoming funeral rites as well as for a general reminder of the future path all must tread. However, the experience of time travel is reinforced even further by a different ending recorded by Tolkien and apparently provided for the BBC radio performance. I am indebted to Merlin DeTardo, who pointed out that in his recording, Tolkien used the *Dies Irae* chant and only closed with the final lines of the *Dirige* as presented in the published version (HB 26), thus reinforcing the idea of time travel for the audience. The verses represent the Day of Judgement, with the world dissolved in fire and ashes, and may remind the audience of Totta's vision of the future when he exclaims, "the world withers"

(HB 24).<sup>11</sup> Neubauer comments that the *Dies Irae* verses, likely from the thirteenth century, are an anachronism in this tenth-century setting (230n87), which further corroborates how the conclusion of the play looks to the future.

In fact, the BBC radio play may have presented a similar version to its listening audience. Scull and Hammond summarize and quote from one of Tolkien's letters to BBC producer Rayner Heppenstall stating that "The lines he selected from the *Dies Irae* 'make sense, are apt, and preserve the rhyme-scheme. They are either recited in speaking voice, or sung to simple tone or tune (which preserves the metre and emphasizes the rhyme)'" (*Chronology* 469). However, it is not clear whether the Voice or the verses that it speaks were included in the actual BBC performance. Scull and Hammond record that in an early November visit with the producer, Tolkien agrees to drop any reference to the Voice (*Chronology* 467), but later that month, the producer hires an actor for the part (*Chronology* 468). Scull and Hammond report Tolkien's comment in a letter that "He thought that they had agreed that it would be best to omit the 'Voice in the Dark'" (*Chronology* 469), but whether the production went ahead or not with the Voice is not clear.

In any case, in his recording, Tolkien alternates between verses spoken in a chant-like tone and sung verses before closing with the last lines of the *Dirige* chant and the *Gloria Patri*, "a requisite part of several liturgical practices, usually performed at the conclusion of psalms and prayers, public as well as private" (Neubauer 230). Neubauer, in enumerating the selected lines from *Dies Irae* in the recording, believes that the additions illustrate Tolkien's improvisational abilities and his experience in singing liturgical songs (228–31).

Given that "The Homecoming" was rebroadcast in 1955 suggests that BBC Radio, at least, was happy with its reception. The drama works well enough as a radio play or reader's theatre, if one ignores the occasional visual directions for lights and men rowing near the end of the play, and of course, it can be read with enjoyment by any reader. However, the earliest drafts of the play indicate that Tolkien imagined the drama on the stage, with specific movement blocking and lighting cues, some of which persist to the final published version. Rather than accept Carpenter's opinion of Tolkien's negative attitude to drama in general, we should distinguish more carefully between what Tolkien approved of or not in his discussions of drama and let "The Homecoming" itself illustrate Tolkien's original conception. This drama is both an historical fiction and a play written in skillful modern alliterative verse, a composition that presents conversational dialogue, action, and poetic recitations, and that draws both characters and audiences into an immersive experience of faërian drama.

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of apocalyptic themes in this play and "The Fall of Arthur" see Kristine Larsen, "The world withers."

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