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# "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son": J.R.R. Tolkien's Sequel to "The Battle of Maldon"

## **Abstract**

Considers the application of speech act theory to Tolkien's "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son" and its source, "The Battle of Maldon," and how different speech acts propel the action of each story.

"THE HOMECOMING OF  
BEORHTNOÐ BEORHTHELM'S SON":  
J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S SEQUEL TO  
"THE BATTLE OF MÅLDON"

MARIE NELSON

J.R.R. TOLKIEN INTRODUCED "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhtelm's Son" as "a piece 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" in a footnote to "Ofermod," the brief essay on "excessive pride" that accompanied its original publication in *Essays and Studies*. Critics have given Tolkien's "Ofermod" essay considerably more attention than they have given his "recitation," but then Tolkien himself modestly added "It ["The Homecoming"] has of course, never been performed" to his "Ofermod" introductory note (19n1).

Though Tolkien's "recitation" has rarely been performed (in his *Descriptive Bibliography*, Wayne Hammond notes only a 1954 performance on BBC Radio and stage performances in London in 1975 and 1991 [303]), it seems to me to have strong "performance" possibilities—and I am using the word here in its performing arts sense—as one act play. It presents a search in the darkness of night for the body of a fallen leader in which the searchers progress by recognizing the bodies of the men who were most loyal to him. The interest of the drama, then, rests in part on the basic idea of the search. Does it involve danger for the searchers? Will they find clues that can aid them? Can they interpret those clues correctly? And Tolkien also achieves a sense of continuous conflict between the two searchers by allowing them to define themselves in terms of their strongly contrasting perspectives on the decision of Beorhtnoth, the fallen leader whose body they must find and bring home for proper burial, to allow the vikings who threatened his homeland to cross the Blackwater, or Panta River, a natural protective barrier.

Torhtelm, his name an apparent combination of the Old English words "torht," for which John R. Clark Hall and Herbert D. Meritt's *Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* provides the Modern English equivalents "bright, radiant, beautiful, splendid, noble, illustrious," and "helm," which translates to "helmet" (346, 177), represents what Tolkien calls "the northern heroic" perspective. Tídwald, the older, wiser man, on the other hand, represents the

more skeptical point of view that Tolkien himself takes in his "Oferrmod" essay. The parts of Tídwald's name may not translate so easily to a role definition, but its first element, "Tid," carries the meaning "time," and its second element "wald," also spelled in Old English as "weald," translates to Modern English "control." Tídwald is in control of the search—his young helper must do as he says—and his interpretation of the evidence their search uncovers is based on a lifetime of experience. For these two reasons alone, then, it seems to me that "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son" has strong possibilities for dramatic performance.

My intention here, however, involves a different understanding of the word "performance." I will be reading Tolkien's "Homecoming" and selected passages from "The Battle of Maldon," his Old English source, with reference to concepts introduced by J.L. Austin in 1955 in a series of Harvard University lectures and later published under the title *How To Do Things with Words*. The work of Austin and John R. Searle, whose *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* provides further understanding of some of the ways that language works, along with that of others who have followed in their footsteps, has given us an area of language study called "pragmatics" that can help us understand what speakers *do* when they "perform" acts of commanding and predicting and promising and threatening. Pragmatics, or speech act theory, then, provides an additional perspective for the reading of "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son" and Tolkien's source, "The Battle of Maldon."

I will begin with Tolkien's sequel to the Old English poem, which begins after the battle between an English force led by Beorhtnoth and a host of viking invaders has been fought and lost. Torhthelm speaks first. He opens the play with the words "Halt! What do you want? Hell take you! Speak!" Here the imperative verbs "halt" and "speak" signal the young son of a minstrel's assumption of a right to command a man approaching from a darkness that obscures his identity to immediately stop and identify himself. If Torhthelm actually had the authority he assumes, his speech act would satisfy the requirements Searle spells out for the performance of commands (*Speech Acts* 66). Commanding involves a future act on the part of the Hearer: it correctly assumes that the Hearer is able to do what he is ordered to do, it is not obvious that he will do what he is asked to do without being ordered to do it, and the Speaker must genuinely want the Hearer to do what he asks him to do. The "Hell take you!" that comes between "Halt!" and "Speak!" is not a genuine curse and hence requires little attention here, and, when Tídwald replies, addressing Torhthelm with the diminutive "Totta" and undercutting his assumption of the right to give orders with "I know you by your teeth rattling," we know that Torhthelm's "command" can be read only as a failed attempt to perform a particular speech act. It does, however, succeed as a dramatic

introduction to his recognition of his superior. “Why, Tída, you!” he exclaims, and proceeds to give the older man an account of his own watching and waiting in a night so dark that he hears the whistling of the wind as “words whispered by waking ghosts” (6).

Tídwald understands that Torhthelm has been imagining the presence of “barrow-wights and bogies” in the darkness, and, proceeding from his sense of his own superior knowledge about the actual state of affairs, he confidently asserts or predicts (his prediction extends a claim of knowledge to what has not yet happened) that they will soon find Beorhtnoth. Tídwald follows his prediction with a command (and *his* act satisfies Searle’s requirement that its performer speak from authority). Tídwald, or Tída, as Tolkien reduces his name, orders Torhthelm to help him identify the warriors who lie upon the ground. “Help me to heave ‘em!” he says. “It’s heavy labour to lug them alone: long ones and short ones, the thick and the thin.” Tídwald then follows his command to Torhthelm to help with the work with further orders: Torhthelm is to change the way he thinks. He is to “Think less, and talk less of ghosts,” and “Forget [his] gleeman’s stuff” (6), which, as it happens, is more difficult for Torhthelm than heavy labor.

Torhthelm does not share his companion’s confidence that they can find their fallen leader. They could search forever, he asserts, and still “miss the master in this mirk.” Nor does he abandon his “gleeman’s stuff,” the apparent source of his ideal of heroic behavior. And the contrast of Torhthelm’s way of thinking with Tidwald’s pragmatic approach (and here I am using “pragmatic” in a pre-Austin and Searle sense that involves simply treating things from a practical point of view) that Tolkien establishes in the opening scene of his play contributes substantially to his continuation of the “Battle of Maldon” story.

Torhthelm is no coward. Hearing the hoot of an owl and interpreting it as an ill omen he boldly asserts that he is not afraid of “fancied fears,” and, furthermore, he is not a fool. Other men, he says, also “find the mirk gruesome / among the dead unshrouded.” Torhthelm clearly has reasons for making his claim, and this satisfies Searle’s first requirement for acts of assertion. It is not obvious to both the Speaker (Torhthelm) and his Hearer (Tídwald) that Torhthelm is not a coward. Tídwald has just heard Torhthelm’s teeth chattering. And Tídwald is certainly no fool. He has predicted that they will find their leader near by, and almost immediately, upon finding a sign that they are close to the place where Beorhtnoth lies, he orders his helper to “Look here, my lad, where they lie thickest.” The single word “Here!” that follows can be understood as a further specification of where Torhthelm is to look, and then the familiar “Lend a hand!” follows as a command to help lift a fallen warrior, whom Tídwald immediately identifies as Wulfmæc (7).

This leads to Tídwald's second prediction of success for their sorrowful mission: "I'll wager aught / not far did he fall from friend and master." The form of the speech act he performs at this point may not satisfy the grammatical requirements for explicit performance. This would involve a use of "I" followed by "wager," a simple present tense verb, and completion with a "proposition" (to call again upon the pragmatics vocabulary) that might read as "he must have been close to his lord when he fell," but this speech, again, is a confident statement of Tídwald's belief that they can do what they have been asked to do: find Beorhtnoth and bring his body to the monks of Ely who await his return, and thus serves its predictive purpose.

But there is a moment of confusion at this point. Torhthelm understands Tídwald to have identified the body as that of Wulfmær, Beorhtnoth's nephew, and immediately associates the discovery with a remembered line of song, "ever near shall be at need nephew to uncle." Tídwald corrects him—and his correction shows how closely Tolkien reads the Old English poem that serves as his source. The body is that of Wulfmær, identified in line 155 of John C. Pope's edition of "The Battle of Maldon" as Wulfstan's son, not Wulfmær, Beorhtnoth's nephew. Upon this discovery Tídwald says "It's a wicked business / to gather them ungrown" and laments the death of this "gallant boy [who had] / the makings of a man" (7), which leads Torhthelm to compare Wulfmær's age to his own. Wulfmær was a year or more younger than he is now.

The next young man to be identified is Ælfnoth, who is found lying next to the arm of Wulfmær. Torhthelm notes the appropriateness of their closeness in death, since they were "fast fellows" in work or play and "faithful to their / lord, as close to him as kin" (7), and the discovery of the two young men leads Tídwald to a re-assertion of his conviction that they will not have to travel far to find Beorhtnoth. "My oath I'll take / they fell in his defence, and not far away / now master lies," he says, and his words, though they do not precisely satisfy the requirements for performance of an explicit act of swearing (this would require a first person nominative pronoun followed by a present tense verb and then by a proposition, and Tídwald's "I'll" would seem to have to be read as a contraction functioning as part of a future tense expression), can be read as further evidence of Tídwald's confidence that they will succeed in their mission.

Next, having instructed Torhthelm to "Move them gently," Tídwald moves from "Brave lads!" an expression of his respect for Wulfmær and Ælfnoth, to one of disrespect for "bearded men / [who] shun battle [...] while the red heathen / beat down their boys" (8), which leads in turn to a curse of the cowards who, as we shall see when we turn to Tolkien's source, not only fled but caused others to flee as well.

Both of the actors in Tolkien's play have used the language of cursing before. Torhthelm's opening demand that Tídwald identify himself included the

words, "Hell take you," but this, like Tídwald's "Curse this lamplight / and my eyes' dimness" (8), seemed to be simply an expression of frustration. But when Torhthelm says "May the blast of Heaven / light on the dastards that to death left them / to England's shame!" (8) his words ring with the sound of a strongly worded request that, if we understand "I" to be the subject, "ask" as the required present tense verb of speaking, and let the language that tells what Torhthelm hopes to see happen stand, can, I think, be understood as a genuine curse of the cowards who fled, a request that they be appropriately punished.

Ælfwine, "barely bearded," Torhthelm says, "and his battle's over," is the next young warrior to be found, and Tídwald, following a now established pattern of praise for the fallen says that "He was a brave lordling / [...] a new weapon / of the old metal. As eager as fire, / and as staunch as steel" (8). Tídwald follows this assessment of Ælfwine's capability to perform heroic acts on the field of battle with a reference to his performance of speech acts. "Stern-tongued at times, / and outspoken after Offa's sort," he says, and this leads in turn to Torhthelm's memory of having heard that Offa once said at a lord's meeting that "There are cravens at council that crow proudly / with the hearts of hens," an utterance that, even with its conversion of male human being to rooster and masculine to feminine, we will be able to see as a precise parallel to a speech made by Offa that Tolkien found in his source.

Next, adding further ridicule to Offa's lesson about putting too much faith in heroic boasts, Torhthelm says that "lays remind us" (he has not forgotten the "gleeman's stuff" that Tídwald told him to forget) that "'What at the mead man vows, when morning comes / let him with deeds answer, or his drink vomit / and a sot be shown'" (8). He understands what the act of promising requires. He knows a man is obligated to suit his action to his words, and he seems to have gained a certain maturity from his current experience, since he acknowledges that "the songs wither / and the world worsens," but this is not enough to keep him from wishing that he had been on the battlefield instead of being left behind. Swearing "by the Cross"—and this is as strong a claim of sincerity as one can expect to find – he asserts that he loved Beorhtnoth as much as any lord who supported him in battle, and that a poor freeman could prove "more tough when tested than titled earls / who count back their kin to kings ere Woden" (8) an assertion that we will find to be completely justifiable when we turn to "The Battle of Maldon."

But Tídwald, now speaking more kindly than he has spoken before, tells his young friend that the time will come when he will need God's help if his "glees falter" and he is forced to choose between shame and death. He then returns to the task at hand and asks for Torhthelm's help with "this one," who, once he is heaved over, is shown to be a "hulking heathen." At this point Torhthelm asks Tídwald to put the lantern out so he will not be able to see the

dead man looking at him with eyes as “bleak and evil / as Grendel’s in the moon.” Tídwald the realist responds with an observation that the viking is “dead” and “done-for,” and an assertion that Danes don’t trouble him unless they have swords and axes, and, though there are no stage directions to tell us that he himself moves toward the next fallen man, most probably suits his action to his words when he orders Torhthelm to “Come, haul the next!”

And the “next” is found to be Beorhthnoth. Torhthelm calls Tídwald’s attention to the size of a limb “a yard long and thick / as three men’s thighs,” and Tídwald calmly replies, “I thought as much,” tells Torhthelm to “hold [his] babble / for a moment,” and, continuing in his matter of fact way, “Well, here he is—or what Heaven’s left us: / the longest legs in the land, I guess” (9).

Torhthelm does not keep silent long. As Tolkien’s stage direction shows, “*His voice rises to a chant,*” and it is hard not to hear very strong echoes of the closing lines of *Beowulf* as he sings in praise of Beorhthnoth:

His head was higher than the helm of kings  
with heathen crowns, his heart keener  
and his soul clearer than swords of heroes  
polished and proven: than plated gold  
his worth was greater. From the world has  
passed a prince peerless in peace and war,  
just in judgment, generous-handed  
as the golden lords of long ago.  
He has gone to God glory seeking,  
Beorhthnoth beloved. (9)

Tídwald commends Torhthelm with “Brave words my lad,” and seems for the moment, when he says “The woven stars have yet worth in them / for woeful hearts,” to acknowledge the value of the poetic tradition before returning to his there-is-work-to-be-done-here voice (9).

Torhthelm next finds Beorhthnoth’s sword, which he recognizes by its golden hilts. Tídwald marvels that the invaders missed it, and Torhthelm, having seen now that the vikings have beheaded Beorhthnoth and mangled his body with axes, exclaims “What a murder it is, / this bloody fighting,” to which Tídwald replies “and no worse today than the wars you sing of” before returning to the language of command with “Come, bend your back [...] / Catch hold of the legs! / Now lift—gently! Now lift again.” These are acts that must be performed and Torhthelm will do what he must do, but first he seems to be obligated to utter words that show his understanding of the meaning of their mission. “Dear still shall be this dead body, / though men have marred it,” he says, and then, as Tolkien’s stage direction says—*his voice rises again to a chant*—and, once again, his language strongly recalls the language of *Beowulf*:



Now mourn for ever

Saxon and English, from the sea’s margin  
To the western forest! The wall is fallen,  
women are weeping; the wood is blazing  
and the fire flaming as a far beacon.  
Build high the barrow his bones to keep!  
For here shall be hid both helm and sword;  
and to the ground be given golden corslet,  
and rich raiment and rings gleaming,  
wealth unbegrudged for the well-beloved;  
of the friends of men first and noblest,  
to his hearth-comrades help unailing,  
to his folk the fairest father of peoples.  
Glory loved he; now glory earning  
his grave shall be green, while ground or sea,  
while word or woe in the world lasteth (10-11).

Tídwald gives what seems to be perfunctory credit to Torhthelm for the words he has sung. “Good words enough, gleeman Totta!” he says, adding that Torhthelm must have “laboured long” in the “watches of the night, while the wise slumbered,” and it seems reasonable to assume that he is suggesting that if the wise slept it was unwise *not* to sleep when opportunity presented itself. In any case, *Tídwald* would rather have rest and his own “rueful thoughts,” and besides, he says, these are Christian days and they are carrying Beorhtnoth not Beowulf to what will be his final resting place, to which he will be led “with learned Latin” (11).

And so they trudge on, carrying the body of Beorhtnoth. At one point Torhthelm complains that his back has broken and his breath has left him (it has not, of course, since he is still able to speak and complain), to which Tídwald replies that he would succeed more easily if he spent less of his energy in speech, but then encourages the young gleeman with an assurance that the cart that waits by the causeway to carry Beorhtnoth the rest of the way is not far away now, and follows this with a military sounding instruction: “Now start again, and in step with me! / A steady pace does it.”

The two can be assumed to proceed in this manner until Torhthelm comes to a sudden stop, for which Tídwald reprimands him, calling him a “stumbling dolt,” and, continuing with his use of imperative verbs orders him to “Look where you are going.” But now a role reversal begins with Torhthelm’s plea “For the Lord’s pity,” followed by “halt, Tída, here! Hark now, and look!” and Tídwald, willing now to listen, asks, “Look where, my lad?” Torhthelm, who seems to have the clearer night vision, seems to see “troll-shapes,” or “hell-walkers,” naming the shapes he sees with compound nouns that continue to

recall the language of *Beowulf*. But Tídwald still cannot see what his fellow searcher sees. He does, however, hear voices, and orders Torhthelm to hide the lantern, lay Beorhtnoth's body down, lie down beside it, and be "stone silent."

When the plunderers—for this is what they are—come close enough Tídwald shouts a challenge that may be heard as an echo of the "Maldon" Byrhtnoth's "invitation" to the vikings to cross the Panta. "Hullo there, my lads!" he says, and if this sequence were to be performed as a play, we can assume that an actor's voice would resonate with a hearty affectation of the sounds of welcome. In any case, Tídwald says to them,

You're late comers,  
if it's fighting you look for; but I can find  
you some, if you need it tonight.  
you'll get nothing cheaper. (12)

Torhthelm's address to one of the plunderers takes on a rougher tone. He calls the man a "snuffling swine," and says he will "slit [him] for it." Prefaced as it is by this threat, "Take your trove then" can hardly be considered a genuine invitation. And when Torhthelm shouts "I've slain this one. He'll slink no more," the "boast" that Torhthelm calls out to announce his victory to Tídwald is hardly a heroic promise of the kind we will hear when we turn to analysis of the language of "The Battle of Maldon." It is instead simply a bragging claim that an intended act has been successfully completed.

If Torhthelm expected praise for slaying a plunderer, for him to be addressed as a "bogey-slayer" and a sarcastically uttered "my brave swordsman," and to be reprimanded for using Beorhtnoth's sword for an unworthy purpose, it would seem that he would be seriously disappointed. He does not, however, seem to understand what Tídwald is trying to teach him. Sighting a third "corpse-stripper," he expresses his eagerness to "thrash the villain," which leads Tídwald, once again, to utter a series of short commands: "Lift your end there! Lift up, I say. / Put your foot forward" (13). And so they continue until they reach the causeway.

At this point Torhthelm wonders why, when "a hill of heathens" would be what one "would hope to find," there is so little evidence of fierce fighting. He has not, precisely, requested information, but Tídwald answers the unasked question with words that relate most directly to Tolkien's interpretation of the "Maldon" poet's use of the word "ofermod."

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.  
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. (14)

With this speech, qualified only by a brief reference to what men in Maldon were saying the morning after the battle, Tídwald explains the lack of evidence of a fierce confrontation in the space in which they now stand, and provides an explanation for the death of so many men and of Beorhtnoth himself. Beorhtnoth made a bad decision, and he made that decision—and here Tídwald goes beyond the “Maldon” poet’s “þā sē eorl ongann for his ofermodē / aliefan landes tō fela lāðre þeode” (89-90, Then the warrior began for his pride to allow too much land to the hostile people) to provide a further reason for Beorhtnoth’s having granted the viking request. He wanted the lasting fame that poets could give him.

Torhthelm responds with a speech that relates the vikings’ present attempt to encroach upon English territory to the story of how this land was won in the past. Citing *his* source of information with the phrase “as songs tell us,” and glorifying his ancestors’ accomplishment a bit with “Realms here they won and royal kingdoms, / and in olden days this isle conquered,” he concludes his placement of what happened in former times to the present situation by saying “And now from the North need comes again: / wild blows the wind of war to Britain!” (14-15).

Tídwald, consistent in his expression of the practical viewpoint, turns Torhthelm’s metaphor to a statement of fact: “And in the neck we catch it, and are nipped as chill / as poor men were then,” then once again expresses his lack of respect for the view that the poets will take with “Let the poets babble.” *He* is concerned with the suffering of the poor that is sure to follow the current invasion. Torhthelm, equally consistent in his focus on what may be developed into song, speculates that Anlaf, the leader of the currently invading forces will never equal Hengest or Horsa, which leads back to Tídwald’s current concern. “We’ll hope not, lad,” he says, and once again he utters the words necessary for performance of the task at hand (15).

The two searchers, their mission now almost accomplished, load the cart that waits by the causeway to carry the body of Beorhtnoth the rest of the way to Ely, where Beorhtnoth will receive the honors due him. But these are not the final words to be brought again to life in Tolkien’s retelling of the “Maldon” story. Torhthelm, suddenly aroused from a dream as he rides in the cart, seems to hear chanting in a hall, and then chants these words, which can be read as a

direct translation of a “Battle of Maldon” speech by Byrhtwold, who, like Tídwald, was fully aware of the challenges to which men who make heroic promises must respond,

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. (17)

It may grow ever harder, but the effort must still be made and respect paid to those who make the effort to suit their action to the word. The dialogue of Torhthelm and Tídwald is almost over. The cart rumbles on and the final words of Tolkien’s “Homecoming” are those of a Latin chant for the soul of Beorhnoth.

As we have just seen, it is their knowledge about the lives of men who died in battle that enables Torhthelm and Tídwald to find the body of their fallen leader. The names of these men follow below in the order in which their bodies were found, along with citations to the pages on which they first appear in *The Tolkien Reader*. A considerably longer list of names with line numbers from “The Battle of Maldon” is also presented here. This list, I would like to suggest, can taken as evidence of the “Maldon” poet’s intention not just to pay formal tribute to Byrhtnoth, but also to honor his loyal followers.

**“Homecoming”**

Wulfmær, Beorhnoth’s kinsman (7)  
 Wulfmær, Wulfstan’s son (7), mistakenly identified at first as Beorhnoth’s nephew (7)  
 Ælfnoth (7)

**“Maldon”**

Offa’s kinsman (5)  
 Eadric (11)  
 Byrhnnoth (17, 42, 92  
 [referred to as Byrthelm’s son], 101, 127, 151 [referred to as Æpelred’s retainer], 162, 203 [referred to as Æpelred’s earl], 257)  
 Wulfstan, Ceol’s son (75-6)  
 Ælfhere (80)  
 Maccus (80)  
 Wulfmær, Byrhtnoth’s sister’s son (113-15)  
 Wulfmær, Wulfstan’s son (155, 183)  
 Ælfnoth (183)  
 Cowardly sons of Odda:  
 Godric (187, 237-38)  
 Godwine (192)

Ælfwine (8)	Godwig (192)
Offa (8)	Offa (198, 230, 286-8 [referred to as Gadd’s kinsman])
Beorhtnoth found (9)	Ælfwine, son of Ælfric, grandson of Ealhelm (209- 11, 217)
	Leofsunu (244)
	Dunhere (255)
	Æscferð, Ecglaf’s son (267)
	Edward the tall (273)
	Æðelric (280)
	Sigebyrht’s brother (282)
	Wihstan, Thurstan’s son (297-8)
	Wighelm’s son (300)
Beorhtnoth beloved named in Torhthelm’s song (9)	Oswald and Eadwold (304)
Beorhtnoth, not Beowulf, carried home (11)	Byrhtwold (309)
	Godric, Æþelgar’s son (320- 21)

The opening lines of “The Battle of Maldon,” the poem that served as Tolkien’s source for “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son,” or what we must take for its opening lines—the “Maldon” manuscript was among the texts damaged and destroyed in 1731 in the Cotton Library fire—present Byrhtnoth moving among his troops, encouraging them, and ordering each of his young men to drive his horse away and focus on what he will do with his hands and on “good thoughts,” which I take to mean that he tells them they must mentally prepare themselves for the challenges to come.

Here we see a young man referred to just as “Offa’s kinsman” who responds to his lord’s words by immediately releasing his beloved hawk to fly to the woods, and learn that another young man named Æadric also quickly determines to obey the orders he is given. We learn that Byrhtnoth “tæhte” (showed) his men what they should do, told them how they “scoldon standan and þone stede healdan” (19, should stand and keep the position), “bæd” (told) them to hold their shields correctly, firmly with their hands, and “ne forhtoden nǣ” (21, fear nothing). And only when he has “fægre getrymmed” (22, suitably prepared) his men does Byrhtnoth dismount among the men where he finds it most pleasing to be and knows his household retainers to be most devoted. With this account of Byrhtnoth’s movement among his men, then, the poet has set a scene for verbal confrontation.

A “wīcinga ār” (26; viking messenger) stands on the shore of a tidal stream that provides access—but only at low tide—to the land Byrhtnoth is determined to defend. The messenger shouts his challenge across the river, and offers Byrhtnoth a way to avoid fighting the vikings who stand ready to advance across the causeway when the waters recede. If he will “quickly send rings in exchange for protection” the host that threatens the safety of his land will go away.

The messenger’s speech, as it is reported, does not fulfill the requirements for explicit speech act performance as Searle sets them forth in *How To Do Things with Words*. This would require the first person nominative pronoun “Ic” (I) as subject, along with a present tense verb of speaking, and the pronoun with which the messenger begins his speech is “mē” (me). He introduces himself not as the performer of a speech act but as a man to whom orders have been given. The bold seafarers have sent him with a message for Byrhtnoth. The message itself, however, can be seen to function as a threat, a speech act for which Searle, having spelled out these conditions for promising: “H[earer] would prefer S[peaker]’s doing A[ct] to not doing A, and S believes H would prefer his doing A to his not doing A,” adds this critical distinction between promises and threats: “a promise is a pledge to do something for you, not to you; but a threat is a pledge to do something to you but not for you” (58).

The vikings want Byrhtnoth to believe that it will be better to “forġieldan” (buy off) a “gār-rās” (spear-rush) “mid gafole” (32, with tribute) than it would be for the two forces to meet in battle. There is no need for them to “spillan” (slaughter) each other, their messenger says, if Byrhtnoth’s most prosperous supporters will give “feoh wiþ frēode” (39; money for peace, or protection money) to the vikings. In fact, the messenger asserts, he and the seamen wish to go with the tribute-money to their ships, depart, and keep the peace.

Byrhtnoth responds with gestures of defiance that involve the performance of both physical and speech acts. As the “Maldon” poet represents the action that leads to the clash of forces that leads to the death of Byrhtnoth and so many of his men,

Byrhtnōþ maðelode,    bord hafenode,  
wand wācne æsc,    wordum mælde,  
ierre and ān-ræd    aġeaf him andsware. (42-44)  
(Byrhtnoth spoke, raised his shield,  
brandished his ash-wood spear, spoke with words,  
angry and resolute, gave him an answer.)

With these three lines the “Maldon” poet makes it possible to see how Byrhtnoth raised his shield and brandished his spear, and his sequence of verbs, beginning

with “maðelode,” a verb associated with formal acts of speaking, including “wordum mælde” (spoke with words), and ending with “ageaf him andsware” (gave him answer), may have functioned as a signal to tenth-century listeners, informed that Byrhtnoth is angry and determined, that they were about to hear a critically important act of speaking. In any case, these are the words as we read them from the page:

“Gehierst þu, sã-lida, hwæt þis folc sægeþ?  
Hie willað eow tō gafole gāras sellan,  
ætrenne ord and ealde sword,  
þã here-géatwe þe eow æt hilde ne dæg.” (45-48)  
 (“Do you hear, viking, what this folk says?  
They wish to give you spears as tribute,  
deadly point and old sword,  
war-gear that [will] not benefit you in battle.”)

John C. Pope punctuates the first line of Byrhtnoth’s speech in the edition of the poem he includes in *Eight Old English Poems*, appropriately enough, as a question, but spoken aloud—and loudly enough to be heard across the flood-tide waters that separate his men and the Vikings—his speech could hardly be understood as a simple request for information. It would have been heard instead as a demand that the viking messenger pay close attention to what Byrhtnoth says. And what follows is as clearly a command to the messenger as the command to which he referred in the opening lines of his speech to Byrhtnoth. The messenger is to return to those who sent him with this message: “Here stands dauntless an earl with his band of men who will defend this homeland, the land of Æthelred my lord.” The message may not be directly translatable to “I,” a first person nominative singular subject, followed by “refuse,” a first person singular present tense verb of speaking, but it nevertheless functions as a strong assertion that Byrhtnoth intends to defend his homeland. And Byrhtnoth does not stop here. With the words “Feallan sculon / hæðne æt hilde” (54b-55a, heathens shall fall in battle), he responds to the viking threat with a counter threat, and then provides this reason for his response: “Too shameful it seems to me that you should go to your ship with our tribute money unfought, now that you this far hither have come on to our land” (55b-58). I am not willing to go as far as Tolkien did in his analysis of Byrhtnoth’s response to the viking challenge, but I must acknowledge that his response is motivated at least in part by pride. In any case, with these words, loudly and forcefully uttered in a voice strong enough to be heard by the forces on the other side of the river, Byrhtnoth takes a position of bold defiance.

The Blackwater is now at high tide, so it is not yet possible for either Byrhtnoth's troops or the vikings to advance. Here Byrhtnoth's battle-line of East-Saxons must stand on one side of the river while the viking army stands in proud array on the other, and the only way a warrior on either side can injure or cause the death of a warrior on the other is by the flight of an arrow. At this point Byrhtnoth orders Wulfstan to defend the "brycge," a causeway or ford that makes it possible to cross the Blackwater at low tide, and Wulfstan (further identified as Ceol's son in l. 76) hurls a dart and kills a viking who boldly advances toward the causeway. The "Maldon" poet, having now given credit to one of Byrhtnoth's men, also records the acts of Ælfhere and Maccus, two brave warriors who stand beside Wulfstan. They never wished to flee from battle, he says, and boldly fought against the enemy as long as they could wield weapons. And thus three more names are added to the roll call of heroes that began in the opening lines of the poem with Offa's young kinsman and a warrior named Æadric.

But back to the action of the story and the sequence that leads to what Tolkien saw as an act that was "too foolish to be heroic" ("Ofermōd" 22). The vikings know they have found fierce guardians of the causeway, so they begin to "lytigian" (86a, use guile). Their messenger's speech act is a request, and though our everyday use of "request" seems too polite for what we see happening here, the messenger's speech satisfies Searle's requirements for the performance of requests. The propositional content must involve the future action of the Hearer (in this case Byrhtnoth), while preparatory conditions involve (1) the ability of the Hearer to do what he is asked to do, and (2) an understanding that the Hearer will not perform the Act he is being asked to perform under normal conditions. Byrhtnoth, acting from "ofermōd"—over confidence? pride? great pride? arrogance? (translation of the noun depends on the judgment of the translator)—responds. And these are Byrhtnoth's words as the "Maldon" poet reports them: "Nū ēow is ġerȳmed; gāþ recene tō ūs, / guman tō gūðe" (93-94a), which translated to "Now the way is opened for you, come to us quickly, men to battle," have something close to the sound of an open invitation.

Permission received and the tide having ebbed, the viking response is immediate. The time for battle has come. The "death-dealing wolves" advance. Men fall on both sides, and the poet continues his roll call of heroes. The Wulfmæc Torhthelm thought he recognized when he and Tíða began their after-the-battle search is said to "choose a resting place among the slain" in ll. 113-15. The expression of course is formulaic, but the death can nevertheless be seen as an instance of the loyalty expected of men who have been given orders, and of one man who suits his action to the words of his leader and kinsman.

"Æadweard" is the next name to be added to the roll call of loyal supporters as the poet tells of his immediate retaliation for the death of



Wulfmær. “Edward struck one [of the advancing enemies] swiftly with his sword, did not hold back the stroke, so that the doomed warrior fell at his feet” (117-119) and Byrhtnoth, Edward’s “þēoden,” or “lord,” thanks him for not holding back the stroke that brought the doomed viking to his death. And here the rules for thanking that require reference to a past act performed by the Hearer and the gratitude of the Speaker for that performance that fall well within our common understanding of what it means to thank are clearly satisfied.

Slaughter falls upon the earth (126b), but Byrhtnoth’s men stand steadfast (127a), and Byrhtnoth, who is himself in the midst of the fighting, continues to perform the speech acts that first defined his role as leader. He is said to have “stihte” (directed, ordered) their actions, and to have “bæd” (urged) each of his men who hopes to gain praise to focus his thoughts on fighting. His men respond by advancing toward the enemy, weapons raised and shields held firmly for protection, their actions a suitable response to the words their leader addresses to them.

And now Byrhtnoth himself engages in hand to hand combat. As Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson explain the action here in their *Guide to Old English* (231-32), a viking, his weapon raised, advances, and Byrhtnoth, referred to as an “an-ræd eorl” (132a, resolute earl) goes toward the “ceorle” (132b, peasant or free man of the lowest rank). The viking is referred to next as “sē sārinc” (the sea-warrior). He wounds Byrhtnoth, who is now referred to as the “wigena hlāford” (lord of warriors). The wounded Byrhtnoth knocks his shield against the viking’s embedded spear in such a way that its shaft bursts and the spear springs forth. Now angered, Byrhtnoth, referred to in line 138a as “sē gūð-rinc” (the warrior) wounds the proud viking who attacked him. Referred to next as “sē fierd-rinc” (140a, also the warrior) and said to be “frōd” (wise), Byrhtnoth causes his spear to go through the neck of his attacker. Continuing to suit his actions to the requirements he has placed upon his men (and the “gūð-rinc” and “fierd-rinc” nominalizations can be seen to draw attention to this correspondence of word and deed), Byrhtnoth quickly pierces the body of another viking so that his coat of mail bursts and he too is fatally wounded.

At this point Byrhtnoth, who has just demonstrated his skills as a warrior, rejoices, laughs, and thanks God for the “dæg-weorces” (day’s work) he has been granted. But the time for rejoicing is brief. “Drenga sum” (149a, a certain viking) now throws a spear with such force that “sē tō forþ gēwāt / þurh þone æðelan Æðelrēdes þegn” (150b-151, it goes through the [body of the] noble thane of Æðelred), and Byrhtnoth, now grievously wounded, is identified by reference to the lord he serves.

Wulfmær, son of Wulfstan, the first young man to be found by Torhthelm and Tídwald, is now presented as a man ready for action. The “Maldon” poet places him at Byrhtnoth’s side and tells how he pulls the weapon with which the viking has dealt his lord his death blow from his body:

Him be healfe stōd    hyse unweaxen,  
 cniht on ġecampe,    sē full cāflīce  
 brægd of þām beorne    blōdigne gār,  
 Wulfstānes bearn,    Wulfmær sē ġeonga (152-155)

(By his [Byrhtnoth’s] side stood a young warrior not fully grown,  
 a man young in battle, Wulfstan’s son,  
 young Wulfmær, who very boldly pulled  
 the bloody spear from the man [Byrhtnoth])

and this young Wulfmær hurls the spear that inflicted Byrhtnoth’s fatal wound so that it penetrates the body of the man who threw it and *he* lies dead upon the ground.

Another “secg” (159b, a man identified by Mitchell and Robinson as “yet another viking”) now approaches, apparently intending to seize Byrhtnoth’s armor, treasures, and sword. Byrhtnoth responds by drawing a “sword from [its] sheath, broad and bright-edged.” Yes, he will give the viking what he wants, but not in a way he might wish to receive it. But, as Byrhtnoth raises his arm to strike, “lid-manna sum” (164b, another sea-man) wounds him in the arm. His sword falls to the earth, and Byrhtnoth, who falls to the earth as well, now has only words of courage to offer the men he leads. But he continues to urge them to go forward as “gōde ġefēran” (170) and considering the context in which he performs this speech act, “loyal members of the comitatus” would seem to be the best equivalent Pope’s Glossary provides.

Byrhtnoth’s final speech, as the “Maldon” poet represents it, begins with his thanks to God for the joys of the world he has experienced: “Ic ġeþancie þē, þēoda wealdend, / ealra þāra wynna þe ic on weorulde ġebād” (173-74, I thank you, Ruler of the people, for all the joys I have experienced in the world), he says, and the two-line speech, as Pope edits it, provides the nominative first person singular pronoun “Ic” (I) as a subject for “ġeþancie,” a first person present indicative verb for an act of speaking. This makes it possible to read the speech as a performance of an explicit act of thanking, and to spell it out in this way:

**First person nominative singular pronoun:** Ic, I  
**Present tense of verb of thanking:** ġeþancie, thank  
**Addressee:** þē, you  
 þēoda wealdend, Ruler of the people

**Proposition:** ealra þēra wyрна þe ic on weorulde gebād  
for all the joys that I have experienced in the world

Having given thanks to God for the joys of life he has been granted, Byrhtnoth speaks of his present “māste þearfe” (175b, greatest need), and requests that God permit his soul to journey in peace into His control, and, if we can take the adjective “frymdig” to mean “I beseech you,” as Pope’s Glossary suggests, Byrhtnoth’s final words, “Ic eom frymdig tō þē / þæt hīe hell-scaðan hienan ne mōten” (179-80) can be read as a fully explicit request that the fiends of hell not be permitted to harm his soul.

The poet now, having noted that the vikings “hēowon” (181, hewed) the body of Byrhtnoth, a detail that does not prevent Torhthelm and Tídwald from recognizing the headless leader whose legs, Tídwald says, are the longest in the land, and that Ælfnōth and Wulfmæc lie slain beside their lord, turns his attention from the fallen heroes to men who fled from battle.

Þær wearþ Oddan bearn    ærest on flēame,  
Godriċ fram gūðe,    and þone gōðan forlēt  
þe him manigne oft    mearh gesealde;  
hē gēhlēop þone eoh    þe āhte his hlāford,  
on þām gērædum    þe hit riht ne wæs,  
and his brōðru mid him    bēgen ærndon,  
Godwine and Godwīg,    gūðe ne gīemdon,  
ac wendon fram þām wīge    and þone wudu sōhton,  
flugon on þæt fæsten    and hira feore burgon,  
and manna mā    þonne hit æniġ mæþ wære (186-195)  
(There Godric, Odda’s son, was first in the flight  
from battle. He abandoned the generous [lord]  
who often gave him many a horse.  
He leaped upon the horse that his lord owned—  
in its trappings—an act that was not right,  
and his brothers, Godwin and Godwig, both  
ran with him, did not heed the battle but  
turned from it and sought the wood,  
fled to that fastness and saved their lives,  
along with many more than it was at all fitting.)

And thus we hear the “Maldon” poet’s judgment of Odda’s sons—Godric, Godwine, and Godwig—and the offense of Godric is seen to be particularly blameworthy. He seized his lord’s horse, recognizable by its trappings as Byrhtnoth’s horse, and Byrhtnoth had given him many horses! His brothers fled

with him to the woods, and, their example of the possibility for flight having been provided, many others fled as well.

Offa, we learn from the following lines—and he is most recognizably the Offa that Torhthelm and Tídwald remember—is now said to have predicted that many men who spoke proudly at meetings would “æt þearfe þolian nolden” (201, at need would not endure). Offa may not have said words precisely translatable as “I predict that many men will not, when the time comes to act, do what they promised to do,” but it is clear that his prediction has now come true. But even so, the acts of Godric and his brothers and of those who followed their cowardly example do not invalidate the more pervasive “Maldon” theme of the agreement of word and deed, of suiting the action to the word. Many more of Byrhtnoth’s men, when they see that their lord has fallen, determine to “lif forlātan oþþe lēofne ġewrecan” (208, relinquish life or avenge their beloved leader).

In response Ælfwine, the young son of Ælfric, steps up to encourage his fellows. Three men have fled and others have followed their example, but Ælfwine now asks, or perhaps orders (“Ġemunað” can be read as an imperative verb) his fellows to remember the speeches they often made in the mead hall. “Ġemunað nū þā māla þe wē oft æt medu spræcon, / þonne wē on benče bēot ahōfon / hæleþ on healle, ymbe heard ġewinn” (212-14), he begins. His speech translates readily to “Remember now the times when we often spoke over mead, when we, men in the hall, often raised boasts about hard struggle from the bench,” but some attention to the word “beot” would seem to be required if we are to understand the speech acts to which Ælfwine refers. Our Modern English understanding of the verb “to boast” may be limited to boasting or bragging about something a speaker has done, something he or she has inherited or otherwise acquired, or perhaps a family connection, but, as Dwight G. Conquergood pointed out in “Boasting in Anglo-Saxon England: Performance and the Heroic Ethos,” the Old English word “beot” carried a “heroic promise” meaning. With this meaning in mind, then, the line that follows, “nū mæg cunnian hwā cēne sīc” (215, now [the present moment] can test who is brave).

Ælfwine continues his speech by identifying himself as a man from an important Mercian family and the grandson of Ealhelm, a wise nobleman of the highest rank, a successful man. And this leads to his statement of how he himself, a man concerned with his own reputation and a kinsman of Byrhtnoth, is prepared to act:

“Ne sculon mē on þære þēode þeġnas ætwītan  
þæt ic of þisse fierde fēran wille,  
eard ġesēcan, nū mīn ealdor liġeþ

forhēawen æt hilde. Mē is þæt hearma mǣst;  
hē wæs ægðer mīn mǣg and mīn hlāford." (220-224).  
("Never shall thanes among that people reproach me,  
[say] that I wished to go from this defense army,  
seek my homeland now that my lord lies dead,  
cut down from battle. For me that would be the greatest grief;  
he was both my kinsman and my lord.")

Ælfwine supports his words with action. He goes forth, cuts down a viking seaman, and urges his friends and companions to follow his example, and Offa, shaking his linden spear in a gesture that recalls Byrhtnoth's response to the viking demand for tribute, commends Ælfwine for the words he has spoken and continues with this further assessment of the warriors' present need:

"Nū ūre þēoden liġeþ,  
eorl on eorðan, ūs is eallum þearf  
þæt ūre æġhwelc ððerne bielde  
wigan tō wīge, þā hwīle þe hē wāpen mǣge  
habban and healdan." (233b-236a)

("Now that our lord lies dead,  
our leader upon the earth, it is necessary for us all  
that each warrior encourage the other to fight  
as long as he can have and hold a weapon.")

Offa turns next to what *has* happened as a result of one man's failure to fulfill this obligation. He spells out the consequences of Godric's action in very plain terms: because other men followed his example the shield wall has now been broken and the men divided on the field of battle. And with "Abrēoðe his anġinn, / þæt hē hēr swā manīgne mann afliemde!" (242b-243, May his action fail because here he caused so many men to flee!) he ends his speech with what can be read as a "curse" in both senses provided by the Oxford *American Dictionary*. His words can be read as both "a call for evil to come upon a person or thing" and "an expression of anger."

Offa may have been, as Tolkien's Torhthelm said, a man that not everyone liked, but he achieves his purpose. Byrhtnoth's men determine to honor their fallen lord by defending their homeland. A series of utterances of "boast words," or heroic promises, as Conquergood defines the speech act, follows.

Leofsunu, raising and shaking his shield in a gesture that recalls Byrhtnoth's earlier determination, remembers a promise he made in the mead hall and firmly states his present intention:

“Ic þæt gehāte, þæt ic heonon nylle  
 flēon fōtes trym, ac wille furðor gān,  
 wrecan on ġewinne mīnne wine-dryhten.  
 Ne þurfon mē ymbe Stūr-mere stedefæste hæleþ  
 wordum ætwītan, nū mīn wine ġecrang,  
 þæt ic hlāfordlēas hām sīðie,  
 wende fram wīġe; ac mē sceal wāpen niman,  
 ord and īren.” (246-53a)

(“I promise that I will not flee one footstep  
 from here, but will go further, avenge  
 my lord and friend in battle.  
 The steadfast men from around Sturmer  
 need not reproach me now with words  
 now that my comrade has fallen—say that  
 I, lordless, would travel home and turn from battle,  
 but weapon shall take me, point and iron.”)

With these words Leofsunu restates, in both negative and positive terms, his intention to respond to the challenge he now faces. He will *not* flee from battle, he *will* avenge his lord, and his speech fulfills the requirements for an explicit act of promising: “Ic” is a first person singular nominative pronoun, “ġehāte” is a first person singular present tense verb of speaking, and his statement of both negative and positive intentions provides a double satisfaction of the proposition requirement for speech act performance. And the next lines of Leofsunu’s speech recall *Ælfwine’s* determination to maintain his reputation in Northumbria. Leofsunu will not flee to find safety and earn ignominy in Sturmer, his homeland. Facing the either-or choice of life with shame or death with honor, Leofsunu chooses to take the chance that death will take him, and we learn that “Hē full ierre wōd, / feaht fæstlice, flēam hē forhogode” (253b-255, He advanced, full of anger, fought resolutely, scorned flight). And thus Leofsunu renews his promise and goes forth to suit his action to his words.

Dunhere, a man the “Maldon” poet identifies as an “unorne ceorl” (humble peasant), is the next to call out over all. His short speech, “Ne mæg nā wandian sē-þe wrecan þencþ / frēan on folce, nē for feore murnan” (258-259, “He who intends to avenge his lord on an enemy host can neither waver nor care for his life” may have more the sound of a gnomic maxim than a heroic promise, but, prefaced as it is by the poet’s statement that he “bæd þæt beorna ġehwelc Byrhtnōþ wræce” (257, urged each man to avenge the death of Byrhtnoth), and followed by a statement that the “hired-men,” men of lower rank than *Ælfwine* and Leofsunu, went forth as fierce spear-bearers to avenge their lord, it can be

read as the speeches that precede it are read, as an assumption of a leadership role—and perhaps taken as support for the validity of Torhthelm’s claim that he was as worthy to fight as a warrior loyal to Byrhtnoth as any man.

The “Maldon” poet does not directly quote the words of Æscferð son of Ecglaf, but he too receives credit for helping others by setting a proper example. He did not flinch at all from the war play but frequently shot forth arrows. Sometimes he hit a shield, sometimes he tore the flesh of a man, and repeatedly inflicted wounds as long as he could hold a weapon.

Ēadweard the tall, the next man to receive attention, is said to have “gīelp-wordum spræc” (274b, spoken with boast words). “Hē nolde flēogan fōt-mæl landes, / ofer bæc būgan, þā his betera læg” (275-276, He would not flee one foot of land or turn back when his better lay dead). And Ēadweard, like Ælfwine, Leofsunu, and Dunhere, whose heroic fulfillment of their promises has just been told, follows through on his promise. He fights until he has worthily avenged his ring-giver before he falls among the slaughtered.

The poet next honors Æðelric and his brother Sige-byrht and “others” whose names may have been lost. There is a break in the manuscript here—just before the death of Offa is recorded. But the words of Offa’s earlier promise to Byrhtnoth “þæt hīe scolden bēgen on burg rīdan, / hāle tō hāme, oþþe on here cringan, / on wæl-stōwe wundum sweltan” (291-293, that they should both ride to the stronghold, whole to home, or fall here with the army, die of wounds on the battle field) remain, and thus we know that Offa fulfilled his promise. But the vikings advance. The battle rages, and Byrhtnoth’s men continue to fight back. Wistan, Purstan’s son; Wighelm’s son; and two brothers named Oswald and Ēadwold fight bravely, encouraging their comrades to fight until they fall. And now we hear the words spoken by Byrhtwold that, according to Tolkien, “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” (“Of ermod” 20):

“Hyge sceal þy heardra, heorte þy cēnre,  
mōd sceal þy mære, þy ure mægen lýtlaþ.” (312-314)  
“Courage shall be the more resolute, heart the braver,  
spirit the greater as our strength lessens.”

Old men, along with young men, died with Byrhtnoth, who, Tolkien writes in his introduction to “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son,” was “old and hoar, but vigorous and valiant” in 991 when the viking challenge came to Maldon in Essex (3). And Byrhtwold found in courage itself a compensation for the loss of physical strength. But Byrhtwold also acknowledges the reality of what has just happened on this field of battle when he says “Hēr

liġeþ ūre ealdor eall forhēawen, / gōd on grēote” (314-315a, “Here lies our lord all cut down, a good man in the dust,” and he may be seen, like Offa, to curse the cowards who fled or may now decide to flee when he says “Ā mæg gnornian / sē-þe nū fram þȳs wīg-plegan wendan þenceþ” (315b-316, “May he forever mourn who now intends to flee from this war-play”), before making the following statement about his own condition, and re-asserting his intention to give his life in service to his lord:

“Ic eom frōd feores; fram ic ne wille,  
ac ic mē be healfe mīnum hlāforde,  
be swā lēofum menn, licgan þence.” (317-319)

“I am old; I do not intend to depart from here. I wish instead to lie here by the side of my lord, beside the beloved man,” Byrhtwold says in his firm statement of intention, and with this speech we have almost reached the end, or what we must take for the end, of “The Battle of Maldon.” All that remains is a brief account of how Godric Æpelgar’s son urged his fellows on to battle and, suiting *his* action to the words of his promise, launched many a spear before he fell in death. And with his last words, or the last words that remain (and editors agree that, as at the beginning, very few lines are likely to have been lost), the “Maldon” poet takes pains to make certain that his listeners or readers understand that this is not the Godric who fled on Byrhtnoth’s horse.

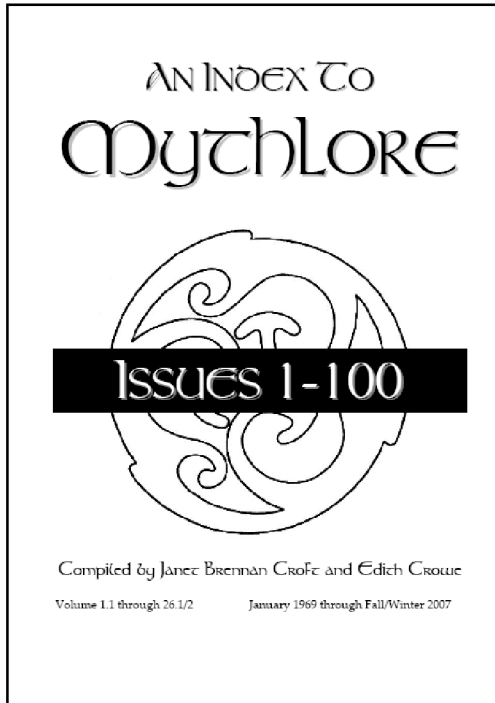
It seems clear that the “Maldon” poet’s purpose was not simply to eulogize a fallen leader. From his opening reference to the young kinsman of Offa who set his beloved hawk free to fly to the wood in response to Byrhtnoth’s call to action to his careful distinction of the name of the last man to be included in his roll call of heroes from that of the coward who fled on Byrhtnoth’s horse, the poet has also shown his commitment to the task of telling what happened on that August day in the year 991 that the battle of Maldon was fought. His narrative perspective was of course markedly different from the double perspective of Tolkien’s account of Torhthelm and Tídwald’s search, but I hope that the consideration of relationships between the two versions of the story of Byrhtnoth’s decision and its results I have presented here will have suggested not just some of the ways we can learn about how we use words to request and curse and thank and promise, and yes, sometimes boast of our capability to do what we say we can do, but what we may also hope to learn from reading and re-reading stories of human courage that have fortuitously survived the ravages of time and fire.



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